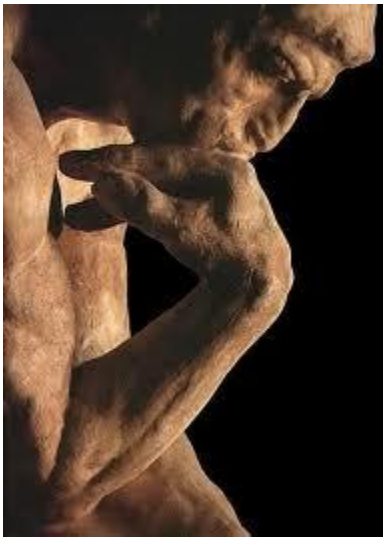
Sunday, October 2, 2011

SHOW ME THE PHILOSOPHY



E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Mention Western philosophy to someone who is a Black Nationalist and they will swear the Europeans stole everything (except the price tag) from the Egyptians or people of a darker hue. What is your position on this? Does this really matter in 2011?"

At times one is hesitant to dignify outrageous, overly-generalized statements of this sort by responding to them. I recall a well-known black writer, a self-proclaimed Afrocentric satirist whom I will not name, casually saying to me at my home during a visit in the 1980s that, "The Buddha was black." However, he offered not a shred of evidence to support his claim. He didn't even offer an argument. Or a single, intriguing, contestable "fact" from the historical record worthy of chewing on or serving as the basis for an intelligent (or even *un*intelligent) conversation. And, obviously, the brainless notion he floated (perhaps just to see what my reaction would be) has nothing whatsoever to do with the theory and practice of the Buddhadharma. As for the oft-stated claim in some in-bred black nationalist circles that the Greeks "stole" their various philosophies from the Egyptians, that too at the present time is a delicious piece of sophistry insofar as we are talking about a world so distant in antiquity that conclusive evidence to back this idea is just about impossible to find.

My position on this is easy to state: I do not suffer fools gladly. And I never take seriously statements by anyone---black or white, male or female, young or old, on the left or the right, from the East or the West---who isn't prepared to support their claim(s) with logical argumentation and evidence that is apodictic. (I wouldn't even listen to my beloved parents when on matters of fact they were clearly wrong, as on occasion they proved to be during my childhood and teens.) Generally, my default position on claims made about the world is---like that of, say, any good journalist---a healthy skepticism, which is the attitude that any scholar worthy of the name would also assume, especially since all our knowledge is provisional and always subject to revision based on new evidence.

However, I'm also very sensitive (perhaps hyper-sensitive) to the pain and suffering that are the foundations behind many statements that people make on the subject of "race." We must remember that black American history until quite recently was marginalized, often deliberately erased from history books and the popular imagination. Put simply, during the era of segregation whites suppressed our stories and countless truths about the American (and Western) experience that involved people of color. Nearly every week we learn something new---and exciting---about the roles played by people of African descent in the Western world. But while such information is both enlightening and emotionally satisfying, we must always be cautious about embracing statements simply because we *want* them to be true---for example, the long repeated but now qualified statement that the Tuskegee Airmen *never* lost an aircraft (not one) when they were deployed as bomber escorts in Europe. (They flew hundreds of escort missions, and lost a mere 25, which is still impressive.) I'm willing to admit that over the last 63 years, I've sometimes slipped and embraced an idea on flimsy evidence (or testimonials), but I generally try to rigorously question everything I think is true. (And this human tendency to err is, of course, why we often see retractions for news stories a day after they are published.)

On November 8, 2003, I attended a lecture by the distinguished historian Ira Berlin entitled "American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice." Dr. Berlin judiciously distinguished between the generally dispassionate and skeptical approach of the historian of slavery, who necessarily assumes that "everyone lied" until their claims can be verified, and the approach of the American (especially black American) public which does the opposite: it focuses on the victims of slavery, whose history emerges from personal and received experience---stories told and retold by one's family and predecessors.

"For memory," said Dr. Berlin, "unlike history, rejects a skeptical, detached reconstruction of the past. For the keepers of memory, it is unquestioned and reflexive, absolute, and instantaneous; not distant from the present but conjoined with today and contiguous with tomorrow. Memory speaks, not to a desire to understand the whole and to include all in the story, but the personal, individual understandings based on the most intimate experiences in families, churches, and communities. It is conveyed through symbols and rituals and knowing gestures, through often-repeated stories passed from grandparents who were too often ignored but never forgotten, and through kitchen table banter that was barely audible but always heard...Memories are anything but tentative, distant, contingent, or dispassionate. They are immediate, intense, and emotive. They do not evoke skepticism but command commitment; they demand loyalty, not controversy. Memories are not debated (except in the most trivial sense), they are embraced. If history is written with the presumption that everyone lied, memory presumes the truth. No one lied."

Always the difficult burden of proof is on whoever makes a claim about the world. (If you claim that neutrinos travel faster than the speed of light, which would overturn contemporary physics and prove Einstein wrong, then you must test and retest your findings, then have others test them, too.) We all have a right to our own opinions, but not to our own facts. And extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. (Which for example, the Bush Administration failed to provide for its repeated assertions that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction.) We are right, I believe, to assume that "everybody lied" until we are given evidence that proves otherwise. If such evidence emerges that European philosophers "stole" everything from "people of a darker hue," or that the Buddha was black, believe me, I will be among the

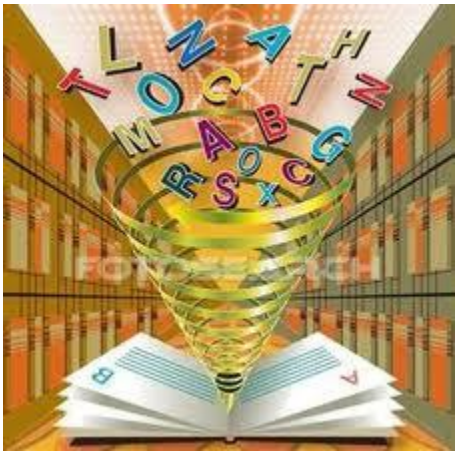
first people to admit I was wrong, shout these disclosures from the rooftops, write reams about it, feel a brief twinge of egoistic racial pride (which as a Buddhist I'll endeavor to eliminate because we are all human beings and the feeling of "superiority" is often identified as one of the last obstacles toward spiritual awakening and liberation), and work diligently to broadcast such new information. But until such proof is placed on the table, I feel a healthy skepticism is the most responsible position to take.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:13 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/show-me-philosophy.html

Monday, October 3, 2011

DISCOVERING THE FASCINATING WORLD OF WORDS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What is the best way for a writer to improve his/her vocabulary?"



In all likelihood, this is a question that haunts every serious apprentice writer. It certainly haunted me when I was in my late teens and early twenties and (1) Read books on how to improve one's vocabulary, and (2) flagged words in books, magazine articles, news stories and so forth that I didn't know. But that approach to improving one's word power, sad to say, is haphazard. And, as we all know, words are the most fundamental tool a writer has at his or her disposal. Sartre once wrote that "Every sentence is a risk." Well might he have added that, "Every word is a risk," for in what we write precision in word choice is of paramount importance.

In general, Americans use about 20,000 words in their everyday discourse. But we know and recognize far more of the more than one million words in the English language. Scholars who have devoted themselves to this arcane research, and keep track of this sort of thing, report that Victor Hugo used 15,000 different words in his works, Shakespeare 12,000, and John Milton 9,000. I recall once reading a provocative, challenging statement that said in the 19th century scholars typically read new editions of a dictionary to determine what new words had been officially added to the language, and which ones had fallen by the wayside. And Malcolm X passed his time in prison reading the dictionary.

These matters kept tugging at me until in 1973 they reached a tipping point. I was at dinner one evening at the farmhouse of John and Joan Gardner in southern Illinois. I made a comment about how much I was enjoying the poetic and archaic words John had used in his book-length epic poem, *Jason and Medeia*, many of which I had not encountered before. Joan replied that those words were there because she'd teased John about not having enough "big words" in his books. So John, with his magnifying glass in hand, went through every word in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* before revising his update of the classic story. We had a good laugh about this, but her anecdote haunted me for days. I thought that if so many writers and scholars had gone to such trouble in being systematic about their word study, and now JG too,

then what was *my* excuse? So the next year when I was in the doctoral program in philosophy at Stony Brook, I did the same with the 2,129-page *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, which was a Christmas gift from my parents. It took me five months to plough through it, page after page for an hour every evening, night after night, as I developed for my own use a personal lexicon tailored specifically to my particular needs as a writer.

All that was long ago, but I've often wanted to repeat this exercise. What a lover of words and their beauty discovers after doing this chore (which soon ceases to be a chore and becomes a fascinating meditation on etymology, and on life itself in all its permutations) is that there is literally a word for *every* object, material or immaterial, every relation, and every process that human beings have experienced. Because that is what words are: the crystallization in language of thousands of years of experience across numerous cultures and civilizations, each word being the almost tangible flesh in which thought is tabernacled. To quote Sartre again: "The word *is* the Other," for it embodies the full spectrum of experiences, sensations, thoughts, and feelings in all their kaleidoscopic shades and hues that our species has lived through and recorded. The dictionary is our transcript for all of that.

So my study is filled with dictionaries. The *Oxford* (with its included magnifying glass), of course. Seven dictionaries for Sanskrit, and two for Pali. One for French (my required graduate school language), and one for German. And 19 others devoted to scrumptuous poetic and archaic words, to British English, famous quotations, slang, American and world literature, Latin quotes, Indian philosophy, foreign words in general, terms for building and architecture, on the Bible (my wife has her own separate, well-stocked library of reference material on that subject), and other subjects. As with my *Webster's* in 1973, I've often sat down and gone through every page of some of these dictionaries (lately, the ones for Sanskrit), taking notes for building vocabulary. (For Sanskrit I have stacks of flashcards in Devanagari script for quick review.) In my experience there simply has been no other way to methodically and thoroughly acquire the general and technical words I require for the diverse subjects I'm called upon to write about.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:12 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/discovering-fascinating-world-of-words.html

Thursday, October 6, 2011

NATURE GIVES US NO METAPHORS

"The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars." Aristotle, *Poetics.*

"Though metaphor is seen in a highly developed form in poetry, and is the characteristic mode of energetic relation in poetry, it may also prove to be the radical mode in which we correlate all our knowledge and experience." From *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Metaphor draws many poets to poetry? What draws you to fiction?"

