

Top to Bottom
by Neal Grigsby

I

"The mind of the sage, being in repose, becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation." -Zhuangzi

The boy would try to pull himself out of bed each morning by 9. If it had been a hot night, this wasn't difficult. The loud mechanical "clunk" from the fan, marking every passage through degree 48 of its oscillation, would wrench him from half-sleep even if his sheets hadn't that night reached a sweat saturation point sufficient to turn repose to intolerable wallow. But had the night been temperate, like this night had been, some minor effort was needed, some spark of dawning awareness sufficient enough to trigger a motor response: a drawing away of the thin sheet, a dragging of the legs beyond the edge of the mattress. Now gravity assisted, with the pelvis a pivot point, the ever-warming muscles in the thighs and abdomen, such as he had, levered upright the onerous torso and pushed it aloft.

The machine took over, then. The muscle memory coordinated propulsion past the door, down the hall, and into the living room where, having done their morning work, his legs collapsed into a heap, now dumb cantilever to the spine, which arched up and forward like a gallows. But the position was all for convenience and comfort; the head needed no support, or rather, it had all the external support required. A beam, invisible (immaterial, in fact, but all the stronger for its lack of weight), emanated from the TV set, penetrated his head through the eyes, and held that mousy-haired orb rigid. These forms—the boy, the television set, and the ineffable link between them—created a perfect equilibrium. Given the thermodynamics of the house, this arrangement constituted the lowest energy state for all involved.

No mindless slave to the television, this one. No. He was a real professional. It took dedication to keep this up all day, just like any job. Patience was often necessary. Certainly quick thinking. Most importantly, it took a good strategy. Channel flipping was for dilettantes or people with remote controls. He was neither. Sometimes he couldn't even find the TV guide, and often it was inaccurate. Anyway, it wasn't enough to know the shows and pick the ones you wanted to watch. You had to feel the rhythm of the day's programming. Transitions were important, repetition a real danger.

Early morning TV, though dutifully attended by the boy, was especially treacherous. The live "morning crew" magazine shows that dominated the networks usually had one feature between them that was worth watching: a chat with an actor the boy admired, or a showcase of gadgets ahead of the most proximal gifting holiday. The remainder of those shows, however, was real brain degenerating stuff. A reliable alternative was to flip to *Sesame Street* for that hour. But of that hour, at least 25 minutes would be ABC songs, animations he'd seen 1000 times before, or a cloying dialog between Gordon and some blind kid. The boy preferred the sketches. To his taste, live action (and puppets) should be comedy. Cartoons should be action. But cartoons,

except for a few unwatchable shows on C-list stations for churchy homeschoolers or the preschool set, didn't come on until 3 (the legacy of school schedules, that institution doing its best to ruin even his summer months). The span between 10 and 3, then, presented the greatest challenge. The network blocks filled up with wretched soaps in the afternoons. Under the right circumstances, the boy could kill 10-11AM with game shows. But the following 4 hours belonged to the UHF frontier and its desperate showcase of paid programming and "classic" sitcoms.

But again, the boy was a discerning viewer. He did not reject those old programs categorically, like some philistine. *Gilligan's Island* was consistently fine (and sometimes even in color). *The Andy Griffith Show*, however, was right out, the boy turning hastily away as soon as he heard the first high-pitched notes of that whistle. *Leave It to Beaver*, when good, was probably the boy's favorite, but was highly variable day-over-day. If he hadn't already seen an episode, he'd have to make a critical guess about whether it was worth watching.

He found himself in this very conundrum that afternoon. He had never articulated his schema for sizing up unseen *Beaver* episodes, so the following calculations proceeded entirely subconsciously.

Opening: Each season had its own. Early seasons were best.

Beaver's Friends: Shows with Whitey were better than shows with Gilbert.

Wally's Friends: Shows with Eddie were better than shows with Lumpy.

Plot: The more potentially outrageous the better.

Beaver's Age: The "gee whiz" shtick didn't work so well after Mathers started pushing 13.

