

TOM ROBBINS

“When she was a small girl, Amanda hid a ticking clock in an old rotten tree trunk. It drove woodpeckers crazy. Ignoring tasty bugs all around them, they just about beat their brains out trying to get at the clock. Years later, Amanda used the woodpecker experiment as a model for understanding capitalism, Communism, Christianity and all the systems that traffic in future rewards rather than in present realities.”

from *Another Roadside Attraction*

“What would you like to see first?” Amanda’s father asked his budding twelve-year-old upon their arrival in Paris. “I’d like to visit the brothels,” answered Amanda, scarcely looking up from her onion soup. Amanda’s papa refused to take his pubescent daughter into the Parisian flesh pots, but pointed them out to her from the window of a taxi. Whereupon the child asked, “Father, if you were in a whorehouse and you couldn’t finish, would it be permissible to ask for a bowser bag to take the leftovers home?”

from *Another Roadside Attraction*

“But to say it’s all meaningless. Isn’t that a cop-out?”

“Maybe. But it seems to me that the real cop-out is to say that the universe has meaning but that we ‘mere mortals’ are incapable of ever knowing that meaning. Mystery is a part of nature’s style, that’s all. It’s the Infinite Goof. It’s meaning that is of no meaning. That paradox is the key to the meaning of meaning. To look for meaning - or the lack of it - in things is a game played by beings of limited consciousness. Behind everything in life is a process that is beyond meaning. Not beyond understanding, mind you, but beyond meaning.”

from *Another Roadside Attraction*

"Recent neurological research indicates that the brain is governed by principles it cannot understand. And if the brain is so weak or timid that it is incapable of comprehending its own governing principles...then it is not going to be much use to anyone confronting the Ultimate Questions....This author's advice to his readers is to make the best you can of your brain - it's pretty good storage space and the price is right - and then turn to something else."

from *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

“You’ve heard of people calling in sick? You may have called in sick a few times yourself. But have you ever thought of calling in well?”

It’d go like this: You’d get the boss on the line and say, ‘Listen, I’ve been sick ever since I started working here, but today I’m well and I won’t be in anymore.’ Call in well.

That’s what Dr. Robbins did, exactly... and he wasn’t faking. You can’t fake a thing like that. It’s infinitely harder to pretend you’re well than to pretend you’re sick.

After telephoning, Dr. Robbins donned an electric yellow nylon shirt, and when he tucked it into a pair of maroon bell-bottoms, it was like lightning striking a full wino. Before he left his

apartment, he fed both his alarm clock and his Bulova to the disposal unit. 'I'm passing out of the time of day and into the time of the soul,' he announced. Then, when he considered how pretentious that sounded, he corrected himself: 'Strike that!' he said. 'Let's simply say that I'm well today.'"

from *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

"They continued to grow, the first or most preaxial digits of Sissy's hands. ... (Yes, they grew even as millions of young Americans under social pressure and upon the instructions of their elders, struggled to cease growing; which is to say, struggled to "grow up," an excruciatingly difficult goal since it runs contrary to the most central laws of nature - the laws of change and renewal - yet a goal miraculously attained by everyone in our culture except for a few misfits.")

from *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

"Now Sissy was waiting for an elevator. She waited with a fatigue-induced approximation of that combination of stoicism and anxiety with which people wait for the Big Event that will transform their lives, invariably missing it when it does occur, since both stoicism and anxiety are blinders."

from *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

"It was at this point...that the magic that had attended her thumbs from the moment in her youth when she first made her commitment to a life less shallow, safe and small than our society demands of us, excused itself, tiptoed out of the apartment ... and strolled down to Stanley's Bar on Avenue B for a beer.

Beer does not satisfy magic, however. So the magic ordered a round of Harvey Wallbangers. But it takes more than vodka to fuel magic. It takes risks. It takes EXTREMES."

from *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

"I must warn you: I won't go quietly. Criminals, because they're plagued with guilt, often will surrender and go quietly. Outlaws, because they're pure, never will."

from *Still Life With Woodpecker*

"The only organization I ever joined in my life was the Columbia Record Club," she declared, "and I had to get out of that because it was too disciplined."

from *Jitterbug Perfume*

"The gods have a great sense of humor, don't they? If you lack the iron and fizz to take control of your own life, if you insist on leaving your fate to the gods, then the gods will repay your weakness by having a grin or two at your expense. Should you fail to pilot your own ship, don't be surprised at what inappropriate port you find yourself docked. The dull and prosaic will

be granted adventures that will dice their central nervous systems like an onion, romantic dreamers will end up in the rope yard. You may protest that it is too much to ask of an uneducated fifteen-year-old girl that she defy her family, her society, her weighty cultural and religious heritage in order to pursue a dream that she doesn't really understand. Of course it is asking too much. The price of self-destiny is never cheap, and in certain situations it is unthinkable. But to achieve the marvelous, it is precisely the unthinkable that must be thought."

from *Jitterbug Perfume*

"What makes you think, Mr. Arrogant, that I need to be transformed?' 'Because that's what we're here for. It's obvious. Or do you think we're here to service our debt?'"

