

The Dave, the Bob and the Default Setting

The fact that I discovered David's death purely by accident was the first shock of the day. How could I have missed it? How could I not have heard somehow that this had happened?

I don't read the newspaper that often. Long ago I decided I had no desire to house stacks of leftover pulp, no need for birdcage liner nor puppy training materials.

How could I not have known?

"DFW Tribute," it said. "Students and family celebrate the life of David Foster Wallace ... gathered to read from ... personal reflection on how he had touched ..."

Dead?

Impossible.

I searched for the date. October 2008! A year and a half? What had I been doing?

I googled it.

"September ... suicide ..." I read on. "... hung lifelong chronic depression ... struggling with for months ..." and then farther on, "... long article in Rolling Stone ..."

The tribute and story of his life took almost an hour to read. My eyes hurt by the end of it. Cup of coffee. Think.

Where are they?

I found "Broom of the System", bookmarked at page 15, in the upper drawer of my bedside table. "Infinite Jest" had a corner turned at 268. "A supposedly fun thing I'll never do again", sat upstairs on a shelf with "Consider the Lobster". Those, at least, I knew I had read all the way through. The article on the twirlers and the cruise ship thing I remembered from their titles.

I stacked them on the table beside my computer and brought up Amazon. What else had he done? At the same time I started another tab and found there were videos on YouTube of the tribute, but then also of him reading. The twirlers, it was. As I watched I could see it, lurking there, depression in the background, behind the circular, steel rimmed glasses and the slightly, not quite sloppy, look. T-shirt, hair almost but not quite shoulder length tucked behind the ears could not hide the brow that stayed slightly fearful, slightly concerned, oh so slightly furrowed in doubt.

Amazon gave me “This is Water” subtitled, “Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life”. A small book. The library had a copy. I set off.

Though it had been sunny and warm the previous week, polar air, spilling off the northern glaciers like icewater, had flowed into Ontario, filling it, chilling it to the brim. My ears stung before I reached the corner. I went into the corner store. There were about three people from the nursing home down the street - the one that I had entered and then turned around and left because it stank of piss - standing there checking their lottery tickets from the previous night. I pulled the hood out of the collar where I had rolled it only last week, sure that summer was on the horizon and winter’s fleeing shadow was climbing over the hill out of town. I pinched my lobes. Numb. I drew the zipper up so the collar belled out. My chin sank in behind the Goretex (What the hell is Goretex anyway?) and turned to go. The cashier, dead eyed and chewing gum, watched the misfits examine their tickets, smooth them out and sign them before giving them to her. She, chewing, worked at the Chicklets with her tongue probing, her eyes on them patiently impatient so they didn’t make off with any of the peppettes. Dave would have seen that. I left.

The book was postcard small and white. There was a goldfish in one corner. On the back there was a quote from the book about an old fish, young fish and the phrase, “Morning Boys. How’s the water?” in orange. Inside back flyleaf, my eyes drawn to the bottom, said the final words in his final book, “... died in 2008.”

And I had somehow missed it.

I needed to find a spot to read it, away from the usual crowd at the library:

- the achingly thin guy with the little Jewish beanie thing who I see walking around town was there, mumbling away at a table over a newspaper, pulling at his nose ... no ... picking it and flicking it under the table.

- the woman, blonde and more than middle-aged but still mysteriously blonde, who spends every day there reading. Once said hello only to discover I had scared her so badly she avoided me, averting her eyes from me like I was the devil or something and scuttling along the stacks away, never, ever to look upon me again.

- the other guy, the one I'm sure is gay who minces around, smiles at everyone and is oh so perfectly neat and tidy, is at his usual table, a stack of papers at his side, flicking through a Globe and Mail Entertainment section. "How I luvya, how I luvya, my dear old Swanee .." The tune runs, banjoing through my head and I imagine him doing a softshoe routine there among the Large Print editions of Jane Austen.

Why think these things?

Finally, I find a spot where I can put my back to the wall, loosen, but not remove, my coat and settle in. The book is new, hardly cracked before now ...

One of my favourite authors? What a crock! If he was truly one of my favourite authors wouldn't I have read more than fifteen pages ... more of Infinite Jest. True, I read all the non-fiction, but ...

I return to the Water book. Truly it is a commencement address, given at Kenyon College in 2005, reprinted in book form. I flip. Some pages have as few as ... three or four words!