I do like today's question because the answer is so danged obvious.

During my final year in the doctoral program in philosophy at Stony Brook, when I was churning out seminar papers and the prospectus for my dissertation, I found it increasingly difficult to write fiction. This wasn't a "writer's block" per se, because I could write philosophy papers all day long. But Western philosophers since John Locke, and especially those acquainted with the work of Wittgenstein, harbor a deep suspicion of metaphor as being imprecise, sloppy, careless, and misleading. Literary language is to be avoided. Fortunately, during my first two quarters of teaching creative writing at the University of Washington, those reservations fell away and I was able to settle into the wisdom behind the words Albert Camus wrote in his *Notebooks* of 1935-42: "Feelings and images multiply a philosophy by ten. People can only think in images. If you want to be a philosopher, write novels."

Nature gives us no metaphors. These tropes of transference (metaphor, analogy, simile) that give us "two ideas for one" and allow us to "get hold of something fresh" (as Aristotle put it), are products of human consciousness, and as such are probably inseparable from the way the imagination and intellect operate on their highest levels, not simply in poetry, but in *every* form of intellectual endeavor that I am familiar with, including the sciences. (As a heuristic,

the scientists at work on sub-atomic particles in the 1920s advised their students to think of these strange, new entities in terms of what they knew about literature and music; in the early 70s one of my editors at a newspaper called *The Southern Illinoisan* was Ben Gelman, brother of physicist and Nobel laureate Murray Gell-man, a true genius who coined the term "quark," which is a reference to a line in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.) I tilt somewhat toward sympathizing with anthropologists who suspect that all language is metaphor. In *Countries of the Mind* (1931), John Middleton Murray wrote that, "The investigation of metaphor is curiously like the investigation of any of the primary data of consciousness...Metaphor is as ultimate as speech, and speech as ultimate as thought. If we try to penetrate them beyond a certain point, we find ourselves questioning the very faculty and instrument with which we are trying to penetrate them."

Absent the presence of metaphor, certain powerful, thought-provoking stories are unimaginable. For example, the extended metaphor that is Kafka's "The Metamorphosis"; or John Gardner's *Grendel* (the equating of the Beowulf monster with Sartrean existentialism); or Orwell's *Animal Farm*; or any of the animal fables from the West (Aesop) and East (Jātaka tales), among them my short story "Menagerie: A Child's Fable"; or films such as "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" (Depression-era dance contests as a metaphor for capitalism, or at least that's how I read the story.) And each and every day, our nation's inventive editorial cartoonists rely on precisely this fundamental technique as they depict the shenanigans of our elected officials. So, in short, I think one has to say categorically that metaphor is an essential aspect of the imagination during its peak performances across all creative and intellectual disciplines.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:07 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/nature-gives-us-no-metaphors.html

Sunday, October 9, 2011

THE BLUES OF SISYPHUS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "There seems to be one question black people keep asking over and over again. Year after year...Where do we go from here? How would Charles Johnson answer this question?"

I would answer that deeply troubling question this way:

Everything in America today is broken. Let us count the ways. The public schools. The military. The economy. The nuclear family (for black people). Traditional dead-tree journalism. The hope for home ownership. The American Dream. Small businesses. The cost of a college education and the prospect of it leading to gainful employment. Government jobs---local, state and federal---that are being cut back steadily (and which black Americans depended hugely upon). A federal government locked in gridlock between Tea Party Republicans and the first black American president. On and on, we can add to this list of things that are *broken* in contemporary American society.

The Civil Rights Movement was predicated or premised on an America in the 1950s and '60s that was economically prosperous, so that Martin Luther King Jr. could title one of his books, *Why We Can't Wait* when every white American was living in a country that was the most powerful, economically, on planet Earth. Why, he reasoned, should black Americans be left behind in a period of prosperity? But now, in 2011, that era of prosperity is long gone. This is, as we are reminded every day, a new and frightening period of "austerity," one comparable to the Great Depression in its numbers of the unemployed, a period that well might last for a decade.

Abdullah Pollard, who is 58-years-old and was interviewed in New York at the Occupy Wall Street protest this past week, said he came to the United States from Trinidad in 1996, and became a citizen in June. In April, he was laid off from his job in telecommunications. "I didn't feel empowered as an immigrant," he said. "Now I am citizen, and I want to stand up for the

downtrodden. Both political parties march to the same drummer---the powerful corporations. You leave your own country and you expect things to be better in America, a step or two up from what you left back home. And then there's this rude awakening. America is just not what it used to be."

No, America is *not* what it used to be. And I will venture to say that what it used to be---in the decades following World War II and the financial crisis that began in 2008---is something that it will never be again. We can kiss that period in American history goodbye, along with all the individual and collective hopes and dreams (and, in some cases, fantasies) that were premised on the belief in unending prosperity and increasing, uninterrupted upward mobility for every successive generation. What we are witnessing, I believe a Buddhist would say, is a "rude awakening," to quote Mr. Pollard, to the fact of the impermanence of all things. A rude awakening that is about the inevitability of change. A rude awakening to the fact that the things we desperately cling to (and ourselves) will one day die after running their course. When things change, as they must, many of our personal desires and dreams are dashed to pieces. And so there is nothing to cling to. Nothing a wise man or woman will be attached to. We know about entropy. Ultimately, all systems will fail. We all walk daily on a high wire and beneath us there is no safety net. To be frank, there are *no* safety nets that can endure forever. One day the universe itself will experience proton death.

Having no crystal ball, I cannot predict the future. But I do know this: our black parents and predecessors who experienced the Great Depression "made a way out of out no way." They handled the greatest forms of adversity with dignity and courage and the highest ideals, and during the darkest days of the 1930s created things of beauty---political, social and artistic---that we are still building upon today. In a broken society, a broken world, we can---and must---do the same. In this matter, each of us individually has no choice but to do our best, each and every day, to serve others and the common good. So no, this is no time for selfishly singing the blues. Our work is always before us and we know, each and every one of us, what that is. Who the people are who are relying on our help, support and compassion every day. Are we Sisyphus pushing that rock up the hill only to see it roll back down again? I daresay, yes, we are. And, as Albert Camus put it long ago in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, rolling that rock back up the hill once again (only to see it roll back down) is an action repeated again and again throughout the history of our species that demonstrates both the profound tragedy and the triumph of the human condition.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:10 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/blues-of-sisyphus.html

Monday, October 10, 2011

WRITING REPAIRS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "I'd like to know what exercises you might have stopped using in your classes. What didn't work? Why? And what exercises did you create for your students?"

During my first few years of teaching the craft of writing, I came up with about twenty exercises that I would give to students returning to work with me for a second time after they had completed all thirty of the ones in John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*. (When I first started teaching, my students did three of these exercises a week for ten weeks, in addition to writing three stories for me, and keeping a writer's notebook.) I remember several of the exercises I came up with for them to do focused on their becoming skillful with a variety of classic sentence forms (*epanalepsis, anadiplosis, symploce, epistrophe, anaphora, polysyndeton, asyndeton,* and the masterful long sentence, which I discussed in a post on the third of September.) In other words, I wanted them to see the possibilities of creating elegant, architectonic structures on just the level of the sentence alone. But on the whole, and in general, I preferred in the early 1970s JG's well-conceived exercises to those of my own invention. After a decade or so, I did cut back on some of JG's exercises that were merely descriptive. (How many times can a professor actually bring himself to read student work where they attempt to "Describe a landscape as seen by a bird, but do not mention the bird"? That one gets old pretty fast.)

Over the course of three decades, a professor is likely to see changes in the elements of craft that students need to focus on. Based on those changes, I naturally emphasized some craft exercises more than others. But in my experience, the single most recurring and difficult element for apprentice writers, both graduate and undergraduate (as well as for many veterans), is plot. What literally *happens* (the external, observable and objective action) in a story that moves it forward with a sense of organic story flow. Contemporary literary stories can often be weak on that element, substituting lots of dazzle---poetic language, wit, beautiful descriptions (or "picture painting"), which always brings a halt to the story's forward momentum, or at least slows that down---for tight plotting and tight pacing. For me, the simple question of *what happens next?* in a story, and the feeling of suspense this creates, is a crucial aspect of great entertainment. Furthermore, plot, as JG wisely put it, is the storyteller's equivalent to the philosopher's argument; its importance lies in it being an interpretation (one based on causation) for *why* the world works the way it does. Occasionally, one hears literary writers dismissing the importance

of plot (usually because they find good plotting hard to do), placing it in the "lesser" domain of pop (or pulp) fiction. And how many times have we heard that there are only 30 plots in the world? Or 100? (People give different numbers, but the point is always that plots are limited. Or that all the possible plots have already been written.) I've never believed any of those excuses for justifying stories that are weak on plot. (There *are*, of course, stories with minimal plots that are wonderful, but I think you see the point I'm making today.)

So during my last 20 years of teaching, I required that students turn in one new, fully developed plot outline (2 single-spaced pages) every week. (Back in the late '70s, I briefly made myself do this exercise, too.) In part, this was to discourage them from relying on the same story-line over and over again. It was to encourage them to become raconteurs, writers able to effortless create a new story on demand. And also so that, even though they only wrote three stories for me during every ten-week quarter, they left class with seven more developed plot outlines they could use for stories after my class ended, on their own or in another workshop.