The sight of Beaver's now disproportionate facial features and poorly obscured acne forced the boy into action. He got up and turned to his plan B (always have a "plan B"). But *Donahue* was being preempted by baseball. His only alternative was to go even further up the dial, into the heart of darkness, as it were. He spun the big wheel and came to stop at a man, framed him from head to neck in a telephoto shot that almost completely obscured the setting. The boy tried to drop the program into one of his mental slots. Was it a religious kook? He was speaking like a preacher, kind of, but there were no phone numbers scrolling across the bottom of the screen, no solicitations for donations. Was it an infomercial? Where was the product, then? The boy waited for 5 minutes, then 10. No commercials. Nobody was trying to sell him anything. This made the boy nervous. He should really change the channel. But something made him sit there and listen.

"Last year was 1984. It came, and it went. You may feel relieved, but do not. You may think we survived the year without witnessing the realization of the prophecy of Orwell, but think again. Maybe you're just happy that we're all still alive, that the superpowers did not chose this year to end the world with the press of a button. But there are fates worse than death. Perhaps Orwell, though cunning, lacked vision. He could not imagine the sophistication of technological control in the 'computer age'. Technology that obscures itself as it controls, that disappears as its effect becomes more pronounced. We have been made eternal children by these technologies. Coddled and controlled. Are you a child? Are you a child? Are you a child?"

He repeated those words until the image flickered and was replaced by Jack Tripper executing a pratfall.

The boy turned off the TV set and stared into the tube. He focused through it and

saw his reflection, drained of color and distorted by the curved gray glass. Blood rushed painfully into his legs as he pushed himself up, and he stumbled the first few steps towards his parents' bedroom. He slid the large mirrored closet doors open and pulled down a black blazer. Hung around his shoulders, over his *Empire Strikes Back* pajamas, the jacket's arms extended well beyond the boy's hands, but he pushed them up and struck a pose in the mirror.

He seemed to get inspired, and shuffled out of the bedroom to the kitchen. Finding the bottle of Flintstones vitamins, he pushed and turned the child-proof cap and upended the contents onto the counter. He chose a Bam-Bam and carried it back, with the empty bottle, to the bedroom. He stood in front of the mirror and held these items up.

"Thank you, thank you. Yes, I've done it. I've unlocked the very secret of life. With this pill, just one a day, you'll be able to live forever. Just take it and then think about the age you want to be, and you'll be that age. It will cure all death and disease. I'm living proof. I may look like a small boy wearing a suit over my pajamas. But I'm really a man, a brilliant scientist who developed this life-saving treatment. Why the pajamas? Well, they're comfy. And one of the advantages of my treatment is that you can wear whatever you want now, regardless of age. Why the suit? Well, this is an important press conference, isn't it? Now for a demonstration"

The boy popped the vitamin and chewed. He puffed his cheeks full of air, raised his arms above his head like he was growing to their height, and stomped around the bedroom like Frankenstein's monster.

II

"The still mind of the sage is the mirror of heaven and earth, the glass of all things." -Chuang Tzu

"I have to make sure you understand the risks associated with this clinical trial."

"Of course I understand. I signed the paper."

"I know. Listen, this trial is not like others you may have heard about or participated in. It has possible side effects of a qualitatively different order."

"The paper said it could kill me. What more is there to know? I saw the effect of this disease on my father. It was much worse than death. I'm prepared to take that risk."

"It's true there is a risk of fatal organ damage, but even if it proves safe in that respect, there is another cause for concern. Like you said, there are fates worse than death."

The old man frowned and settled more deeply into his chair. He'd have to hear this sermon out.

"To attack the cause of Alzheimer's disease," the neurologist began, "the drug obviously has to act on the source of the disease: the brain. These are the questions our animal trials really can't answer: What will be the total effect of the drug on your mind? What will be the side effects on your personality? Your memory?"

"Wait, isn't the drug designed to fix all that? Otherwise, what's the point?"

"We believe the drug to be effective on the causes of Alzheimer's. In a perfect system, that would also cure the symptoms. But that might not necessarily be the case. The causes and symptoms of a neurological disease are not always so directly related."

"I don't understand."

"Your brain isn't like your other organs. We have very effective stem cell therapies to repair damaged livers and hearts, for example. But we can't just repair your brain any more than we could give you a brain transplant and hope you'd still be you. The relationship between your mind and your brain is very highly nuanced. It's nearly impossible to design a drug that will repair pathologies but leave normal functioning unimpaired."