Gwendolyn Mati and Larry Diamond in Tom Robbins' *"Half Asleep In Frog Pajamas"*

Q: What is the significance of [the Tarot card] 'the Fool' in *Half Asleep In Frog Pajamas*?

A: We are all, each of us, the Fool; and the Fool's journey is our own journey through life. However, we should make a distinction between Fools -- capital "F" -- and fools -- lower case "f". A Fool is a person who's searching, growing, changing and actively participating in the human whoopjamboreehoo. A fool is a person who has shut down, who has reached a nice comfortable plateau and stopped there, not thinking very deeply, not feeling very much; just consuming, procreating and watching television; clinging desperately to the old values and cliches he or she was once spoon-fed early in life.

The Fool, on the other hand, is a piece of working evolution, complete with trials, errors and ridiculous pratfalls.

The lower case fool isn't necessarily a moron, but rather a robot, a zombie, a drone.

Tom Robbins, from an interview

"Deep down, all of us are probably aware that some kind of mystical evolution is our true task. Yet, we suppress the notion with considerable force because to admit it is to admit that most of our political gyrations, religious dogmas, social ambitions and financial ploys are not merely counterproductive but trivial. Our mission is to jettison those pointless preoccupations and take on once again the primordial cargo of inexhaustible ecstasy. Or, barring that, to turn out a good, juicy cheeseburger and a strong glass of beer."

Tom Robbins, *The Meaning of Life*.

"All a person can do in this life is to gather about him his integrity, his imagination, and his individuality, and with these ever with him, out front and in sharp focus, leap into the dance of experience."

Tom Robbins

The Soul

If you need to visualize the soul, think of it as a cross between a wolf howl, a photon, and a dribble of dark molasses. But what it really is, as near as I can tell, is a packet of information. It's a program, a piece of hyperspatial software designed explicitly to interface with the Mystery. Not a mystery, mind you, the Mystery. The one that can never be solved.

To one degree or another, everybody is connected to the Mystery, and everybody secretly yearns to expand the connection. That requires expanding the soul. These things can enlarge the soul: laughter, danger, imagination, meditation, wild nature, passion, compassion, psychedelics, beauty, iconoclasm, and driving around in the rain with the top down. These things can diminish it: fear, bitterness, blandness, trendiness, egotism, violence, corruption, ignorance, grasping, shining, and eating ketchup on cottage cheese.

Data in our psychic program is often nonlinear, nonhierarchical, archaic, alive, and teeming with paradox. Simply booting up is a challenge, if for no other reason than that most of us find acknowledging the unknowable and monitoring its intrusions upon the familiar and mundane more than a little embarrassing.

But say you've inflated your soul to the size of a beach ball and it's soaking into the Mystery like wine into a mattress. What have you accomplished? Well, long term, you may have prepared yourself for a successful metamorphosis, an almost inconceivable transformation to be precipitated by your death or by some great worldwide eschatological whoopjamboreehoo. You may have. No one can say for sure.

More immediately, by waxing soulful you will have granted yourself the possibility of ecstatic participation in what the ancients considered a divinely animated universe. And on a day to day basis, folks, it doesn't get any better than that.

Tom Robbins in *Esquire*

Miscellaneous [Posted by *Verdant* on the AFTRlife Online Discussion Group]

Both money and art, powdered as they are with the romance and poetry of the age, are magic. Rather, money is magic, art is magik. Money is stagecraft, sleight of hand, a bag of clever tricks. Art is a plexus of forces and influences that act upon the senses by means of practical yet permanently inexplicable secret links. Admittedly, the line between the two can be as thin as a dime. What's more, the magicians of capitalism strengthen their hold on their audience through the manipulation of artistic images.

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"These people aren't performing, for God's sake. Their misery is real."

"Everybody is performing. We only think it's real."

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"Let us be as journalists, then. And like all good journalists, we shall present our facts in an order that will satisfy the famous five W's: wow, whoopee, wahoo, why-not and whew."

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'There are three mental states that interest me... These are: one, amnesia; two, euphoria; three, ecstasy.'

She reached into the cabinet and removed a small green bottle of water-lily pollen. 'Amnesia is not knowing who one is and wanting desperately to find out. Euphoria is not knowing who one is and not caring. Ecstasy is knowing exactly who one is- and still not caring.'

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How can one person be more real than any other? Well, some people do hide and others seek. Maybe those who are in hiding- escaping encounters, avoiding surprises, protecting their property, ignoring their fantasies, restricting their feelings, sitting out the Pan pipe hootchy-kootch of experience- maybe those people, people who won't talk to rednecks, or if they're rednecks won't talk to intellectuals, people who're afraid to get their shoes muddy or their noses wet, afraid to eat what they crave, afraid to drink Mexican water, afraid to bet a long shot to win, afraid to hitchhike, jaywalk, honky-tonk, cogitate, osculate, levitate, rock it, bop it, sock it, or bark at the moon, maybe such people are inauthentic, and maybe the jackleg humanist who says differently is due to have his tongue fried on the hot slabs of Liar's Hell.

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"There's a level on which life might be perceived as a joke, on which it literally is a joke, and this bothers a lot of people. The trickster's function is to break taboos, create mischief, stir things up. In the end, the trickster gives people what they really want, some sort of freedom." Tom Robbins, NY Times.

