

# ***Sample Patter ~ Pandemic Musings***

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## 8.21.20 ~ Lemons into Lemonade

But first a tip of the hat to the Karma gods for having Steve Bannon arrested, in part, by agents of the U.S. Postal Service. For those of you not from my home state of Connecticut, where he was arrested, it will add to your karmic pleasure to know that one of Connecticut's nicknames is "The Constitution State." It is a document that badly needs our support these days, and to have an ally of the Constitution-basher-in-chief arrested in the Constitution state is a good omen. ("Nutmeg State" is our other handle. Mountain Laurel is the state flower).

Joe Biden's forceful and heartfelt speech to close the first-ever virtual national convention for either party, lifted my spirits. Character, policy and competence is what the Democrats are selling. It sets up a stark contrast with the incumbent team. Which brings me back to lemons. The rancid, squalid, corrupt, self-absorbed nature of Donald Trump was apparent to me when he descended the escalator at Trump tower and said our neighbor was sending us their murderers and rapists. All of the chaos and catastrophe that has transpired in the past three and a half years has only reinforced my initial assessment of the President's fitness for the office. But what is abundantly clear to so many of us remains adamantly unclear to the President's base. It is a mystery political scientists will be trying to explain for years.

In the meantime, in order to help even some of the President's supporters reverse course in a way that gives them cover, think of it as transactional, as indeed your man Donald thinks of the presidency. You wandered onto a car lot four years ago looking for something new and flashy. Different. You felt abandoned by the political elite and you wanted to drive away in something that made you feel good. So you chose the model with the gold grill and the big fins and the bright orange paint job. But now, three and a half years later, you know that you bought a lemon. It broke down, guzzled gas, polluted the air, ran loud and noisy, ran over a few things here and there because of a faulty brake system (the Constitution... hello Connecticut).

Here's the good news: we all get stuck with lemons now and then. It comes with being a consumer. So if you bought a lemon named Donald Trump (and it's easy to remember because of the president's hue), it's time to turn him in at that same lot (the ballot box) where you bought him, and drive off with a model that runs better and is more reliable. Make it transactional America. Leave the greater rantings about the President's monumental shortcomings to those of us who see them differently than you. Make it transactional. On November 3rd, turn your lemon into lemonade.

## 10.4.20 ~ Words have no Meaning

Saturday's circus of obfuscation and misinformation masquerading as a press briefing by Trump's doctor outside of Walter Reed Hospital was just the most recent example of one of the most dangerous legacies of the Trump administration: words have no meaning. The President, of course - called by his college professor William T. Kelly, "the dumbest goddamn student I ever had," and the launcher of more than twenty thousand lies or misrepresentations as tracked by the Washington Post - speaks gibberish most of the time. The late novelist Philip Roth, in a New Yorker "Talk of the Town" piece leading up to the 2016 election said Trump didn't speak English, he spoke "Junklish."

Part of 45's problem is that 44, his predecessor, was one of the most intelligent, elegant, artful, nuanced, powerful orators to ever live at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Another problem is that the "gibberish infection" spread early on to any number of Trump administration characters. (There's a mask irony in there somewhere.) His former doctor Ronny Jackson spoke of Trump's "incredible genes," and his almost superhuman vigor. Sean Spicer, first in a long line of Trump Press Secretary liars, started the ball rolling at his first press conference when he described the crowd at the President's inauguration to be "the largest in history," even though photographic comparison indicated that the crowd at Obama's first inauguration surpassed that "bigly."

When words have no meaning, public trust has no footing. When trust is gone - dispersed by either lies and/or gibberish - it is hard to compromise on policies based on logic, facts and a search for common ground. When compromise dies, governing goes on life support. Which is where we find not only our own republic, but the President himself - not yet on life support, and maybe never - but clearly a victim of the fog of junklish he has inflicted on the American public since that under-attended inauguration.

Bob Gibson, the fearsome right-handed pitcher of the St. Louis Cardinals (he of 251 wins, 2 Cy Youngs, and 9 gold gloves) passed away on Friday. He featured not only a dominant fastball and slider in his arsenal, but a world class glare and glower. Tim McCarver, his catcher at St. Louis, and a long time baseball broadcaster, tells this story on himself. There was a rare game in which Gibson uncharacteristically lost his control and walked three batters on twelve pitches. McCarver sheepishly rose up from behind the plate, thinking he should walk to the mound and calm down his pitcher. Gibson saw this, charged off the mound, and intercepted McCarver half-way there. "The only thing you know about pitching," he told his catcher, "is that it's hard to hit. Get your ass back behind the plate."

I dream of a time after January 20, 2021, when a new administration will speak with the directness of Bob Gibson and the poetry of Barak Obama. After four years of Donald Trump, America needs to put meaning back into words.

