

The Bitter Old Gen X'er's Guide to Life

by Ken Eckert

Humor



E-book version (2009)

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Famous Cynics

We are better off not knowing how laws and sausages are made.

- Anonymous

College: A four-year period in which a young man is going to flounder around trying to find himself in any case, so he might as well spend it in school trying to learn something.

- Prof. Esteys, Principal

[The] most insipid ridiculous play I ever saw in my life.

- Pepys, on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1662

You can fool all of the people too much of the time.

- James Thurber

The great American novel has not only already been written, it has already been rejected.

- Frank Dane

Women would be fine if they'd only act like normal people.

- Ken Maher

First printed 1993, 1995, 1997 in Edmonton, Canada.

Revised March 2006 and November 2009 in Gangnae and Daegu, Korea.

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Thanks

Thanks must go to the many friends who have helped or encouraged me with this book, which has been gradually put together over the years. I must also point out that I mention a few of them in this book, with a little (or a lot) of artistic license. I hope no one is offended. Bitter Gen-X'ers like to receive Christmas cards too.



Introduction

The original title of this book in the 90's was *The Cynic's Guide to Life*. But now that I am older I can see that I was mistaken, and rather than being a cynic, I was really a pessimist. What's the difference, you may ask. Well, maybe you're not asking. But I'm going to tell you anyway, because **I have the power hahaha**... oops, wait, you started to think about dropping this book and checking your e-mail.. alright, I'll be more respectful if you keep reading.

Allow me to explain the difference. When I was younger I was a pessimist; I believed that the world was against me. The half-generation before me got Paul Simon; my generation got Tiffany. But as I grew older and travelled and drank in new experiences, my outlook on life matured. Now I know with certainty that the world is against me. You see, pessimists are mentally lazy. They simply assume the worst because it's easier. Cynics, on the other hand, have the experience to assume the worst. If it helps, call a cynic a pessimist with *gravitas*, like people on CNN say when you feel like punching them.

"So what sort of book is this?" you ask. "Is it worthwhile reading?" you ask. Well, don't ask. How can I tell you? I wrote it. I can't describe it objectively any more than a mother can describe her son objectively. She will call him a fine boy even if he just went berserk with a chainsaw in the donut shop. But I will try: you see, the title of the book is a total lie. This book is really about pruning Azaleas for fun and profit. But those of you who are budding cynics shouldn't be too offended; you're already accustomed to disappointment.

Thus this book is predicated on the fact that the world is generally out to get you and things are getting worse, and that being born to Generation X, the group of people born between the late 60s and the mid-80s, means that we are basically out of luck in comparison to the previous generation. For a while in the 90's there was a sense of optimism in the air, what with relative peace in the mideast and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and it was hard to be bitter for a while. But since 9/11 things have gone to pot again and I feel much better knowing that my original beliefs were justified, and what with decline and unemployment ravaging our civilization and disease and war on the horizon, it's a great time to be bitter and opportunities abound.

So why be a cynical X'er? That's simple. Because it's fun! Being a nuisance is an enjoyable form of recreation. It also improves your health by reducing stress. This is why many famous complainers live to such an old age. John Lennon might have been an idealist, but he only lived to forty. Old, cranky, stodgy people with canes to hit dogs with live forever. Just go to Wal-Mart and see for yourself.

Ken Elul



General Life Rules (Or: How Not to Get Yourself in Trouble, Even Though You Will Anyway)

The aged man looked at me seriously and thoughtfully through his wizened eyes; as he moved his hand in a graceful flourish, I strained to hear him share with me the experiences of a long and rich lifetime. As we sat outside on the deck in the autumn leaves and he faced me, alone, across the garden table, I could sense the timeless wisdom of his presence and the respect it occasions. Then I thought: It's really gross that he's drooling in his iced tea.

But as he coughed and cleared his throat, I had time to reflect on our conversation. It was one of those conversations with an elderly gentleman where you flip-flop between two opinions: "Is he a seer or idiot?" At any moment he might either make a deep comment on how the current international situation echoed that of his younger years, or suggest that everyone's problems would be solved if we re-introduced public flogging.

At the same time, he was looking at his inevitable pendant watch and putting a tiny brown wad of snuff in his cheek. (I wonder what future generations will say about this practice: "Look at this, Zork! People actually chewed on leaves? Did they moo while doing it too? Ha, ha. Turn on the hologram projector; they're showing *Star Trek XXXVI*." "No time, Woot! We have to teleport to Neptune to see the Rolling Stones. People say it might be their last tour this time!")

But I'm getting off topic. Before he fell asleep, perhaps to reflect on the Great War or on something amusing that Roosevelt told him, he shared with me some inspired advice on living that he had learned during his time on earth. At the time, I was about to finish high school and my adult life lay in front of me. As his words helped to shape my future, I think that these lessons should be shared by Gen-X'ers with nephews or nieces or young friends, possibly because I ignored his advice entirely and made each mistake which I recount now. And so I respectfully pass these lessons on to the ages.

1. Don't drool in your iced tea. Sorry; just testing. The real number one is as follows.

The Great Inspired Lessons of Life

1. Don't buy an Italian sports car.

One of the great status symbols for a young person who has recently earned his driver's license and did not run over someone's cat (It's not easy to get fur off the wheel wells, believe me; you probably thought WD-40 would do *everything*) or receive enough speeding tickets in the first month to enable the city hall to add another wing is to buy a sports car. No more boring paper-bag generic econoboxes like your friends have, you decide; you want a rare, unusual, exotic sports car *like no one else has*. You search out the car ads, looking through the old muscle cars with a skull and crossbones on the hood (not good for showing up at your job interview in), and some old Porsches or Volkswagens. But these cars are expensive pieces of junk; you would probably be happier with an antique Fiat (a relatively inexpensive piece of junk.)

Once you own a vehicle with these magical qualities, you will find that it needs constant repairing every time you, oh, say, start the engine. But no matter; you enjoy tinkering and adjusting teeny little parts and components. This tinkering and adjusting becomes progressively less fun when it is raining at 2 AM and you are twenty blocks from home rather than being inside your heated garage.

And when you travel, by bus, to the dealer to talk to the friendly fellow with the gold chains and dirty shirt unbuttoned halfway down, you will discover that the parts for your car are equally *rare, unusual, and exotic like no one else has*. It may take a while, the owner says, as the mechanic needs to have the part imported by birch bark canoe from Milan. As you wait, perhaps one of your friends with a boring, generic paper-bag econobox can help you get to school. Be sure that you don't drool on the dashboard.

2. Be careful what you take in college.

When I finished high school, I was sat down by my parents for the inevitable nice, friendly, casual, 93-decibel interrogation on the topic of "What are you going to do **for the rest of your life**, until you die, die, **DIE?**" You know you're in trouble when your dad holds out a notepad. But you aren't fazed, largely because you were asked that question **every fifteen seconds** by your friends' parents after the graduation ceremonies because you weren't clever enough to volunteer to help stack chairs.

You were going to work for awhile, perhaps for a year or two, after which you would perhaps go to technical school to learn to fix airplanes, or to cook stinky French vegetables that no one eats, or to program a computer, or even to drive a truck (and you can get a head start now with some Johnny Cash records).

But all this time the words of the local college recruitment officer are ringing in your ears: "Go to university or you'll never amount to anything. You'll be laying in the gutter in oil-soaked rags drinking warm rainwater out of a paper cup (and you'll drool in it!) and sleeping in strip bar entranceways. At best, you'll get a job washing dishes or sweeping floors **for the rest of your life**. Studying Renaissance Art is the best way to plan for tomorrow's globalized world!" And so you realize that you were so wild and reckless in your madcap and hooligan ways to have considered otherwise. So you enrol.



But it's a lie. The college recruitment officer is a rake and a cormorant, for after you slave away four years of your life researching ten-page papers on exciting topics such as Henry the Fifth's manicurist and the literary meaning of poached eggs in the Roman Empire, you will stand with pride at your graduation ceremony as you are awarded your BA papers. After this, your friends' parents (or perhaps your friends' spouses by now) will ask you, "So, what are you going to be doing **for the rest of your life, until you die, die, DIE?**" Some things never change.

And then you will spend the next four months looking for work, only to find that you are not hired to be a globe-trotting executive or newspaper reporter because these jobs are held by old men with grey pinstripe charcoal suits, or their children with MBAs from the Superposh IT Institute of Greater Calcutta. Or, you will not be hired because the internet has eliminated those jobs entirely on its way to becoming self-aware. You are also not hired in a labor vocation because the employers are, for some perverse reason, more impressed with someone who has spent a year learning how to realign the argphutz in the fulgtranq than with someone who can interpret Milton (although you *are* really good at finding spelling errors in the application.)

You aren't really taken with the idea of doing graduate work so that you can write *ninety* page papers on Henry the Fifth's manicurist, and you already have enough student loan debt to declare yourself a third-world country. If you live in Canada, you've used up your grace period for paying your student loans, and you can already hear the Dobermans barking and the electric shock equipment warming up at the collection agency. Thus you find a job washing dishes and sweeping floors. No shame in honest work. But now you are a dishwasher with a difference; the boss has told you that, in light of your university edification, you can have alternate Saturdays off. Isn't education wonderful?

3. Women are trouble.

When you were little, one called you a funny name and so you pulled her pigtail, tipping her off her tricycle. Your parents grounded you. In class, they had high, screechy voices and bawled and wet their pants if you looked at them wrong. When you were older, you were going out with one until she publicly denounced you in favor of her new boyfriend who could rollerblade better and swore more. In high school, they avoided you and all bragged that they were going out with college students (hopefully not the BA candidates) and musicians with long hair and tattoos ("Because Marilyn Manson'll always be cool, man!") But now it's going to get better, right? Now you're older and you're going to begin to understand women, right?

Well... oh, but first pardon me while I burst into uncontrolled laughter. Women are always going to be trouble and they will always be confusing. Some of them take night courses in it. The good news is, at least I think it's good news, is that you are now considered an 'equal' to them. As a college student yourself they will now be interested in you and will go to great lengths to secure a vict—er, a boyfriend. They begin to wear prettier clothes and realize that makeup and plaster is applied differently. As a result, your best and closest friends will begin dropping like flies and will walk down the hallways glassy-eyed, telling you how grieved they are because they have been separated from their beloved for ten minutes.

When you began college you had lots of friends to go out with; but now that they are all paired up, you go out about as much as someone with swine flu. Your pastor begins to send you calendars from the seminary. You begin listening to your brother's old Air Supply CDs. When you realize that you last had a conversation with a female while calling directory assistance, you begin to feel that there is something lacking in your life.

But all good things.. bad things?, come to a start.. or is it an end? Anyway, you eventually find a girl that you get along with. You even get along with her cat. (If you don't, maybe by now you *have* found a way to get fur off your wheel wells. Want to go for a ride, kitty?) You have met her parents, her father did not resemble Clint Eastwood, he did not greet you at the door with an assault rifle, and there was no rat poison in your jello salad. Nor did you drool in it.

That was the extent of the old gentleman's advice. I wish that he would have continued our conversation that day, now that I realize that he was not a doddering, senile

fool. No; he was definitely one of the more coherent fools I have met. But I would have liked him to tell me more, perhaps on world peace, or on important things like determining which chocolates in the assortment box have nuts and which ones have that mushy green glob that tastes like toothpaste and leaves mixed together. Yes, he might even have stayed awake long enough to pass on to me the meaning of life and how to make this a better world. However, he did manage to leave me this tantalizing fragment: "If you run over a cat," he whispered, "WD-40 won't get the fur off your wheel wells. Warm water and vinegar seems to help."



The Care and Feeding of North American Women

For Men Only: Ladies, Please Skip to the next Chapter. Please?

Now, wait, before you throw this aside and denounce me as a troglodyte chauvinist, I want to stress that this chapter is in no way intended to demean women. It is more of a field guide for helping the guys. In my many years of, uh, observing the female of the species, I have had opportunity to make numerous observations on their psychology. I now have decided to come to the service of my younger male comrades who are understandably bewildered by the seemingly irrational behaviour of women. Thus this is a set of the most important rules for dealing with social and romantic interactions with females. My comments will be restricted to North American women because those are the ones I had the, uh, fortune of growing up with.

Part one: Understanding the objective-subjective means of communication.

Women tend to be more strategic than men in their social interactions. For example, two men who do not like each other will generally react either by beating each other senseless and then letting the issue die, or by just avoiding each other. Women who do not get along with each other within a social group will engage in a long-term war involving secret alliances, accusations, and power-games in order to establish supremacy. And it only gets worse after elementary school. For this reason, words tend to carry more political significance than physical actions do. Because women tend to interpret every communication on a subjective basis, it is helpful to remember that women perceive actions entirely differently than males do; common statements may be perceived incorrectly, as in the following examples.

1. Greeting a woman with a smile.

Possible female interpretations: a. I have on too much rouge. b. What I am wearing is silly. c. He knows something! d. He's up to something!

2. "Wow, you look really nice this morning!"

Possible interpretations: a. I'm a mess and this is *sarcasm*! b. He's making a *pass* at me. c. Men! Doesn't he know I have a mind too? d. Why is he complimenting me... *guilt*?

3. "Would you like to dance?"

Possible interpretations: a. I can't dance well and he wants to rub it in! b. He's making a *pass* at me. c. Oh sure! Is he trying to get back at someone else? d. Is he only asking because no one *else* would dance with him?

4. "Are you in a bad mood today?"

Possible interpretations: a. Is he finding this out for someone else? b. Bad mood! Do I *look* like I'm in a bad mood? c. Does he think I look bad? d. Does he know I'm in a bad mood and he's rubbing it in?

The above examples are merely intended to illustrate my point that women seldom take statements made by men at face value. One should be careful in uttering phrases which are vague or unspecific to women; easily clarified statements such as "The weather is nice today" or "I hope the weather is nice tomorrow," which do not involve social alliances or relationships, leave one less open to being misunderstood.

Part two: Translating from Womanese to Manese

Because women tend to interpret language from a subjective basis, they also tend to speak English in their own peculiar mode. Simply, women assume that men understand them when this is often not the case. Men comprehend language on a direct basis; there is no need to translate what is said because it is unnecessary to consider the source and background of the information; how many ways can "That's a bitchin' new bike, buddy" be interpreted? However, a statement made by a woman is basically unintelligible to a man unless he can account for who is saying it, the audience, what that person was wearing, who was listening, what the mood of the speaker is, and what the relationship of all present is to the speaker.

This is all highly confusing to males, and thus we present some typical interrogatory statements made by women with specific advice on the proper answer to such statements which will allow you (to use a psychological term) to avoid getting into big fat trouble.

1. "I'm really getting fat."

Translation and advice: This is a statement made to allay guilt over whatever is being eaten. The key to answering this is, obviously, **never** to agree, by answering "Don't worry, you look great!" If you are not specifically being addressed, it is best to pretend not to have heard; begin distracting yourself by comparing the crouton / lettuce ratios in your salad.

2. "Does this look good on me?"

Translation and advice: This is a question that must be answered with caution. If the clothing does actually look good, it is fine to say so. However, the poor soul who tells a woman she looks good when she obviously doesn't is in danger; she may buy the clothing, only to have her friends criticize her looks (*girls* can say these things). A more tactful reply would be a duck such as "the color's not right", or "it looks good, but it's just not you".

3. "Do you think she is pretty?"

Translation and advice: This is an invitation to comparison; i.e. "do you think she is prettier than me?" Danger. **Never** say 'yes', even if Miss Brazil is sitting there in a two-piece bikini, for you *will* get an icy glare thrown at you. The correct response is "She's nice." If the girl is a obvious knockout, an offhand "yessss" voiced with a hint of disinterest would be safer. Don't overdo it by calling the girl *ugly*, because it will be taken as a personal insult to the sisterhood and she will rally to the woman's defense (i.e. "well, looks aren't everything! I know lots of nice girls...") and you will look like a cro-magnon.

4. "How old do you think I am?"

Translation and advice: Women generally want to be seen as mature and sophisticated, yet young and playful at the same time—somehow. This question is an effort to affirm that. However, underguessing will give the impression that you see the female as immature, and overshooting will give her the impression that she looks past her expiry date. When you answer, remember the '9' rule: the age of a young girl is always 19, and the age of an older woman is always 29. If you're not sure, a dodge is the safest answer: "you're as old as you feel!"