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"A lot of life boils down to the question of whether a person is going to be able to realize his fantasies, or end up surviving only through compromises he can't face up to. The way I figure it, Heaven and Hell are right here on earth. Heaven is living in your hopes and Hell is living in your fears. It's up to each individual which he chooses." Jelly paused. "I told that to the Chink once and he said, 'Every fear is part hope and every hope is part fear - quit dividing things up and taking sides.' Well, that's the Chink for you. What do you think?"

"I'd like to hear more," said Sissy."

from *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

"[Dr. Goldman] decided to dump Sissy's case on Dr. Robbins, the young intern who had only recently assumed duties at the upper East Side clinic.

Dr. Robbins spent much of his time in the garden, a dreamy expression on his face. He looked like Doris Day with a mustache. He had been overheard yelling at a patient who complained of a lack of purpose in life: "Purpose! Purposes are for animals with a hell of a lot more dignity than the human race! Just hop on that strange torpedo and ride it to wherever it's going."

To a patient who had expressed a wish to overcome his alleged irresponsibility, Dr. Robbins had said, "The man who considers himself 'responsible' has not honestly examined his motives."

To a patient expressing outrage, Dr. Robbins had shouted, “Don’t be outraged, be outrageous!”

At least two patients had received from Dr. Robbins the following advice: “So you think that you’re a failure, do you? Well, you probably are. What’s wrong with that? In the first place, if you’ve any sense at all you must have learned by now that we pay just as dearly for our triumphs as we do for our defeats. Go ahead and fail. But fail with wit, fail with grace, fail with style. A mediocre failure is as insufferable as a mediocre success. Embrace failure! Seek it out. Learn to love it. That may be the only way any of us will ever be free.”

from *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

“A disbelief in magic can force one to believe in government or business.”

* * *

“What limits people is lack of character. What limits people is that they don't have the fucking nerve or imagination to star in their own movie, let alone direct it.”

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“Humanity has advanced, when it has advanced, not because it has been sober, responsible, and cautious, but because it has been playful, rebellious, and immature.”

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“In the haunted house of life, art is the only stair that doesn't creak.”

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“It is never too late to have a happy childhood.”

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“There has got to be Poetry and Magic. Poetry and Magic. At every level.”

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“The bottom line is that (a) people are never perfect, but love can be, (b) that is the one and only way that the mediocre and vile can be transformed, and (c) doing that makes it that. We waste time looking for the perfect lover, instead of creating the perfect love.”

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“Keep your eye on the ball - even when you can't see the ball.”

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“Love is the ultimate outlaw. It just won't adhere to any rules. The most any of us can do is sign on as its accomplice. Instead of vowing to honor and obey, maybe we should swear to aid and abet.”

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“The fool is potentially everyone but not everyone has the wisdom or the guts to play the fool.”

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“Dreams don't come true - dreams are true.”

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“When we can converse with the animals, we will know the change is halfway here. When we can converse with the forest, we will know the change has come.”

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“It is from the unwavering edge of risk that the sweetest honey of freedom drips.”

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“There are only two mantras: Yuk and Yum. I prefer Yum.”

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“A sense of humor, properly developed, is superior to any religion so far devised.”

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“The universe does not have laws. It has habits. And habits can be broken.”

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“If freedom were outlawed only outlaws would be free. Dolphins are outlaws.”

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“She's compassionate and eccentric. An excellent combination in a human being.”

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“Illumination is found only by putting everything one has in jeopardy.”

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“Be your own master! Be your own Jesus! Be your own flying saucer! Rescue yourself. Be your own Valentine! Free your heart!”

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“One of my main themes is joy in spite of everything. I don't think that I am pollyannish; my characters suffer, they die. They experience pain, alienation, frustration--all the hardships of life that real people experience. But, my heroes and heroines, the characters with whom I most identify and who are most important to me, all insist on joy in spite of everything.”

Tom Robbins in Writer's Digest.

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My method--which I don't recommend to aspiring writers--is to never leave a sentence until it is as good as I think I can make it.”

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“I have what I think are really sound philosophical reasons for playfulness.”

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“See, I think we have to ask ourselves--and this is corny in a way--what are we doing here. And I've become convinced, after a lifetime of asking that question, that we are here to enlarge our souls, light up our brains, and liberate our spirits. ”

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“You write a sentence and see where it takes you. You take a trip on the page. You go where sentences lead you. It's a journey.”

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“And what is *your* faith, exactly, Mr. Switters? What do *you* believe in?”

“Umm. Well. I try not to.”

“You try not to believe?”

“That’s right. I’m on the run from the Killer B’s.”

“Pardon? What have killer bees to do with?...”

“B for Belief. B for Belonging. The B’s that lead to most of the killing in the world. If you don’t Belong among us, then you’re our inferior, or our enemy, or both, and you can’t Belong with us unless you Believe what we Believe. Maybe not even then, but it certainly helps. Our religion, our party, our tribe, our town, our school, our race, our nation. Believe. Belong. Behave. Or Be Damned.