In my classes, we always began with a student critiquing the work before us for that particular day. But before that student launched into his (or her) discussion of a story written by another, I required that he (or she) first break down or present the story in terms of just its plot. And to do that with just *five* to *seven* sentences. (I didn't want to hear about theme or ideas, character traits or any of that, only about *what happens*, then *what happens next*.) You have no idea how difficult some students found this to do, though the literal plot of *any* story can be summarized in less than ten sentences. (I can usually do this in four to five sentences, though I need something like eight sentences for the plot of Ellison's episodic *Invisible Man*.) And, as I believe Aristotle suggested in the *Poetics*, just the bare-bones summary of a terrific story should move a listener to experience pity and fear. Try doing this yourself with one of your favorite novels, short stories, television episodes or films. It should quickly give you the basic, minimal, underlying structure---the skeleton, the spine---upon which everything else (all the literary richness and elaboration) in the story rests.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:35 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/writing-repairs.html

Tuesday, October 11, 2011

TELL ME A ZEN TALE

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Do you have a favorite Zen story or saying?"

One of my favorite sayings, which also is the title of a book by Zen master Wu Kwang, is "Open Mouth, Already A Mistake." I remind myself of this wisdom several times a day (and abuse that wisdom, no doubt, whenever I'm writing an E-Channel post.)

As for Zen stories, there are scores of classic ones that I love. Here is a version of a very famous tale that has been one of my favorites since the 1960s:

Empty Your Cup

A university professor went to visit a famous Zen master. While the master quietly served tea, the professor talked about Zen. The master poured the visitor's cup to the brim, and then kept pouring.

The professor watched the overflowing cup until he could no longer restrain himself.

"It's overfull! No more will go in!" the professor blurted.

"You are like this cup," the master replied, "How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:01 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/tell-me-zen-tale.html

Saturday, October 15, 2011

VIOLENCE IN THE SPIRIT

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: In your short essay "Toro Nagashi" you mention how violence can exist in one's spirit. What did you mean by this? How is this different from violence that begins in the mind or violence that is physical?

I should clarify a little that statement from "Toro Nagashi." What I simply meant is that we almost unconsciously cultivate violence within ourselves. Culturally and socially, we are encouraged to do this. In the social world, we are daily given many invitations, not to experience compassion and empathy for others, but rather to feel separate from them (and frequently superior to them). We are especially invited to feel anger, which I imagine everyone will agree is a violent emotion. Violence and anger go hand-in-hand. (And how strange it is, don't you think, that we tend to see an angry person as a "powerful" person instead of one who is out of control, a kind of emotional barbarian?) Do these statements sound controversial? Or perhaps a little "over-the-top"? If so, then let me elaborate and fine-tune them a little.

Violence is not merely physical. Physical violence is the end result of a process that begins first in the mind. I would wager the incidents of physical violence are fewer than the countless forms of mental or psychological or verbal forms of violence that precede them. All forms of violence involve a degree of disrespect toward others. Let's focus right now on just our speech. I would judge its intention to be violent when it disparages and is intended to hurt others. When it seeks to belittle others. Or make them appear less than ourselves. (And, yes, I include in that broad statement the black folk behavior of "Playing the Dozens," which every young black male encounters early in life.) Even what socially passes as acceptable "teasing" or "kidding" involves, in my humble opinion, not so much an expression of endearment, but rather violence in the form of a faint (and usually awkward and unnecessary) attempt at humor that is always at another's expense. Too often our entertainment---comedies and satires---boils down to simply being an attempt to diminish another in some way. (Unlike drama, which seeks to portray characters in

their fullness and complexity, comedy almost always involves characters rendered as types---if not stereotypes---who are reduced to a one-dimensionality of meaning or being.) Gossip contains an obvious element of violence. Lust or selfish desire that objectifies another person and ignores his (or her) individuality and integrity as a subject (*i.e.*, another human being who just seeks happiness and freedom from suffering, as we all do) are tinctured with a violence that often later manifests itself as rape. Our motion pictures, generally, are violent, especially those that target people in their pre-teens to early thirties. (Why? Well, because violence quickly gets our attention.)

How often have we heard of politics in America referred to as being a "contact sport"? How many times a day do our elected officials, Democratic and Republican, and our talk show hosts, insult members of the opposite party? How often do they use metaphors, tropes and figures of speech literally taken from the realms of the battlefield or fighting? How often do members of one party demonize or misrepresent the members (and positions) of the opposition party? And how often do we witness, cheer, and celebrate acts of violence and aggression in competitive sports of all kinds ranging from football and basketball to hockey, boxing, and mixed martial arts? And how often have we seen mindless violence erupt among beer-bloated spectators after their home team loses a game?

There is violence in the way some rappers (and crude men in general) talk about women. And equal portions of fashionable---even socially acceptable---violence in the ways that some women stereotype and put down men as less than themselves. There is often a heartbreaking violence in the way children, in pursuit of independence and self-realization, disrespect their parents and elders.

All this violence in the social world is, at bottom, about a competitive (not cooperative) relationship between Self and Other, one that is founded on a mistaken and deluded sense of separateness. On a sense of difference between ourselves and others. And on petty ego. It is about what a Buddhist calls *maana*, usually translated as "pride," though the Sanskrit verbal root for *maana* means "to measure," as in measuring ourselves against others---*i.e.*, seeing others as our inferiors, equals or superiors. (I refer readers to my essay "Is Mine Bigger Than Yours?" in the winter 2010 issue of *Buddhadharma: The Practitioners Quarterly*.) Every dimension of our lives---personal and professional, even our miscellaneous list of "likes" and "dislikes"---is saturated with *maana*. With measuring, judging. (When, in fact, the Other really is a mystery whose complexity and richness always outstrip our attempts to define or characterize or measure him or her.) From our earlier years of receiving grades that measure our academic progress to the promotions we strive for in our jobs, *maana* is an activity we are socially coerced into engaging in every minute of every day.

If we did not do this measuring, we would be unable to function socially or, as Buddhists (or anyone pursuing a spiritual path) be able to practice "right effort" when we see our discipline becoming lax. But *maana* can be spiritually damaging to ourselves and others in the social world. It can lead first to thoughts, then speech and physical acts of violence.

How do we break this cycle of violence, within and without? As someone actively involved in the social world, I know I am as subject to this---anger, harmful speech and thought---as anyone. The answer, I believe, lies in the efforts we can make every moment of the day to reduce our

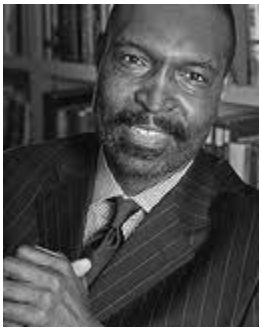
sense of separateness. And to catch (then correct) ourselves, mindfully, when we see we are about to pass relative judgment (This is "good," that is "bad") on others (or ourselves). At the very least, we can remember the Buddhist saying I mentioned in my last post: "Open Mouth, Already A Mistake."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:11 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/violence-in-spirit.html

Monday, October 17, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT RUDOLPH BYRD

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "When did you first meet Rudolph Byrd? How did the idea for doing the book, I CALL MYSELF AN ARTIST begin? Did you ever think of expanding the opening essay " I Call Myself An Artist" into a memoir?"



To be honest, my working relationship with Dr. Rudolph Byrd stretches back so far in time that I cannot exactly recall when or where we first met. When*ever* that was, he would have been a young man then, a former student of Ellison scholar and novelist John Callahan dreaming of the contributions he wished to make to (black) American scholarship and pedagogy. Now, in 2011, I believe we can say enthusiastically that he not only surpassed his youthful promise but distinguished himself brilliantly as one of our finest, and hardest working black literature scholars today, a man whose unselfish contributions have created so much for others to build upon for the rest of the 21st century and beyond.

Personally, I owe Dr. Byrd a very great deal. The book collecting my non-fiction entitled *I Call Myself An Artist* was entirely his idea. (And, no, I've never thought of expanding the autobiographical essay in that book, originally written for Gale Research, because I get bored writing about myself; I even took a pass a few years ago when Gale Research inquired if I wanted to extend that essay from 1990 to the present.) I have written a few prefaces and introductions for his books. The idea for the Charles Johnson Society at the American Literature Association was originally his. I fondly remember his being present in Washington D.C. at the unveiling ceremony for international stamps (Ghana and Uganda) honoring 12 black American writers of the 20th century (Maya Angelou, Alex Haley, myself, Richard Wright, Toni Cade Bambara, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Rita Dove, Mari Evans, Sterling Brown, June Jordan, Stephen Henderson, and Zora Neale Hurston), an inspired project conceived and made possible by the poet and arts activist E. Ethelbert Miller. And I remember, too, his being present when his alma mater Lewis and Clark College gave me a Doctor of Humane Letters degree in 2006.

Sitting in front of me on my desk are several of the books he wrote and edited: *Essentials: Timeless Truths for Living in Today's World* by Jean Toomer (Hill Street Press, 1999); *Jean Toomer's Years With Gurdjieff: Portrait of An Artist 1923-1936*

(University of Georgia Press, 1990); *Cane* by Jean Toomer, edited by Rudolph Byrd and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Norton Critical Edition, 2011); *Charles Johnson's Novels: Writing the American Palimpsest* (Indiana University Press, 2005)*; I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson* (Indiana University Press, 1999)*;* and *The Essential Writings of James Weldon Johnson* (The Modern Library, 2008).

At Emory University, Dr. Byrd is the founding director of the James Weldon Johnson Institute. *I.e.,* he has well understood both the importance of doing original, needed scholarship *and* the imperative of institution building: creating organizations that will transcend our individual flicker-flash passage through this life, that are a gift to present and future scholars to whom he will one day pass the torch of intellectual excellence, personal courage, and selfless service. Over the last couple of decades, I have known Dr. Byrd to be not only a scholar of the highest critical and moral standards but also a true gentleman always ready to support the work of his students and colleagues. He has enriched many, many lives (mine included), through his research and publications, his dedication to teaching, and especially by the outstanding "content of his character," as Martin Luther King Jr. might put it. Working with him has been one of the great privileges and pleasures of my life. He has truly fought the good fight as a black man of ideas and letters, and through his example inspires all who know him.