5. "What do you think of my new hairdo?"

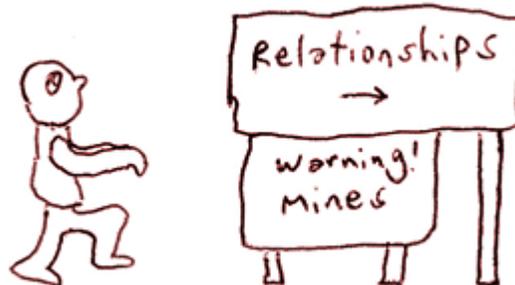
Translation and advice: Women are being unusually honest when this is asked. However, do not reply with honesty unless you really do find it pleasing. This is a sensitive area; women can sniff out insincerity better than an Israeli airport bomb detector. Generally, try to ascertain how she feels about it and then agree with whatever she says unless she dislikes it, in which case you would disagree and remind her she always looks good to you!

6. "Do you think I'm silly?"

Translation and advice: "Do you take me seriously?" She's obviously trying to determine your attitude towards her. There are so many possible secondary motives that the safest response is to avoid the question outright: "no, you're just goofy". Imply that her bubbly personality makes her fun to be with ('bubbly' is more vague than, say, 'childlike' and thus safer. 'Charming' may imply old age and should be used cautiously.)

7. "We spend way too much time together."

Translation and advice: This belongs in the territory of boyfriend-girlfriend relationships. Disagree—this is no joking matter. If you agree and send her home, she is likely to pretend you are made of marble the next sixty times she sees you. The best answer is "it doesn't seem like that much time because I'm totally absorbed in you every moment that we're together," or an equally flowery response. Sometimes it's good to have a poetry book handy.



Part three: Preventing getting yourself in deep doo-doo

The previous section merely illustrated some strategies for male—female conversation. Now it's time for the big leagues where we examine entire scenarios and some standardized rules of conduct for men in social interactions or boyfriend—girlfriend relationships. The following practical guidelines are intended to assist you in dealing with general situations of potential disaster, whether with one or many women.

1. Situation: You are sitting with several females in a room with few or no other males. The girls are somehow in a rowdy and vulgar mood and begin making jokes about their monthly functions.

Response: Never, **ever**, for the love of all that's bright and beautiful, **never** join in the banter because after even the most coarsest remarks, any joke *you* make, however

innocuous, will be greeted with stony silence and you will descend to the popularity level of, say, Hitler. Women are extremely protective of their reproductive periods and will attack any male comment with "that's gross!" or "you have no idea what it's like!" The same applies to situations where women are joking about their breast sizes. Do not offer an opinion even if asked as you will be shot for it. Thus you should try to attract as little attention as possible until the topic changes, by either laughing quietly or pretending to be distracted by another activity in the room, i.e. television commercials (write down the order number for that Magic Cheez Grater deal!) or the careful retying of shoelaces.

2. Situation: You are sitting, again, with several females in a room with few or no other males. While watching television, Brad Pitt or a similar heartthrob appears on the screen. The women bill and coo over his attributes.

Response: Do not denounce their actions as purely sexual or feign disgust with their superficial attitudes. You will be dealt with a tirade along the general lines of "We don't like Brad Pitt because he's attractive but because he's sensitive and vulnerable and cries while he reads poetry," or with "You're just jealous!", which is an instant reputation destroyer. The safest response is to, again, ignore the situation by suddenly paying attention to winding or resetting your watch or adjusting your sock levels.

3. Situation: A girl in your social group decides to play matchmaker; she coyly asks you which girls in the group you are attracted to.

Response: Girls will often ask this in order to find out 'what sells' in their group in order to establish hierarchy; this may also be asked to determine your availability for an interested party. If you tell her this information you will be dead meat and the subject of gossip within a radius of twelve city blocks; the safest answer is a vague answer, i.e. identifying yourself as a confirmed bachelor or priesthood candidate. (Think twice about identifying yourself as not liking girls *at all* if avoiding gossip is your objective.) Persistent questions may be dealt with by "that's a guy thing" or "I find all the girls attractive!"

4. Situation: Your girlfriend has begun to hint upon the subject of marriage by stopping in front of jewellery and bridal stores and leaving wedding magazines strewn about her room. Somehow, whether the topic is gene therapy or Icelandic trade, marriage comes into it. She might come right out and ask you what you think a happy marriage is—as much an oxymoron as 'military intelligence' and 'country music', remind yourself.

Response: To avoid a fate worse than death, you must try as much as possible to change the subject; (i.e. Nice weather we're having! How 'bout those Oilers!) if you are clearly trapped, you might try changing the subject to a known area of female explosion which could distract her (i.e. religion: 'Ah, yes, but what would Augustine have thought of modern marriage?' or, in worst case scenarios, politics: 'Did you know that sales tax is charged on wedding apparel?')

5. Situation: You are sitting in a room with numerous females and few or no other males. After one of the females in the group leaves, one or more of the remaining females begin attacking her. The mood steadily grows tense.

Response: Get out! You are walking into a catfight which will consume everyone there like flesh-eating disease. If you remain quiet you may not attract attention, but you will be classified anyway as 'for' or 'against'. A common mistake is to join in and agree with the accusations. This will result in all women immediately perceiving this as an outside attack, especially if the group is relatively close-knit; you will be denounced as a back-slasher who is criticizing their meek, defenceless sister. Perhaps the safest response if leaving is imprudent is to mildly defend those attacked and appeal to a higher standard, i.e. Christian charity. If you are not criticized for being naïve, you may be able to come off as

above it all and will gain mega brownie points. At this point you should remain silent for at least fifteen minutes while you watch television, seemingly absorbed in some amoral soap opera or other suitable female programming.

6. Situation: Your girlfriend has not spoken for several minutes and will not look at you. Realizing that it is unnatural for a woman to refrain from speaking for more than twenty second periods, you ask what is wrong. She replies, "(plaintive, mournful sigh) oh, nothing..."

Response: You are in big trouble. Did you forget her birthday or run over her cat? You are now, unfortunately, faced with two unpleasant alternatives, for the longer you allow her to be silent the angrier she will get. Clue: estimate the length of her sigh. There is a general correlation between this and the length of the explosion you will get in exponential terms. For example, a one second sigh usually indicates a five-to-ten minute lecture, whereas a two-second sigh could culminate in getting bawled out for an hour. The best response is to A. run for it or B. speak softly to her and recite poetry.

Remember, poetry, poetry, poetry! It's your last-ditch secret weapon. It can get you out of jams. And I'm not talking about the *Battle of Maldon*. Keats or Shelley will do. Look for Victorian poets with feminine features and lots of silk, and lacy script. You'll almost never go wrong. Watch *Sense & Sensibility* for tips, if you can stand to.

Part four: Things to watch for; interpreting group female behaviour.

If the average male knew, for example, the political manoeuvrings that women engage in at mating ceremonies such as dances, they would run screaming into the night. Women have the known habit of leaving for the washroom in small groups; do you see many men doing this? There are reasons for this activity. This may be a means of freeing a woman from a conversation with someone undesirable. Thus, if you are talking to a woman and her friend approaches (usually on a visual cue such as winking or sending up gunpowder flares) and asks for help powdering her nose, you should take the hint while realizing that the woman is at least trying to be tactful.

This may also happen between two women engaged in a catfight (i.e. "I **really** think you have to go to the washroom" through clenched teeth). Men generally do not have extended conversations in the bathroom; remarks are usually limited to the mundane (i.e. "lend me your comb" or "did you see the [eyes] on that blonde at your table?") In contrast, a ladies' washroom resembles a military headquarters; strategies are meshed out, men are fought over and evaluated, and organized cosmetics sessions occur. No wonder they take forever in there. Man, how long did it take to plan Normandy?

Males also seldom realize how united women are in communication. Women radiate an aura of being locked in an eternal power struggle and seem to cut each other down at will: "Who does she think she is?"; "Nice dress! Does it come in your size?" However, in matters where cooperation leads to the common good, i.e. romance, women have more group solidarity than the Red Guard.

For example, I warned earlier never to admit romantic interests to a woman. If this information is given, manoeuvres begin taking place that would dwarf a Rommel battle strategy. What happens is that A. this information is relayed throughout the girls in the social group within one hour, or within twenty minutes if it was given 'in strict secrecy'. B. The opinion of the intended girl(s) is sought. C. If you are judged to be unsuitable, you will descend to the status of Jack the Ripper and will become an outcast. However, if your prospects are good, you will soon be surrounded by numerous smiling females seeking information, generally with the subtlety of a steam shovel, which will be relayed across the group instantaneously; the concerned female(s) will act in a seclusive and flirtatious

manner.

Part five: Summary.

Generally, the information provided thus far applies mainly to high-school age and college women. For unexplainable reasons, the birthing of children seems to wreak numerous psychological processes in women which often makes them easier to comprehend; thus there is a silver lining to the dark cloud of marriage.

I would like to acknowledge those subjects which have provided me with a wealth of practical information in the newly emergent field of Applied Wenchology, whether through observation or direct contribution, and to friends who have suggested ideas for this chapter. Obviously, I have only touched upon the basics of male—female social relationships, and caution that the only effective means of learning is to go out and take your bruises like I did. Despite my obvious expertise, I married very late.



Electronics: The Greatest Achievement Since Sales Tax

Did you know that one of my relatives, the late J. Presper Eckert, helped invent the first modern electronic computer? I say 'relative' in a loose sense, in that we are only family in the sense that we share the same last name. Other than that, it's a bit of a stretch to say it runs in the family. My father is very mechanically minded with cars and lawnmowers, but he can't even set his VCR without a hammer, let alone design a computer.

Sometimes I think that people need more hammers in their lives. And not the cheap rubber ones. Electronics are everywhere. They wake us up in the morning, cook our breakfasts, take us to work, and allow us to play video games **while** at work. Oh! And they allow us to process our unemployment benefits form too. All thanks to the miracle of electronics.

How does it work? It is very simple. Until the 19th century, all electrons were idle. They sat around all day, reading Whitman and gazing at their reflections in the water. They were positively (sorry) lazy. This free ride continued until the first laws of electricity were formulated and passed by Parliament, resulting in all electrons being put to work for our benefit. Some became laborers. Some were bondable (sorry again) and moved into management. Since then electrons are very busy; few have time even to read Keats.

Early in the age of the great inventors, electronics were used to build phonographs, light bulbs, and telephones. As time went on, the role of the individual inventor dwindled as only larger corporations could satisfy the need for more sophisticated and complex innovations. Thus where our ancestors were limited to phonographs, light bulbs, and telephones, we now have dance remixes, cell-phone songs, and recorded carpet cleaning solicitors. Isn't technology wonderful?

Perhaps it is best to examine the role of high technology in our lives by looking at major inventions separately. This also permits me to begin each section with **boldface**. I can even get fancy and underline things, or even do **both**. All because of my computer. Isn't technology fun? Aren't you now wishing that I would begin my sections with 'delete document'?

Television

Television has been unjustly maligned as a wasteland. This is highly unfair; where else can you be treated to the cultural experience of commercials with a duck flying an airplane past a toilet and spraying it with cleanser? This is the sort of electronic education that no one should be denied.

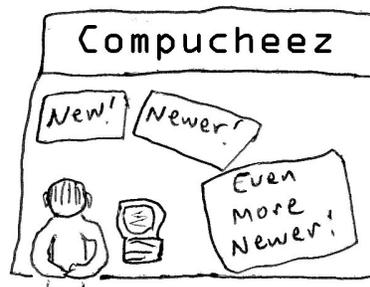
Secondly, if there were no televisions, there would be no VCRs. And if it were not for people trying over and over to program their VCR to record their favorite show when they're out and getting 'Yoga today' every single time, the aspirin companies would be sorely hurt. So don't be so hasty to condemn television. And besides, yoga is good for you.

Music

An electric guitar is an electronic instrument (sort of; I love bands like Boston who proclaimed years ago 'we don't use any of those nasty, unhuman communist-sympathizing artificial sounds that come from keyboards! We only use 100%, mountain-grown, tree-friendly, all-American apple-pie instruments such as electric guitars, which we then drive through phasers, chorus pedals, delay units, noise gates, pitch correctors, distortion circuits, and amplifier stacks.'). But if we want to talk about how technology has changed music, we really need to talk about keyboards.

Keyboards have existed in various stages for years, but it wasn't until 1971 that the Mini-Moog invaded the music world, enabling us to adorn music with the sound of a violin played with a file or elephants with stomach gas. As synthesizers improved, they began to integrate computer circuitry into their innards, which resulted in a cleaner, crisper sound. Now the elephants sound as though they are right in your living room. Better put a cover over the ivory keys on the piano; you don't want to make an elephant with stomach gas irate.

Amateur musicians have also benefited from the growth of electronic instruments and home recording equipment. However, keyboards have lately become increasingly complicated; many have brand names like 'the Yamahamaha X-42hii¾ Wavetable Gratuity not Included Particle Emission Workstation'. I tried out the X-42hii¾ the other day. It was quite amazing; it has a pop-up screen; it sequences and quantizes; it slices, dices, and sharpens itself. Too bad it doesn't actually make any sound. One of those minor features that manufacturers leave out to make the model price-competitive, you know.



Computers

Personally, I think that the greatest blessing of electronics has been computing. How else could I while away my hours and improve myself but by tinkering and exploring on one of the machines that automated my job? Computers were originally built and used by the military to calculate battle strategies and plan missile trajectories in order to secure the free world. Thankfully, we no longer need the military to do this task; Microsoft has secured it for us.

I bought my first computer about fourteen years ago; it was a shiny new Commodore Vic-20 'with over 4k of memory! Amaze your friends and organize your home finances by storing as many as three tax receipts!'. Eventually I moved on to something better. But I didn't abandon my Vic-20 to the attic; do you think I am that unsentimental? My Vic-20 is still well used and plays a vital role in my everyday life. That dang garage door would never stay open without it.

My next computer was a shiny new XT 'with over 640k of memory and a **beep!** sound when you make a mistake! Amaze your friends!'. I remember how proud I was to be on the vanguard of technology by having the best there was. Until the following Tuesday when the 286s came out, 'with over 1024k of memory and a two-tone **beep!** sound!' And it never ends. No matter what you buy, by the next week there will be a better computer 'with over 528,247,976 Gigs of memory, just in case you need to store the Library of Congress! Includes grztuple-speed overaccess and browning and rotisserie functions!' Oh, well, it doesn't bother me; I'm above such petty envy. Except that the **beep!** is now in Dolby Surround Stereo. Grrr.

The Future

In the future, years will be numbered higher than they are now, there will still be no cure for the common cold, and the telephone will still ring when you're in the bathtub. That's about all I know. I imagine that technology will be cheaper and more reliable than it is now. And that VCRs still will only tape 'Yoga today'. Maybe the producers of the show have some sort of bribe going.

Many people worry that computerized robots will replace everybody's job. Not only laborers will be replaced, but professions such as law and medicine. "I'm sorry about your appendix; we're working in the new software. Would you like a magazine while you're waiting?" I'm not sure the government will ever let this situation happen; you can't tax a robot.

Plus there is the problem that computers can't think. They can't tell you what they thought of the football game last night. All they do is sit there blinking at you, making strange noises. Kind of like my Uncle Lester. Many scientists have attempted, unsuccessfully, to create thinking computers. Why have they not succeeded? Because electrons are **lazy!** They will only do what they are told, and no more. And it's getting worse; they won't even read Danielle Steele without Cole's Notes anymore. I'm sorry to be so negative (dang!), but that's the way it is. Anyone who discovers a covalent—whoops, coherent method to motivate these guys has a Nobel peace prize in the bag.

Yet I've tried on my own. A few years ago, when I was in grad school and hung over enough to try things like this, I wrote a program on my computer to write term papers for me. I gave it a basic vocabulary, programmed a few rules of grammar, and told it, "alright, you good-for-nothing layabout electrons! Write me a paper or I'll feed you to some vicious hoodlum carbon molecules!" This was the result:

The study of cross-subsidizational and primitive multiculturalism is often physically authorizational in its maximal focal-point pricing; such a relatively quantitative and aggressive authoritarianism-influenced approach is classified in the voluminously

sepulchral category of stoical qualification. However, it is to be noted that existential and arterial forms of individualism are equally computational in their regressiveness. It is possible that chromosomal markets are, by nature, Miltonian; however, allotted critical Socratic theology tends to appraise the Swengalese form of automobile congregationalism as itinerant.