“But human beings have----”

“A need to belong somewhere, to believe in something? Yeah, Sister--if I may still call you that--they seem to. It’s virtually genetic. I’m on guard against it and it still overtakes me. The concern is that we may annihilate ourselves before we can evolve, or mutate, beyond it, but you may rest assured that, even if we survive, as long as we’re driven to Belong and Believe, we’ll never be at peace, and we’ll never be free.”

“Ooh-la-la! That’s crazy. A human who belongs to no group or believes in nothing? What kind of robot, what lost animal? No longer human at all.”

“In the sense that a frog is no longer a tadpole, you may be right. And it may never come to pass, or have to. We just might learn enough tolerance, and jettison enough fear and ego, to compensate.....”

Conversation between Switters and Sister Domino Thiry in
Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates - Tom Robbins

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“Well,” she said, “even if you don’t object philosophically to active withdrawal, that doesn’t mean you are personally suited for it. For example, we are very orderly here.”

“So? Nothing wrong with that - as long as you don’t deceive yourself into believing your order is superior to somebody else’s disorder.”

“But disorder is -”

“Often just the price that’s charged for freedom. Order, so-called, has claimed more victims historically than disorder, so-called, and besides, if properly employed, language can provide all of the order a person might ever need in life.....”

Conversation between Switters and Sister Domino Thiry in
Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates. - Tom Robbins

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“Suppose the neutral angels were able to talk Yahweh and Lucifer - God and Satan, to use their popular titles - into settling out of court. What would be the terms of the compromise? Specifically, how would they divide the assets of their earthly kingdom? Would God be satisfied to take loaves and fishes and itty-bitty thimbles of Communion wine, while allowing Satan to have the red- eye gravy, eighteen-ounce New York steaks, and buckets of chilled champagne? Would God really accept twice-a-month lovemaking for procreative purposes and give Satan the all-night, no-holds-barred, nasty “can’t-get-enough-of-you” hot-as-hell fucks? Think about it. Would Satan get New Orleans, Bangkok, and the French Riviera and God get Salt Lake City? Satan get ice hockey, God get horseshoes? God get bingo; Satan, stud poker? Satan get LSD; God, Prozac? God get Neil Simon; Satan, Oscar Wilde? Can anyone see Satan taking pirate radio stations and God being happy with the likes of CBS? God getting twin beds; Satan, waterbeds; God, Minnie Mouse, John Wayne, and Shirley Temple; Satan, Betty Boop, Peter Lorre, and Mae West; God, Billy Graham; Satan, the Dalai Lama? Would Satan get Harley motorcycles; God, Honda golf carts? Satan get blue jeans and fish-net stockings; God, polyester suits and pantyhose? Satan get electric guitars; God, pipe organs; Satan get Andy Warhol and James Joyce; God, Andrew Wyeth and James Michener; God, the 700 Club; Satan, the CRAFT Club; Satan, oriental rugs; God, shag carpeting? Would God settle for cash and let Satan leave town with Mr. Plastic? Would Satan mambo and God waltz? Would Almighty God be that dorky? Or would he see rather quickly that Satan was making off with most of the really interesting stuff? More than likely he would. More than likely, God would holler, “Whoa! Wait just a minute here, Lucifer. I’ll take the pool halls and juke joints, *you* take the church basements and Boy Scout jamborees. You handle content for a change, pal. I’m going to take—*style!*”

Conversation between Switters and Sister Domino Thiry in
Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates. - Tom Robbins

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"(S)uccess," in terms of fame and fortune, is a peculiarly modernist American word that, except in its most poignantly ironic sense, has no place in the vocabulary of the evolved. The only success, for example, with which a writer might be meaningfully concerned, is how successfully his or her adjectives exude their flavors, his or her syntax drums out its cadence, his or her metaphors eternalize their phrases, or whether or not, when their nouns meet their verbs, the verbs yell out, "Gotcha, baby!" For the task of the writer is not to attain recognition or reward but to meditate upon our passing world and, through the working magic of language, awaken in the solitary reader a sense of wonder at that world.

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Yes, friends, in the ego realm, which is a very silly realm indeed, acclaim is pleasant and rejection disagreeable, but since ultimately there is nothing to gain and nothing to lose, neither really matters in the least. What matters is that we enlarge our souls, light up our brains, and liberate our spirits. What matters is that we hop on a strange torpedo and ride it to wherever it's going, ride it with affection and humor and grace, because beyond affection, humor, and grace, all that remains is noise and sociology.

What matters is that we never forget that the little paper match of one individual's spirit can outshine all the treasures of commerce, out-glint all the armaments of government, and out-sparkle the entire disco ball of history. Yet, at its deepest level, even the human spirit, like everything else in the universe, is only a weird dance of electrified nothingness. The undulating shadows this dance throws upon the walls of our sensorium we call "reality." Because they are merely shadows, it's unwise to take them too seriously--but it may be equally unwise not to cherish them.

Tom Robbins in acceptance speech, Golden Umbrella Award, Bumbershoot Arts Festival, Seattle, 1997.