Thank you, Rudolph. Thank you from all of us.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:14 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/charles-johnson-talks-about-rudolph.html

Tuesday, October 18, 2011

THE 4TH STAGE

"Nothing, however right, is right when carried too far." Christmas Humphreys, *Walk On!*
"The movement of the Way is a return." *Tao Te Ching.*

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Could you talk about the 4th stage of the Hindu *Four Stages of Life*? Have you thought about dying? Do you have a fear of death? Have you ever had a near death experience? Will you have a typical burial? Have you thought about cremation and spreading your ashes somewhere?"

In a recent interview (*Callaloo,* summer 2010), I was asked by Geffrey Davis to reflect upon my retirement from teaching after thirty-five years in the classroom. In order to address his question, I described the Hindu "Four Stages or Seasons of Life," the last one being "old age" (winter) when "we retire from the worldliness of the world to devote ourselves exclusively to matters of the spirit, to knowledge (*vidya*), and preparation for death." I would place the emphasis on withdrawing from the "worldliness" of the world of desires, duties, and the necessary compromises a spiritual person must make in the secular, professional and social worlds in order to broadly and selflessly serve others and what is of primary interest to them. After spending a lifetime of being so devoted---to honoring one's parents and teachers, serving family, friends, students, colleagues, one's profession(s), community, and even strangers---after decades of being "*in* the world but not *of* it," as one biblical reference says, in the sense that one has dutifully done one's best to follow an often demanding spiritual path in the social world, I think there is great wisdom in "letting go" of the work appropriate for one's youth and middle-age, and moving on to a final stage (or season) that has its own proper exigencies for this particular stage of life.

As an aside (or footnote), I must say that I remember well August Wilson sharing with me his fantasy of finishing his ten-play cycle and telling the world he was retiring. Then, when the reporters went away, the phone stopped ringing, and he vanished from public view, August planned on sitting on his Capitol Hill porch reading piles of books he never had time to get to, playing with his young daughter, and writing without interruption or distraction for a decade. When that ten years ended, he said, he planned to emerge from seclusion like Eugene O'Neill after *his* decade away from the spotlight, and with plays that would be as powerful and enduring as *The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey Into Night,* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten.* He

also hoped to write a novel. But, as we know, he did not live long enough to do any of that, and died at age 60, just at the beginning of life's final season.

"Preparing for death" is a phrasing that probably jolts the American (or Western) mind, because we are socially conditioned to be attached to and cling to life at any cost. That has never been the case for me. (And I've never forgotten that in one of Plato's Dialogues he states that philosophy is preparation for death.) I've probably thought about my inevitable death every day since my late teens, starting around age 19. (I wrote lots of bad poems at that age on this subject.) As a matter of fact, as a young black man living through the violent 1960s, I was rather surprised when my twentieth birthday came around and I was still alive and healthy. (Not incarcerated, crippled by gunfire, damaged by drugs, or taken out by racism as so many young black men I knew at the time were.) I've lived every day of life since my teens as if it might be my last day, and with a kind of dogged determination (a characteristic I no doubt inherited from my father) to fulfill before drawing my last breath my worldly duties and responsibilities to others and as a creator compelled to work in many areas of expression.

As I mentioned in a previous post, I've regarded life as a black man in the Western world, and especially America, as being much like a tour of duty in a foreign land. (I really *do* like that image.) I didn't see myself as being there to play or to party. Only to do the job(s) I was given to do. And, mercifully, the day must eventually come when one is discharged from that soldiering on day after day, night after night---usually at the beginning of life's winter season. (That is one way to define "emeritus.") Have I ever had a near death experience? The answer is, yes. In high school I loved swimming. But once I almost drowned---and was saved at the last moment by another student. (I saw my whole life flash before my eyes. That really does happen, or at least it happened to me. But at age 17, there really wasn't much for me to see of life's passage, which I found amusing.) Do I fear death? Not at all. I've always seen it, metaphorically, as a chance to finally rest eternally after a long, long day of labor. My intention, of course, is to be cremated and my ashes strewn at sea.

There are Hindu and Buddhist ways of discussing this fourth stage of life, but also Taoist ways as well. Since my teens when I first read Lao tzu's *Tao Te Ching* ("The Way of Life"), I've regularly thought about and have a great affection for Verse #9 in that venerable, old text:

To hold and fill a cup to overflowing
    Is not as good as to stop in time.
Sharpen a sword-edge to its very sharpest,
   And the (edge) will not last long.
When gold and jade fill your hall,
   You will not be able to keep them.
To be proud with honor and wealth
   Is to cause one's own downfall.
Withdraw as soon as your work is done.
Such is Heaven's Way. (Italics mine.)

And consider these lines from Verse #16:

All things come into being,
And I see thereby their return.
All things flourish,
But each one returns to its root.
This return to its root means tranquility.
It is called returning to destiny.
To return to destiny is called the eternal (Tao).

These lines, too, from Verse #30, have been with me for a long time:

The good man's purpose once attained,
He stops at that;
He will not press for victory.
His point once made, he does not boast,
Or celebrate the goal he gained.

So I see this fourth stage as a "return" to and deepening of spiritual (and creative) practice, unconditionally and without compromise. It is, I believe, a period we all deserve after a lifetime of service and should look forward to. In his own way, I think August Wilson was looking forward after completing his ten-play cycle to such a period of reflection, renewal, "taking stock," putting one's affairs in order, a period of freedom from the world's unending demands, and a revitalizing "return" to one's creative and spiritual roots after sojourning for decades through the obstacle course called Samsara.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:43 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/4th-stage.html

Wednesday, October 19, 2011

WHERE HAVE ALL THE BLACK FATHERS GONE?

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: In his essay *"I Was My Father's Father, and He My Child": The Process of Black Fatherhood and Literary Evolution in Charles Johnson's Fiction"* William R. Nash writes about the fatherless males in your work. This seems far from your personal experience and life. Since this theme appears in some of your early work can we conclude that you would not write about it today?

When I was growing up in a Chicago suburb in the 1950s, I was one of the few black kids in my neighborhood who had a father (and an excellent one, at that). Many of my black friends were being raised by single mothers. This was an extraordinarily painful social situation then, as it is now. I remember talking with one of my best friends about our future dreams just before we graduated from high school. He was a good kid, always joking and cheerful. But that day, as we stood on the sidewalk in front of my father's house, he confessed that he feared he wasn't smart enough to go to college. And then he said, "I don't even know who my father *is*." I was at a loss for words. Clearly, this confession hurt him. It was something---a burden, a pain, an ache---he carried every minute of every day, but never spoke about. (That friend enlisted in the Navy after we graduated, then became a minister.) Decades later, when my daughter brought one of her boyfriends by our house for the first time to meet my wife and myself, that childhood event was echoed when this young man said (later to my daughter) that ours was the *first* house he'd been to in his thirty years of living where there was *both* a black mother and a black father.

Seventy percent of young black children today have no father in their homes. As newspaper columnist William Raspberry once put it, this is no longer a "problem." It is a *condition*. I remember talking once with my former editor at *The New York Times Book Review* about the plays of August Wilson. After some discussion, it became clear to both of us that the play August always *wanted* to write---but didn't---was one about the anguish he felt from childhood caused by the absence of his white (German) father from his life. ("He wasn't around much," was the way August put it, bitterly.) Why he didn't write about that is understandable. It's too painful. I remember, too, once giving an interview to a white woman reporter in my office in the English Department at the University of Washington. At some point during that interview, I mentioned my childhood and my father. And what did this woman say to me? "*Oh!* You *had* a father?" Pardon my English, but I've long regretted the fact that I didn't bitch-slap this person right then, right there, when she said that. I should have kicked her out of my office. (She was very lucky, believe me, that I try to live my life non-violently as a Buddhist. But remember: I grew up in the environs of Chicago. Bitch-slapping was a thought that crossed my mind but, thanks to vipassana and being raised right, I let it go to maintain Right Action and Right Speech. Black Buddhists have to practice such restraint in the white world all the time.)

Because I *did* have a strong black man as a father, one who was the most moral man I've every known. Who *loved* black people. Who taught me how to work, be a man, and take care of my loved ones. I thanked him *all* my life for that gift. The gift of his example, which I grew up seeing night and day. (Today, my South Carolina relatives remark all the time about how uncanny it is that I look so much like him, that they often think they're talking to my late Dad

when they're talking to and looking at me.) But so many of our young black men today do not have their biological father living with them or significantly present in their lives. I've written many times, and in many places, that this situation profoundly destabilizes the black family. And *that* destabilizes the entire black community.

Just yesterday, columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. of the *The Washington Post*, wrote in his piece "A Bargain For the American Family," that "The impact of the single-parent family on the well-being of children has sometimes been an explosive matter because it is often discussed in relation to the African-American community. Obama himself has made this explicit link...'We know that children who grow up without a father are more likely to live in poverty...They're more likely to drop out of school. They're more likely to wind up in prison. They're more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. They're more likely to become teenage parents themselves.' Growing up without a father (Obama said) 'leaves a hole in a child's life that no government can fill.'...Black men do face a crisis...It does not demean the heroic work of dedicated single mothers to say that two-parent families have a better shot at prosperity."

So, yes, in my fiction I've often grappled with this problem that is so raw, so intractable, and so old that we usually prefer not to even speak its name. Rutherford Calhoun in *Middle Passage* and both Matthew Bishop and Chaym Smith in *Dreamer* have never known their fathers. I've always wondered: How can you honor your father if you don't know who he *is*? How do you determine, then, who *you* are? Believe me, I will return in my fiction, today and tomorrow, to this genuinely dire sociological and existential characteristic---the Absent Father---of black life in America, because nearly all of our problems as a people can be traced to it. It was a problem that I did not have, personally. But it has left a deep scar, a wound, on so many black people, male and female, that I've known in my life. Actually, if we cannot repair this generations-old problem, then I am not optimistic about the future of black America.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 1:57 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/where-have-all-black-fathers-gone.html

Thursday, October 20, 2011

A RETURN TO THE OLD PAD

"I'm a nigger. I can do *any*thing." Statement by black, Northwestern philosophy student Gilton Cross to me in 1974.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: Could you talk about the campus TV show you hosted while at Southern Illinois University?

