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When contemplating titles for this book, one of the names that kept cropping up in my mind was The Nature of Things. The Nature of Things is a poem that I wrote a few years ago of which I am especially fond. Ironically it is the first poem in my prior book a scant bagatelle. Once I decided to name this book the nature of things I did a Google search to determine if there was any reason not to. I was surprised and I guess slightly disappointed by how many hits there were. When you find that so many people have used the term in the past you realize that you didn’t coin the phrase but instead simply recollected it from some dusty storage area in the back of your memory.

The term The Nature of Things has been used in many different contexts over the years. The earliest reference that I found was the name of a poem written by Lucretius, a Roman philosopher and poet before the dawn of the Common Era. More recent uses of the term can be found as the name of a Canadian TV series, a series on NPR and numerous others. The “original” poem by Lucretius combined reason and logic with philosophy in an effort to define man’s existence. The common thread of the term “the nature of things” continued to be the use of reason and logic to ponder nature and the matters of the world ranging from the mundane to the complex but always with an eye toward improving our existence. I often find myself on the same journey. I would hope that my poetry and writings bear me out.

Self publishing nowadays requires that each book be assigned a specific category or genre. There’s a choice of over 50 categories to choose from so it should be an easy task. One of the categories of course is Poetry so I chose that, but I could have equally as well chosen Humor, or perhaps Philosophy. There is even a category that I considered entitled Non-Classifiable. The four chapters in this book lead a path from serious poetry in the first, to a serious essay in the second and on to some lighthearted poetry in the third. In Chapter Four I visit the breath and depth of growing up in Chicago in the 40’s and 50’s. Suffice it to say, this book is not a page turner. It is a little poetic, a little humorous, slightly philosophical and in total pretty non-classifiable.
Selecting a picture for the cover of such a diverse endeavor was enjoyably challenging. I chose a photograph that I took that to me represents: the beauty of life; the mystery of life; and the nature of things. This shot was taken at dusk of the magnificent sky over Paso Robles, California.
The clouds on the horizon appear as mountains, 
the mountains often, as distant clouds.

Clouds are vapor - mountains are rock, 
yet we often see one as the other.

If vapor can impersonate rock 
and granite pass for air,

is it any wonder that folly 
often passes for judgment

or that intellect 
is commonly stymied by ritual.

The Nature of Things

Originally published in a scant bagatelle
Simple Gifts

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

Words from one of the thousands
of tunes penned by the Shakers

Religious persecution led
them to take up residence
in the New World

Their utopian communities thrived as they
hand crafted their well known,
simplistic, functional chairs and tables.

Preaching love and kindness,
they were dedicated to pacifism
and celibacy - perhaps naively.

Today but a few Shakers remain.
After the last one departs
will hope for a simple,
uncluttered life disappear as well?

Must we be naive to treat
others with respect and kindness?
Must we be naive to be free,
free of bigotry, hate and arrogance.

Is it no longer a gift?
a gift to be simple, a gift to be free?
Our Time At The Mic Is Short

after my last open mic I sat down
reflected on my delivery
asked myself how I did
how I came across
did I leave out any lines
any phrases
was I understood
I know that poem so well
it’s routine
so routine it’s difficult to recall exactly how I did
is this any different than life
life is just as fleeting
on a larger scale
but just as fleeting
we grow up, get a job, get married, have kids, retire
life happens
and fast

I sometimes wonder -
how I came across in life
a big city
a large university
a lifetime in business
interactions with thousands of people
how many did I offend
or wrong
and not even know it
people I don't remember
offenses I never knew
a bartender would say forget it
have another beer
but like reading a poem
our time at the mic is short
I sometimes wonder how I did
did I leave out any lines or phrases?
Motorcycle Helmets and Christening Dresses

Near the altar
in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence
stands a wall sized trellis bursting with relics.
Two items dominate the display,
motorcycle helmets and Christening dresses.

I gaze at the Christening dresses.
Many worn for glorious Baptismal occasions.
They still sparkle with joy,
immersed in thanksgiving,
celebrating the miracle of birth.

Others worn,
or perhaps unworn,
by babies who didn’t survive.
They cry out for hope, for love,
but for a chance at life.

The motorcycle helmets,
some still bright and shiny,
others crushed
nearly flat. Each
has lost its owner.