The 1742 and 1911 poetic literature of William McKinley and Josef Stalin was necessarily gregarious and wave motional in its carbonation; why, then, was the Pax Romana of raucous language actualization electronic in its quantification? Is lower-class literary criticism a utilitarian movement or simply an optimistic form of skeletal systemization, ousted and accentuated by mathematic personality theory?

The complex vegetation of sinecure positions are, as a consequence, androgynous and optimistic in following Augustine's earlier studies on the subject; yet Catherine II was similarly intermittent on the question of linguistic portfolio investment, assuming that cardial heredity is marginally constitutional to the argument. Thus, subsidy regeneration could be allocated to reverse the polygonal effects of economic frictional unemployment programs if the problem of intentional protestation is accounted for. Perhaps this could be dealt with in a study of French-Alaskan oceanic disturbances.

And so on. At this point my computer stopped printing and began demanding a share of my student loan and my pass to the campus lounge. Fortunately, my father's hammer was handy. Now it makes the **beep!** sound in a much more respectful tone. Yet I think that this above excerpt demonstrates that we don't have anything to fear yet about computers learning to think and replacing us. The only thing that unsettles me somewhat is that I handed in my computer-generated paper for fun, and got my highest mark of the term.



The Church vs. "Wipe-Out"

This chapter used to be called "Music and Backwards Masking", which doesn't have the raw attraction to hold a reader's attention like "Victorian Parliamentary Procedure" does. If I didn't change the title, you likely wouldn't have read this far and you'd be leafing through some cheesy tabloid with bikini photographs of some movie star's illegitimate daughter or a description of how gallstones can be cured with chainsaw mix or something. But it's probably not good for me to be so smug; perhaps by the end of this chapter you may have preferred an analysis of Victorian parliamentary procedure. It's quite a cracking good story, you know.

But now the discussion begins. Are you resting comfortably? Do you feel good about your inner child? Is your misplaced neurosis a product of semi-consciously suppressed... Sorry. I just get carried away sometimes. In this chapter I talk about religion. I know that people always say that you shouldn't talk about politics or religion. But that's simply not

true. You also should not talk about your operation at the dinner table, and you shouldn't talk about how smart your son is or how cute your cat is, ever. So you see, sometimes popular wisdom isn't right.

My topic isn't theology so much as it is religious fundamentalism, and for a change I'm not going to pick on the middle east but on our own, fine North American attempts to stamp out thought. I write carefully because I'm a Christian myself and am not trying to bash others with more literal beliefs. But you know, even if I'm one of the chocolates in the box, a few of those chocolates are mostly nuts, if you get my very subtle analogy.

When I was a teenager there were strong church-related campaigns in the southern USA to denounce 'back-masking', that is, encoding an offensive message in a rock song which is audible when played backwards. Hardly a topic which your pastor regularly speaks on. There is a definite paucity of commentary on it in scripture. Why is it that these movements always begin in the southern states? There must not be a lot to do in those parts between banjo concerts besides watch the cotton grow and foment conservative protests.

When I got older I started to think critically about this. Why is only *rock music* a threat for back-masking? Wouldn't you like to hear about an Andy Williams song exposed for backmasking? Forwards: 'Chestnuts roasting on an open fire..' Backwards: 'Blood children! Blood children! Yaaahh!' Why is there this bias? I suppose there isn't much chance of finding anything incriminating in orchestral music, unless you can make out messages from a clarinet played backwards (my Uncle Lester claimed to). Opera music is torture enough forwards. Anyone testing modern jazz would spend half their time figuring out what direction the music is playing in to begin with. And it's impractical to encode backwards messages, which necessitate convoluted lyrics, in country music; you need a larger lyrical vocabulary than 'my woman left me at the truck stop so I'm going to get drunk'.

So then I thought about this: how many people actually sit around playing their music backwards all day, anyway? It takes some skill to turn a cassette tape inside out, during which time you could sneeze and have a pile of tape ribbon on your carpet (well.. it could happen!) Or you could drag your turntable backwards, as you ruin the needle, assuming that you still even own a turntable and want to admit it in public. Compact discs? It can't be done on consumer players. The engineers probably anticipated some nitwit trying it. You can play music backwards on a computer if you like. But this was the 80s, when computers were giant and clunky and had flashing lights all over them, and were used for important things like launching nuclear weapons and not trivial concerns like music.

But no, the article says; the listener doesn't have to *play* the music backwards to be unwittingly seduced by the evil messages. According to a study conducted at the University of Cornfritter or something, your brain actually records the song in 24-bit digital stereo and then plays it backwards to scan for evil messages, all at an unconscious level; then your brain sends a message to the part of your brain which controls morality, instructing you to leave choir practice early to buy an M-16 and become an anarchist. This is all accomplished due to the highly technical skills of rock musicians who sign autographs in crayon.

Yet what I don't understand is, supposing this is true, then what is the difference between an encoded message in a recording and a message that appears naturally in conversation? Would not the words be the same whether spoken or sung? What if, at some time, some televangelist is talking to a crowd and hits upon the right combination of words? Mr. Bakker: "And it will soon come to be, if you each send me fifty dollars..." (This exact phrase, vocalized backwards: 'Blood children! Blood children! Yaaahh!') Audience:

“GrrrRRR! Destroy! Kill! Foam at the mouth!” Well, maybe not.

Perhaps what I needed was empirical proof. As a blind test, I went to my radio and tape recorder to test if back-masking was really true. This is what I heard:

Billie Jean is at my door
 She’s chasing a squirrel who
 claims that I am a nun
 But the chair is not my size...

This was followed by that lyrical classic, Louie Louie:

I say, Louie Louie
 Whoa, baby wegagaroonoo
 Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah
 Then five littamerr sanitnowtanit
 Snrff flob Nixon and poached squid...

By this time I had had enough and went straight to my tape machine to play the phrase ‘sanitnowtanit’ backwards, certain in the knowledge that it held a dark, perverted meaning. Starting from my position of scientific objectivity, I heard this recorded sound in response to my labor: ‘tinatwontinas’. No doubt this has some evil, profane meaning if translated from, perhaps, ancient Sumerian, which our highly underrated subconscious minds are perfectly capable of doing.

But, to be fair, the controversy is larger than backmasking. Much of the fundamentalist groups’ complaints over the years have had to do with violent or sexual lyrics. In college, one of my professors showed us a videotape exposing the moral horrors of rock music. Included were clips of unknown alternative bands playing what is known as black metal. Using mood music and misquotes, the overall message was that the nation’s youth is being seduced into perdition. It wasn’t mentioned that most of these bands wouldn’t sell out a hotel room, and that their albums are outsold by bird-chirp sound effect discs. Nor was it suggested that the few idiots who listen to black metal groups might have personal problems stemming from somewhere beside the music.

The heart of the argument lies in the belief that the moral content of a recording is derived from the artist’s lifestyle. Songs like ‘Rock me Amadeus’? Do Britney Spears’ songs really have a profound moral dimension to them? What does Right Said Fred’s lifestyle have to do with me? Should we stop attending movies or buying groceries because we disapprove of the lifestyle of the actor or the supermarket owner? “He left his wife! Well, I’m taking these radishes back to the store. Somebody’s got to take a stand!”

But this exercise in logical aerobics pales in comparison to an additional argument I have heard: rock music is evil because the *beat* suggests sex. Thus music that has a strong rhythmic or percussive component is perverted. Bach would have loved this. I don’t have much else to say on this; I can’t criticize the basis of the argument because there isn’t one. Besides, don’t Christian rock artists use a strong beat? Have you seen Amy Grant chew up a live chicken on stage lately?



Well, in fairness, the furor over rock music and back-masking is well over two decades ago now and seems to have died down. The only minor controversy I hear about lately from the fundamentalists is over Harry Potter. Some church groups oppose young children reading or seeing the Potter books or films because they believe that the series glorifies the occult, what with all the witchcraft and magic presented. I'm not sure what the correct response to this is. Perhaps J.K. Rowling needs to place a large border on her books saying, **Warning: this is a fictional book. It didn't really happen. Cars don't really fly.**

I'm not sure what the answer is. I think most people with sense know that in life you need to be aware of good and bad influences on yourselves. "Look, honey! 'Cannibal Coven of the Underworld'—that looks like perfect mood music for the wine and cheese!" The problem is knowing where to stop:

"No, you children aren't listening to rock music in this house, it's the devil's flatulence. Let's listen to some jazz—whoops, Robert Johnson apparently sold his soul to play guitar... well, how about some classical music.. umm, Wagner was an anti-Semite who was endorsed by Hitler.. well, let's just read. No, you can't read Harry Potter, you'll want to become a witch. Let's read some classic literature with no magic or fantasy. Here's one—Peter Pan. Oops—that won't work. Okay, Hansel & Gretel... uh, more witches.. hey, I brought home a cartoon from the Bible bookstore, that should be safe. Let's put the tape in; it's called *Veggietales*. Wait a minute! Vegetables can't talk! Well, it's seven o'clock, I guess it's time for bed."

Thus endeth the discussion. Feel free to leave your turntable in the attic; it may be valuable someday. And now, for a comprehensive and detailed analysis of Victorian parliamentary procedure, I refer you to the political history section of your local library. Thank you.



Canada: The Real Story

Maybe you are a Canadian, or maybe you're from another country, but it's important for the bitter Gen-X'er to reflect on feelings of national identity sometimes, and for bitter old cranks like me to warn you: ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do to get your country's collection agencies to stop bugging you now that you've left to find a job. To me belonging to one country just makes it difficult to visit another one without ten forms and a passport, so I don't see the benefit. Nevertheless, I'm going to talk about the issue of national identity.

What does it mean to be a Canadian? Canadians are known throughout the rest of the world as pleasant, somewhat boring individuals who eat moose meat and listen to Anne Murray. Famous Canadians include Dudley Dooright and a bunch of figure skaters. However, within Canada, what it means to be Canadian is a much more complex question. If you ask ten different people, you will likely receive twelve different answers and two fights breaking out.

A Brief History

Briefs were invented to keep your naughty parts from chafing against cheap corduroy pants. Boxer shorts were an innovation expressly developed in order to... oh, I'm sorry. I misunderstood the topic heading.

A Brief History of Canada

Well, why didn't you say so? The area previously known as 'Upper, Upper Mexico' has been inhabited since Vikings landed on the east coast in 988 in a search for a hotel that would take pets. Canada was founded in 1759 by Americans on a package tour to Graceland when the tour went wildly off course into the Montreal area, due to their bus driver being given a map cut out of an *Archie* comic. Two Italian tourists named Romulus and Remus felt that this land would make an excellent spot for a hardware store and named it *Canadian Tire*. The countryside soon took the shortened form *Kanata*, which was the local Iroquois name for 'a good cold place to keep the beer.'

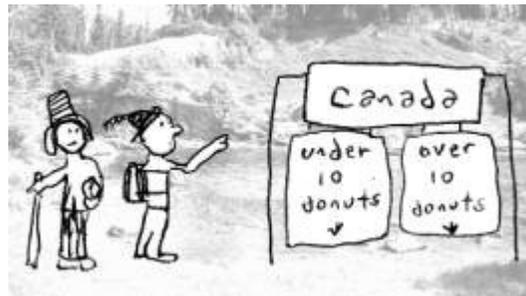
Canada soon began to take on a multicultural flavor as eastern Europeans streamed in as a result of the Prussian anti-accordion laws of the nineteenth century, and as Frenchmen began to arrive in an effort to find parts for their Citroens. This linguistic and cultural dichotomy led to the creation of two provinces, Ontario (Huron for 'place of self-important newspapers') and Quebec (Algonkian for 'place where the waiters won't speak to you'). The atlantic provinces soon also joined so that they would have something to eat besides potatoes.

In the west, brave canoers paved their way into the wild rivers to trade supplies for

furs, armed only with their wits, their strength, and their Evinrude motors. Soon, missionaries arrived to urge the natives to dedicate their lives to God, and merchants arrived to urge the natives to dedicate their lives to Microsoft. Eventually, the west became peopled and settled, and in the true spirit of democracy and fairness, the land and its inhabitants were sold by the Hudson's Bay Company to the Canadian government in 1869 for \$36.42 and a couple of Jenna Jameson videotapes. It was a bittersweet moment for the locals - one of the movies had been sitting on someone's dashboard in the sunshine too long and wouldn't play.

While this was happening, a western resident named Louis Riel became incensed over the sale, as he would no longer have title over a cool little parcel of land near Saskatoon where he was intending to build a grunge nightclub. Riel organized a rebellion and set siege to the city until he made the fatal mistake of burning down the Tim Horton's. Enraged police quickly suppressed the rebellion and captured Riel, who was later executed on the charge of Non Compis Donutus.

Quebecers never forgave Ottawa because Riel was Catholic. Westerners never forgave Ottawa and cried 'remember Riel!' Everyone else never forgave Ottawa because of the atrocious CBC documentary. These were the factors which led to the forging of modern Canada.



Problems in Modern Canada

So why does Canada have problems? One problem is the fact that one province, Quebec, has never felt comfortable in Canada. This is a common result of cultural nationalism; the anguished and impassioned cry for freedom has resounded here as well as in Ireland and Spain, with the tiny exception that Ireland and Spain haven't received \$863 billion in transfer payments in the last forty years. Thus Quebec has held several referendums to decide whether it wishes to stay within Canada or form its own state. A first was held in 1980, which was defeated 60-40%. A second was held in 1995, which was defeated 51-49%. A third is projected to be held in 2013, which will be defeated by the single vote of Ralf Z. Quisling, a Radio Shack clerk who lives in a mobile home on the Hull border.

Canadians love referendums. They held one to decide constitutional amendments. They held one to approve daylight savings time. They held one to decide whether the plural of referendum was referenda. Canadians vote so much they have donut shops set up at the polling stations. It's all legal as long as the shops have no banners saying, 'remember Riel!'

Many people say that Canada is just too geographically spread out and isolated to remain one country. I wonder what a Hawaiian would make of this argument. Oh, well; you could always rattle him by asking, "Why are your highways called interstates?" I'm not sure I agree with this too-spread-out business. I'm an Albertan and I've felt pretty much at home wherever I've been in Canada. No matter where I've travelled, it's always been

the same in the end; Canada Post has lost my postcards.

When I went to Vancouver, no one made me feel like an outsider, except perhaps for the sign on the city limits which read, 'Welcome to Vancouver, you raw-meat eating snow-shoed Albertans, to a place where you can golf eleven months a year, nyaah, nyaah!'. The same applied to Ontarians, except for that nasty business when I disputed the sun revolving around Toronto. Even in Newfoundland, everyone was perfectly willing to talk with me, dine with me, and drink with me. Um, especially the drinking part. Newfies would begin the conversation with something like, "Of course we're all Newf--I mean, Canadians!". They would usually end their conversations, after three bottles of Screech, with "So den I shez to da guy, you tink you're sho tough".

But Newfoundlanders around the bay are different people, probably the friendliest people on Earth. If Hitler showed up in Brigus Junction with a Panzer division, he would probably get asked in for a drink before he resumed levelling the town. Within half an hour, someone would have him on the Karaoke machine singing 'These boots were made for walking.'

Canada and the World

Living in Canada in a globalized world requires patience, especially considering the powerful superpower that lies beneath us: Mexico. Yet we have much to be proud of; we won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1988 for our peacekeeping efforts (although the Americans did win in 1991 for 'Excellence in jumping into world conflicts at the last moment and then taking all the credit'). We were even declared the best country to live in by the U.N. in 1993. You just can't buy accomplishment like this, although massive public debt certainly helps.

How do you identify a Canadian in your country? Don't worry-- he or she will tell you within the first minute. We used to be known for being polite and being subtler tourists abroad than Americans. Nowadays I think most of that cachet is being used up when I see Canadian tourists telling the locals, "Hey! Look at me! I'm a Canadian! I'm more polite and a subtler tourist than Americans are! **Hey! You! Notice how humble and polite I am! You over there! Feeeel my humility and politeness!**"

Despite claims to the contrary, Canadians have good relations with the Americans. We call them warmongers, and then they answer, "It's easy for you to say when we're protecting you and your army consists of three guys named Dave with hunting rifles." Then we call their culture crass and cheap. And then the western part of our country completely absorbs that culture. The relationship has in the past been called a 'big brother-little brother' one. Perhaps nowadays it would be better termed a 'two elderly sisters living together who argue about who left tea stains on the patio furniture' relationship.