When I think about the how-to-draw PBS television series I created, hosted and co-produced in 1969, "Charlie's Pad," I'm reminded that public television at that time had the wide-open, freewheeling character that commercial television had in the early 1950s. Anything was possible, as it had been during the early years for Rod Serling and Paddy Chayefsky. The year before I approached my campus station WSIU-TV with the idea for this show, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (the major source for PBS programming) had just been created by Congress. All over America, local PBS stations were hungry for content. There can be no other explanation for why WSIU-TV went with a proposal for a 52-part series by a 21-year-old, black undergraduate. Of course, there *was* another reason, too, but I'll get to that in a moment after the following aside:

It's always been amusing to me that I'm primarily known as a "writer," because before the age of 30 I had to prove and distinguish myself in three different professional fields. In other words, between the ages of 17 and 30, I had to start *all over again* from scratch and Square One three different times in three "worlds" that had their own vocabulary, grammar, "school rules," and expectations. (No wonder I feel so existentially tired some days.) Those professions are (1) As a professional cartoonist/illustrator and journalist; (2) As a black doctor of philosophy and Buddhist scholar; and (3) As a literary artist, and black literature scholar. What I also find amusing is that workers in those three fields tend to believe *their* field is the only one of importance. As an undergraduate taking as many philosophy courses as I did those in journalism, I once had one of my journalism professors take me to one side and in all seriousness and "concern," tell me that I would have to choose between philosophy and journalism for my career. Later, John Gardner said to me that my earlier work as a visual artist and comic artist was just "preparation" for writing fiction. And I recall in graduate school the late, distinguished philosopher Justus Buchler (a major figure in American pragmatism) inviting me to chat in his office at SUNY-Stony Brook after the publication of *Faith and the Good Thing* so he could let me know that he knew of no one who had ever distinguished himself as both a great philosopher and great novelist. I dredge up these memories because some people in the three, professional "worlds" I've worked in tended to be provincial and protective of their bailiwick. Those in philosophy and the literary world expressed no interest in my life as a cartoonist/journalist. Many in the "creative writing" world seem to have an aversion to philosophy. And so on and so forth. But, obviously, I ignored them all, because in each case the person was speaking through the lens of their own creative and intellectual limitations. (And I've also loved, too, the very existential epigraph for this post, which was something said to me by a brilliant young black philosopher after he read *Faith*.) In short, one of my individual life's challenges was always to ignore the kind of negativity and professional parochialism I've just

described, to keep working at the diverse things I love, and to find as many ways as possible of bringing all of them together.

In 1969, I came up with the idea of a how-to-draw show for PBS after working intensely---and exhaustively---since the age of 17 in 1965 as an editorial and panel cartoonist, illustrator, and comic strip artist. I'd already taught other students cartooning in a 1968 class that took place in SIU's "Free School," where anyone could teach anything they wanted (for free, of course). I was publishing in the black press (*Ebony, Jet, Black World, Players,* St. Louis's *Proud*) and white newspapers (*The Chicago Tribune*, my campus newspaper, and *The Southern Illinoisan*), and selling one-page scripts (drawn by others on staff) to Charlton Comics, which was the low-man on the totem-pole of comic book companies in the late 1960s (their best artist was the brilliant, eccentric, and reclusive Steve Ditko, who was also the original artist for Marvel's "Spiderman.") I was publishing drawings anywhere and everywhere I could, including some soft-core porn for men's magazines (all those magazines vanished after the rise of feminism, thank heaven). You name it, I did it---or rather drew it--- in my youth (a lot of this I see as juvenilia), and to be honest I've forgotten some of the places I published visual art. By 1970, I'd published around 1,000 drawings, and the same year "Charlie's Pad" was broadcast (1970) my first book of political cartoons *Black Humor* was released by Johnson Publications in Chicago, and followed quickly by *Half-Past Nation Time* in 1972. (I also did other full-length cartoon manuscripts on slavery and Buddhism, but those have been lost over time.)

So here is how "Charlie's Pad" happened:

One spring day in 1969 when I bored, I sent a letter to WSIU-TV, summarizing my work as a cartoonist and pitching the idea for the show. I never expected them to write back. But they did, and called me to come in and talk about the project. I think what they liked about the idea was that it was inexpensive. All they needed to have was me sitting at a drawing table in front of two cameras. I designed each of the 52 programs (or lessons) for a 15-minute slot, and based the lessons on the correspondence course I took with writer/cartoonist Lawrence Lariar between the years 1963 and 1965 when I was in high school. We started shooting in fall of 1969. We shot three shows at a time. Director Scott Kane came up with the title, "Charlie's Pad," which I thought was cute at best. The series began running locally in southern Illinois in the spring of 1970, even before we'd shot the last lessons. Then it ran in Chicago. And Boston (on WGBH). And all over the country on different PBS stations for about eight to ten years. It was even broadcast, or so I heard, in Canada. Some stations ran one show a week for a year, which was my original intention. Others ran two shows together for a 30-minute block of programming. It was the kind of series PBS stations could assemble in different ways depending on the time slot(s) they needed to fill.

"Charlie's Pad" was, in a way, the culmination of my work at the time as a cartoonist. No sooner than it was on the air in 1970, I started writing novels, and by 1971 I was working on my master's degree in philosophy. In other words, I moved on.

But back in the early 70s I received a lot of mail from viewers around the country who would send me their drawings for commentary after they watched a particular show. (I have a box of that old mail somewhere in my attic, but I haven't looked at it in decades.) Personally, I can't watch "Charlie's Pad" because I was so young at the time I did it that what I see on the screen seems like an animated high school yearbook photo of myself. (But the demands that came with doing that show did teach me how to be relaxed on camera, and how to develop a voice appropriate for TV or radio.) And even today, within the last year or so, I still receive mail from people who saw the show when they were kids, learned a little something about how to draw from it, and wrote to thank me because they said "Charlie's Pad" gave them the ability to draw for their own children. (Here's a footnote: that series led to my first speaking engagement in 1970 at Xavier College in New Orleans, which invited me there to do a talk on cartooning.)

You will probably never see this series. It was broadcast before the era of VCRs. I have a DVD with three sample shows on it, sent to me by WSIU-TV. That station, I was informed recently, now only has those three shows left. The rest, 49 15-minute lessons (preserved on very old technology) were lost when one of the out-going station directors did some housecleaning. But the director who replaced him said he grabbed those three shows at the last minute. A couple of years ago, that director broadcast those three shows locally in southern Illinois as part of a series WSIU-TV did on the early days of PBS programming. It was an exciting era in the history of PBS, and I guess "Charlie's Pad" is a kind of window onto those wild and wooly early days.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:57 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/return-to-old-pad.html

Saturday, October 22, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON AND THE GOOD THING

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "I've asked you many questions for the last ten months, now comes the big one. What is the good thing?"

Today's question won't take long to answer. In *Faith and the Good Thing* when the Swamp Woman is asked about the Good Thing, which is based on a popular black phrase in the 1970s and obviously refers to Plato's notion of the Good, she replies, "The Good *Thing*? You sure you ain't committin' the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness, girlie?" Well, of course, Faith Cross *is* committing that fallacy described by Alfred North Whitehead. The Swamp Woman tries to get her to see that what she desires cannot be---not ever---a *thing*. Later, at the novel's end, Faith's odyssey comes to rest provisionally and tentatively on her belief that the Good Thing is love.

Ancient Greek philosophy is much concerned with three, grand themes: the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. (Even the Swamp Woman conflates goodness and beauty, but playfully elevates them above whatever we mean by "truth.") I have absolutely no desire to rewrite that early novel (for I still believe that the experience of love in its many manifestations underlies those things we judge to be good); but if I *were* to revise that text 37-years after its publication, I would want to add to the many philosophical explanations of the Good that Faith encounters (2,000 years worth of ethical positions from the Greeks to the existentialists appear in that novel) the voice of W.E.B. Du Bois in 1926 when in his address "Criteria of Negro Art," he imagines with clarity of vision and hard-won wisdom the conditions required for the realization of "a beautiful world":

"...if we had the true spirit; if we had the Seeing Eye, the Cunning Hand, the Feeling Heart; if we had, to be sure, *not perfect happiness, but plenty of good hard work, the inevitable suffering that comes with life; sacrifice and waiting,* all that---but,

nevertheless, lived in a world where men know, *where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life*." (Italics mine.)

In other words, my sense in 2011 of the Good Thing is a good life, one lived within the contours so eloquently and realistically described by Du Bois.

W.E.B. Du BOIS

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:48 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/charles-johnson-and-good-thing.html

Saturday, October 22, 2011

FATE AND DESTINY: LETTING THE BIRDS GO FREE

"In our myriad deeds, whatever we do,
We reap our own rewards, it's true.
Who can we blame for our woe in the hells?
Who can there be to blame but ourselves?"
From *The Buddha Speaks the Sutra of Cause and Effect in the Three Periods of Time.*

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "How does a Buddhist deal with concepts like fate and destiny?" The traditional, Buddhist answer to this question is that our "fate" or "destiny" is determined in the strictest cause-and-effect fashion by the karma we create (intentional deeds) in our present and past lives. This is simply another way of saying, "As you sow so shall you reap."

On my desk in front of me right now is a 20-page pamphlet for Buddhist children, entitled *The Buddha Speaks the Sutra of Cause and Effect in the Three Periods of Time.* It was translated by the Buddhist Text Translation Society, Dharma Realm Buddhist Association, Talmage, California in 1988. The illustrations are by Lee Fei-meng (Nyou Ge) and Feng Dz-Kai. One of my martial art friends acquired this powerful---and sometimes disturbing---instruction manual on karma for kids when he was attending a Seattle Buddhist temple for lessons in Chinese.