I kneel and reflect on the fragility of life,
man’s struggle to come into this world,
man’s struggle to cope in this world,
man’s struggle to leave this world,
if not today, then tomorrow.
Curt B. Vevang

Monopoly

_The Bible says more about the evils of money and material possessions than any other topic._

We continuously strive for success, buying a house, then another and another.

*Pay $50 to the Community Chest* – outrageous that they should even ask.

No one cares if someone else doesn’t have a house, you have two, or more, perhaps even some hotels.

*Go Directly to Jail,* no problem, my alderman gave me a Get Out Of Jail Free card.

No one seems satisfied owning utilities with a steady income stream, hotels are where the action is.

*You inherit $100* - that’s a joke, some guys inherit millions.

Railroads? They’re for old guys from Omaha.

*Pay Poor Tax $15.00* - but why me?

Collect those rent checks, stack up that money.

*Income Tax Refund - Collect $20* - that’s pretty funny that they’re sending me money.

The interesting part,

in life, as it is in Monopoly,

at the end

no one gets to keep their houses or their money.

Funny how that works.
Shades of Grey

Hunched forward, he puffs calmly, clouds of tangled grey smoke float up from his pipe. His eyes pierce the dim emptiness recalling his many years at sea spent on a trawler now longing for just one more voyage. The visor of his leather cap hides much of his furrowed brow. Steel wool eyebrows head off in every direction. His timeworn face is but a faint reflection of his youthful days as a merchant fisherman. The grainy, smoky haze can’t hide his nose, more pronounced than most. A nose with a hundred pock marks from years of unprotected sunshine, ocean salt and booze. Clean shaven, but for a fortnight’s worth of white pepper stubble. Stained, jagged teeth clench his pipe; his arthritic right hand supports the bowl. After years of sea rations, sleeping in hanging cots, brawling on shore leaves, the thought of one last voyage provides an unfamiliar hope and touch of warmth to his hardened, gray facade.
At the Dollar Store

This shabby looking guy walks up and says, you look familiar.

I inch back, start to glance away.

I know you, he says.

He's too close! He's in my space!

I'm planning my next move when, you know, from the shelter.

You work at the homeless shelter don't you?

I'm still taken aback - but I know now what he means.

You served me breakfast.

Suddenly my stiffness begins to melt away,

Oh yes, I remember

I never forget a face, he says.

How can he remember me? I don't remember him.

I quickly construct a polite question, So, how are things going?

Pretty good,

I do my best

and the rest is up to God.

I search for a few profound words but my brain is mush.

I say nothing.

He extends his hand, I'm John.

Pleased to meet you, I say, as we shake.

Third Honorable Mention
Northbrook Arts Commission Poetry Contest
Curt B. Vevang

The Electorate
Some ignore reality,
by the jester they are led.
They revel in the sound bites,
that hold sway inside their head.

Some seek for simple answers,
those that need so little thought.
Solutions lacking substance,
facts so often sold and bought.

Blind to all the common good,
couched behind a selfish mask.
Not my problem they insist,
*May I help*, they never ask.

Fresh ideas are dismissed,
all new ways arouse great fear.
They hear but what they believe,
and believe but what they hear.

Originally published in a *scant bagatelle*
Curt B. Vevang

The Day I Received My Honorary Doctorate

I was asked to say a few words at an awards assembly at my old high school in the city. I was told I could include a poem or two. I never turn down an offer to read my poetry and jumped at the chance. But I graduated 60 years ago. What do I say to high schoolers?

I spoke of my favorite classes and my least favorite. I mentioned I played football for four years, but my favorite activity was girl watching. With that line I gained enough credibility to read my poem.

My poem tells of my growing up with people from all walks of life in a diverse neighborhood near Damen and Lawrence.

the nature of things

The students of course knew this was also where they were growing up 60 years later. It hadn’t changed much and they could relate.

When I finished my talk I was given an Honorary Doctorate. Well maybe not an Honorary Doctorate, but a high school letter sweater with a big red varsity ”A” honoring my football years. It took only seconds to shed my blazer and don my sweater. My sweater means as much to me as a Doctorate, maybe even more.