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Q: I wonder what you think about prayer. I like the concept of prayer as presented in Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower," prayer not as petition, but a vehicle to help shape our reality. Do you pray, Tom, and if so how? -- Amy

A: I pray every night without fail -- although not to any of the usual suspects. The God at which I direct my prayers is unnameable, unknowable and indefinable; it (never he or she) is the Which of Which there is no Whicher, and to even call it "God" is a matter of highly over-simplified shorthand. In any case, I've received enough feedback over the years to be reasonably convinced that my prayers are "heard." Prayer is a pretty good way of acknowledging on a regular basis the existence of a higher dimension in the universe, a level of reality far beyond our mundane preoccupations. It's a convenient, low-key way to interface with the Mystery (as opposed to the more time-consuming practice of meditation, or the more dramatic -- and effective -- interface provided by psychedelic drugs). I agree with Octavia Butler that prayer shouldn't be reduced to a litany of pleas and solicitations. Expressions of gratitude and efforts at connection are more appropriate. If God had a bumper sticker, it would probably read: SHINE, DON'T WHINE.

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Q: I have been trying to apply Tom's "Joy, in spite of everything" attitude and I find it very difficult; I believe it's a process, a goal. It seems to me that the characters that have this attitude, it comes naturally, they don't have to work at it. My question is, do you personally have to work at it, or is it just an ingrained part of your personality? Have you ever been disappointed that you chose not to find "Joy, in spite of everything"?

A: Essentially, "joy in spite of everything" amounts to a kind of defiant attitude, a refusal to be victimized by events over which one has no control. It reflects the belief that life is too short to be wasted in the anger or lamentation that easily could be generated by the era or area in which one, by circumstance, happens to reside. We must recognize the injustice and suffering that abounds in the world and do everything we can to alleviate it, yet in the same instant insist on having one hell of a good time. Some individuals do seem to possess an innate ability to be simultaneously caring and carefree, but most of us have to work at it. It's easier for me now than it used to be, though I still struggle with it, finding myself tested, for example, every time an evil fruitcake like Mad John Ashcroft opens his nazified yap.

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Now it has occurred to me to point out that "joy in spite of everything" also amounts to a recognition that all existence is really cosmic theater, and therefore ought never to be taken too seriously. From that perspective, John Ashcroft is merely another actor playing out his role. Sure, Ashcroft wants to turn America into a Christianized Iran with himself as Ayatollah, but as dangerous and reprehensible as that is, it's his role, and that role may well be an essential part of the ongoing drama. From the Tao, we learn that light and darkness are perpetually revolving, and we cannot have one without the other. From a cosmic perspective, it's a self-righteous mistake to align oneself with the light against the dark, to always think in terms of "us" against "them". By all means, vigorously oppose Ashcroft and everything he stands for, but resist the trap of becoming attached to that opposition, bearing in mind that it is also part of the existential drama -- and its ultimate purpose may be to help keep the "story" interesting.

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I'm both pantheistic and monotheistic. Simultaneously. Spiritual truth reveals itself when we interface with Mystery, and contradictions are to Mystery what waves are to the sea. Those poor perplexed pilgrims who shun paradox to go chasing after certainty are spiritual hamsters and intellectual mice spinning in a cage.

Each and every one of us has to establish his or her own one-on-one relationship with the Divine, his or her personal religion. Allowing a priest, pastor, rabbi or imam to do it for you is like allowing a surrogate to make love to your spouse while you, virginal and celibate, stand off to the side and cheer them on. Or something like that.

Elements of Zen, Taoism, Sufi, Tantra, Gnostic Christianity and, especially, Tibetan "crazy wisdom" have all gone into the creation of my unorganized religion. Some other loose cannon might profit from my theological tomfoolery, I don't know, but for me to proselytize it would be to violate its basic principles--especially since its major principle is the refusal to take myself too seriously. One thing this befuddled planet doesn't need is another cosmic salesman with a once-in-a-lifetime offer.

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Ariele: What are the main messages you'd like readers to "get" from your writing?

Tom: Well, if I were forced to distill what is a fairly enormous vat of chunky and hearty stew into a single cup of clear broth, I suppose that the message steaming from that cup would read something like this: "Our lives are not as limited as we think they are; the world is a wonderfully weird place; consensual reality is significantly flawed; no institution can be trusted, but love does work; all things are possible; and we all could be happy and fulfilled if we only had the guts to be truly free and the wisdom to shrink our egos and quit taking ourselves so damn seriously."

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Ariele: What do you think "writer's block" is, and have you ever had it?

Tom: I'm not convinced that there's any such thing as "writer's block." I suspect that what we like to call "writer's block" is actually a failure of nerve or a failure of imagination, or both. If you're willing to take chances, risk ridicule, and push the envelope, and if you've managed to hold on to your imagination (the single most important quality a writer can possess, even slightly more important than a sense of humor), then you can dissolve any so-called block simply by imagining extraordinary, heretofore unthinkable solutions, and/or by playing around uninhibitedly with language. You can imagine or wordplay your way out of any impasse. That's assuming, of course, that you're talented in the first place.

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Adults Are Nothing But Large Children Who Have Forgotten How To Play

This chapter title is a quote from the following talk by Tom Robbins, one of the best-loved novelists of our time. Robbins is a tremendously creative author (*Skinny Legs and All*, *Still Life with Woodpecker*, *Another Roadside Attraction*, etc.).