Everything one reads in this instruction book is correct from a traditional point of view, and applies to the realm of conventional reality (*saṁvrti-satya*). "All men and women of the world," it says, "whether they are poor and lowly, or wealthy and noble, whether they are undergoing fruitless sufferings or enjoying blessings without end, are experiencing causes and effects from their past lives." In this text, this pre-scientific formula is presented literally, along with illustrations, that supposedly "explain" why certain people are living with certain pleasant or unpleasant conditions. For example:

"Sometimes people have plentiful goods,
The reason, in fact, again is quite fair.
In the past those people gave food to the poor."

"Others don't have food or drink,
Who can guess the reason why?
Before those people were plagued with a fault:
Stingy greed made them squeeze every penny."

"The well-to-do among us dwell
In tall mansions and vast estates.
The reason is they gladly gave rice,
Lavishing gifts of grain on monasteries."

"Some people's features are fine and perfect.
Surely the reason for such rewards

Is the beautiful flowers they offered to Buddhas."

This book for kids even goes so far as to state "Servants and slaves made that bondage themselves/By neglecting repayment of goodness done them."
With our modern, liberal-humanist and Western eyes we can easily see the inherent problem with this method for interpreting someone's "fate." Thousands of years ago, this inflexible method of interpretation was used in India to not only "explain" but also justify the exclusion of Untouchables from society. Here, on page 10, it is used to "explain" why some people are destined or fated to be slaves and servants. (Obviously, those with a Marxist orientation, who believe that "behind every great fortune there is a great crime," will not buy this explanation for why some are poor and others are not.) This narrow conception of karma gives us a bit of insight into the feeling that lay Buddhists throughout southeast Asia have that they must make "merit." In Thailand, you can buy merit. Venders with birds in cages will, if you pay them, allow you to open the cages and let the birds go free: instant good karma! And, yes, I did that when I was in Chiang Mai. But let's not forget one thing: this book I'm describing is for *children.*

Personally, and in terms of my experience, I know nothing about past lives or reincarnation. Nothing! And a wise Buddhist abbot I interviewed in Thailand in 1997 didn't simply tell me not to talk about reincarnation, he urged me to not even *think* about it. (He saw his people's concern with merit-making as a sad, backward practice. As a philosophy based on change and impermanence, Buddhism itself is clearly obliged to change and evolve beyond erroneous ideas from its early, pre-scientific history.) I believe his suggestion was wise (and it fits well with my own insistence upon epistemological humility, and my certainty that the Other will always to some degree remain a mystery). According to legend, Shakyamuni Buddha saw his past lives during his night of awakening. Good for him, I say. But we, as practitioners today, should forget about the empirically unverifiable proposition of past lives. We should also "let go" thoughts about the future. And devote ourselves 100% to mindfully living in the present moment. If we do that, following the Precepts and the Eight-Fold Path, and if there is any truth to karma (which I am not claiming here), then---according to one poplar argument---it follows that the seeds we plant in the present moment will lead to good results in moments to come (the future). That is one of the beauties of Buddhism---its promise to practitioners that right here, right now, we can through our actions liberate ourselves from suffering past and present, and know happiness. We, and no one else, are in control of our lives and "destiny" moment by moment.

But listen: even *that* is beside the point. Even that begs the question. If those seeds planted in the present do *not* lead to the "reward" we desire, so what? Our actions in the present, those devoted to alleviating the suffering of sentient beings (*i.e.*, the Bodhissatva vow), should be performed free of the desire for personal results and rewards. Selfless doing is its *own* reward. Furthermore, who or what is this "self" that experiences reward? We know it, of course, to be a fiction. A construct.

We also find in the literature of Buddhism (and I was also told this by the abbot in Thailand) the understanding that as we progress along the path, the day eventually comes when we create neither "good" nor "bad" karma. We move beyond the realm of relativity. (And if we still unfortunately cling to that notion of good and bad karma, we can offer our good karma to others to ease their suffering.) Farther along on the path, and in terms of absolute reality (*paramārtha-*

satya) we come to see that there is no doer. And no deeds. And the entire issue of karma---"fate" and "destiny"---becomes moot.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 8:22 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/fate-and-destiny-letting-birds-go-free.html

Wednesday, October 26, 2011

THE VISION OF CHARLES JOHNSON

If literature isn't everything, it's not worth a single hour of someone's time. Jean-Paul Sartre.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Where are our writers like Orwell and Wells? Do you consider yourself a visionary writer?"

This is a question of genuine interest to me. I've spent my entire adult life thinking about and working on the issue of literary and philosophical vision in my *oeuvre.* In her work of literary scholarship, *Charles Johnson in Context* (2009), Linda Ferguson Selzer says on page 6, "As a writer whose career has spanned a period of several decades, it is not surprising that Johnson has developed a number of intellectual and cultural interests, *or that concerns left unanswered by one pursuit have sometimes been addressed by his immersion in another*." (Italics mine) What Selzer is saying about my work did not come about by accident. All the things I've created, and various disciplines I've studied, were part of a very conscious, systematic effort to create an inter-disciplinary, multi-cultural body of work that is broad and deep, inventive and expansive. If we are speaking of philosophical vision in all its fullness, we expect for it to exhibit three things: *coherence, consistency,* and *completeness.*

Regarding completeness, you will recall in my longish post on phenomenology, "Creative Philosophy: What You Need to Know" (Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2011), that I said, "As one profile (of an object or subject) is called forth, the others recede from view. Thus to *re*veal (a meaning) is also to *con*ceal (other meanings). To describe an object (to *say*) is also to *show*. But that saying or showing renders other things unseen or 'invisible'." In terms of intellectual and creative practice, what that means in terms of my work is that I've attempted to show as many profiles (meanings) as possible across creative works that span novels, short stories, essays, literary criticism, literary journalism, screen-and-teleplays, drawings, etc. (If I have not written about a subject, there is a very strong possibility that I drew something about it.) But we know the field in which meanings unfold has an ever-receding horizon. In other words, we shall as historically situated subjects never be able to describe *all* possible profiles or meanings for *any*thing. (And that insures that life will always be surprising and full of the unexpected.) However, I have worked during my lifetime at consciously trying to disclose as many profiles for racial and cultural phenomenon as I can. (And my current interest in science fiction---stories like "Popper's Disease," "Sweet Dreams," "Guinea Pig," and "One Minute Past Midnight" as well as the in-progress novel I'm working on with Steven Barnes, *A War in Heaven*---arises specifically from the need to make a greater presence for contemporary science and technology in my body of work, because phenomena seen from the standpoint of the various sciences reveal a unique meaning, as my dissertation director Don Ihde makes so very clear in his many books.)

In one of my writer's notebooks, I came across this statement I jotted down for myself: "If a writer presents only one side of a problem, one meaning in exclusion to all the others, then that writer is guilty of oversimplification, one-dimensionality, a lack of depth, and an act of violence to the phenomenon itself. He has *denied* its richness, scaled down the possibilities of being, frozen the process of meaning at a single fixed point, and cheated the efflorescence of meaning.

His (or her) work may be emotionally powerful, it may be rhetorically strong, but it does not have the integrity of real thought, which presents an open-ended series of phenomenological profiles, the light as well as the dark." I feel comfortable with standing by that statement.

Something else that should be said is that, in my humble opinion, a body of work should deliver both theory and practice. Thus, you will find stories and visual art in my *oeuvre* alongside works that are theoretical (*Being and Race*, "Philosophy and Black Fiction," "A Boot Camp for Creative Writing," "Whole Sight," "Storytelling and the Alpha Narrative," even a very early 1973 article I wrote and illustrated entitled "Creating the Political Cartoon"), *i.e.*, philosophical and critical books, essays, and articles that clarify the aesthetic principles that are the foundation for artistic practice. I recall decades ago my dear literary agent asking me "why" I was writing *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970.* Her question was reasonable. Creative writers seldom write works of aesthetics. But my reason for doing it was that, in addition to it being my Ph.D. dissertation, we lacked in our literature a phenomenological aesthetics applied to works of black fiction.

It is truly my hope that when scholars and students (or general readers) examine my body of work they will find interpretations (or creative renditions) that cover a wide range of subjects; they should be able to find *some*thing that addresses ontology or metaphysics, the nature of (Buddhist) perception, the nature of the self, theory of knowledge, politics and race and culture, aesthetics, theory of language, ethics, religion, American history, etc., etc. (I should note here that I probably have more yet to do with theory of science and logic because, as Buddhist scholar Richard Hayes once said, ""99.98% of all discourse in the United States is made up of informal fallacies," with the two worst offenders being *argumentum ad hominem* or an attack on someone's character instead of their argument; and *argumentum ad verecundiam*, or an appeal to authority.)

In his introduction for *Charles Johnson: The Novelist as Philosopher* (2007), in the section entitled "Charles Johnson and Western Philosophical Traditions," literary scholar Marc Conner remarks that, "Johnson has long been intimately engaged with the very roots of western philosophical thought: the pre-Socratics, those Greek thinkers who preceded the great age of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle by several generations...Intriguingly, when it comes to the more famous successors to the pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle, John's engagement is much diminished. This is not surprising: for Plato's adherence to rationalism and idealism, and Aristotle's adherence to empiricism and realism, are neither particularly sympathetic to Johnson's own thought."

When I read those words by Dr. Conner, I realized and had to confess that he was right. I've worked with Heraclitus and Parmenides far more often than I have with Plato or Aristotle (and for reasons that he carefully explains). But this "diminished" presence in my body of work, this intellectual weakness, if you will---and Marc pointing that out---mildly annoyed me. So to clear up this matter, I wrote in 2007 a short story entitled "The Cynic," a tale narrated by Plato, who speaks at length about his teacher Socrates, Diogenes, and many other philosophers. Aristotle even makes a cameo appearance as a young student of Plato. In other words, Dr. Conner's

critique inspired me to make an effort to fill in this obvious intellectual and creative "gap" in my body of work.

For years now I've expressed (to myself) my particular literary vision in a single phrase that joins together East and West, the ancient and the modern, the rigorously philosophical and the spiritual: phenomenological Buddhism.