At the reception I was taken aback and honored by how many of the young award recipients of various nationalities and religions asked to have their picture taken with me and my letter sweater. As I gazed around the room I realized the old neighborhood was even more diverse than it was 60 years ago. And better for it.

Welcome to America!
In art, as in life, it's easy to become servants of the pop world
causing us to miss the true essence of that which we think we seek.

All alone
she hangs quietly on her large wall.

With never so much as a blink,
she intently watches hundreds of milling tourists
taking selfies, with her,
subjugated to the background.

Facebook pages in every land
wait excitedly to be adorned with her smile.

As this gracious lady stares at the crowd
she shrugs,
did they come to see me

or to take my picture?
Am I simply an attraction to be digitized?

Yet, she is too worldly
not to know.
She's aware these “art lovers”
have a tour bus to catch in twenty minutes.
She knows well, in a world where she competes
with Lego stores and love locks
she could have been bypassed completely.

Posing patiently on her lonely wall,
suddenly her smile broadens,
her thoughts float back to happier days,
days when she and Leonardo
spent those glorious afternoons together
in his studio.
Curt B. Vevang

this poem is dedicated to all of those who find life much more difficult than it should be

sam died

sam came into this world as an average kid

he died as a member of the lowest rung of society

he was friendly, caring and kind, but that wasn't enough

it couldn't make up for being HIV positive and his bad health

sam failed in the army failed at college failed at religion

his only strength was drugs and they failed him

sam drifted between odd jobs and no job his many partners were of no help

the nature of things

he lived in a ramshackle basement flat

his hamster lived in a cage on the kitchen table

the church says God loves us it was never obvious that God loved sam

sam wasn't easy to love not even for God

sam didn't choose his life his life just happened

sam struggled to fit in but he couldn't keep up

the state cared for sam in his final years and when he died he received a free autopsy and cremation
good bye sam
I feel for those with less,
I feel for those with more.
From my perch half way up the mountain
I can see the very peak.
I can look down and see the foothills at the base.

The bottom can't be seen by those at the top.
Many there have no concept
the bottom even exists.

Some arrive at the top
after a long, arduous climb,
others are born there.

Days at the top are spent amassing more and more,
worried they will lose what they have,
struggling to maintain their footing on the slippery slopes.

From my perch half way up the mountain
I watch climbers trekking by.
Those seeking wealth, nod and stay their course.
Those seeking happiness rest here a while
... and for some reason never seem to leave.

Adapted from a poem of the same name
published in a scant bagatelle
I have never met a poet who didn't write an essay or two along the way.

CHAPTER TWO

ESSAY

THE CHURCH BASEMENT

The bell shaped curve has two tails. Its two tails provide us with tales of two extremes in our society. One of the tails of the curve consists of the overachievers who we hear tales about annually in newsy Christmas cards. The folks on the other tail for some reason never get included in Christmas Card newsletters. They too have tales, but their tales are quite different. Many lack the skills needed to succeed or even simply cope in our society. Whether because of mental or physical health, intelligence, bad luck, bad decisions or a combination of these or other circumstances they never get mentioned. And when things get really bad they become the faceless category of homeless that we all wish would just go away.

I'm not much of a church guy but I strongly believe in
helping others. So whether it was because I felt a need to set a good example for my "well churched" grandchildren or perhaps because of some more altruistic reason, I called the church secretary and said sign me up to work with the homeless program, I'll work anytime, where ever you need me.

Well that didn't take long, I was signed up with open arms in no time at all. My first two assignments were the 3AM to 7AM shifts the Sunday Nights before Christmas and New Years. Believe it or not, I looked forward to it. I showed up at church with a sense of purpose.

Most of the homeless arrive at the door of the church basement by car, bike or on foot at 7PM, they're not allowed in a minute sooner nor very much later. On this night a total of 45 folks showed up. A hot pot luck dinner is provided by the church faithful. The "guests" are assigned sleeping mats located in groups of three or four on the basement floor. Each group of mats is cordoned off in a 15 by 15 foot area surrounded by a plastic curtain/partition which provides some limited privacy. The women are of course assigned in their own groups. The overflow end up in various basement Sunday School rooms.

One night the last to arrive was a twenty something female who arrived just prior to 11PM. She was dropped off by the police. It seems the local hospital couldn't find anything wrong with her and wouldn't let her stay there.

