Alphabeticalist 2.1

February 2, 2011 By Jay Vithalani

Astronomer: what I wanted to be as a kid. Visits to the planetarium at Worli were part of my weekly juvenile routine. I still have most of my childhood books about space and space travel, including a couple of *TIME-LIFE* volumes from the early 60s, which now strike me as both charmingly quaint as well as Apollo mission propaganda. (Query: is propaganda always to be understood pejoratively?) I was given a small telescope thirty years ago, on my eighth birthday, by my parents: have I been as uncomplicatedly happy since that time? The night skies of Bombay not being conducive to star gazing -- what with apartment buildings and street lights and, of course, air you can whole-heartedly trust (Woody Allen: "I don't trust air I can't see") -- the little telescope was taken on every family trip outside the city. I used to know my Aldebaran and Betelgeuse from my Vindemiatrix and Zavijava; now I'm hard-pressed to locate even the Big Dipper. The glory of Orion goes unrecognized when I look up at the heavens. And so we age. The child is not always the father of the man.

Blogs: I read many; I write or maintain one. The ones I read fall, mostly, under three (slightly overlapping) categories: American politics, constitutional law, human rights. That third category is very broad, and should be understood to include civil rights generally, gay (LGBTQ) rights, and women's rights. (Oh, I'll glance at the occasional literary or -- oh heavens forfend! -- "cultural" blog now and then; even a few autobiographical ones, if compelled to by guilt or obligation; but these don't, as a rule, hold my interest.) Writing one -- well, this is only my fifth post -- has proven to be a bafflingly pleasant learning experience. How do I strike a balance: tone, topicality, tendentious opinions, truthful voice, too much information? I don't quite know what audience I'm writing for. Or should be writing for. I don't know if I even have, or ever will have, what might charitably termed a "readership." I'm a slow writer. I'm reticent, unlike, say, Carrie Bradshaw ("And I couldn't help but wonder") about the details of my current quotidiana. It's virtually impossible for me to write without recourse to allusion and quotation. Ah, speaking of which: there's also this great observation by Dr. Johnson: "No one but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money." So: I'm an unpaid, picky-picky, molasses-in-winter speed, reticent essayist: and yet I'm blogging for POZ. See the entry on "Contradictions" just below.

Contradictions: the stuff we're made up of. Paradoxes, too. This truth is re-discovered every day and then trumpeted as revelatory. Isn't it tiresome when you read, either in a chatty magazine profile *or* in a scholarly biography, that so-and-so was -- wait for it! -- "a complex, multi-faceted personality, capable of both softness as well as harshness, shyly sociable withal sociably shy" etc etc etc? Did you hear the new revelations about Paris Hilton? Or Tolstoy? A surprise indeed, quite a feat of biographical analysis! This is assumed surprise, and surprise in bad faith. We are none of us consistent, even if we pride ourselves on a wise or foolish consistency; we always are, or should be, surprising ourselves. Philip Larkin, a committed and devout atheist (oxymoron intended), still

found himself drawn to churches. In the final stanza of one of his most famous poems, “Church Going,” he writes, after visiting a quiet and empty Christian building -- a specific church but also representative of churches-in-general -- that “someone will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious.” Amen. And just today, for instance, I surprised myself by actually finishing this blog entry.

Depression: clinical variety and not “just” the blues -- something deeply personal, yet densely strange (“a familiar compound ghost / Both intimate and unidentifiable” -- T.S. Eliot), that I’ve dealt with, off and on, since the age of ten. I’ve never written at any length about this subject, despite being asked to do so many times -- why compose, my rejoinder has always been, yet another depression memoir, why submit to (or go to the trouble of subverting) the conventions of the now-established genre, why tell my (by definition) unique story in the spectacularly banal manner of what is usually found in the memoir section of a bookshop and even more readily in the blogosphere? For the record: I find most books and essays and blog posts about depression pretty annoying (mind-bogglingly repetitive, about as profound in their insights as the average fortune cookie, sick-making prose) though obviously not worthless. At any rate. I pretend to get outraged pretty often; it’s part of my shtick as it were. But one of the few things guaranteed to make me genuinely livid is this kind of pseudo-Nietzschean crap: “Your depression has made you stronger, right, helped you be more creative?” A shrink, of all people, once said that to me, and I had to walk out of his office before the urge to punch him grew too strong. The tendency to invest sadness or melancholia with a kind of allure has existed at different times and in different ways, in the history of our strange species; and of course this tendency, or tradition, endures. But depression, as Susan Sontag remarked, is melancholia minus the glamor. Laying a claim to depression is an act of disrobing and not one of cloaking; it is to reveal a disfigurement, not conceal it with putatively redemptive values.

Épater le bourgeois: which is, literally, “Shock the middle classes.” More generally: be a contrarian, an affront to conventional morality, unafraid to talk past the talking-points. Gosh, how I love doing that! (Though it must be added that the “Vithalani contra mundum” position or posture is getting to be tiring; I am middle-aged after all.) And naughtiness of this kind, if a defense is needed, can be didactic. One example, from more youthful times, must suffice. Whenever a friend said that someone or something was “an asshole,” I would respond with -- using the tone Homer Simpson reserves for saying “Doughnut!” or “Beer!” --“Mmm, aaaassshole!” (A look of smug contentment -- rehearsed, of course -- on my face, a shocked or bewildered or rolling-of-the-eyes expression on that of whoever was the unfortunate auditor.) The point, ahem, was to get the subject of rimming, and anal sex more generally, out of the closet. Needless to say, this sort of thing can be carried out too far or for too long, resulting in tedium rather than a pleasantly recalibrating shock.

Food: something which should come in the form of pills, the way Nature intended. (It’ll happen yet: NASA, I’m counting on you.) One of the witches in *Macbeth* makes a reference to a “rump-fed ronyon” (i.e., fattened as well as feeding on scraps); in my battered school copy of the play an irreverent genius had written in the margin: “Wouldn’t intravenous have been more hygienic?” Oh, alright: I don’t wish my nutrition to come either through a needle in my veins or with leftovers being stuffed up my butt. But the culinary arts do rank low in my estimation. I *do* like going out to

eat at restaurants, but not for a decorative arrangement of lettuce and peas on some fancily austere china; the complexly simple pleasures of conversation and people-watching are more than enough for me, and the actual food is usually a matter of indifference. Well, there is an eat-to-live vs. live-to-eat divide between people. Foodies, don’t hate on me. Can’t we all just get along?

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