And is there more to say on this subject of vision? Well, yes, of course. Much more. But let me conclude with yet another notation from my writer's workbook: "Any discipline or field at any moment has areas where it is both strong and weak, and it is the latter that always makes discovery, innovation, and creativity possible. There are areas in any field that are gray, weak, inconclusive, and uncertain in development---this is a guarantee that a significant contribution can be made in that field."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:32 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/vision-of-charles-johnson.html

Thursday, October 27, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON RESPONDS TO THE READER ROSSI

Today's question isn't from E. Ethelbert Miller, but instead was a comment on October 22, 2011 by Rossi Lamont Walter in response to my "A Return to the Old Pad" post. Rossi Lamont Walter asks: "I am very curious about the origins and ideology behind this Free School at SIU that Charlie mentioned. Could you ask him to elaborate on what this was, why it was, and what kind of people took advantage of it?"

I had to dig deep into my old, yellowed files to come up with information on Southern Illinois University's Free School in the late 1960s. Here is a schedule, dated January 20, 1969, which was printed (I think) in an off-campus publication, though it might have appeared in the campus newspaper *The Daily Egyptian:*

Free School Classes

The following weekly classes are offered free of charge to all. Classes begin week of January 20, 1969.

Mondays

Poetry	7:30 pm Library Lounge
Chemical Warfare	7:30 pm 212 E. Pearl
Marshall McLuhan	8:00 pm Matrix
Free School Concept	9:00 pm 212 E. Pearl

Tuesdays

Social Biology	9:00 pm Library Lounge
Film Making	8:00 pm Matrix
Leadership	7:30 pm Library Lounge
Indian (East) Culture	7:30 Univ. Center Rm C
Harrad Experiment	5 pm " " (cafe)
Allan Watts Philosophy	7:30 pm 212 E. Pearl

Wednesdays

Cartooning	7:30 pm Main 201
Creative Can Smashing	7:30 pm 212 E. Pearl
Poetry Workshop	2:00 pm 212 E. Pearl
Art of Essay	7:30 pm Main 102
Tape Recording	7:30 pm Main 206
Experience	9:15 pm 212 E. Pearl
Music Aesthetics	7:30 pm Home Ec. 206

Thursdays

Democratic Communism	3:00 pm Main 203
International Issues	12 noon 913 S. Ill.
Marcuse, New Left	7:30 pm 212 E. Pearl
Photography (Begin)	7:30 pm 212 E. Pearl
Photography Composition)	8:00 pm Main 102

Saturdays

Guitar (Advanced)	2:00 pm Matrix

Sundays

Guitar (Begin)	2:00 pm Library Lounge
Bodypainting	2:00 pm 212 E. Peral

Free School at University Park "Intercourse"

Group Dynamics	(Tim Weber)
Art	(Dave Johnson)
Physics Help Session	(Larry Bennett)
Jazz	(Jon Taylor)
Philosophie	(Tim Weber)
Rap	(Larry Bennett)

For more information---Student Activities Office 435-3093.

If memory serves, both students (grad and undergrad) and faculty could teach any course they were passionate about in Free School. My class met on Wednesdays at 7:30 PM in the Old Main Building, room 201 on campus. One of my best friends at the time, Dr. Scott Kramer, another undergraduate philosophy major (who for 20 years or so now has taught philosophy in a community college in Spokane, WA), taught Beginning Guitar Lessons on Sundays. But please don't ask me to remember what the courses entitled "Chemical Warfare" or "Experience" were about. Nor do I have any idea what the second section called "Intercourse" refers to. Remember, Free School happened in the late '60s during the height of the Vietnam War (and at SIU the Vietnam Studies Center was thought by many students, and faculty, to be involved with the CIA; it was the target of continual student protests), and during the height of counter-cultural sensibilities. If Free School had an "ideology," it was probably based on the idea of expanding the curriculum beyond what was officially offered by the university. Students were not given course credits for taking any of these classes. One of my fellow students, Buzz Spector, who is an installation artist, sometimes collaborator with Adrian Piper, former Department Chair of Cornell's Department of Art and currently Dean of the College and Graduate School of Art in the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis (he was also my fellow student at Evanston Township High School, but was a poet and just called himself Franklin Spector in those days) once remarked to me that SIU,

unlike elite ivy league schools in the 1960s, was "wide-open" for student activism; it had no hoary traditions to uphold that might hold one down, and so the possibilities for Baby Boomer student creativity---and political activism---were plentiful. In that place, at that time, blue-collar, working-class kids from the city (Chicago, St. Louis), were brought together with Vietnamese exchange students, and kids from the country (one of my dormitory roommates who was drafted and sent to 'Nam was from a place called Flatrock, Illinois).

Looking through my old scrapbooks, I see that I asked students in my cartooning class to turn in weekly assignment, which I graded. The list of topics the course covered were: The Cartoon Figure; The Cartoon Head (Expressions); Exaggeration and Realism; Cartoon Composition; Light and Shadow; Perspective; Pen and Ink Delineation; Cartoon Types; Cartoon Animals; Cartoon Landscapes; Comic Strip Techniques; Marketing Cartoons; Reproduction Procedures; The Cartoon Rough; Editorial Cartooning; Basic History of Cartooning; Caricaturing; How to Create Gags; Tools of the Trade; Cartoon Juxtapositioning; Cartooning Backgrounds; and Analysis of Contemporary Cartooning.

Rossi, I hope this post will suffice as a partial answer to your question. Thank you for asking it.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:16 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/charles-johnson-responds-to-reader.html

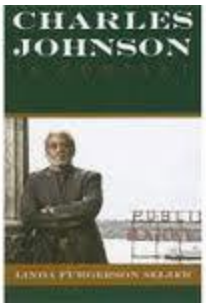
Friday, October 28, 2011

JOHNSON'S PRIVATE THOUGHTS ON PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What are the challenges and pitfalls of becoming a public intellectual? Has our media redefined this term? What key subjects should a public intellectual study or master before talking to the public?"

Many, many books have been published on this subject, which has been an on-going matter of debate stretching from 1897 when Alexander Crummell, W.E.B. Du Bois and A.H. Grimke established the American Negro Academy to Harold Cruse's highly influential *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), and finally to the new generation of black public intellectuals that emerged in the 1980s. Among the important works that trace this debate is Linda Furgerson's Selzer's *Charles Johnson in Context.* A third of her book is thematically devoted to exploring in great detail the complex role of "black public intellectuals" in American society and the dangers inherent in that role. I strongly recommend that E-Channel readers interested in this question read Dr. Selzer's thoroughly researched account of the ways different people have defined "public intellectual" in general (for example, "as thinkers who directly engage with or are engaged by nonacademic publics") and how those definitions can be applied in particular to black Americans today (a "thoroughly credentialed and completely professionalized black intellectual class"). In her book, Selzer observes that:

"Many other critics and black intellectuals, however, are suspicious of the celebrity status of new black intellectuals and are worried about its consequences for scholarship. Partly because he believes that the term 'intellectual' is trivialized by its associations with celebrity, Johnson prefers the word 'scholar.' He explains: 'When one's reputation is founded not so much on a ground breaking work of scholarship but rather on being well known, it follows that one most strive mightily to stay newsworthy, no matter how shallow, hastily executed, or ephemeral one's work becomes. The painstaking, slow work of scholarship becomes replaced by media appearances, often shameless self-promotion, and even the dubious distinction of being 'controversial' buys one a headline in the press and Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame on the Oprah Winfrey show.' (Hortense) Spillers also expresses serious reservations about the performative conditions that obtain in the new public sphere for black intellectuals. She argues that 'public discourse has been immeasurably diminished since the late sixties and the explosion of image industries.' Criticizing Cornel West's decision to leave Harvard for Princeton (after his confrontation with then-Harvard president Lawrence Summers), Thulani Davis notes that the new black scholar's increasing celebrity can lead to 'power plays' driven by a desire 'to enhance...already cushy careers.' In short, with the growth of blogs, talk shows, twenty-four-hour news cycles, sound bites, and what Spillers calls the increasing 'theatricalization of culture,' many critics and public intellectuals---including Johnson---are concerned that the public sphere now privileges the fleeting cameo appearance over the sustained scholarly project."



There is very little I can add to Dr. Selzer's thoughtful examination. In the above paragraph, she quotes from my essay, "The Role of the Black Intellectual in the Twenty-first Century," which readers should examine if they wish to see my entire argument. That essay is reprinted in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (Scribner, 2003). To this day I remain uncomfortable with (and find myself dismissive of) artists or intellectuals who hunger after fame and celebrity, because I cannot forget the wisdom given to us 108 years ago by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

"...to make men, we must have ideals, broad, pure, and inspiring ends of living---not sordid money-getting, not apples of gold. The worker must work for the glory of his handiwork, not simply for pay; *the thinker must think for truth, not for fame.* And all of this is gained only by human strife and longing; *by ceaseless training and education*; by founding Right on righteousness and Truth on the unhampered search for Truth." (Italics mine)

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:43 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/johnsons-private-thoughts-on-public.html

Saturday, October 29, 2011

WHAT DOES THE E STAND FOR?

In fiction there must be a theoretical basis to the most minute details. Even a single glove must have its theory. Prosper Mérimée

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "How does one remove ego from the creation of art?"