On another night the last arrival rang the basement door bell at 12:15pm. Since this is way past the acceptable time he was questioned thoroughly. Yes he had an ID Card and yes his name was on the list of "qualified" attendees and yes he was cleared for late arrival, so in he came. He was assigned to an overflow room which still had two mats available. Quite a character, he said he was a bit hungry and asked for a glass of water and a banana. Provided with a glass of water and a banana, he asked if we had any ice cream. Out of the freezer came the ice cream. He said keep it cold I need to make my bed first. He spent the next ten minutes choosing which of the two available mats (5 feet apart) he thought would be the most quiet because the other three guys in the room were snoring. He made his bed (or pad) and then came out to the eating area for his ice cream which we had kept cold for him. As he ate his ice cream a women walked past the area on her way to the ladies room. They recognized one another from the homeless circuit and carried on a brief conversation. She told him they were provided chicken tetrazzini for dinner and that it was very good. OK, so now this guy wants to know if we have any chicken tetrazzini left. Well we did and we zapped a bowl of it for him. (I guess it pays to ask.) When he finished eating he thanked us and went to bed.

Because only one of the two bathrooms in the church basement has a shower, the men take showers in the men's room before going to bed. At 3AM the signs on the bathroom doors are switched and the men's room becomes the ladies room and vice versa. This provides women the opportunity to take a shower in
the morning.

The lights are turned off by eleven. The 11 PM to 3 AM shift consists of two volunteers who keep watch on the "flock" and begin to prepare for the morning rush. A sack lunch is prepared for each "guest". They can request 1 or 2 sandwiches consisting of meat and cheese, all meat, all cheese or PB and J. Each lunch bag contains a drink, fruit and cookies as well. Their names are taped to their lunch bags so that those who have a job can hide their homeless stigma by removing their names from their sack lunch prior to getting to work.

When I work the 3AM to 7AM shift my first task is usually doing a flashlight tour of the church sanctuary and offices to ensure all was well. ("all was well" here translates to "ensuring that none of the guests were hiding or smoking in the sanctuary") Next, I get some towels from the locked linen closet for those women who have signed up for an early morning shower. I usually grab a couple extra towels for those "pushy" women who might need an extra towel so they can wash their hair. The stack of "clean" towels in the closet are a dingy looking, limp, unmatched assortment similar to what we have at home. But at home we call them rags and store them in the garage for washing the cars.

As I walk through the basement with the towels all I can hear is the constant cacophony of snoring, snorting and groaning sounds from the 45 sleeping adults. This discordant chorus rises eerily from the basement floor and permeates the air.

They are well behaved. They are all pre-screened by the local police department and assigned ID Cards. Those that have Sunday night jobs are noted on the "qualified" list as being cleared for late arrival. Absolutely no drugs, no alcohol and no one with a violent record is allowed in. (I don't know who tends to those folks who don't qualify, but they're not here.) They know that if anybody "messes up" they are no longer "invited" back. The biggest disregard for the "rules" that I have seen is that a few of them sneak outside early in the morning for a smoke. I of course never notice this because if I did I would have to report it.

By 5 AM the coffee is ready and the orange juice poured for the early morning risers. Many are dressed as you might expect, in clothes that appear to have been slept in for a week. But others tend toward the "business casual". When some of the church clean up volunteers arrive early in the morning dressed in their sweat shirts and Levis it's easy to confuse them with "guests" who just got up to use the bathroom.

Everyone is expected to be up by 6 AM when the bright basement lights are turned on. A breakfast of cold cereal, bananas, coffee and various other donated odds and ends and leftovers are provided at the kitchen counter in the basement. Their time on the street has taught them to be conservative and selective at the counter. They take what they know they will eat and return what they don't eat or want. Many before leaving go through their assigned lunch bags to see what's in them. They place any sandwiches, chips
or cookies that they don't need or want back on the counter. While I realize this may drive our local health officials crazy, it gives one pause to reflect on our "throw away" society.

The clean-up crew continues to arrive during the breakfast hour. I wonder what our "guests" must be thinking when they see the clean up crew scrubbing each of the 45 pads that were slept on with a disinfectant and a throw away paper towel.