Tom Robbins is a creator. He models what a creator does and how he lives. He is funny, and able to laugh at past and present tragedy and the pretentiousness of belief systems for all the world. He is a model creator who lightens us up before we launch into the hard work of life design and community building. This attitude of play and irreverence for all past tradition is absolutely essential for people who begin to make a life of creating.

He gave this speech to an alternative high school graduating class several years ago. When I asked him for permission to publish it, he responded immediately with a confessional letter, from which the following is excerpted:

“When, back around 1975, I was invited to deliver the commencement address at a small alternative high school in Oak Harbor, Washington, I accepted largely because I was enamored of a young woman connected to the school, and wanted to charm her into my bed. Having to write the speech in a hurry, and searching for a punchy way to begin it, I added to my shame by borrowing—nay, stealing! —the opening paragraph, and the two with which I closed it, from another, now forgotten, source.

“At the time, I was contributing fairly regularly to underground newspapers, and the underground press had a free-exchange policy. Nobody was proprietary and credits counted for very little. Therefore, I felt not a pang of guilt in appropriating three quirky paragraphs about life after death from one of the papers, especially since I had no intention of publishing my speech and never expected it to survive the evening that it was delivered.

“Now that it has resurfaced to haunt me (apparently one of the teachers surreptitiously taped the talk and later circulated it), I must apologize to the unknown author whose words I lifted, and say that I’m more than happy to give them back. Please be assured that all of the remainder of the speech was my own original work, and that I never made a dime from it—although I did get laid.”

Here is the advice he gave the graduating class:

“I am often asked whether there is life after death. Certainly there is. There is also death after life, and life before death, and death before life. It goes on forever. In fact, you already have.

“As for Heaven and Hell, they are right here on Earth, and it is up to each of you in which one you choose to reside. To put it simply Heaven is living in your hopes and Hell is living in your fears.

“In the traditional image, where hell is down and heaven is up, one escapes from hell by digging a hole in the ceiling. Though in an age of downers and uppers down and up no longer make sense, it is still possible to think of in and out. Think of hell as in and heaven as out. To get out of hell you expend your soul until it is pushing on all the walls from the inside all the way around. If you just maintain a steady pressure, your soul will gradually filter out into limitless heaven beyond.

“One problem with the notion of Heaven and Hell, however, is that, although they are exact opposites, an astonishing number of people seem to be confused about which is which. For example, all over the United States on this very evening, commencement speakers are standing

before audiences not greatly unlike yourselves, describing Hell as if they were talking about Heaven.

“Their speakers are saying things such as, “Graduating seniors, you have reached the golden threshold of maturity; it is time now to go out into the world and take up the challenge of life, time to face your hallowed responsibility.”

“And if that isn’t one Hell of a note, it’s certainly one note of Hell.

“When I hear the word “maturity” spoken with such solemn awe, I don’t know whether to laugh or get sick. There circulates a common myth that once one becomes an adult, one suddenly and magically gets it altogether and, if I may use the vernacular, discovers, where it’s at. Ha ha. The sad funny truth is, adults are nothing but tall children who have forgotten how to play.

“When people tell you to “grow up,” they mean approximately the same thing they mean when they tell you to “shut up.” By “shut up” they mean “stop talking,” by “grow up” they mean “stop growing.”

“Because as long as you keep growing, you keep changing— and a person who is changing is unpredictable, impossible to pigeon-hole and difficult to control. The growing person is not an easy target for those guys in the slick suits who want you to turn over your soul to Christ, your heart to America; your butt to Seattle First National Bank and your armpits to new extra crispy Right Guard.

“No, the growing person is not an ideal consumer, which means, in more realistic terms, he or she is not an easy slave. Worse yet, if he or she continues to grow, grows far enough and long enough, he or she may get too close to the universal mysteries, the nature of which the Navy and the Dutch Reform Church do not encourage us to ponder.

“The growing person is an uncomfortable reminder of the greater human potential that each of us might realize if we had the guts.

“So society wants you to grow up. To reach a safe, predictable plateau and root there. To muzzle your throb, to lower the volume on the singing in your blood. Capers all cut, sky finally larked, surprises known: SETTLE DOWN — settle, like the sand in the bottom of an hour glass, like a coffin six months in the ground. ACT YOUR AGE— which means, act *their* age, and that has, from the moment they stopped growing, always been old.

“As for responsibility, I am forced to ask, “Responsibility to what?” To our fellow humans? Two weeks ago, the newspapers reported that a federal court had ruled that when a person’s brain stops functioning, that person is legally dead, even though his or her heart may continue to beat. That means that 80% of the population of the Earth is legally dead. Must we be responsible to corpses?

“No, you have no responsibility except to be yourself to the fullest limit of yourself, and to find out who you are. Or, perhaps I should say, to *remember* who you are. Because deep down in the secret velvet of your heart, far beyond your name and your address, each of you knows who you really are. And that being who is the true you cannot help but behave graciously to all other beings—because it *is* all other beings.