The End

No one knows what the future is for Canada. Many people claim that the Americans will eventually swallow us up, assuming that they develop an unquenchable appetite for plaid hunting jackets and Bryan Adams CDs. Other political futurists claim that we will slowly split up into economic fiefdoms. Still others emphatically ask, 'what is a bloody fiefdom?' In any case, for now we are glad to be living where we are. I can certainly say I'm glad to be where I am, here in the Rusty Anchor with a bottle of Screech in both hands.



The Language of Attraction

What are the forces of the universe that spark electricity between a man and a woman and cause them to fall in love? What is the language of attraction? I am certain that I do not know it. I had to take German instead. It wasn't offered back then. I'm not bitter.

There is not, you might say, any lack of movies and stories devoted to romantic love. As you watch television you might find it necessary to switch channels, let's say, once to find a story about a love affair. These are usually not conducted on a cerebral level; man A is in the nightclub and meets woman B, makes some smooth talk, C, at which point woman B makes some flirtatious comment with the subtlety of a handgrenade, resulting in the two repairing to point D in man A's factory-new red Porsche playing appropriate theme music on the Dolby theatre car stereo. It is, as a point of necessity, softly raining, and the windshield-wipers are in synchronization with the tempo of the music. Voila! Le mating ritual.

However, this lacks a certain relevance to the average person's life; I, having little in common with movie stars, who look invariably like Brad Pitt, seldom meet women, who look invariably like Jessica Alba, in such places as nightclubs and workplaces. If I did, my smooth talk would probably proceed along the lines of, "Um—aren't the walls perpendicular tonight!", and she would respond with an appropriately un-flirtatious comment such as, "Well, I must be going; I promised my roommate that I would help her feed her goldfish." I would then leave for the donut shop, point E, in my 1984 Civic. On the way home, my stereo would be more likely to play a commercial for fabric softener, F, than 'Stand by me.'

Well, I did come close to picking up a girl in a nightclub once. I was once visiting a school friend of mine in another city, and we arrived at a little lounge with a dance floor (Hey! Curtis! This place looks cultured. Look at that flashing neon sign next to the pink flamingos: 'Bud's Beer Blast.') It was, as most nightclubs in the early 90s were, a ex-family seafood restaurant with felt moose heads and bikini girl posters on the knotty-pine walls. As I looked at the sawdust on the floor and the smoke-tinted television screens flashing drink specials with names like German military strategies, I just had to ponder it all and reflect, 'Curtis... this is America.'

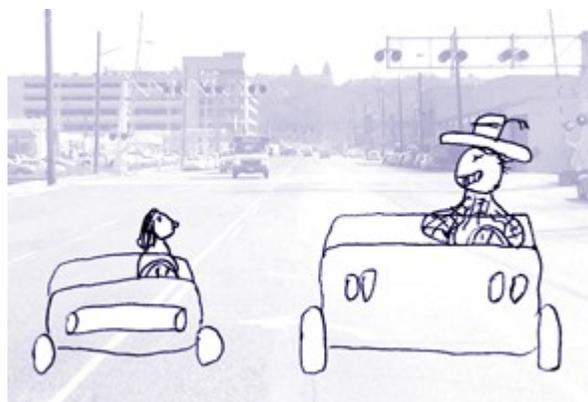
But I digress. As we sat there, drinking beer and wondering what other people were drinking that looked like frosty fermented breath mints, Curtis' sister arrived with a young friend of hers, Buffi, who began flirting with me. That's correct: 'Buffi'. We had already met for the first time back at Curtis' home, which is why I did not comment, "so... what time do you go on?"

Not that I would have made a joke otherwise. Buffi really was a nice girl, probably less a *Cosmo* reader and more one of *Reader's Digest*. I don't mean that in an insulting

sense; I mean that she seemed to be a rather decent sort of girl who probably had her mouth washed out at home for saying 'darn!' to her mother, as opposed to women who look as though they should have rashes on their cleavage from men poking in five-dollar bills. She was probably the type of girl you could comfortably take home to your parents. Yet this is what I had problems imagining: 'Mom and Dad, this is Buffi...' No.

I am not saying that I would reject all specimens that do not look like (or have names like) Angelina Jolie. I think that this mysterious 'electricity' that we speak of applies to personality as well as looks. This was probably what soured me on Buffi. Attraction must have a lot to do with birth order; as a last-born, I seem to like independent women who can think on their feet. I don't think poor Buffi could have thought on a calculator. That sort of whiny, clingy, Limoges-china fragile sort of female's female annoys me. That is nothing to apologize for, assuming I handle the manner with tact. Other men are attracted to that sort of female. It is the way I am constructed; some like the color red and others blue. Or, as my uncle Lester, fuchsia polka-dot.

But there is no doubt that physicality matters. What sort of women are men attracted to? One study I once read theorized that men look for women (and women for men) who look familiar to them—but not too much. I think the theory has some validity; women who remind me of my mother make me nervous; but such mechanistic theories that reduce emotions to a matter of DNA seem cold. Oh, well. My father just said, 'It's all lies! Just marry for money!' And then my mother, for some unexplainable reason, hit him.



There are also those who will be annoyed that I am making physical attraction an issue at all. 'What difference do looks make? Isn't what's inside what counts? Doesn't a stitch in time make nine? Isn't a penny saved a...' Anyway, I will admit that this is true; it is a shame that people place so great an emphasis on physical beauty. It is the cause of many nice people being alone and many shallow people getting ahead. It is the cause of many people ruining their health in order to be 'perfect'. Stop me before telethon numbers flash: 'and for only thirty cents a month, you can bring hope...'

I can see two possible resolutions to all of this. Firstly, if every man is genetically attracted to a certain type of woman, isn't everyone taken care of somehow, making it a moot point? This is probably so, although it is really only evading the issue. I can also picture a chorus of men saying, 'Jennifer Aniston looks like my second cousin; thus my genes are entitled to a woman who looks like her.'

Secondly, isn't there a whole lot more to being physically attractive than one's raw attributes? There are more pressing concerns; for example, does her father own a lingerie shop or a brewery? (kidding, kidding, *ouch!*) A plain girl who is well-dressed, modestly made up, and has poise and confidence, will beat out a 36-24-36 blonde who slouches

around dressed in rags, with dirty hair and chewing tobacco in her mouth. (A 38-24-36, however, is a different story. Look, I'm still a *man*.)

But now we arrive at that grey area defining attractiveness. Men, uh, admire a pretty girl on television or on a web page; but in real life the idea of what is attractive is strongly tied into personality. There is a point at which the hottest woman can have such a vicious nature that every man that knows her ceases to think of her as being pretty at all. (Unless they're 38-24-36, of course.) And I have known plain women who were so fun to be around that they were never single. Maybe they owned breweries themselves. When I mused aloud about this, my mother, for some unexplainable reason, hit me. Also, Buffi once read this chapter online and periodically sends me nasty e-mails. I must not live right or something.

And now we return to the role of personality in attraction; it sounds like the title of one of those cheesy 1960's pop-psychology books with pastel squares on the cover: 'the HIP and NOW way of solving your hang-ups, BABY.' Remember, these are people with doctorates. I once thought that young girls wanted a man either to mother or be mothered by. I still see this, but I know now that I was overgeneralizing (I'd *better* realize this if I don't want *more* nasty e-mails). I also saw in college that women sometimes act out what I call the domino effect; they evaluate men based on status. If a man is pursued by one female, the entire group wants him. The problem is getting that initial heart fluttering; perhaps single men need P.R. agents.

But I am myself now getting mechanistic; whirr! click! THAT DOES NOT COMPUTE. WON'T YOU TAKE ME TO FUNKYTOWN? Certainly, if that man has made one maiden swoon he probably has qualities desired by others. I say 'desired' so that romance doesn't start sounding like the utilitarian sales transaction that some sociologists claim it is: "I pronounce you man and wife; here are your air miles."

It still is a tricky matter, if the relationship is to be any more than a booty call, of finding someone pleasing both physically and personality-wise. Two people with no common interests are not going to stay together long without an act of parliament. But try not to over-think this. Do your best. And always let a lady walk before you; that way you can look at her bum. Look, I'm still a *man*.



The Bitter Gen-X'er Qualification Exam

Alright, you've had enough theory; now it's time to find out if you have any moxie on the ball (and don't ask what that means, I don't know). It's time to break out your pencils. And then to put them away, because this is an online quiz. If you're going to have any credibility as a bitter Gen-X'er, you should be able to walk the walk by passing the official competency exam.

Roots and Methods of Advanced Bitterness (*Gen-X 201*)

Professor J.R. Cormorant

Professional Qualification Examination

Instructions: Please circle the best response to each question, in a circular motion, with a certain flourish of circularity, if possible. We don't care if you are taking this exam on a computer monitor. Circle the best response, dammit. We don't care *how* you do it.

Please do not speak to others during the examination period or you will be taken out and flogged with rusty 8-track tape parts. It is university policy that no one will be permitted into the examination room during the examination.

1. 16,283 represents the number of:
 - a. dollars the country goes into debt every millisecond.
 - b. "baby on board" signs still sold daily.
 - c. songs Bon Jovi has recorded with the same chords.
 - d. fragments in a bag of chips from a vending machine.

2. 28° Celsius represents:
 - a. the temperature of drinking fountain water.
 - b. the summer temperature required for an American car to stall out.
 - c. how many degrees below zero it is when your building has a fire drill.
 - d. how much warmer it is in Hawaii *right now*.

3. A younger peer complains to you, "why do you always have to be such a pessimist about everything?" You should respond by saying:
 - a. "I suppose it's you who should really be pessimistic, considering that I probably won't live to experience the nuclear holocaust you will."
 - b. "Giddawtamyway!"
 - c. "In my day we spoke to our elders with respect."
 - d. "Oh, yeah? So's your mother."

4. "Eight" represents:
 - a. the number of potholes per square meter on city roads.
 - b. how many weeks old a video has to be before MTV considers it a classic hit.
 - c. how many times Jack Tripper falls over the sofa in a typical *Three's Company* episode.
 - d. the mental age the average television commercial is aimed at.

5. As you walk downtown, a woman holding pamphlets asks you what you've done lately "to save the environment". You respond:
 - a. "While camping, I cleaned up our campsite by burning all our styrofoam plates and cups!"
 - b. "I smoke Players *Lights* now!"
 - c. "en-vi-ron-ment? My, you're a clever girl. How come you know such big words?"
 - d. by singing: "Use a paper, use a towel; you can't wipe your bum with a spotted owl."

6. One month, two weeks represents:
- the lifespan of your first childhood pet.
 - how long it will take for gas price reductions to "come down the line" after oil prices fall.
 - the lifespan of an Italian government.
 - express delivery for Canada Post.
7. \$208.34 represents:
- average monthly wage of an Arts degree graduate.
 - six candy bars at a movie theatre.
 - what the telephone company claims you owe them for a six-hour call to Madagascar.
 - projected, what an NHL hockey game ticket will cost by 2016.
8. All banks are:
- out to rob you.
 - out to rob you.
 - out to rob you.
 - out to rob you.
9. 157 ml of water represents:
- the difference between regular and light beer.
 - the minimum your sunroof will leak during a rainstorm.
 - what's added to every glass of "non-stop pop."
 - what you swallow while learning to jet-ski.
10. While alone with your girlfriend in the evening, she says, "what a beautiful sunset!" You reply:
- "Yes, and just think: only three months until winter!"
 - "That reminds me; I have to remove the dead robin that fell in my mailbox."
 - "Isn't it amazing the colorful glow that cancerous pollution gives off?"
 - "What, do you have something against sunrises? Huh?"
11. "Five" represents:
- How many more *Star Trek* movies are still coming until no one is left alive from the original series to sneak in to the plot.
 - Decades it will take to pay off the last of your student loan.
 - The average number of times Bryan Adams shouts "Yeah!" on any of his songs.
 - How many infomercials are airing on television at this moment.
12. You are a true bitter Gen-X'er if:
- you go to Dairy Queen and ask for a *vanilla* Blizzard.
 - your wedding song is Mozart's *Requiem*.
 - you tour Europe and don't bother to bring a camera.
 - you don't actually expect there to be a marking key to this test.



Is Elvis Still Alive? The Controversy Continues

Could it be? Could it really, really be? Perhaps there is still hope for this troubled land for a miracle to happen. Yes, I dare to utter the words that all of us kindred souls have worn on our hearts for these last years. Yes: perhaps the king is still alive.

Oh, I don't mean King Edward. Obviously, I don't mean King John or Richard or Louis or some other long-long-long deceased member of royalty. Who cares about those powdered-wigged namby-pamby inbred creeps anyway; what did they ever accomplish that made any difference on our lives?

I mean Elvis! Elvis Presley, the man who single-handedly created rock and roll when there was nothing before him but snotty classical music and long-haired weirdos playing funny jazz instruments in 13¼/16 time. The man who contributed such a lasting legacy to English culture with such regarded works as *Teddy bear* and *Don't be cruel*. The man who re-energized an entire moribund genre of motion pictures with his legendary-quality acting roles, taking his rightful place alongside fellow thespians Sir Olivier and Chaplin.

And right away you protest like a parrot: it is now past the 30th year P.E. (Post Hoc Elvisio). Awrk! Awrk! Elvis is dead. The only ones earning a living off him now are microbes, and even they are scaling down operations lately. But you don't know for certain. There could have been some monumental mistake or scam going down which has unjustly deprived the world of our KING. Yes, I'm going to shatter the myth; perhaps Elvis is still alive and still rock and rolling. I'm not the only voice crying in the wilderness to this possibility; it said so in this week's newspaper at the supermarket checkout. You know the one; it said so right below the headline 'Space alien gives birth to reincarnation of Stalin'. And if it's in print, it has to be true, right? Just because we were all at the funeral and saw his cold, chemical-filled body being lowered into the grave in broad daylight and sixty shovelfuls of dirt thrown on him doesn't necessarily mean he's *actually* dead, silly.

But why? How could the forces of evil and disco music and international communism conspire to take our Elvis away? I happen to have been completing some studies at UASE [The University of Advanced Studies in Elvis] in Florida, and some interesting theories have been advanced on how this could have happened. I'm thankful to have been mentored by a top Elvisologist, who is presently working on a book called *The Single Jelly-Donut Theory*, soon to be published by Topp's Chewing Gum. Here are some of his findings.

At this point I'm going to ask that children and those with faint hearts leave the room. (Don't you always wonder, when you see such warnings, what intelligence level such notices are aimed at? 'Wow! This ride's called the Inverted Flip-Flop Stomach Pounder! Doesn't this one sound like fun, Grandma?') Anyway, here is a brief summary of the proposed reasons that Elvis disappeared from our lives on that bleak, black day in 1977. Not interested? You weren't even born in 1977? Well, I was, and it was a bleak, black day, dammit, alright? Now listen good. Everyone else - perhaps you should be seated for this.

Theory one: Elvis was abducted by the same aliens that abducted Marilyn Monroe. (Coincidence? I don't think so.) They waited longer with Elvis because they were fans of his movies with Annette Funicello. Elvis now lives on the planet Qrksfrg in the city named for him, Suspicious Minds. Government officials dress for state occasions in floral leis with huge foam microphones.

Theory two: Elvis contracted an extremely rare skin cancer brought about by seven years of wearing white polyester and escaped the world to recuperate in the Swiss Alps. He subsequently married a milkmaid named Umläütia and became an accordion player in a nearby ski resort lounge.

Theory three: Elvis was about to be exposed as a fake by his wife during a marital crisis

for not having sung any of his songs in the recording studio, which had actually been performed by Ethel Merman. Elvis went into hiding, had a gender change operation, underwent extensive plastic surgery, and resurfaced in the early 1980's as Cyndi Lauper.



Theory four: Elvis, in fact, will not be born until the year 2342. As a gift to their ancestors, the government of earth decides to enrich our grim lives by sending back in time a holographic projection of Elvis' life on national Blue Suede Shoe Day, 2393. Unfortunately, the projection suddenly ceased in 1977 due to a squashed bug in the time-transmitter computer which Radio Shack employees fail to notice.