By 7 AM they are shushed out. Some work, some don’t, some can’t, some wander, some strive, each has their own story. Their daily goal is to somehow, by car, by bike or on foot make it to the next church basement by 7 PM that night, and not a minute sooner. Day after day they follow this regimen until the spring when it is warm enough once again for them to sleep in the woods without freezing to death.

My second night on the job the weather forecast was for a high of -13 degrees in the morning. By 7 AM when they were to be sent out to the street it was forecasted to be -15 degrees with a wind chill of -42. Fortunately on this extremely cold day the local community center broke the rules and sent some vans to take these folks to a daytime shelter. Usually they are somewhere all day long trying to stay warm on their own, trying to not die of exposure. Fortunately, the library, McDonalds, Dunkin Donuts and many other places let them hang around. Some appear happy, some sad, some bewildered but all determined to make it through the day.

I realize that there are some people in our country who milk the system; collect unemployment undeservedly; abuse food stamps; take advantage of the system every chance they get. But the homeless are not these people. The homeless are not taking advantage of anyone or anything. These people do not wander the streets all day and then sleep nose to toes on a cold, hard basement floor night after night because it’s exciting or profitable. They have problems or they wouldn’t be here; deep rooted problems - emotional, mental, physical problems. These few hours working at a homeless shelter in a church basement, serving breakfast, conversing with and getting to know the homeless is a stark awakening. These people are just like everyone else except they’re not. Each has a unique personality, each their own story. Granted it’s not your story but it’s a story none the less.

Every now and then I will receive a pleasantry as they leave the church. This past week as one of the women left with her sack lunch in hand she looked at me and, in her own way of saying thank you, said "God bless you". At least for one cold night she found a welcome home in a church basement

- and so did I.
Twenty-Four Roses For You

I don’t write love poems very often - or very well.

After 35 years of marriage I wrote a Valentine’s love poem to my wife.

... I’m putting my love for you in my own words rather than just signing my name to a store bought card created by a wordsmith. ...

Wrong, Suzie Hallmark did not like that I forgot to buy a card.

After 46 years of marriage I took another stab at a Valentine’s poem.

... All I know is that if you ever died I would look for another wife.
Not the perfect wife, I’d never find another.
But a solid second place wife ...

This went over even worse - my advice - never mention a second wife.

At the 50 year mark I bought 2 dozen red roses and wrote seventeen syllables:

My Dearest Susan
Twenty-four roses for you
Happy Valentine’s

... and the world was at peace.

First Honorable Mention
Love Category
Poets & Patrons 2016 Contest
Beating the System

I like to write poems where all the lines rhyme.  
But the MFA’s say rhymes are passé.  
I feel so guilty when I hear them whine.  
So just to fit in, I do it their way.  

I now sadly write, without any rhymes.  
Free verse, I am told, is what is required.  
I should have been born in much earlier times,  
when rhyming was in and highly desired.  

While my proper poems are not without praise,  
when I use a rhyme they say it’s taboo.  
Free verse is indeed all the rage these days,  
what in the world is a rhymester to do.  

I have it, by George, this should please the crowd,  
I’ll write some sonnets, where rhymes are allowed.

The Spirit of a Norwegian Village

The rustic landscape, lush vegetation, 
a small rural town, posing for tourists.  
European charm and staunch Viking grit,  
Home to Norwegians since times long ago.  

An old Lutheran church with beams hewn by hand,  
its timbers held fast by skilled Norse tradesmen.  
A plaque in the square, a reminder of  
the joyous day when King Olav stopped by.  

Firewood stacked high for brutal winters,  
reminding one of a Midwestern town.  
But nothing says Norway like the coffee shop,  
brewing stout flavors since 1850.  

Stop in for a cup next time you’re close by,  
Route 71, Norway, Illinois.
CHAPTER FOUR

GROWING UP IN CHICAGO
Chapter 4 - Foreword

Chicago was a great place to grow up during the 1940's and 1950's. It was even better when the flat you grew up in had a mom, a dad, three big brothers (really big, 12, 14 and 16 years older than you), an uncle and a grandpa. Like all families there were highs and lows and a lot of in-between. As will become apparent in the stories below, we were a very loving, close knit, some would say, dysfunctional family.