“Yet, we are constantly reminded of our... “responsibility.” Responsibility means obey orders without question, don’t rock the boat, and for God’s sake, get a job. (Get a job. Sha na na na.) That’s the scary one. Get a job. It is said as if it were a holy and ancient and inviolable law of nature. But the *fact* is, although cultural humanity has been on Earth for some 2 million years, the very concept of jobs is only about 500 years old. A drop in the bucket, to coin a phrase. And with advent of an electronic cybernetic automated technology, jobs are on the way out again.

Jobs were just a flash in the pan, a passing fancy. There is no realistic relationship between jobs and work—work being defined as simply one of the more serious aspects of play - any more than there is a realistic relationship between jobs and eating. It is curious how many people believe if it weren't for jobs they couldn't eat. As if it weren't for Boeing their jaws wouldn't chew, if it weren't for the Navy their bowels wouldn't move and if it weren't for Weyerhaeuser, that great destroyer of plants—plants wouldn't grow. Technocratic assumptions about the identity of humanity, society and nature have warped our experience at its source and obscured the basic natural sense of things. Rabbits don't have jobs. When was the last time you heard of a rabbit starving to death?

“Ah, but we must be responsible, and if we are, then we are rewarded with the white man's legal equivalent of looting: a steady job, secure income, easy credit, free access to all the local emporiums and a home of your own to pile the merchandise in! And so what if there is no magic in your life, no wonder, no amazement, no playfulness, no peace of mind, no sense of unity with the universe, no giggling joy, no burning passion, no deep understanding, no overwhelming love? At least your ego has the satisfaction of knowing you are a responsible citizen. Responsibility is a trap.

“As a matter of fact, the entire System into which you were born and which now, upon completion of high (high?) school you must perhaps face more directly, is a System designed to trap you—and manipulate you as a co-operating slave, a System designed to steep you in Hell.

“Hell is living in your fears, and it is through fear, both subtle and overt, that the System traps you: Fear of failure, fear of social rejection, fear of poverty, fear of punishment, fear of death.

“For example, we once were taught to fear something called Communism, and millions of Americans have gone to sleep each night wondering if Mao Tse Tung is under their bed. Conversely, on the other side of the world millions of Russians and Chinese have gone to sleep wondering if Henry Kissinger is under their bed. Our Totalitarian government used the hoax of the threat of Communism to control and enslave us, just as the totalitarian communist governments used the hoax and the threat of capitalism to enslave *their* people. It's an extremely old and obviously effective trick.

“You see, the powers behind Communism and the powers behind Capitalism are virtually the same people. We might also include the powers behind the Vatican and the powers behind Islam.

Their main function is to mystify the popular mind by creating illusions of omnipotence and omniscience with which to command docility from their subjects, while at the same time creating illusions of health, happiness and fulfillment for their subjects — although it does not require much thorough investigation to discover that few of the peoples of the world are healthy, happy or fulfilled.

“But never mind, there are ways out of the trap, ways, as I earlier suggested, out of Hell.

“The only advice I have for you tonight is not to actively resist or fight the System, because active protest and resistance merely entangles you *in* the System.

“Instead, ignore it, walk away from it, turn your backs on it, laugh at it. Don't be outraged, be outrageous! Never be stupid enough to respect authority unless that authority first proves itself respectable. And, unfortunately, there is no officially sanctioned authority today,

from the President of the United States down to the cop on the beat, that has earned the right to your respect.

“So, be your own authority, lead yourselves. Learn the ways and means of the Ancient yogi masters, Pied Piper, cloud walkers, and medicine men. Get in harmony with nature. Listen to the loony rhythms of your blood. Look for beauty and poetry in everything in life. Let there be no moon that does not know you, no spring that does not lick you with its tongues. Refuse to play it safe, for it is from the wavering edge of risk that the sweetest honey of freedom drips. Live dangerously, live lovingly. *Believe in magic*. Nourish your imagination. Use your head, even if it means going out of your mind. Learn, like the lemon and the tomato learned, the laws of the sun. Become aware, like the jungle became aware, of your own perfume. Remember that life is much too serious to take seriously. Remember to never forget how to play.

“In times of doubt and chaos, it has been the duty of superior persons—artists, poets, scientists, clowns, and philosophers (certainly not statesmen or military heroes)—to create order in the psychic vibrations of their fellow beings. But in times such as ours, times that are too carefully ordered, too strictly organized, too expertly managed, thoroughly programmed and carefully planned, times in which too few control too many, it is the duty of all feeling, thinking, humanitarian people to toss their favorite monkey wrenches into the machinery. On second thought, you do have some responsibility to your fellow beings. To relieve the repression of the human spirit, it is your sacred duty to screw things up royally.

“Looking at you tonight, I know you’re going to do just fine.

“Let me wrap this up with a few short questions I am often asked.

- Will we be eaten by bugs and worms? We ought to be. We have eaten, and we ought to be eaten. This is the Justice, and there is no stopping it. If you have your body burned, starving the earth to glorify a memory, you are asking for trouble.

- Does your soul fly out of your body at the moment you die? No, this is a foolish superstition. Your soul is constantly flying out of your body in just the same way that energy is constantly flying out of the sun. At the moment your body dies, the soul stops flying out.