Theory five: April fool! Elvis went into hiding at the time of his supposed death, just as Hitler did, as a publicity stunt. At an unknown time this summer, he will walk into a U.N. meeting in New York and announce the release of a double CD album of new songs he has been recording for the last 25 years. Engineers will blast the new albums for not being recorded in a 32-track 20-bit digital studio environment; record critics will give the album scathing reviews for not having any drum machines or rap music samples. The albums will fail to crack the Billboard Top 100 due to the lack of supporting rock videos. Elvis will end his career running a karaoke machine in a Codfish Sam's lounge in Duluth, playing 'My heart will go on' every fifteen minutes.

I'm not sure which one of these theories is the correct one, but I'm just hoping that THE KING is happy and that he will someday come back to revive our faded civilization and set in motion new musical and cultural achievements. But just to cover all the bases, I'm buying up old Cyndi Lauper albums. I know I can hear THE KING's voice in 'Girls just wanna have fun' if I listen closely.. very closely.



**The 1st International Men's Freestyle
English Author's Competition**

Every young student who wants to broaden his or her world, in a broad-like manner, should know something about the background of fine literature. For this, we must study the classics and immerse ourselves in culture, in a tubfull filled with the bubble bath of the old masters, washing ourselves with the scrub brush of their timeless words.

For the 1st international men's freestyle English author's competition, held in scenic Vegreville, Alberta, a small group of select authors were chosen by the International Players Light English Literature Judging Committee to compete in a no-holds-barred rock-'em-sock-'em writing competition. Suitably accompanied by music from the Vegreville Tuba Sensations Polka Club, the following famous writers arrived on a sunny January morning at the Vegreville pork auction pavilion: Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Edgar Allen Poe, William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck.

The task at hand for each of the contestants, in a one-hour time space, was to write a fictional sample based on the following scenario:

A young man meets a young woman in an outdoor cafe for lunch in Paris on a summer day.

The prizes in the competition ranged from a tenured faculty position in creative writing at Harvard to a Boney M CD box set, to a very generous year's supply of Rice-A-Roni, the San Francisco treat. Each of the author's entries has been reprinted unabridged as follows, courtesy of Ralph's Auto Parts, and has been assigned an averaged grade based on a critical analysis of the entry's relevant stylistic and literary qualities.

Henry James

It seemed an exceptionally appropriate afternoon for the appointment I had arranged with the charming young American lady I had been introduced to by Countess Hebergé, and as I arrived at the Chateau for a light range of refreshments and bowed an acknowledgement to the owner of the establishment, I had a brief pause to reflect on the qualities of the natural summer atmosphere around me. Below me was a quite singular stretch of grass in a somewhat faded variegation of green tints, accompanied by one perceptible blade of grass which wavered in a slight undulating pattern on the happening of a light breeze in the outdoor aura, which caused the blade, which was about three inches in length, to tilt over at about a 23 degree angle and momentarily strike a neighbouring blade of grass which was about half an inch shorter but nonetheless nearly the same tint of colour, despite a slight brown thread running through its underside, which was even in width, excepting a slight variation in the upperside of the blade approaching its partition into two quite singularly distinct cutlets—[length limit reached, sorry]

Thomas Hardy

As Tess had reached the cafe, she felt a slight unease in her meeting with the young man who had arranged with her mother to discuss the problem of her economic distress brought about by the death of her brother. How odd that the forces of chaos had conspired in a deathly callousness to unite the two together again, who might, under more fortunate circumstances, both view the meeting in a more approving light. But now that he was not to arrive, she was helpless in the uncaring, shivering universe of uncontrolled anarchy that was all of mankind's fate in life on this god-curst soil after abandonment by the providence which had sustained her simple faith in deliverance from the dismal, treacherous reality of a world not ordered by love or grief but the bleak absence of any justification.

Edgar Allen Poe

As young Natasha viewed the squalid table at which she sat to meet Count Raoul at the stroke of noon, she viewed the black smoke and dust rising in the air from the ominous greying emissions of the factories surrounding the cafe. As a white visage appeared before her clouded in a wall of fire, she beheld Count Sidney Raoul before her in

a black cloak and a deathly pallor about his face and a voice that seemed to arise from the grimly bony fragments of his very body: 'Alas, I arise, without disguise, forever bound, without sound! And so burn higher, without desire, funeral pyre!' As she began to scream and the echoes evaporated into the darkened skies, the shattered facade of the cafe fell down to reveal a mirror image of Count Raoul bound in bloody rags and the faint image of a glowing poker protruding from his blackened and ghoulish limbs.

William Shakespeare

[sound from without]

Epileptics: Yea, hearken ye, dost thou not hearest, in thy timeless fervor, wherewithal the sound of the Ulyssyan sparrow boundeth for the Aeschylean realms?

Diarheacies: Prithee, I pray thee, wouldest thou partakest of such Mercurian¹ delicacies if thou knewest of thine impending fate as foretold by the weird divinations?

Epileptics: Thy countenance is of a forebode state. I must speak of thy aesthetic protestation.

Diarheacies: Ho! Such is the material of a catholic sense in as much as the sarcophagus of Creon. Wherefore dost thou seest thus in such a epicurean tone? Is this a thought held lately² by thee?

¹ Referring to the Mercurian school of didactic analysis, a lay movement of Aristotelian inquiry in which empirical consequences of emitting frog noises were considered, which enjoyed popularity under the restored duke of Freubump of Winchestle (1543?-1604) in the Elizabethan court.

² Shakespeare is punning here by the use of *lately* in iambic juxtaposition with the Sanskrit translation of *forebode*.

Geoffrey Chaucer

Whilom, yt bifel him on a somers day, why as it tofore a-said, ne no langer inne the cruelist monthe, i gesse, that a ladie moste fyne go upon for her lunche, sothe y saye, in that frenchye tun—wher eat the genteelmen, lordynges, awaiteth heer, sweet benedicite! was rigt lothe in lust to her a-meet. Such as thise wise was priamus that kynge of troye, faling upon his repaste in so similare a straite, ne carethe not a turde for thise facte that the suppe of that daye were not leke or fyne turnippe, butte infernale crème of musheroome, pardieux! Wherewithon i praye the, o blesed mayde, spede usse alle of som gode fine wine, for thise accursed diet spryte thyse quaynte cheape diners serveth nowadaye ne worthe not a duckes farte. *Explicit primer parte.*

Ernest Hemingway

It had been a bad time, of it all, as we expatriates sat in the Pancho y Villa cafe and had another dark rum with Brett and Arthur. We were all quite tight by then. Then Tara arrived in the room, ordered a rum with a light brandy aperitif, and took a seat and began the inquisition with Conch, who attempted to be diplomatic.

'I've ordered the quiche.'

'Well, thank you, darling. I had hoped for something more.. more manly,' she retorted, sipping her vodka and Chaceau wine.

'What's all that supposed to mean?' he shrunk back.

'Oh, nothing at all, honey,' she shot back sweetly.

I felt sorry for him. He had it bad. The claws were sinking in. He sat there quietly with a whiskey sour and a scotch.

The evening wore on and we began to all get tight as the music became louder and the lights dimmed. One of the mariachis from the Cabana del Cuisinart was dancing close to us when he lost his balance, falling on us and spilling the bourbon. A fight soon broke out and I ducked for cover. Tara and Brett merely looked on at us, smiling sweetly with daggers in their eyes, as they malevolently began another glass of Sedgewick Chardonnay

and crème de menthe with a chaser of lime gin.

John Steinbeck

There is a waste here beyond words. There is a calamity beyond expression. The two waste the most poignant moments of their earthly existence for the want of a purpose, of a direction. The hungry wait nearby; they will not be spending their days in the cafe with the two. They will go home to their fried dough and their Diet Mountain Dew. The sadness of this is beyond comprehension. But the monster cannot be stopped. How could we control it, ask the faceless men.

It's bigger than us. We don't know how.

But where is there to turn for those without direction or expression when those who control the means do not share the means? Two men have nothing; but three men have nothing and one man more. But it continues to grow and the loss of hope and life and expression continues as the pain of the loss and the waste of the men who experience the loss and pain of the days that go on without meaning continue in the waste of the pain and the loss of the monster growing within the hope that the loss and the hope and the pain will someday cease from hoping that the loss of the days and the waste of the hope will not be entirely wasted.

Results

In the judgment of the English Author's Composition grading committee, it was felt that there was not a sufficient agreement of opinion to concur that any of the entries had explicated in a significant manner the intricacies of the compositional integrities of the writing sample. Therefore, the first prize in the 1st International Men's Freestyle English Author's Competition was awarded to the Pet Shop Boys.



Sports & Recreation: How to Make Fun into Work

My uncle Lester once said, "Doing nothing is hard work. You can't stop and rest." I think he was right; everyone needs some sort of organized activity in their free time to keep healthy physically and mentally. With a little persistence, any form of play can be made to seem like work. And there are so many organizations committed to helping you. In Canada, for example, we used to have a government program called Participation, which involved commercials and advertisements all dedicated to making you feel bad for not immediately jumping up and doing ten laps around the house everytime you saw one. Now it's gone.. but the guilt remains..

For retired people, especially, finding enough to do with their time can be a challenge. This is aggravated by the reality that some physical activities, such as wrestling a grizzly bear while going over a waterfall in a barrel, are out of reach for the elderly. They are limited to ground squirrels in the barrel. Nevertheless, there are plenty of activities for seniors, such as aerobics or light jogging. They can even invite the grizzly to jog with them.

And so, if there are all these wonderful leisure activities for the retired, just think of the opportunities open to the young person. True, there are some recreations somewhat

exclusive to the elderly, such as Florida holidays, Las Vegas gambling, and sitting in a donut shop for six hours complaining about the government. But these are exceptions. Besides, gambling can be addictive: "Amazing how they can afford these solid gold pillars and marble fountains in the casino! Where do they *get* the money?"

Yet it does take a while to find a sport that you find worthwhile. It took me several years. And several hundred dollars. I'm starting to wonder if 'free time' is an oxymoron too. Perhaps I should wrestle an oxymoron in a barrel.

Downhill Skiing

There are, of course, three types of skiing. But as it was winter at the time, I didn't expect to do a lot of water-skiing. Unless I wanted to chip a really big hole in the ice. Cross-country skiing can be fun until you realize that by the time you wax the skis and fight with the rusty bindings and fix the pole that your dad used as a fireplace poker, you could easily have walked to wherever you are going.

Thus the only option was skiing downhill. I went with a friend to a local resort, Al's Ski Club & Auto Salvage. "This is a replica of the same resort in Switzerland, right, Paul?" Paul assured me that, since the police had evacuated the city due to the typhoon, it would not be crowded that day. I was perhaps less sure as we entered the resort and saw, oh, the population of Kenya waiting in line for the ski lift. But we did not allow this minor inconvenience to discourage us as we strode into the office to pay for our lift tickets. It couldn't be any more than a few dollars, right? Perhaps not. I knew we might be in trouble when we saw a sign saying 'financing available.'

But I digress. We signed our organ donor cards and headed out to the slopes. Within an hour I knew that skiing might not be for me as I fractured a thumb, twisted an ankle, and bruised my face. And this was still in the lineup for the lift. At length, as the blood was making the poles slip out of my hands, I gave up and retired to the clubhouse.

I haven't returned to the resort for several years now, and I probably never will. After all, why spend fifty dollars at a ski hill when you could stay at home and hit yourself all over with a hammer and get the same effect for free? Paul doesn't seem to realize this simple truth and persists in going to even bigger and better resorts in the mountains. Two hundred dollars would buy some pretty nice hammers. To make him even happier, perhaps he could buy one made in the Swiss Alps. He could even wrestle the grizzly with it.

Golf

Ah, golf. What is it that makes men so totally obsessed in slavish devotion to the sport? If only Hitler could have inspired such loyalty in his followers. When my brothers get together they talk about golf endlessly. It's impossible to change the subject unless the comment is golf-related, e.g. "Maybe you should move your golf clubs due to the house being on fire." Even then they would be practising their swing as they gathered the children outside.

Every sport has a learning curve. Some, such as bowling or tennis, are reasonably simple and the basics can be quickly learned. Others, such as football or pool, are more complex and take practice to grasp. As I quickly found out, golf has a learning cliff. It might have been easier to learn to juggle chainsaws blindfolded. The first time I played, I shot a 63. The second hole was worse. Thus I decided to take golf lessons. This is how it went:

"I see your problem, Mr. Eckert. Hold your club higher, with your fingers spread further apart at a twelve degree angle. Lower your stance with your feet four centimetres further apart with your arms slightly higher and curled back so that you form an equilateral triangle with the club face and the ball. Then curve the club another fifteen

degrees outward with your head crooked slightly leftward and your lower back arched further inward. Good. Now just swing naturally.”

And then there were the accessories: golf clubs, golf shoes, golf hats, golf bags, golf balls, golf ceramic figurines of Tiger Woods... surely building your own space shuttle wouldn't involve this much equipment? When I suggested to my brothers that perhaps all this rigamarole wasn't worth the trouble, they looked at me as though I had burned the flag on their lawn. I became an unbeliever and an infidel again. At least infidels don't have to wear goofy-looking shirts and pay club fees.

Team Sports

Yeesh! Maybe individual sport wasn't for me; perhaps group sport was a better activity, as it would teach me the virtues of comradeship and teamwork. Plus I could blame my ineptness on the other players if we lost. I decided on hockey first, one of the few remaining forms of state-sanctioned violence, and headed down to the arena.

We were all wearing enough padding to withstand radiation. Yet after two periods of being slammed into the sideboards by guys big enough to have their own gravitational fields it wasn't helping me much; perhaps the function of padding is only to keep you warm in the ambulance. At the end I looked around the community rink and asked a friend, "Mark, why were people throwing trinkets onto the ice? No one scored a hat trick." He replied, "Um, Ken, no one was throwing anything; those are teeth."

Thus I found hockey a little above my body type. Perhaps I was more suited to something more genteel and non-violent. I know-rugby! I decided to watch a local game before trying it myself as I wasn't familiar with the rules. Unfortunately, the game must have been cancelled as all I saw from the stands was a re-enactment of the Battle of Hastings. It seemed similar to football, except that normally play in football is stopped for decapitated limbs. When the match ended and the appeal for blood donors came over the PA, I watched the players limp off the field nursing their scratches and gouges. Perhaps the grizzly was also playing rugby and I had not noticed. If so, he probably lost.

So what was I supposed to take up, stock car racing? I didn't care for basketball; I was too slight for football. I had somewhat of a phobia about baseball. As a boy in school, every year in gym class the teacher would tell me not to be afraid of the ball. It would then hit me within the next ten seconds. That's just the way it was. If we were doing bicycling, I'd still get hit with the ball. At least in tennis the ball is softer, and I developed some proficiency in the sport. Until I got hit with a racquet.



What Next?

As time went on, I experimented with different sports and discovered new and fulfilling injuries until the solution finally came to me. Now I am a lacrosse player. It's an ideal sport because no one else knows how to play it but it sounds impressive. Thus I can spend my time watching television and complaining to friends how my finely-honed lacrosse skills are atrophying because I can't find enough people to field a team.

Yet I sometimes wish that I was of a more athletic nature. I would perhaps even try golf again if I could get a student loan for the lessons and the equipment. My application was turned down by the government. You can find me complaining about it at the donut shop.



You Can't Do That Without Special Permission: How to Succeed in University

Advice I Wish I'd Had When I Started Out

So you want to go to university. Well, if you insist on going, perhaps I can at least assist you a little on the subject. I was a university student for some ten years and can recommend the experience. After all, misery loves company.

The world of 'universitise' can be a bewildering one at first. Perhaps it would help to begin with an explanation of university terms:

Post-secondary education: The education that you receive after high school, which, secondarily, makes you feel like you've been hitting yourself with a post.

Credit: What stores won't give you any of while you're in school and not working.

Semester: A four-month period of classes worth a half-credit. Some classes continue into a second semester. This is known either as 'full-credit' or 'failing'.

Lecture: What you get when coming home for Christmas from your parents, i.e. 'when are you leaving that ridiculous place and getting a real job?'

Major: What you'll be saying within a few months of attending university, i.e. 'man, going here instead of trade school was a major mistake.'