## 10.27.20 ~ Baseball & Politics.

Tonight is game 6 of this year's World Series between the Dodgers and the Rays. It's not a coincidence that major league baseball's showcase and presidential elections share the handle of "Fall Classic," although elections happen every four years (thank God) and the World Series annually. Both feature an endless regular season, then a playoff season (in politics, the primaries), before the main event. Most fans have a favorite team, and if it doesn't make it to the Fall Classic, they either root for their second favorite team, vote straight party (National League, American League), or sit it out entirely (in 2016, about 100 million eligible voters chose not to vote). Both entities offer a grande bouffe of shared ingredients and overlapping philosophies; here are just a few finger snacks.

Team allegiance in baseball and politics is fiercely cherished. Some Democrats wouldn't vote for a Republican, if Abe Lincoln were running. Some Republicans wouldn't vote for Hillary Clinton, if Vladimir Putin were running. There have been legendary collapses down the stretch in both baseball and politics: The Red Sox in 1978, and Mike Dukakis in 1988, come to mind... as well as legendary runaways: LBJ v. Barry Goldwater, Nixon v. McGovern, the 1995 Cleveland Indians, who clinched the American League pennant on Sept. 8, and the New York Yankees, who did the same thing, a day later, in 1998. (I am happy to report that losers are not always suckers. While living in Boston in 1972, the bumper sticker on my car proudly proclaimed: "Don't blame me, I'm from Massachusetts."... the only state to vote for McGovern.)

Both leagues play by their own rules. The American League has the designated hitter, the National League doesn't. The Republican party suppresses the vote, the Democratic Party doesn't. The National League is a fastball league, the Republican Party throws curveballs. Both are rife with nicknames that would make Ring Lardner and Roger Angell proud to this day. Just a few: The Big Hurt, The Big Unit, The Splendid Splinter, The Georgia Peach, The Sultan of Swat... Little Marco, Sleepy Joe, Honest Abe, Lyin' Don (aka Donnie little fingers, aka The Borgia Peach), Crooked Hillary, Pocahontas, and Low Energy Jeb.

It is only appropriate to quote the wisdom of Yankee great Yogi Berra (he of ten Fall Classic titles - most of any player): "It ain't over till it's over." Just ask Harry Truman and Al Gore, to cite opposite outcomes. Most of all, pick a team even if your favorite team isn't running. Sitting out this year's election is democratic malpractice. It could get you sent down to the Montgomery Biscuits, or the Vermont Lake Monsters, or, God forbid... to the Lehigh Valley Iron Pigs. Vote - as if your stay in the bigs depended on it.

## 12.24.20 ~ I'll be home for Christmas.

To me, Christmas was never just a single season ritual, but a layer cake of all my Christmases combined. It's what gave it so much emotional weight. It was, and is, a way to take stock of where you are in your life, and to measure it against the memories of where you were on all those Christmases past. Who you were with... if you were happy... or optimistic.. or discouraged. This year, because of the national ravages of coronavirus, memories will play an even greater role -- their gathering a safer pursuit than the gathering of loved ones, friends and family. So if you're home, or home alone, give yourself the gift of a favorite Christmas (or Chanukah, or winter solstice) memory. Shipping's free. Reminiscence priceless.

In my childhood home in Connecticut we always got our tree on Christmas Eve. In the living room, where it stood - and where four brothers decorated it in almost time-lapse speed - a fire crackled in a soot stained, red brick hearth. Cats and dogs lay before it, happily absorbing heat. Somebody played the baby grand Steinway, or a guitar. Wine, beer, sharp cheddar cheese and shrimp were easy to come by. The highlight was always the appearance of Herb Cohen and his wife Ruth (Steinkraus Cohen) - piano teacher, musicologist, founder of the UN Hospitality Program in Westport, local civic legend. And of course, Herb's Stradivarius violin.

One Christmas Eve, decades ago,(and I can remember it snowed for at least one day and one night when I was twenty and not twenty days and twenty nights when I was one) a snow storm raged. Yet Ruth and Herb braved it to come celebrate with us. Herb was near the end of his life. I carried him from his car in my arms through the snow, pontooned on either elbow by a brother, up the slope and into our home, his instrument case in hand. Every Stradivarius violin has a name. Herb's was "The Russi." Herb was an amateur player, a man of uncommon grace, and a lifelong supporter of the arts. He explained that it was the lacquer Stradiveri applied that imparted the instrument's legendary tone - a lacquer some say scientists have never been able to fully analyze.

Ruth would eventually take over the piano playing duties, resplendent in her seasonal, Germanic red & white dirndl, and we would sing carols for an hour or so. The last one was always Silent Night, when we were deep in our yuletide cups. By candlelight, and fireplace light, with the colored bulbs shining through the boughs of the Douglas fir, and the room sweetly scented of evergreen and hardwood smoke, Herb on his Russi accompanied Ruth on the piano -- and our voices gathered as one for that most resonant and affecting of carols. Tears flowed, triggered by a commingling of melody and memories.