I was recently at a reading. I won't tell you where it was, or the day, or who read with me, or who sponsored this event. I was the evening's main reader so I read last. This gave me a chance to focus on the younger artists who preceded me. One was a spoken-word poet who, with neither notes or a manuscript, talked remarkably fast, nearly hyperventilating, and at the highest volume her voice could achieve as she blasted every kind of person she disliked (homophobes, rich people), and became so worked up, there on stage, that she nearly broke down in tears. (Really. She was spilling her guts, giving us theater and all her fears, all her angers, and so at one point she had to pause to calm herself down.) Another reader detailed her sorrow at being still poor in her forties, and how a great writer in similar circumstances gave her inspiration to keep on keeping on. As I sat listening before it was my turn to read, I realized that the works I was listening to were all about the egos of these performers. These presentations were nothing if not *confessional.* These young writers had feelings in great abundance to share, but no story to tell (or certainly not one that created suspense and made a listener wonder "What happens next?"). Their subject matter was derived from some aspect of the biography, likes and dislikes of the performer herself or himself. Each performance, therefore, became simply a small stage or theater for the display of *I, me, myself.*

Over four decades, I've been to countless readings like this one. They help me understand, for example, why so many of my former students write to me for help with getting their often rejected works published---works that are about their struggles with bad marriages, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, and other personal problems. With these young (and some old) writers, and with performances like the one I just described in the preceding paragraph, literary art is understood, rightly or wrongly, to *be* about the artist himself or herself. A listener cannot separate the performance from the writer's ego needs. They are understood to be one and the same. And sometimes an over-the-top spectacle of emotionalism---chewing the curtains, as I think they say in theater---is seen as "art." (But we know, of course, from Aristotle's *Poetics* that

while "spectacle" momentarily hits every audience hard because of its shock value, spectacle is not art.) There can be no question, at least in my mind, that this naked display of ego takes a certain amount of courage---or perhaps a degree of exhibitionism (which, once again, is yet another name for ego.). I'll let you decide which is the appropriate designation.

But there is another, more satisfying way to envision the job of the artist, especially the professional storyteller, who is able to write about any subject he is called upon to dramatize. In his excellent book, *The Golden Theme: How To Make Your Writing Appeal To The Highest Common Denominator*, film-maker Brian McDonald says this:

"As a storyteller, you are a servant of your story, not the master. You must do what it requires, not what you want to do. You remove your ego from it. Art is not to show people who *you* are; it is to show people who *they* are."

I think that is the best answer to today's question. The story I read on the evening I've described was one I worked on for a month, day and night. I spent that amount of time on it because every imaginative story presents numerous problems of *techne* to solve and decisions that have to be made. Who are these characters (who, by the way, are *not* me)? What names will I give them that are appropriate for their class, and the culture and era in which they live? How do I incarnate or give flesh to the theme or idea we all were asked to write about nine months ago? What is the setting? The conflict or ground situation from which the dramatic action will arise? Do I open with scene or narration? (And, if narration, should this story be told in first-person, second-person, or third-person?) Do I open before the protagonist is thrown into a state of dis-equilibrium (in other words, before his conflict aries?) or *in media res* when he is already in the thick of things? Two places for emphasis in a story (as well as in a sentence) are at the beginning and end. So what intriguing line (narration or dialogue) would be best to open the story? What would be the most appropriate balance of dramatic scene and narration for this story? All questions related to Who, What, Where, When, Why and How had to answered.

For months prior to writing the story, I assembled a fat folder of articles related to the theme we were given to write about. As my deadline for the story approached, after I had a first draft I could massage and rewrite and tinker with, I devoted a full week and a half to revisions, *i.e.*, looking at each sentence, each image, each line of dialogue hundreds of times. With dialogue, each speech had to be in language appropriate to the character's level of education, his or her individual background, etc. I started with one working title, then abandoned it for a different, better one that appeared on the page mid-way through the story, which I could not have thought of when I began writing weeks earlier. In fact, the slow work of developing a first draft for three weeks was all about discovery, keeping my mind open to possibilities. Where did my protagonist live? With his mother? All right, then, what is *she* like? As I began to carefully sculpt details for his mother a shift in the story appeared. That is, once I began to know her better, I knew the protagonist better, and that enabled me to see more clearly how he would possibly behave in part three of the story when he must finally resolve the conflict that arises for him in part one.

Week after week, this is how things went. Asking questions about the performers. Patiently waiting for the developments in the story to surprise me. And for lines I revised over and over again to reach that point whey they delivered through layering a revelation or linguistic surprise

that I didn't know was coming. During the last week and a half, I scoured 40 years of my writer's notebooks, looking for any idea, scrap of description, or thought I'd jotted down 10 or 20 or 35 years ago, any individual words that would be right for this in-progress story. I drilled down on details. Each and every object, prop, and article of clothing had to be moved from a generic description (if possible) to a concrete, individuated one with poetic inscape---it wasn't good enough to just say there were anti-depressant and anti-psychotic drugs in a character's bathroom cabinet; we needed these objects to be Zoloft, Paxil, and Risperdal. It wasn't enough to say a character entered a kitchen; it needed to be a Viking kitchen where moonlight streamed through the windows. On and on, this is how I revised, working to achieve maximum specificity for as many details as possible to create a convincing, imaginative world, trying to see in my mind's eye the story and its scenes at every moment. Did the characters drive south from north Seattle to Sea-Tac airport? Then what route did they take? I typed in their starting point and destination in MapQuest to determine the best directions. Did one character live in the affluent Seattle neighborhood called Interlaken? I did a little quick research on that (Google)---what homes there sold for, what they looked like, inside and out, the history of homes built there in the 1920s. I also drilled down on sentences. What would be the rhythm between short and long sentences? Between ones that were periodic and loose (the periodic sentence is always good for creating suspense)?

Then, in the final two or three days before I had to read the story, I cut mercilessly---ruthlessly---removing anything that slowed the pacing, anything I personally loved in earlier drafts that didn't actually serve the story and its characters, anything that was more about my own subjective quirks and eccentricities than the needs of the story at a particular moment. I let my wife read the story and give me feedback. She felt one small detail needed rethinking. I made that change, and even down to the eleventh hour I was polishing and re-polishing the final sentence, the one that would bring closure to the story. After a month of labor like this I was sick of the story and a bit exhausted. A pile of drafts had grown steadily, day after day, in one corner of my study. But by that time I couldn't remove a single sentence without disrupting the meaning and music of the sentences that came before and after it. That is when I knew the story was as done as I could possibly make it after 30-plus days of work and concentration. All questions raised by the story had been answered. Every word and sentence had been subjected to scrutiny hundreds---if not thousands---of times.

Then the night before the reading, I test-read the story out loud to determine how to perform it. How to be "in character" when I read the speeches by different characters. (And especially for the first-person narrator, a bright, 22-year-old black taxi driver whose education only went as far as one year at a community college.) Where to speed up the reading, where to slow it down. Where the silences or pauses should occur. Naturally, a few hours before the reading I sat in formal meditation to bring myself a degree of tranquility in mind, body and spirit. To "let go" the work of the previous month, to offer it in the spirit of sacrifice, and with the hope that it would be of service to others.

During that month of work, of focusing on hundreds of details in the story, there was simply no place for my ego. No room for it to arise. The fictional world, the object incubating in my consciousness day and night, forced out all thoughts or concerns of ego. Of *me, myself,* or *I.* Doing this work was no more about my ego than would be the building of a chair or a table for

which I would lovingly dwell on each and every detail until I made what struck me as being the right and inevitable choices. All this is captured, I think, in an epigraph I used for an earlier post, one from *Concentration and Meditation* by Christmas Humphreys:

"As a student wrote: If one is trying to do something really well, one becomes, first of all, interested in it, and later absorbed in it, which means that one forgets oneself in concentrating on what one is doing. But when one forgets oneself, oneself ceases to exist, since oneself is the only thing which causes oneself to exist."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:15 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/what-does-e-stand-for.html

Sunday, October 30, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON FACE TO FACE

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "If you were interviewing Charles Johnson what might be the first question you would ask him? Are there any questions you would love to discuss and talk about but few people ask you?"

If I were to interview me, I would begin with these 10 questions:

(1) "Given that you were born just after World War II in 1948, just before America became a super-power and an empire in the second half of the 20th century, and only seven years before the Civil Rights Movement that ended racial segregation and completed the work left unfinished by the Civil War, how would you describe the specific challenges---artistic, intellectual, political, and personal---that you encountered and had to deal with as a citizen and a black member of the Baby Boom generation?"

(2) "We know that art does not happen outside history. Art is always forged in the tempestuous crucible of a particular historical moment. It is a specific hour in cultural history, in the enveloping society, and in the state of one's profession(s) at a moment in time, which define and determine the real creative and imaginative possibilities for the work of any artist, scientist, educator or scholar. His methods, the styles the artist selects from, even the questions he asks---all these are shaped by the specific cultural and historical forms in play (and sometimes out of play) when he begins to create. This being the case, in your work as a literary artist and philosopher, what was the state of these professions when you showed up? When you, as a young man, entered the domains of literature and philosophy, who was *already* in those rooms, so to speak, preceding you and whom you had to react to, positively or negatively? (And what did they think of you?) What forms were out of play in black and/or American literature, philosophy, and English departments when you showed up as a writer? Which were dominant?"

(3) "Who are your ideal examples of black Americans? Which black predecessors do you draw inspiration from and why? Which blacks folks, past and present, disappoint you, make you want to pull out your hair, and turn in your Race identification card?"

(4) "What is your attitude toward white people? Do you like any? If so, which ones and why? What do white and black Americans do that annoys you most?"

(5) "What sort of hurts and pain happened to you when you were growing up that made the Buddhist message that begins with the fact of suffering so compelling to you? Do you think you will experience liberation in this life, and finally get off the Wheel of Rebirth?"

(6) "How have you and your wife managed to be married for 41 years? How did both of you change over time, but still manage to love each other and take each other's happiness as a priority? Do you enjoy Platonic relationships with other women?"

(7) "What are your hopes for your children?"

(8) "If you could have devoted your life to different professions than the ones you found yourself immersed in, what would those be?"

(9) "Do you think that black Americans on the whole and in general will be competitive with other groups in a knowledge-based, global economy as the 21st century wears on?"

(10) "What are your personal fantasies? The ones your imagination keeps returning to? The ones you practice meditation to free yourself from?"

These 10 questions are just the start of what I would ask in a self-interview. I could go on with more questions. But, listen: if you ask me any of these questions, I won't answer some of them, because I intend to take the answers with me to my grave.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 9:53 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/10/charles-johnson-face-to-face.html