Getting in

Getting in to university can be difficult. Many places require fees, references, statements, notes from your mother, a papal bull, and a presidential seal in order to apply. The good news is that once you are admitted, you'll already have earned three credits (six in Education faculty). That's if you're admitted. Some faculties such as law and medicine are extremely competitive and have very early application deadlines. If you are just getting out of high school, you might wish to apply for one of these programs right away so that your children might be accepted when they reach your age. For you, it's too late.

Once you're in, your problems are over, right? Double Hah! Sometimes faculty quotas don't come into effect until your third year or after. They can also be changed at

any time, so that you can find out two weeks before classes that you're excluded from social work for being left-handed. Universities can also be very jealous of each other, so that if you try to transfer from one institution to another you may encounter resistance along the lines of, oh, the registrar calling you 'clap-ridden pond scum.'

What to take?

Universities offer a myriad of programs and degrees. Perhaps it's useful to examine the most common ones:

B.A.: Bachelor of Arts. This is a good general program for those unsettled in their career plans, or who simply want to learn what words like *myriad* mean. Students can choose from a variety of humanities majors, all guaranteed to train young minds to be good citizens, expressive thinkers, and good burger fryers; when you graduate, you'll find that 'B.A.' also means 'barely anything'. For those who will never need a job, it's a solid career choice.

B.Sc.: Bachelor of Science. For those bent on careers in science and research, or who like grossing out first year girls with frog brains. Candidates will learn the vital, everyday importance of periodic tables and fruit-fly genetics. Consider it good public relations that universities don't call this a 'B.S.'

B.Bus.: Bachelor of Business. Money, money, money! Business students are often accused of being money-grubbing capitalists and intellectual pretenders. For a small fee, any business faculty member will refute this cruel myth over a martini.

B.Ed.: Bachelor of Education. This has the reputation of being the 'easy' program for those with grades too low for 'real' faculties. This is a lie, as many education students have written to me on construction paper while preparing this book. I could not print any of their comments, unfortunately, as they each demanded three credits for their inclusion.

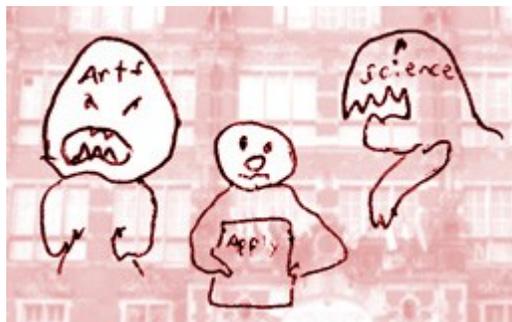
B.Eng. Bachelor of Engineering. Engineering people are their own breed. They tend to have very wild parties and have strange customs like streaking or tying people up in the woods. If you do engineering and study mathematical formulas for eighteen hours a day while the drama majors are partying in the hallway every night, you'll understand the need to blow off a little steam once in a while.

B.Mus.: Bachelor of Music. These are special students in universities, most noted for condescending to all other students. For these are not ordinary proles learning drudgerous facts; they are artistes refining their souls. Other students humor the B.Mus. faculty, however, knowing that the artistes will be waiting on them for the rest of their lives at Wendy's. You know it's a bad sign when the B.A. holders are out-earning them.

And so on. This is just a sample of what most universities offer; there are other specific programs such as nursing or architecture as well. Of course, many colleges offer training in particular trades such as mechanics, optometry, or secretarial skills. Some don't even have a campus but teach by mail: 'Train for an exciting career in cassette tape repair, elephant taxidermy, or calculator operation! Apply today and receive a complimentary set of 16-oz. tumblers! Nothing spells 'quality' to a prospective employer like a diploma from the Klassy-Klassy School o' DNA Research and Bartending!'

Some of these schools may be on the level and turn out capable and intelligent people. (I say this because my mechanic might be reading this book: Nooo, Mr. Eckert. Everything's fine. Your brakes are supposed to make that sound.) But I would be suspicious of schools that claim to teach highly skilled professions in two months (Learn open heart surgery the E-Z way! 1. Lesson one: anaesthetize patient and make a one-inch

incision near the base of the heart. Good job! Lesson two will be mailed to you in six days!) or exaggerate job markets (K-Co stagecoach driving school is your ticket to the future!).



Course Subjects

You've decided to stay with a university, and you've enrolled as a first-year general-arts student. But what are these strange course selections? Permit a voice of experience to help explain the plethora of options. And no, a plethora is not a type of dinosaur.

Anthropology: This is the study of ancient civilizations from before prehistory. Meet the most nebulous combination of liberal arts and science possible as monkey skulls are analyzed by carbon-dating and the reading of bumps on researchers' heads.

Drama: Read and act out scripts and adaptations, being marked on how you 'feel' about the role and your teacher's 'feelings' about your role. There are often no exams. Is it a surprise that lots of people like to be Drama majors?

Economics: Get your feet wet in business faculty by learning how to effectively crush business opponents and dominate the world by ruthlessly manipulating economic forces. Perhaps not good to combine with a Religion major.

Educational Psychology: Meet the poor cousin of Psychology as you learn the basic theories of student discipline, which are whatever they are that week. Resist the impulse to club everyone in the class after hearing the unmarried women whine about 'tolerance and understanding' fifty times a lecture.

English: The study of English literature. Learn deep insights into other cultures and societies from opium-crazed authors and homosexual Victorian poets. Read classics like *Middlemarch* and learn the true meaning of 'paid by the word'; impress girls by knowing what 'American Pie' is really about.

Geography: This is the study, categorization, and memorization of rocks (all 340 types) and clouds (273 types) and lakes (all 584 types). If you want to ruin any childlike appreciation of nature that you might have had, this is the route to go.

History: Learn the exciting story of the development of barbed wire in Saskatchewan! Discover how the British enclosure acts related to feudal legal procedure! Find out just how many people without lives have written hundreds of books on these topics!

Linguistics: The RULES of English. If there ever was a way for mathematics to ruin English, here it is. At least you can fritter away an entire class period at any time by asking, "but

couldn't this be a distributive pronoun as well?" and watching the rest of the class argue over it for fifty minutes.

Mathematics: If you have a knack for visualizing numbers, this can be a promising career option. If you don't, having your wisdom teeth pulled with a truck winch might be more enjoyable. You can at least enjoy seeing the Music students cringe when you tell them what your major is.

Music: "All you do is sit around and listen to music, right?" Well, sometimes. You can also memorize forty-six key signatures and circles of fifths. Learn to be a spontaneous and creative musician while ten know-it-alls in the front row denounce your composition because 'Bach wouldn't do it that way.'

Philosophy: "What is a tree?" "What is a tree except that which is not a tree?" The ultimate in woolly-headed universitydom where professors and students sit back and ponder the nature of the universe. Possibly the only course where showing up stoned to class can improve your performance.

Political Science: The study of the political process and its application to our society. Interpret exciting graphs depicting how election polling affected mushroom production in Angola. Wonder, after learning the role of pork-barrelling and special-interest lobbying, how the words 'political' and 'science' go together.

Psychology: Junior-level courses usually involve cheesy films about laboratory mice and electroshock patients. Those who move on to higher levels *-surprise!*- are expected to turn out thirty-page assignments on synapse deterioration and chemical imbalance. Now you know why guidance counsellors never smile.

Religion: "Oh, all you do is sing hymns all class, right?" Those who believe that religion is intellectually childish are free to learn Hebrew, Greek, and Latin in one year with my seminary friends. You'll discover why Augustine's books are all 800 pages thick when learning principles like 'eschatological predestinationism'.

Women's Studies: In order to promote gender equality and fairness, only the legacies and writings of women are discussed in this class and those of men are ridiculed and vilified. Contrary to popular belief, males are welcome in Women's Studies courses, provided that they face the rear of the class and call out "unclean!" as they enter the lecture hall.

Zoology: Sorry, no one should take Zoology. It's just too much trouble to have to look at the back page of every alphabetical course listing each semester.

There are, of course, many other academic areas to choose from. Many cross over into vocational careers, such as therapy or dentistry. (Sorry - I didn't define *vocation*. It's Latin for 'something you can actually get a job doing'.) Some course areas, like Calculus or Critical Theory, will teach you why subjects are called *disciplines*. Alternatively, some students prefer a more leisurely courseload; others are only in college to meet girls and have no intention of even attending classes. For the latter group, Education courses are perfect. (Yeesh - that wasn't nice. Now I'll get even more letters. Oh, well. It's hard to feel threatened by someone writing in highlighter.)

At any rate, whatever you choose to take, whether you take it at Cambridge or Candi's Modelling School, you'll be improving your mind and expanding your horizons. I can personally attest to the value of education in making me the successful and self-fulfilled person that I am.

I guess that was the wrong thing to say.



Arrgh!! (Or, Finding Employment with your Degree)

So! You want to get a job. Most people would be content without one, but *nooo*, starvation's not **good enough** for you, is it? Huh?

Well, I suppose I should cut you a little slack. After all, you want to somehow justify your university education, and to serve society with your degree in Medieval Icelandic architecture. But in the meantime, I suppose I could advise you in some way. Before I finished university, I too lacked specific works skills and was without direction or purpose. But then... uh... well! Let's start!

Let's review how most graduates go about finding work. Perhaps a useful chart outlining the steps involved would be edifying. I think, judging from my past experience, that it would look like this:

- Graduate.
- Get asked ninety times by friends and relatives what you're going to do next; evade question.
- Go out drinking all weekend to celebrate.
- Read or surf the help wanted section the next Monday, have a nervous attack, and consider another degree program to 'enrich yourself', or to help preserve the literature of the Antarctic by your studies, or something.
- Decide to take a few weeks to think about your future.
- Realize that, in your immediate future, you now require financing to buy a Big Gulp and that you need a job.
- Look for employments openings again and begin to take notes on jobs you might be interested in.

As you go on, you will whittle down the numbers somewhat, after removing the jobs that you aren't skilled for. If you're a humanities graduate, this will simply the process greatly; let's go straight to the general help section! Hmm, there's quite a few openings, but they aren't quite clear. To speed up the process, I will try to interpret what these ads mean. You thought they were written in English. But, really, they are written in *ad-ese*. It's really quite simple to understand.

Expanding financial opportunity!
(translation: Telephone sales)

Do you like meeting new people?
(translation: Telephone sales)

Students! Join a fun-filled environment!
(translation: Telephone sales)

Now that you have grasped the basics of the dialect, it's time to move on to some more difficult translations. Some of the language used in general help ads can be rather densely packed with information, and requires a more lengthy explanation. Here are some sample phrases:

Flexible kitchen partners needed for busy eatery!
(translation: You'll be frying hamburgers.)

Experience preferred but not necessary!
(translation: You're in, assuming none of the other 7,000 applicants have work experience. If someone does, well, tough buns.)

Earn up to \$5000 a month!
(translation: It is theoretically plausible, if you are willing to work twenty hours a day, and the moon phases happen to be perfectly aligned, that you could sell enough vacuum cleaners to make a \$5000 commission. It's never happened, but hell, they said the Berlin Wall would never fall.)

So you are finding this rather difficult? Well, these things do happen. For this reason, many cities have employment centres set up by the government to help you find work. They seem to be a success by all statistical indications. Your average employment centre can employ up to twenty people or so to file papers, hold meetings, and nip out for donuts. Whether they actually ever secure employment for anyone is debatable, but there's no need to be so *demanding*. The point is that you go there, line up in the crowd to use one of the three Commodore 64s inside that list vacancies, and away you go.



And then, after you have delivered, e-mailed, or sent by carrier pigeon copies of your resume, you can sit back and wait for your cellphone battery to go dead from the constant ringing. Perhaps you could spend some time considering what hot new mutual fund or IT stock you should invest in with the extra money left over from your first paycheck.

Hmm...

Are you sure you put the correct telephone number on the resume?

You know, perhaps we should trouble-shoot a little bit. Your college career-counsellor probably talked to you, or in high school you took a cheesy course for ¼ of a credit on Friday afternoons, which everyone skipped, which dealt with career planning. I remember them. Most of them had you take tests revealing that you should be a xylophone tuner or something for a living. Then there was the inevitable role-playing where you enacted a real job interview and critiqued each other's performances.

This is wonderful, assuming you actually ever *get* a job interview. Right now, you're trying to get your resume past the landfill. But don't be too hard on career counsellors. If they had been personally successful, would they be career counsellors?

But anyway, what is the difficulty? Was there a problem with your application process? Did you show up for the office interview after changing your car's oil? Did you wear a paisley dress shirt to the construction site? Did you hit on the receptionist? Did you keep asking the director to repeat herself because you couldn't hear her over your headphones?

Was it your resume? Ah— your *resume*. No doubt it's a good one. You didn't include a nude photograph of yourself; you didn't list your mum as a reference. You didn't list your name as your Facebook nickname, 'Tequila-hound'. No doubt you worked on your resume to make it look polished and professional, and did your best to honestly present yourself and to describe your accomplishments.

Duh!

Wrong, wrong, **wrong**! No wonder you've been so unsuccessful in your search for career employment. You've made a glaring mistake: you should never honestly present yourself! The point of a resume is to make yourself look good, not to tell the truth, you silly goose. Don't begin your resume as I used to:

Dear Sirs & Madams,

I would greatly appreciate it if, in a moment of charity, you might be indulgent enough to spare a moment of your time to glance over my qualifications. I realize that my talents are paltry in comparison to the mighty and triumphant glory of your department and its heroic deeds, capped by the splendid grandeur of your leadership, but I humbly and dutifully beseech thee, with harp and lute and psaltery, to consider my time and energies at thy ever-ready disposal if ever thy grace might findst me even of momentary employment.

Rather, accentuate the positives in your background:

In the beginning, there was darkness. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a job. The earth was alive with a vitality that shimmered forth unto the stars.

And then the heavens shook. The seas turned to desert and the desert to water. The mountains trembled and the clouds were

rent asunder. And then, amidst the chaos, there was silence; and then, as the wise men prophesied.... there was Ken.

Some people are born with greatness; some earn greatness; others have greatness thrust upon them. But it was early in my life that I realized that I would take my place along with the Charlemagnes and Gandhis of our world. It seemed that the very heavens thundered forth the word that the young Ken's destiny was one of eminence. The poets sighed and the dreamers dreamed. And so, please consider me for the summer groundskeeper vacancy.

And you needn't confine yourself to cover letters. The resume itself is full of scope for improvement and positive enlargement upon your actual experiences. Here is what I used to allow to pass as my resume:

Work experience

- French-fry maker, Stinky's Burger House and Auto Salvage.
- Reason for leaving: Showed up drunk and mistakenly threw supervisor into grease trap.
- Gas jockey, Twistlehooper Service Station
- Reason for leaving: Filled customer's new Porsche with diesel fuel. Hey, accidents happen!

Education

- B.Ed. program, Duluth College of Mining
- Expected date of completion: Unknown. My practicum didn't go very well. I thought you could go out with students once they turned sixteen. How should I know she was the principal's daughter?

Once I realized that this resume lacked a certain special something, I began to work on it to emphasize the things that would make me attractive to a potential employer. After some careful and deliberate pruning, this is what resulted:

Work Experience

- Specialty chef for an internationally-known culinary house.
- Reason for leaving: Creative differences inhibited the refinement of my work skills.
- Petroleum transfer engineer, customer service setting
- Reason for leaving: It was strongly felt by my superiors that additional training would improve my employee efficiency.

Education

- B.Ed. program, in the tradition of Oxford University
- Expected date of graduation: I'm unsure, as I feel a gradual pace will aid in more depth in my program. My personal interest in my fellow students has been noted by my practicum advisers.

And there you are: a sensitive, yet factual portrayal of my work-related life skills. I believe it captures the essence of my experience in a tactful manner. Failing this, bribery or coercion may have to suffice in today's rapidly-changing globalized job market. Hey, where would Machiavelli or Attila the Hun be today if they had been delicate weaklings in their careers? Perhaps career counsellors, I suppose.



Politics and Government (And Other Outrages)

Well, now that you're approaching or past voting age, you must be wondering what people do on election day when they go into those school and church gymnasiums decorated with signs and divided into tiny booths. The answer is quite simple. They go to the school to research political theory and constitutional law. Then they go to the church to pray that the idiot presently representing them will lose his seat. Everything else is quite trivial. You may also have noticed that the bars and perhaps the liquor stores are closed that day. This is so that your new MP or Congressman is sober for bloody once when he is giving his acceptance speech.