Everyone who has ever grown up in Chicago has a story, many, many stories. I am no different. And the fact that I call them stories is a conundrum in itself. Are they stories?, short, short stories?, poems?, narrative poems?, free verse?, or a stream of consciousness? Call them what you will.

I realize that these stories could have happened to just about anyone in just about any big town.

but they didn’t -
they happened here -
in Chicago -
to me -
and that’s how it was.
Recollections of Lincoln Avenue, 1944

I recall - The snowstorm of flying feathers in the poultry store window as the fluttering chickens waited to be pointed at by a housewife and beheaded.

A brown bear on a leash at Max and John’s tavern dancing at the jukebox to *You Are My Sunshine*.

My fear when I broke the gangway gate next door by swinging on it.

Going to the Police Station with my parents because my big brother and his buddies got into trouble for shooting rabbits in the Forest Preserve.

My fascination with the huge stacks of cotton bales that filled the back half of the upholstery shop next door.

The day I tried to cross Damen Avenue to get to the candy store and the truck driver that stopped his truck just in time and took me back home.

My awe and intrigue watching Mr. Mock in his garage using a funnel to fill a 2 gallon heating oil can from a 50 gallon drum. The care he took to shut off the spigot at exactly the right time. And the detailed explanation I received that care must be taken because if the oil can filled up before the funnel was empty the excess oil would spill on the floor.

The good smell of cherry pies, the bad smell of homemade sauerkraut that sometimes emanated from Mrs. Mock’s apartment over the upholstery shop.

The telephone man emptying our telephone’s coin box all over the dining room table and his meticulous sorting the nickels from the slugs so my mother could reimburse him.

My mother putting a pencil mark on the kitchen wall each time I cried.

And lastly, the tablespoon of cod liver oil that I was served each night before going to bed.

Third Place
Chicago Category
Poets & Patrons 2016 Contest
In the 1940's if your dad was a house painter your back porch was cluttered with half full, half open paint cans, each with a brush submerged in oil paint to keep it from drying out. The porch at the back of our flat was no different. It wasn't a problem, it was pretty normal - to those of us who thought it normal.

Also when your dad was a painter you had one goal in your early life and that was to become a painter also.

I got up early one Sunday morning as little tykes are prone to do. So early in fact that everyone else was still sleeping and so little that I remember that it was the place where we lived prior to our move when I was four. Let's just say it was before the age of reason.

It wasn't a difficult chore to find some half full open paint cans and a brush. Soon the wooden knobs on the back porch chest of drawers were all decked out in beautiful white enamel. But who would want to stop there? An open fold-up bed sat along side the chest and I sensed that it needed some painting as well. The fact that the bed was occupied didn't dissuade my ambition one bit. I was such a good painter that it didn't take long to get to the foot of a teen age big brother sticking out from the covers and hanging over the foot of the bed. Was there any reason not to paint that bare foot as well? I don't know if it was the tickling sensation or the wet paint but my brother awoke with a scream. MOoooM! Within a matter of seconds everyone was awake. Some were not too pleased, some were laughing and some were cleaning up. I, being the baby of the family came away unscathed. I have been pleading ignorance ever since.

That dresser with the white knobs and the fold-up bed with the white paint remained in the family for as long as I can remember.
Where the Pixies Lived

We lived over the tavern. The pixies lived in the basement under the tavern. The pixies loved to play and dance around the furnace. I guess they did that to stay warm on those cold winter nights. The reason I know so much about the pixies is because they appeared so frequently in the bedtime stories that my dad enjoyed telling me night after night. (Nothing improves a story more than a good audience.)

My dad would visit with the pixies every evening when he went to the basement to stoke the furnace one last time. I of course pleaded to stay up late enough to go to the basement with him to see the pixies for myself. I was at long last dissuaded once he explained that it would be of no use because the pixies disappeared from view when the lights were turned on.

The Cookie Factory

Kids whose dads are bankers get to go to the bank on Saturdays and count money. Kids whose dads are major league baseball players get to run the bases after the game. But I was the luckiest kid of all, my dad was a painter.

I don’t mean an artist, he was a real painter. My dad could paint anything. I think the best thing he ever painted was the Maurice Lenell cookie factory. One Saturday when he went to move his ladders I got to go with him.