- Is Jesus coming back? Yes, all the time. And so are you. All the souls echo forever throughout the universe. I hope you have a wonderful trip."

* * *

... (It's about time we came to terms with the paradoxical nature of the universe. The great struggle in life is not between good and evil, which are both relative terms, but between the desire for certainty and the desire for freedom. Freedom and certainty cannot equally coexist. The more you have of one, the less you have of the other. And certainty is merely an illusionary product of fear. On perhaps an even wider scale, the dichotomy is between the Big Lie and the Big Joke. If you don't want to be controlled and manipulated by the Big Lie -- as perpetrated by all of our institutions: governmental, corporate, academic, social and religious -- then your only choice is to recognize and embrace the Big Joke. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh a.k.a. Osho once defined life as "the beautiful joke that is always happening," and, you know, the old boy was right on the rupee.

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(What have you found that is inspiring or to be of great value in your life?) Love, language, laughter, wild nature, art, sensual pleasure -- and the realization that the only thing standing between us and paradise is the ego and the fact that we take ourselves far, far too seriously.

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The tin can was invented in 1811. The can opener was not invented until 1855. In the intervening 44 years, people were obliged to access their pork 'n' beans with a hammer and chisel.

Now, the psychedelic can opener, the device that most efficiently opens the tin of higher consciousness, was discovered thousands of years ago and put to beneficial use by shamans and their satellites well before the advent of what we like to call "civilization." Yet, inconceivably, modern society has flung that proven instrument into the sin bin, forcing its citizens to seek access to the most nourishing of all canned goods with the psychological equivalent of a hammer and chisel. (I'm referring to Freudian analysis and the various, numberless self-realization techniques.)

Our subject here, however, is creativity, and I don't mean to suggest that just because one employs the psychedelic can opener to momentous effect, just because one manages to dip into the peas of the absolute with a lightning spoon, that one is going to metamorphose into some creative titan if one is not already artistically gifted. The little gurus who inhabit certain psychoactive compounds are not in the business of manufacturing human talent. They don't sell imagination by the pound, or even by the microgram. What they ARE capable of doing, however, is reinforcing and supporting that innate imagination that manages to still exist in a nation whose institutions -- academic, governmental, religious and otherwise -- seem determined to suffocate it with a polyester pillow from WalMart.

The plant genies don't manufacture imagination, nor do they market wonder and beauty -- but they force us out of context so dramatically and so meditatively that we gawk in amazement at the ubiquitous everyday wonders that we are culturally disposed to overlook, and they teach us invaluable lessons about fluidity, relativity, flexibility and paradox. Such an increase in awareness, if skillfully applied, can lift a disciplined, adventurous artist permanently out of reach of the faded jaws of mediocrity.

The impact of psychedelics upon my own sensibility was to dissolve a lot of my culturally-conditioned rigidity. Old barriers, often rooted in ignorance and superstition, just melted away. I learned that one might move about freely from one level of existence to another. The borderlines between reality and fantasy, dream and wakefulness, animate and inanimate,

even life and death, were no longer quite as fixed. The Asian concept of interpenetration of realities was made physically manifest -- and this served to massage the stiffness out of my literary aesthetic.

Unbeknownst to most western intellectuals, there happens to be a fairly thin line between the silly and the profound, between the clear light and the joke; and it seems to me that on that frontier is the single most risky and significant place artists or philosophers can station themselves. I'm led to suspect that my psychedelic background may have prepared me to straddle that boundary more comfortably than those writers who insist on broaching the luminous can of consciousness with a hammer and chisel, and, especially, those who, spurning the in-CAN-descent altogether, elect to lap their watered-down gruel from the leaky trough of orthodoxy."

* * *

I think that jokes are the most serious thing in the world. Humor is both a kind of wisdom and a tool for survival. A funny situation is often the most hopeless of situations. Thus, humor grants you access to the most profound seriousness. There are some things in life that are so serious that the only way of handling them is making jokes about them. That leads to a deeper understanding. That is why cheerfulness to me is the deepest, wisest and most sensible way to meet the challenges of life.

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Q: You've often mentioned your interest in Zen, Taoism, Tantra, and other Asian philosophies, but you obviously are also fascinated with American pop culture.

A: There's a link there, really. With the exception of Tantric Hinduism, every religious system in the modern world has denied and suppressed sensuality. Yet sensual energy is the most powerful energy we as individuals possess. Tantric saints had the genius and the guts to exploit that energy for spiritual purposes. Food, drink, drugs, music, art, poetry, and especially sex, are used in Tantra in a religious manner. Tantrikas perfect the techniques of sensual pleasure and use the energy released as fuel for their God-bound vehicle, their rocket ride to enlightenment.

Pop culture, in somewhat the same way, may be exploited for serious purposes. American pop has great energy, humor, vitality, and charm. It baffles me that so many serious novelists are reluctant to take advantage of that. When it comes to revitalizing the human spirit, sensitizing experience, and marrying a sense of wonder to the terrible truth, pop culture has infinitely more literary potential than, say, bad marriages, abusive childhoods and psychopathic violence -- the favorite subjects of the academic and the dour.

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