That is a memory baked into my Christmas layer cake for good. It was the last year Herb was alive to play his violin. For all those missing loved ones this year, keep their memories close and lift a glass to them. We are all booked for the same destination. It's how we get there, who we get there with, and what memories we take on the journey that make the seasonal cake so rich.

### **3.23.21 ~ "Meant to" v. "Can" Gun Legislation.**

America finds itself in the middle of two plagues, coronavirus and mass shootings. I suspect many of the Americans who disdain mask-wearing and vaccinations (which is to say, science and common sense deniers) are the same ones who support the legislators who have carried NRA water for decades and thwarted any real progress on gun control in Congress.

There are certain components of a Constitution drafted over two centuries ago that because of technological progress and demographic growth foreign to the framers need updating. They are vestigial and dangerous to the continued good health of our democracy. The Second Amendment and the Electoral College are two. I'll leave the Electoral College for another day.

One shot, gunpowder musket technology was the state of the firearms art when the Second Amendment was drafted. Yesteryear's musket has evolved into today's automatic rifles that have no place in civilian life. Related "Open Carry" laws are one thing if the person is carrying a one-shot musket that takes time reload. An AR-15, that was used in Boulder and in so many other massacres, can shoot 40 rounds per minute. Why are they allowed to be carried in public when in many of those same states it is illegal to carry an open beer?

What if we set aside the Constitutional debate and heated emotion and settled on a simple, nonpartisan, what was "intended" standard to determine if a firearm should be allowed in public hands. Call it the "Meant to" v. "Can" Gun Safety Measure. The principle is simple. A car can kill people, but is not meant to. Same for a tire iron, and a baseball bat.

In the realm of firepower, a bazooka is meant to kill people and can kill people. Same with a tank. Same with a hand grenade. Same with an AR-15 and the entire family of machine guns. They not only can kill people, they are meant to. They should be banned from the public, and restricted to military use. A shotgun of any gauge can kill people, but it is not meant to kill people. It is meant to shoot game birds, tin cans and rodents. Same for a deer rifle. Can, but not meant to. They are fine for civilian life. Keep your shotguns and deer rifles. Handguns are a gray area. They are meant to kill people and can kill people... but they are also a legitimate form of self-defense. Plus they can't fire 40 rounds in a minute. Set their regulation aside for the moment, except, of course, when it comes to proper training and background checks.

A proposed Meant to v. Can Gun Safety Measure would establish a bipartisan committee to look at every firearm available to the public. If any weapon - as determined by that body - was "meant to" kill people it should be banned. Full stop. Passed into law. The rest would remain protected under the Second Amendment.

My other suggestion in light of our twin-plague crisis is to have Speaker Pelosi invite Jacinda Ardern, prime minister of New Zealand, to address both houses of Congress about how her country, 30 days after their horrific Christchurch massacre, was able to get all automatic weapons off the nation's streets... and have also been dramatically effective in quelling coronavirus.

I know New Zealand is an island with a population a fraction of ours, and not nearly as diverse, to boot... and a nation unburdened of a contentious Second Amendment, but I have to believe there is much we could learn from their experience and apply it here. The Speaker can invite the Prime Minister and I think she should. To my thinking, it is meant to be.

## 5.9.21 ~ The Ultimate Palindrome

This is my favorite day of the year on Facebook, Mother's Day - a time when everyone trots out pictures of their mothers at varying ages, and remembers them for all the wonderful things they did or were. A palindrome, of course, is a word, or sentence, that reads the same forward or backward.

Everyone has a mother. That is a biological given. But not everyone has a mother they remember, or in some cases, even knew, or still know. And not every mother is remembered as fondly as others. I got lucky, as many of us did. I had a mother who was the sun in my solar system, and remains a bright star in my universe. I also have an ex-wife, Deborah, who is a mother cherished by our three sons, and when I moved to Southern California from Boston in the mid-80's, another wonderful mother, Patty CutKomp, agreed to adopt me as her West Coast son. They all share (d) much in common. Unconditional love. Loyalty. Tolerance. Kindness. Curiosity. Determination. Intelligence. Grace. Fearlessness. Sass. Style. And a belief that their children could make a difference in this world, and with the right approach, and temperament, and parental guidance, might even leave it slightly better than they found it.

My mother always added a dose of common sense and humor to her mothering. As a younger man, I would sometimes retreat to my parents' home in Connecticut, licking my wounds after suffering a setback, or a frustration, or loss in my romantic or professional life. I would whinge to my mother, who always listened patiently and then ask, "Mom, can it get worse?" She would look at me with all the wonder and love you might direct at a litter of newborn kittens, and assure me, "Oh yes. It can always get worse."

I loved her for that, and still do, which is why "MOM" remains the perfect palindrome: forever the same, forwards or backwards.... a constant presence when she was here to give comfort, a comforting memory when looking back is all that remains.