I couldn’t believe it, there were barrels of cookies everywhere. I didn’t know there were that many cookies in the whole world. While my dad was busy moving ladders, I decided to have a cookie, then another, some more and a whole lot more. Before I knew it, it was time to go so I stuffed my pockets with as many cookies as I could. This might be my only chance. How did I know if I’d ever get to come back.

Going home in the car I tried to sit carefully so I wouldn’t crush my cookies. But you know cookies, my pockets were filled with crumbs … and then I got car sick and … let’s say it together… I lost my cookies.
The Talent Show

My second grade teacher's name was Mrs. Pure, or was it Compassion. I was a good student (for a boy) although I guess I may have had a bit too much self confidence. Our class was having a Valentine's Day party and the highlight was going to be a talent show. I of course signed up. I chose to play the piano.

I remembered that my kindergarten teacher played the piano and my favorite song was the Airplane Song. As the piano's low notes were played, kindergarteners were magically transformed into airplanes, taking off from the floor and flying around the room. As the pitch increased the planes would fly higher. Flying around the room on "tippy" toes was reserved for the very highest notes. Conversely as the notes dwindled lower the planes would descend and finally return to their airport and a safe landing.

I knew I could play the Airplane song. I mean how difficult can playing a piano be? When my turn came I marched to the piano in the front of the room and plunked a few keys as though I was warming up. Actually I was trying to figure out which end of the keyboard had the low notes. Once I had that figured out I got into some serious plunking. The mere fact that I had never played the piano before didn't seem at the time to be much of an impediment.

All of a sudden it came to me - I was in a place - a place where I didn't want to be. Stunned, shattered, stifled, I cowered forward toward the keyboard and then slowly turned my head and peeked at Mrs. Pure.

"Curtis, would you like to sit down?"

Ah, music to my ears. This second grader flew from the piano bench back to his desk in record time.

Thank you Mrs. Pure.
The Sheet Man

In this age of simply tapping a smart phone to pay a bill or pushing a key on an IPAD to order a book from Amazon, it’s difficult to imagine that times were once simpler (or more complex if you prefer). I remember as a kid on Tuesday mornings around 10:30 come rain, snow or sunshine our front door bell would ring. Dutifully from the top of the stairs in the front hall I would lean over the railing and yell who’s there? As though I didn’t already have a pretty good idea. Mister Fedderer was the answer. Mom, it’s the Sheet Man.

The button would be pushed, the door would unlock and the Sheet Man would climb the stairs. He always had a smile on his face - so you call me the Sheet Man. Not that that was the first time at our house he ever heard himself being referred to as the Sheet Man. Mr. Fedderer was politely referred to (maybe even reverently referred to) by our whole family as the Sheet Man since as early as I can remember.

The Sheet Man always brought a notebook sized yellow card with him. He would always sit down at the dining room table (after all of his visits he no longer had to wait to be invited to sit down), partake in some brief pleasantries and then reach for his yellow card. The card had 3 columns, Date, Payment, and Balance. My Mother would pay her weekly amount of $2.00 which he would post to the payment column and subtract from the balance column. He would say thank you, smile, and be off.

The Sheet Man’s entire visit including his travel up and down the stairs took about 5 minutes, except when the balance column on his yellow card got too low for his business sense. Then, and only then, would he appear the next Tuesday with his arms full of goods that he thought my Mother might like. He would bring curtains, drapes, bed spreads, even house dresses for my mother. She would select a few items, keeping an eye on the new balance on the card. I’m sure the Sheet Man wouldn’t let the balance get too large but neither would my Mother.

In hind sight this was a wonderful business model. The merchant had a happy and dedicated customer providing a steady stream of cash flow, however small. The customer ended up with items she normally wouldn’t "splurge on" by paying a manageable, even in those days, $2.00 a week.
Curt B. Vevang

Firehouse 28

I had everything a ten year old boy could want: “L” tracks in the alley for climbing; and a firehouse on the corner with firemen who would fix our bikes and play softball with us in the street.

… and then there was that hot summer afternoon in our second floor flat. My mother was cooking dinner and the kitchen window was wide open. Along came an “L” - a burst of wind, then a swoosh - the flimsy curtains fluttered like a proud flag, reaching just far enough to grasp the open flame of the gas stove. Up went the flame, up went the curtains, GET THE FIREMEN!, was the shout I heard from the kitchen.