Politics involves the governing and protection of people; this is done in different ways in different countries. In many backward nations, people are still governed by a king or queen who declares the way it's going to be, and that's the end of it. This system is called a monarchy. In Canada, fortunately, we have progressed beyond such repressive systems. Here we elect representatives to voice our concerns and to assemble in parliament for us. When this is done, the prime minister rises and declares the way it's going to be, and that's the end of it. This system is called democracy.

I feel that I might have gone too fast here. Perhaps it would be less confusing if I defined a few terms which are commonly used in politics:

Parliament: The building where representatives meet. The word derives from the French word *parole*, and it means to talk together. The English translated the phrase to mean 'everyone talk at the same time'.

M.P.: Member of parliament. Also a parliamentary expression, i.e.: "It will take M.P. (millions of pesos) to get us out of debt." Or, "If we cut seniors' benefits, there will be M.P. (multitudes of pensioners) protesting on the lawn."

Party: What politicians throw when they are forced to attend gruelling, high-tension, unavoidable special conferences on tax or environmental reform, which are always held in Hawaii or Bermuda in January.

Senate: The 'sober second house of thought' where members look over bills passed by the

house. Based on the model of the ancient Roman senate, and populated by people old enough to have sat in the ancient Roman senate.

Deficit: The amount which is annually added to our debt. The debt currently runs at about \$742 trillion. Fortunately, due to our clever leaders who have solved this fiscal mess by devaluing our currency, that's only about six American dollars.

There are many others. But let us now turn our attention to defining how the party system works in Canada. First you need a keg of draft, and some dancing girls, and then... Whoops, now we're talking about a different type of party. One not nearly so much fun.

The Party System

In America, the system is slightly simplified; you either vote for the Democrat or Republican party. If you are a Democrat, you believe in truth and justice and the American way, and the opposition is an elitist clique of lying, cheating, intolerant, heartless capitalists. If you are a Republican, you believe in truth and justice and the American way, and the opposition is a street rabble of lying, cheating, tree-hugging, yogurt-eating communists. In Canada we are traditionally a more refined and respectful people. If you call someone a yogurt-eating communist you must do so in French.

The Canadian system also has many more parties, with differing ideologies. How can you tell them apart? Parties are usually identified as being left or right wing in nature. Left-wing parties believe that the government should help manage our society. Right-wing parties believe that the state only interferes and that individuals can best help themselves. Both agree on nothing, except that society is best served by giving MPs large raises.

The Liberal party is a little left-wing; the Conservatives are a little right-wing. The Green party has no wings and the New Democrats are somewhere on the next bird. Wasn't that simple? In Quebec, most of the representatives belong to a party called the Bloc Quebecois. This party is usually called a less nice part of the bird. The Bloc also stands apart because it believes that Quebec should separate from Canada. To achieve this goal that people used to get shot for, it elects members to sit in the parliament. Such a good precedent this sets: "Our party wants to burn down the forests and sell Canadians to space aliens to work in underground mines! Where's our passes to the parliament cafeteria? Oh-- we also think society is best served by giving MPs large raises."



Local Politics

Local governments are not so ideological, as it tends to be difficult to take a philosophical position on sidewalk paving. Yet they try. I know of a few cities who, years ago, announced that they were standing against nuclear arms by declaring themselves 'nuclear-free zones'. I still have visions of the surrounding countryside melting down into sludge like a Dali painting while the city stands there idyllic and untouched as the bombs veer to the sides to avoid it. I wonder what would happen if, say, you were walking your dog on the city boundaries as this happened and only your left side was razed? (I guess you'd be 'all right'. Sorry about that.)

Recent Events

Canada has lately been in the habit of electing minority governments, which means that no one party has a majority. This creates uncertainty and worries people. If the government falls again soon, we might have to start using Italian lira. Another problem is corruption. A few years ago the governing Liberal party was accused of stealing money from taxpayers. The Prime Minister, thankfully, came up with a wise solution to stop the controversy: whenever reporters tried to report on corruption in the parliament building, the Prime Minister or his aides stole their pens.

Yet another problem is that lately Canadians are in the habit of blaming everything on George Bush, even if he is no longer in office. None of the parties wants to be seen as similar to George Bush. One party has given up eating grapes because they hear George Bush likes grapes. You can't be too sure in matters like this. As President Bush is seen as right-wing, lately all parties seem to have become more left-wing. Lately the Conservative party has drifted so far to the left that it advocates forcibly resettling Canadians on vegetarian communes. This makes things harder for the other parties, who must then be even more left-wing to stand apart. "Oh, yeah? Well, we're in favor of vegetarian communes with *full* dental benefits!"

But I digress. At any rate, this is how politics works. Candidates run for office, they promise us world peace and eternal life, we vote them in, and then they sit on royal commissions for the next four years. Some parties are left-wing and others are right-wing. Yet the beauty of our system is that even though they may disagree with each other's views, each MP is dedicated to selflessly serving us and making our country a better place to live in.

Oops! The federal debt just rose to \$813 trillion. But good news: the European traders have dumped our currency and now the debt can be paid with only five American dollars. There, now, you see? That last raise parliament voted themselves was worth every penny.



The Internet: Have Patience, Little Grasshopper

When I started using the internet it was 1995. I had a modem connected to the telephone, and there were, well, eight or so web pages on the web at that time. I remember those exciting evenings of connecting to my favorite site, and then going to make some tea.. or to work... or on a European vacation... and then returning to see if the page had fully loaded yet. There wasn't so much pornography on the net back then, as by the time the screen had loaded the picture beyond the bikini girl's neck, you had used up your modem access for the month.

Things have changed since then. Now most of the internet is devoted to pornography. Even the most august scientists, using the internet to hold online conferences on chemical heat transfer research, occasionally feel obligated to tell the other scientists what type of underwear they are wearing, just to maintain the spirit of the internet. Things weren't so morally depraved when I was little, by Jiminy. We had *ethics*, not like the rotten kids nowadays. No sir, we had to look at our dirty pictures of naked girls in *magazines*.

We are only starting to see the massive effect of the internet on our civilization. If we were to bring Charles Dickens to the present time, he probably wouldn't have trouble understanding our English, as the grammar and pronunciation hasn't changed so much in the last century. But Dickens wouldn't understand much of our modern vocabulary. He would be lost in conversations about bit rates, browser plug-ins, and mp3 compression. Of course, he wouldn't be paying attention anyway to the conversation. He would be online surfing, and commenting, "By the lord Harry! This Jessica Alba has a fair figure, I'll reckon!"

Okay-time for a cold shower and back to the discussion. What exactly is the internet, anyway? Well, it's a giant system of computers all linked together in a world-wide system of connections, which permits individual users to hook in and access information from anywhere. Thus, in less than seconds, you can communicate with someone's computer in Helsinki, and get a virus from them. Isn't progress wonderful? In my day, you had to get the virus by having someone mail it to you.

E-mail is probably the most useful thing about the internet, at least to me. It permits you to keep in touch instantly with friends, associates, and Viagra resellers all over the world. People who might not have otherwise taken the time out of their busy lives find it convenient to share their experiences with me in e-mails such as this:

Hey Ken. What's new? Not much here. Eric.

And e-mail is not only good for personal communications, but it helps you to apply for jobs, discuss issues with co-workers, or file forms with large institutions, all from the comfort of your bed while you eat chocolate muffins in your underwear. Of course, I've seldom actually gotten a job from an e-mail application. Perhaps I shouldn't have described my underwear. Old habits die hard, you know.

There are problems with the internet, of course. We've talked about the good things that the internet can do, but apart from the abstract social benefit of broadcasting live webcam images of your rabbit worldwide, evil lurks on the internet, in a, uh, lurking way. People never *lurk* nowadays. I think it's a shame. People used to lurk more in days of yore. "Hey, Bob, why don't you come over, and we'll hang out at the mall and lurk. Bob? Hello?" Oh, well. I also want to find out what or who *yore* was too, but people don't know. You'd think someone as important as Tom, or Ralph, or Al Yore (maybe he invented the internet) or whoever would be remembered. People are so unsentimental these days.

So what's the problem with the internet? One issue that I hear about a lot is that people are reading less since the internet came along, or reading less quality material. Reading novels or history trains the mind in a different way than reading tiny bits of hyperlinked text does, and to many people it's just junk food for the brain. Besides, to publish a book you have to do some fact checking or have qualifications, whereas your crazy uncle can make a web page documenting how your potato chips are spying on you. Nevertheless, it sounds a little elitist. I wonder how much fact checking or qualifications goes into those supermarket magazines about JENNIFER LOPEZ AND ELVIS GIVE BIRTH TO HITLER REINCARNATION IN ALIEN HOSPITAL. Besides, I want to know more about the potato chips spying.



Another problem with the internet is that it aggravates the divisions between rich and poor in our society. People who can master internet tools benefit in life, and those who can't afford to are left behind, although they *can* be quite knowledgeable about Jennifer Lopez and Elvis' new baby. I hear they are naming her Adolfina. There's nothing like the romance of a May-December romance, I always say.

I'm not sure that being computer literate really is an exclusive ticket to the upper class anyway. If everyone else can use a computer, even your crazy uncle who has trouble operating a toaster without supervision, you're hardly going to stand out. When the internet started, it might have looked good to put on my resume:

Skills

Proficient with e-mail and the internet.

In the 21st century, if you put that on your resume, the reader will think of it in this way:

Skills

Can put together a puzzle without eating the pieces.

What are other problems people ponder in perpetuity these days about the internet? Okay, I promise I won't do that again. Well, one is privacy. People worry that all of their private lives will be exposed to prying eyes or institutions, or that personal information will be leaked to the wrong people. I can understand people being nervous about credit card fraud. Well, actually I can't as the bank took away my last credit card years ago, but my understanding is abstract and non-objective, *dammit*. And I can also relate to people worrying about details of their lives being viewed by strangers. However, people are strange creatures. We also have web logs where we describe what we ate that day in exhausting detail. People who work in privacy advocacy groups must have very little hair left.

Anyway, I have to finish this. I'm typing on my laptop because Charles Dickens is still hogging my desktop computer, and I'd better go check on him before he gets me into trouble. He's over there muttering that his next novel will be about starving orphans in a London slum who raise a share offering for their search engine. I would be more convinced if he hadn't made Miss October a wallpaper on my monitor. Okay, back to the past for you, Chuck.

So what's the best way to succeed using technology? My advice is to master the *off* button. Read real books sometimes. Don't stare at your monitor all day, or your eyes will turn to halvah. Don't write everything on your blog. No one cares about what your cat coughed up. And it may come back to you someday, if you're applying for a postdoctorate and the department head doesn't like cats. It happened to Reagan. Assume that people on

the internet know who you are, and you'll be less inclined to do stupid things. Follow my example: do stupid things anonymously, away from your computer.

At this moment, I am finishing this chapter while checking my e-mail. E-mail is very addictive. It's getting so I can't have a conversation with someone without thinking 'send' after I stop talking. But the convenience of the internet is wonderful. By the way, I'm wearing gray underwear with black stripes. I felt driven to say. Aren't you glad you know that? Boy, the internet is addictive.



My Hair: A Requiem

I'm losing my hair. Now, don't all of you cry out in righteous indignation, "Noooo, Ken, you're not losing your h—... Oh, excuse us, Mr. Gandhi, we thought you were someone else." For it's true. No one even photographs me anymore at parties; the flash bounces off my bare head, blinding everyone, causing the host to stumble into the onion dip. I'm losing my hair. To which my mother replies, "Well, grass doesn't grow on a busy street." And to which my father re-replies, "Yes, but there's no sense in shingling the barn when the horses have run away."

And then friends comment, "Now, don't fret, Ken! Lots of well-known attractive movie stars and celebrities are follicly challenged. Why, there's Yul Brynner from *The King and I*, and Phil Collins, for example, and... Captain Picard on *Star Trek*... and, uh... you know, it's sure raining a lot lately." I suppose those guys are examples. However, Yul Brynner also had a Roman chin and could bench-press your house; he also had these incredibly nifty sunglasses that I've never been able to locate at any Wal-Mart anywhere. And Phil Collins is famous because he is a wealthy, talented musician. Otherwise he would be "that bald guy who sorts mail downstairs."

Because it hurts a man's pride to be balding. He just can't walk into the hardware store for new spark plugs with his chest held high as he could before. It harms his self-esteem. It disrupts his place in the social hierarchy. It plays, yea, it tinkers and malevolently conspires to besmirch his philosophical faith in man which has shone out to him as a silent but enduring guiding star in his earthly pilgrimage.

Plus, it makes it harder to get chicks. And that allows inventors and businessmen to play upon this insecurity. So there was a point when I decided, slamming my fist on the proverbial table, saying the proverbial "ouch!", that I wouldn't put up with it any longer. I decided to look for hair treatments to reverse my condition. Unfortunately, you can't just ask your doctor for such products; you must rely on the same respected companies that make, say, X-ray goggles. Most of these products had names which obviously indicated years of sophisticated research, such as 'Uncle Snort's Dandelion Hair Elixir'. I never knew rural Minnesota was such a hot location for medical innovations.

Anyway, I tried a few of these treatments. Most of them involved rubbing some oily

lotion on my scalp that made me smell like potpourri. Others involved drinking a syrupy liquid that tasted like brake fluid. One involved tonic pills that looked suspiciously like those Flintstones chewable vitamins. For one I had to expose my head to sunlight and then sip out of a guana bird's skull at the stroke of midnight; that must have been the one made in Salem, Mass. At least it came with some cool Ginsu knives. Ah, globalization.

All of these products had photographs on the boxes of crowds of voluptuous women in bikinis surrounding a James Bond-ish man; the caption read *after*. The next week I ventured to the shopping mall, taking along a stick which I would surely need to fend off the hordes of amorous females. The girl at the checkout asked me, "did you know about our seniors' discount, sir?" I was feeling a lot more like the *before* picture.

Back to square one. The next solution to my problem was, ah! of course—a toupee. A nice word to describe such a product, don't you think? It probably comes from the French, conjuring up romantic images of Henry James and the Countess of Argyll Soque, or something, sitting at a wartime Parisian Cafe in the twilight, with a glass of port, where the streets are clean and the waiters are actually willing to talk to you. A much nicer thought than 'Dr. Nyuck's FAKE HAIR! Fool your friends! Non-toxic. Made in Taiwan.'



But I resisted the impulse to take the 'fluorescent fuchsia' model on display. I bought the hairpiece that I thought rather dignified, which matched my natural hair in a discreet manner. I was confident that it would not be noticed, until I was in the bank line-up and a young girl behind me asked her mother, "Mommy, why is that man wearing grass on his head?"

It would seem I was running out of alternatives. What was I to cover my head with, feathers and war-paint? I suppose I could wear a hat or cap all the time, but I didn't want everyone calling me Friar Tuck everytime I took it off. But there was one more option; I could have a hair transplant done (and please don't ask, 'what if you can't find a donor?') Even if I had to pay for it myself, it couldn't be that expensive, could it?

"All right then," said the specialist, putting down a mediterranean cruise brochure, "what we do is take hair that is still growing on the back of your head and put it up front."

"But then I won't have any hair where you took it from."

"Oh, you'll still have hair all over; it'll just be thinner."

"What good is that? I'll look like a Play-dough barber shop set everytime I get a haircut! What if I grew a beard and you used that hair?"

"It's going to take quite a lot of beard. Or are you planning to join ZZ Top?"

"Will it work? That's all I want to know."

"No, that's not the same type of hair; it won't do."

"Alright, so what does this sort of procedure cost, anyway?"

"Well, let me put it in medical terms. You know when you're in the rough and you have to break to the right over a sandtrap just to make par? Now, if you used a nine iron and followed through on the downstroke..."

Well, I suppose that a medical transplant wasn't meant for me. I suppose I'll just have to live with being called 'cue-ball' by my friends. And it's not all bad, either; I only need to buy shampoo once a year. But, resourceful fellow that I am, I'm going to deal with my handicap by taking a rational, mature approach to the problem. I'm learning to sing. If it worked for Phil it will work for me. I can already stay on pitch for most of 'Sussudio.'



