The Celestine Nonprofit

Zen and the art of conveyor-belt maintenance

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I recently had a dream involving veteran CNN stud Wolf Blitzer. He was reporting a story about those people who'd convened across North America to link hands in some vast display of national unity. Eager participants in the Rockies all died from hypothermia, while those in the Plains states suffered lethal sun exposure and melanoma. The Mississippi River overflowed with the bloated remains of overzealous Samaritans. The handful of survivors all complained of theft, having been pickpocketed while locked in their love chain.

I awoke in a cold shiver and was forced to consider the lengths to which I would cheerfully go just for a chance at airtime: Apply my expensive Shiseido foundation to a Victim's lesions for CNN? Sure -- will Sharon Stone be there?

I was promptly overwhelmed with guilt. I hate people like me.

In hopes of quick relief from such early morning loathing, I popped in a VHS cassette of that charming self-declared monarch of self-transcendence, Her Hayness Louise. She simply stuns me. "Thrive and bloom in a world without guilt," she's likely to say. Luckily, her New Age Old Woman wisdoms are available in a variety of convenient formats, all priced to move.

Left unsatisfied, I elected to satisfy my spiritual ennui in a different way: I enlisted for duty at a nonprofit organization I was sure had no satellite hookup with CNN -- San Francisco's favorite soup kitchen, Project Open Hand.

Of course, being one to kill as many birds with as few stones as possible, I had the keen foresight to register my volunteer hours with a little- known secret of the state of California -- Project 20. This program affords the merry motorist a chance to pay off mounting parking violations through manual servitude.

That settled, my arrival at Project Open Hand had me contemplating its acronym, POH, as in Edgar Allan, or, "Gimme food, I'm POH." I thought its brazen clarity invigorating. What ensued was a grisly three-hour shift involving the tedious repetition of a single motion to fill 1,400 luncheon trays dawdling down a conveyer belt. No Lucy and Ethel panicking to save the chocolates, this. It was more like watching the luggage carousel at the Leningrad airport.

Finally, my brush with Zen completed, I found that my inner ugliness had actually increased. Anxious to quench my growing void, I decided to go to a revival screening of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. Watching Shelley Duvall come unglued could easily stimulate my dried fig of a soul.

Shooting for all this heady spiritual depth in one day would require the company of a nurturing escort. I decided to invite the usually mirthful Aretha Myacin, a scholar from the Institute of Low Brow High Camp.

As I arrived, I was disappointed to find him staging a grim operetta of his life for his sizable Persian cat, Fleshy. "You've turned your living room into a tomb by Ethan Allen," I said. "Pull up a plot, dear," he offered.

"I've got a better idea: Let's go see a matinee."

"I couldn't possibly," he quipped throatily. "I have to Knox my nails."

"But Aretha," I argued, "you've been hiding in your apartment for weeks eating nothing but Whitman Samplers. You're starting to look like Marlon Brando in a house dress."

"If you don't like it, get the fuck off my Greek island."

Although biting sarcasm is the usual forte of a queen, I received his invitation to leave as a wholesale insult. "What's come of that life-embracing cheerleader I could always count on for hardened levity? Lead, cheerleader, lead!"

"I can't. I'm uninspired. I'm weak, dammit," he sobbed, "I'm depressed."

"What's the matter, angel-breath? You can tell me."

"Oh, nothing," he said, "except that I want to die and my stove's electric."

Poor Aretha's been on a downward spiral since learning his viral load is so high it's defined in square root.

To complicate matters, he exercises his right to *just say no* to drugs. And this includes protease inhibitors. "I have no inhibitions," he proclaimed with pride.

"The arrival of the new millennium," he pointedly clarified while drawing deeply on a Parliament 120, "has in store something far, far greater than has ever been dreamt of in your fag fads, Horatio. Crack me open a Pabst Blue Ribbon, and we'll ruminate on this."

I left him in a hurry, wishing him well in his stride for failing health. My irritation quickly turned to gratitude as my satori, awaited since morning, finally arrived: It occurred to me that, after toiling through a solid decade of mostly graphic, always unpronounceable diseases of my own, I've developed an acute ability to avoid riding that emotional roller coaster called High Theatrics. Who would've thought?

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