It takes exactly thirteen minutes and twenty-seven seconds to read it. I decide to try it slower. By about page fifteen my head has relaxed so that I can hear him, literally hear the same voice that I heard reading the twirlers thing on YouTube. I slip the coat off and read on, easily seeing him now, hearing the voice, young, scholarly, confident and smart-alecky too, intent on meaning.

One of his students said he wrote a six page critique of her story handed in to him in creative writing class at Pomona College. The critique was longer than the story.

Then I see the words, “default setting” and I connect to it. It is my default setting. A sadness deeper than gloom and darker than those black and white photos of New York nighttime buildings taken in the thirties settles on me. That kind of sadness is one of grief over lost time, lost opportunity, people lost and gone ...

For some reason ... who knows why ... I am back in Toronto, inside Massey Hall, standing there with Bobby and Adair, this before her death from liver cancer at forty, leaving behind four kids. We are going to see Bob ... the Bob ... Bob Dylan. The hall is huge and old, black everywhere. The openers finish and the Bob is suddenly there, led onstage by his handlers, where he waits, blankly, as a young tattooed and pierced guy with black t-shirt and jeans dresses him in his guitar. There is no wave, no acknowledgement of the crowd, just a businesslike progression, like a determined drunk reeling towards a wall to puke, as Bob Dylan goes to the mike.

Oh Bob, oh Bob, oh Bob! What a mess you are! I see in him this sadness, this boredom and exhaustion with the world ... and a strange thought comes over me.

I see myself climbing onto the stage and going up to him. “It gonna be alright, Bob,” I say. “Here, I have a blanket. I’m gonna throw it over your shoulders and I’m gonna take you home with me. That okay with you?”

And it is okay with Bob. He’s okay with leaving the stage, because no one notices that he is gone, Bob and I trudge off backstage. He staggers at one point and I grab him and hold him up and say, “Not much further, now. Watch out for that dogshit.” because we are in the alley, slick with rain now behind Massey Hall, and I am leading him to my car and helping him in.

And all the way home, through the traffic and the stoplights bleeding in the rain, he just sits there wrapped in the blanket as I drive, repeating, “It’s okay. Not far now”

And when we get there, Bob lets me lead him to a chair by the fire and he props his feet up on an ottoman. I drape another blanket, the one my brother brought from Mexico, over him and say, “I’m gonna make some hot chocolate, Bob. You’ll be okay. Won’t be away any more than a minute.” The room is a cabin, with glossy cedar log walls and homey, wildernessy, things all around -

keepsakes and crafts and shelves of books and “Tarantula” and “Broom of the Sytem” and “Infinite Jest” sit there among the copies of “Roots” and James Michener novels thick as two-by-fours.

And Bob just sits there smiling. He appreciates it, this still place away from the world. There are pictures on the stone mantel, above the fire, of others I have brought here - Jim Morrison, Brian Jones, Dylan Thomas.

And now David’s here with us in a big old stuffed armchair with a blanket round him, too. He and Bob’re smiling and talking with each other, enjoying the warmth and thankful to have this place away from the machine.

I look up and the library clock says I’ve been sitting with Bob and Dave for an hour ...

‘Default setting’ is what he said we operate on, mostly. That’s the annoyance we have in crowds. That’s the road rage on the highway. That’s the first reaction we have to anything that pisses us off about other people.

There is another way to live, he says, that’s not a default setting. Instead, this takes effort and ... wait, let me find it ... this “takes will and mental effort and discipline.” You must choose to think this way, to still out the mind’s constant internal chatter that says you are the real and actual centre of the whole fucking Universe and you must choose to move away from this default setting.

I have always liked anaesthetics. Not because they dull pain, but because they shut off that same chatter for a time. There is joy in being switched off. This is why meditation works. It’s object is nullity, nothinkness.

This ‘default setting’ has recognizably deeper meanings. This default setting seems to me to represent something innately conservative in human nature. It is what makes us skeptical of new ideas. It is what says, “It will never work.” It is the base attitude that people are seen as enemies first, because it’s safer that way. It is the attitude that ‘human nature’ will always sink to the lowest level. It is Hobbes’ “nasty, brutish and short.” It is every right wing reactionary junta seeking to control and manage or massacre opposition. It is there, deeply interweaving its strand of caution into whatever progress the human soul takes towards moral and material growth.

That is why we originally invented God. To lead us away from, not towards this.

Dave and Bob smile at me sipping their hot chocolate.