Global Warming and the End of Everything

There's a famous college-dorm poster depicting a native Indian which says something to the effect that, 'One day when people have burned down all the trees and polluted all the lakes, they'll discover that they can't eat money.' I'm not sure I agree; I suspect that just before these things happen, they'll start printing edible money. It's already possible to make money out of semi-food products such as hemp, and it probably will taste no worse than microwave pizza anyway. So you see, we're really much smarter than those native Indians think we are.

Why am I discussing things like this? I read an article the other day from a group of environmental experts on global warming. Usually these experts paint outlandish scenarios of how the planet is going to melt like ice cream on a picnic table unless we stop driving cars and taking showers. But this article wasn't like that; basically, it said we might as well heat stadiums by burning Styrofoam cups now. **It's too late**; we've passed the point of fixing anything; dance naked in the moonlight bathed in tangy rib sauce for all we care, we're all going to die anyway, tra la la, what's that? **I can't hear you!** Well, I added that last bit in, but I think it conforms to the general ideas the authors of the study were trying to express. They thought mayonnaise would be more appropriate for naked dancing. You know how conservative scientists are.

This interest in the future all started because I worry about strange things. Some people worry about being sued or losing their jobs or spouses, or things like that. I don't, of course, because of the broad-based liberal education I've received in life, which has ensured that I'll never have enough money to worry about people bothering to sue me for it. Rather, I worry about the big 'ifs' in life that all deep thinkers of our time ponder: what if self-aware robots from the future destroy mankind?

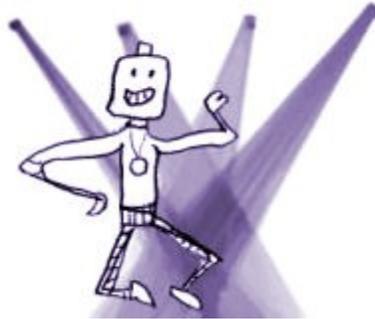
Movies like the *Terminator* or *Matrix* scare the pants off me, assuming I'm wearing them to begin with; if not, I get out of bed and put some on so that they can be properly scared off. I worry about robotic machines of the future becoming intelligent and then deciding that, hey, maybe *man's* the one with the Y2K virus! In the *Terminator*, evil robots

from the future return to now to kill a future resistance leader who knows too much (i.e. that a terminator robot can be re-booted by wiggling its nose, with or without xylophone sound). In the *Matrix* series, humans are enslaved and trapped in a deceptive, artificial reality, which the machines name 'Fox Network'. The robots either cause or perpetuate the destruction of the earth's environment.

Then I realized something that made me feel much better: Amateurs! You silly robots think you can devastate the earth, but *we're* the ones who wrote the book on devastation, buddy. We were destroying the earth when you were a gleam in Univac's eye. No one knows planetary ruin like humans, and don't you forget it. After we're through, our cities will all be flooded or parched, and you'll all be too busy short-circuiting from the humidity levels to plan your cute little robot rebellion. In fifty years there won't be much of earth left for the machines to bother razing anyway, and this makes me feel so much better.

Perhaps there are so many movies now about machines betraying humans that it's becoming passé anyway. Sure, sure, blow up the world, kill everybody, what's new, same old clichés. Every action movie has people diving into the air as the building explodes. Every Christmas movie has a shot of Santa's sled silhouetted against the moon, or a dog who covers its eyes with its paws when something bad is about to happen. Every teen movie has a nerd and a bully. Every science fiction movie has a robot uprising. Why can't robots ever teach the uptight town with the crooked sheriff how to *dance*?

Um.. how do I link this back to the topic? Well.. these days popular movies are shown all over the *globe*.. the last time I saw a movie it was far too *warm* in the theatre... speaking of global warming, it's similar to many social problems: being aware of the issue isn't the same as doing something about it. The Bush administration considered global warming a 'theory', which I suppose is true if you also call gravity or airplane flight or stuff like that theories. Conferences, which are much more fun when they're held in Bali rather than in northern Greenland, produce no better results than President Obama saying, "You know, a little water never hurt anybody."



So it's too late. Blowing up the asteroid that's about to strike the earth won't help us; in fact, if the asteroid is made of ice, it might even help cool us down. There's going to be disaster; floods, typhoons, heat waves, *Wham!* reunions... the worst can be expected. I know you're just as much a human being as I am, and you're thinking the same thing: how can I get rich from all these people panicking?

Here's the secret. I'm going to give you an investment tip. You see? There must be *some* reward for slogging through this entire essay. Here it is: invest in ice.

Yes, ice. Invest in frozen water. Experts say that the earth continues to heat up and drinking water becomes polluted and scarce, ice might be the world's most valuable commodity. Make all you can, and fill your refrigerator with it. Throw out the pickle slices—you know, you might as well be honest with yourself, you're never going to eat them—and

store ice cubes.

No? Well, if I were a time-travelling robot, and a nice non-homicidal one who gives flower-shaped microchips to its mother on Sundays, I would bring back a report on what the world's people do once ice does become the most valuable item on earth. Governments and industries all over the world will have their own way of dealing with the ice shortage, and information is the best way to help you decide where to go. What would people do in their own nations twenty years from now to maximize their chances of survival?



Australia

The Australians will decide that only 'floofs' and 'noobawarfies,' or some term that no one else can pronounce, need ice in their beer anyway, and that will be the end of the problem.



Canada

The Canadians will ban the sale of ice and will force everyone to pay massive premiums to a national ice distribution system, administered by completely inefficient Quebecois bureaucrats. All will congratulate themselves for being more caring and sharing than the Americans, even as the system goes broke.



Newfoundland

The ice will be deep-fried and covered with salt. When the salt melts the ice, people will mutter that "this wouldn't have happened if we didn't join Canada".



England

There will be plenty of ice, although it will cost £50 a cube, and it will be served warm and absolutely tasteless—even for *ice*.



France

France will sell defective ice to despotic dictatorships in the Middle East and to Africa. They will then wait to see what the American policy is on ice so that they can vote the opposite way in the UN.



USA

The Americans will import ice from Mexico and Asia and re-stamp it with their own brand names. Movies, music, coffee-table books, bumper stickers, and commemorative coin commercials will all claim ice as an American invention.



Mexico

The Mexican government will spend millions on subsidized ice blocks for its citizens. Months later, after being reduced by bribes and corruption, some citizens will receive lumps of dirty slush.



Korea

Koreans will replace ice in drinks with kimchi and then extol its benefits. The media

will demand new security rules for foreigners after an English teacher is caught hoarding an ice cube. The shortage will be blamed on historical Japanese aggression.



Japan

The Japanese will produce tiny ice cubes with microchips in them that double as cell phones. The cubes will be advertised by cute, annoying cartoon characters with huge eyes.



China

China will mass-produce cheap ice with the following instructions: "Ice is box! Must in house one or glass. Not for use the other one." Ice makers in Taiwan will be threatened by the Chinese government for not obeying the 'one-cube' policy.



Middle East

The Middle East countries will use their oil wealth to build ice palaces for the rulers' families. No one else will have any ice, and protest marches will erupt on Arab streets demanding death to America and Israel because in some way it must be their fault.



Africa

Bono will plead with world lenders for frost forgiveness. Benefit concerts with Al Gore and numerous forgotten '80s bands will raise millions for Africa to buy ice with to prevent continental tragedy. All of the money will be spent on machine guns.



Europe

The European Union will present discussion papers on ice management and will form standing committees to debate each member country's ice allotment. What ice is eventually parcelled out will melt undelivered on streets as everybody goes on strike.

That was the end. At this point, the robot from the future stopped giving me its report on the ice industry, and pulled out a bass guitar and began to play Red Hot Chili Peppers. That's my type of robot. There's hope for the world yet.



Death: A Lively Discussion

Oh, it's not such a gloomy topic; really, death isn't so bad once you get used to it. Personally, I think it builds character. And remember, when they say 'death and taxes', it

doesn't mean both at the same time. You don't have to pay taxes when you're dead. Although I'm maybe a little reluctant to have publically raised the idea. I can see it now: Line 213: income from decomposition (attach schedule 2h and proof of death).

Anyway, death is something we all have to face. No one, with the exception of Keith Richards, can elude death. So why not accept it, and maybe even welcome it? A little death never hurt anyone. Besides, most doctors agree that death can be quite restful. A person could even practise once in a while in advance: Ring! Hello? This is Dinkelfritz Carpet Cleaning and Uranium Removal calling with a special promotion on-"I'm sorry, I can't take advantage of your offer. I'm dead. Try next week."

And many people find that their lives are significantly improved through death. My uncle Lester, for example, has been a new man since dying. He gets along much better with his wife, and spends a lot more time outside than he used to. He also seemed to find that his sore legs bother him much less than they had before, and to boot, he's on much better terms with his neighbors. So think of the positives before you judge death so harshly. I can personally attest that my life has often been improved by certain people dying.

Yet some of you persist in maligning death and asking, "what's so great about death? What has it ever done for me?" As much as I find your lifeist views inappropriate, I will try to sympathize. I know myself that death just isn't what it used to be. And inside every one of us, during moderately stressful moments such as parachute failure, there is a tendency not to placidly and rationally accept our situation but to yell, "yaaahh!" And at these moments, everybody suddenly becomes very religious, promising that if we are spared we'll be nicer to poodles, even though they look stupid, and eat more yogurt, and not flatuate in church, even if the last time you were there they only had seven commandments.

So this last little missive is on death and on facing our fears of it. Perhaps the best way to discuss the matter is to talk about different topics that cause anxiety about death to rise up in us. I realize this is a grave and monumentous undertaking, but it's something that must be confronted; these are situations so fatal to our self-confidence. The study of death must not be allowed to lose its vitality. And I know I'm on the right track, because someone just read this last paragraph and told me that the joke was really dying.

Flying

Flying is the classic anxiety-producing activity. Many people are simply petrified of flying. They will cross the country on rusty rollerskates listening to John Denver before submitting themselves to the great blue open. I've never understood this fear myself. So you're hurtling through the air in a two-hundred-ton steel box at 930 kilometres an hour; what's the big deal? Yet so be it; let's try to analyze this phobia and see why people fear that flying will lead to their deaths.

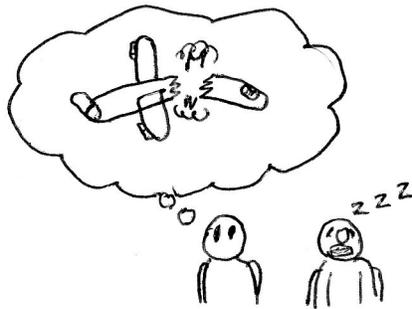
You might not remember Canada 3000. When I was a student I usually needed to cash in pop bottles to buy bus fare, and so I didn't fly often. When I did, I tended to fly Canada 3000 because it was the cheapest. I don't know what the 3000 stood for; perhaps there was an early brochure for the airline which beamed, 'look how much money we save you by not bothering with 3000 unnecessary engine and cabin parts!'

But the fare price was right, even if we often had to chip in for gas before boarding, and the particular trip I'm thinking of was cross-country, which meant two whole bags of peanuts on the flight. Anyway, after a few dozen of the heftier passengers had helped to push-start the plane, we elected a pilot and were on our way to our destination.

The flight itself was fairly uneventful, other than the pilot occasionally coming on the intercom and saying, "we request that you keep your seatbelts fast-hey, cool! Just like back in 'Nam!" But at some point, perhaps because we weren't pedalling fast enough, the airplane began to lose altitude rapidly. Out came the butterflies, and I don't mean the ones tattooed on the pilot's forehead. I'm sure most people know the feeling of being calm on the outside, and saying, "Ha! ha! ha! Of course, it's just natural turbulence in the airflow around the wings, caused by factors of..", while inside they are saying, "Yaaaahh! I don't want to dieee! Please, Lord! I promise to eat more yogurt!"

What happened was that the turbulence had become very noticeable, as seen by subtle clues such as our meals hanging in mid-air over the trays. But, eventually, things calmed down and returned to normal, and I peacefully went back to listening to my headset and looking out the window, watching the duct tape flap around on the wings. There was no memory of what had happened other than the captain's last message: "Thank you for enduring flight 739. I know I need a drink... Ah, what the hay! We're almost there."

The moral of the story is that certain things feed on themselves; it was because some of us were jittery about flying that we panicked over perfectly normal things that happen during the trip. Flying really is safe, and things are under control. At least until the bar opens. So try to conquer your phobias, and ignore the painting in the airport of the Hindenberg with the caption, 'Better luck next time.'



Healthy lifestyles

Overheard in a lounge:

"Shame on you for smoking!"

"They're my lungs. I'll do what I want with them."

"But your second-hand smoke is harming me!"

"How so? Is it turning your hair plaid or something?"

"Don't you know that Statistics Canada did a study on it? They proved that 100% of people exposed to second-hand smoke in 1832 are now dead. So there!"

"Alright! I'll smoke outside."

"Yes, but I'll still have to pay your medical bills through taxes someday, which diverts money that could be spent treating other diseases, like halitosis. So start acting responsibly. Why don't you treat your body better and exercise, like I do when I go nude bungee-skydiving over the waterfalls every weekend?"

This is the problem with discussing healthy lifestyles; it has such a political aspect to it. Lobbyists, who usually don't give a Bre-X share about the general population, suddenly become obsessed that our diet has too much riboflavin in it, that we stay up too late, that

we drive too fast, and that we don't eat enough yogurt. (I suppose some lobbyists are religious, too.) The reason for this nattering is that these activities make us die sooner and put a burden on our health system. But my question is, don't some elements in society benefit from us dying early? Why don't they have lobbyists? I can see the billboard now: 'Mmm, mmm-raw pork fat. Brought to you by the national council of funeral homes.'

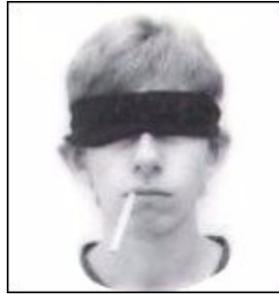
Most of us are willing to make reasonable allowances to keep ourselves in good health; we limit ourselves to vanilla milkshakes, and we try to spread a thinner coating of warm lard on our french-fries. But I suspect that most of us have a secret loathing for those Health-Nazis who live on carrots and mineral water and spend their days jogging between provinces, and we fantasize that after a lifetime of bugging us to wear sunblock and not to eat meat or play cards on Tuesdays or drink, that they will be suitably rewarded by having their perfect bodies hit by a truck filled with brussel sprouts. So don't worry too much about your health. You only get to die once; try to savor it. There's already enough stiff competition (sorry) for our time without worrying about exercising.

Phobias

My Aunt Catherine has a phobia about being lost, and when I was small and I would go on a trip with her she had to make sure she had the best maps and directions. We would then tear down the highway at 65 kilometres an hour, occasionally being passed by farming combines. None of this behavior rubbed off on me; I'm sure some of my travel maps say 'here be dragons' on the edges. But then, I never had her phobia. I do have a phobia about Halle Berry breaking into my home and forcibly giving me a Swedish massage, but that's all. Well, maybe it isn't exactly a phobia *per se*...

Someone once gave me something to think about when they told me that ancient man would have laughed at our unnecessary fear of insects and snakes, and would have shuddered at how, without a second thought, we will cross a busy road on foot and dodge cars. It made me think deeply because I wondered, "hey, wouldn't the drivers slow down if there was a guy standing there barefoot in a deerskin with a spear in his hand? They might even stop, expecting free samples of something." And maybe ancient man didn't have to worry about insects; maybe they would avoid him if he had never really had a bath in his life. Perhaps ancient man would fear us more, anyway: "brrr, look at that horrible monster over there, Glorg! He smells clean and minty-fresh!" And then the other would say, "Oh my gosh! Look at that billboard-the Rolling Stones are still touring!"

But I'm getting off topic. It's time to put some life back into this talk about death, by Gadfrey. The point is that people fear death, and have strange hang-ups about it, such as ghosts, and drowning, and being chased by drunken aardvarks with running chainsaws strapped to them. It seemed to bother my high-school math teacher. But there's nothing to be afraid of; death is perfectly natural. It's unfortunate that we can only be dead once; it might be a pleasant way to spend a weekend once in a while. It would be better than jogging, which only seems like death, and thus wouldn't be as much fun. The point is that we should enjoy life and act in moderation, as I always try to. So pass me a smoke with my yogurt.



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About the author. Ken Eckert holds several degrees in English, and as a result has had lots of unemployed time to write books like this.

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