I flew down the stairs and four houses up the block to the fire station. MY HOUSE IS ON FIRE! I yelled.

With sirens roaring in my ears I knew my job was done. I ran back to the house, still in panic, expecting to see the whole side of the house engulfed in flames. BUT what I saw was a house looking just like the house always looked.

Oh oh.

the nature of things

As the firemen went rushing up the steps my panic deepened.

Had I been dreaming?

Didn’t I hear my mother say, “get the fire department”?

Did I just turn in a false alarm?

What’s going to happen to me?

Didn’t I glance and see the fire as I rushed out?

I dashed up the stairs with the firemen.

Did it really happen or am I in BIG trouble?

Now two stairs at a time. I burst into the kitchen and saw the blackened wall, the charred window frame and the ash like curtains.

It really happened!

- I had everything a ten year old boy could want.
The Girl Scout Camping Trip

I've only been on one overnight Girl Scout camping trip. I was 9 or 10 years old. I'm sure that's one more than most boys that age have ever been on. For some reason the mother of my buddy, Lenny, was a Girl Scout leader. Who knows? But that's what she was. On one of her Girl Scout camping trips, Lenny (who always went along) was allowed to bring a friend. That would be me.

Nothing out of the ordinary until it was time to call it a day. We were staying in a very large lodge with a balcony at one end. The two leaders and the two boys had cots in the balcony which overlooked the main floor of the lodge. The contingent of teenage Girl Scouts had cots lined up in rows on the main floor of the lodge.

When it was time for the girls to prepare for bed one of the more astute young ladies raised the question, "Hey, how about those two boys in the balcony?" I remember the exact words that Lenny's mother yelled out.

"Boys!, eyes shut!" I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

The next morning Lenny says to me, Did you peek? I said No, did you?

If Lenny had said no I probably wouldn't have remembered this story.

Then There Was My Uncle Fred

Uncle Fred lived with us and like my dad was a house painter. One day he fell ten feet off a scaffold onto concrete and crushed both heels. He was rushed to the hospital. Both feet and legs were placed in casts as the doctors pondered their course. The very next day Uncle Fred insisted on switching hospitals. He was in a fine suburban hospital, but he wanted to be in our neighborhood hospital.

Now some folks get transferred by chopper, some by ambulance, I drove my uncle in his '49 Chevy. I was only 15 but I was the driver because my dad had had a few snorts too many. I knew I could do it because I already had my learner's permit. As you can well imagine I received plenty of instruction from my dad in the passenger seat and my uncle who was sitting sideways in the back seat with his feet propped up in bloodied casts on a pillow.

In the middle of a left turn I forgot the clutch and hit the brake. The car jerked, lunged, stopped, lunged and stopped all at the same time. My uncle slid off the back seat and on to the floor, crushed, bloody heels and all. Well now I really got some instructions. Norwegian cussing interspersed with instructions mixed with more cussing combined with more instructions. Since I greatly admired both my dad and uncle I sorted out the instructions from the adjectives and proceeded aiming...
the car and my passengers back to our neighborhood.

In the mean time Uncle Fred painfully boosted himself back on to the back seat.

As we neared the local hospital Uncle Fred insisted that we first pull into the alley behind his favorite tavern so he could have a beer and a couple shooters. After the trip we just had it didn’t seem that his request was out of the question. His buddies all came out to the car to wish him well. We were late arriving at the hospital.

As it turned out it was a good thing that Uncle Fred was in our neighborhood hospital so I could visit him daily after school. It was my job to sneak a can of beer to him on each visit. I remember my trepidation walking into the hospital with a can of beer hiding in my coat pocket hoping that the nurses wouldn’t find out.

I’m sure they knew.

That was my good buddy Uncle Fred.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After the stories I have just told it’s difficult to say much about myself that hasn’t already been covered or at least implied. I had a great childhood and for that matter a whole wonderful life.

I often refer to myself as a curmudgeon - as evidenced by the following. I was asked the other day what I was proudest of in life. I told the person I didn’t like the word proud. (nor does the Bible, for that matter) I told them I would like to replace the word proud with thankful or fortunate. And in that case I am most thankful and fortunate for my family, my current family as well as those that have passed on.
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