The old man leaned forward and rubbed the coarse stubble on his chin. He wasn't getting it.

The doctor said, "Let me see if I can clarify this. Do you believe in the soul?"

"The soul? Of course I do."

"OK. Good. Now pretend you don't."

"What?"

"The existence of the soul muddies the waters for doctors in my field. For the sake of discussion, consider that all you are is in your head and nowhere else. Who you are is all represented physically by that piece of meat between your ears. Emotions are a certain set of chemical reactions and nothing else. Memories are relationships between neurons and nothing else. You come into my office and complain, 'I seem to be sad all the time.' So, I do a blood test and find you have a low level of endorphins. I have to ask myself, did the low endorphins cause your sadness or did your sadness cause the low

endorphins? There's really no quantitative way to tell at that point. It's all the same in the brain. Memories and emotions cause and are caused by the chemical and electrical reactions in that very material lump of flesh."

"This disease isn't a bad mood, doctor. I'm losing my mind. I just want it to stop."

"Here's the bottom line. The drugs may stop the degeneration of your brain, but they may not be truly precise. They may 'repair' things that don't need to be repaired. We think the collateral damage to the healthy cells will be minimal, but there's no telling what even a small effect may have on you."

"You must have a guess."

"We can speculate on a range of possibilities, none much more likely than the next."

"Let me have it."

"It could kill you. It could cure you. It could accelerate the disease. Even with successful treatment, you might experience hallucinations. You might mistake those hallucinations for memories. Your memories might become, in a sense, rewritten. You might relieve memories as if they were happening all over again. You might have trouble separating your dreams from reality."

"So, you're saying that, as soon as I pop one of these pills, I can't really be sure of anything anymore? I could go crazy and never know it?"

"Well, I'd know. And that data would be highly valuable to others in your condition"

"Great."

The old man left the clinic clutching a small white paper bag. A car was waiting for him outside. Though he hadn't had any critical short-term lapses, the home did not allow him to drive himself anywhere as a precaution. He looked at his watch. Off schedule. Of course, with these treatments he'd probably have to modify his schedule a bit. The doctor wanted him to come in every morning for the first several weeks to monitor progress. That was OK. He had plenty of time. He usually spent these early hours in the lounge watching television. He wouldn't miss that too much. As long as he made it home for gardening hour.

With their controlled diets, they'd never be allowed to eat the vegetables they cultivated, so most used their tiny plots for annuals. They'd select seeds appropriate for the time of year, pack them with enough MiracleGro for a large chemical explosive, watch the flowers blossom within a few weeks, then cut them and start over again. They would put the cut flowers in their rooms as trophies, boasting about their green thumbs or lying that relatives had brought them. But the old man stuck resolutely to his organic vegetables. They were near impossible to grow, and if they yielded any crop it was tiny and shriveled. But he didn't care.

After gardening came lunch. The cafeteria served hot meals that the old man found edible only about twice a week. Though it was well known that the elderly had reduced appetites and resistant taste buds—the food should have been swimming in salt and spice—dietary considerations specified low-sodium, digestion-friendly pabulum. The ham, cured and salty by definition, was fine. The turkey burgers and fries were relatively foolproof. Attempts at ethnic food, well, the results were what one would expect. He knew the schedule by heart. Today was Tofu Szechuan. So, he stuck to his turkey

sandwich, which he could assemble from the deli bar any time. Toasted sourdough bread. One slice of low-fat provolone cheese. Two thick slices of turkey. Lettuce from the salad bar instead of the withered leaves in the deli. Cherry tomatoes instead of the pale pink slices of off-season beefsteaks.

After lunch, he could choose between a monitored walk around the grounds, a game of boccie, or "swimnastics." He usually sneaked off to his room and pulled out the GameBoy. It was an older model that his grandson no longer used, but the old man couldn't tell the difference. The doctor told him that solving mental puzzles in adulthood reduced the risk factor for Alzheimer's. He didn't know if it was too late for this to help him now, but he figured it couldn't hurt.

At around 2 o'clock the "entertainment" showed up. This meant a group of performing kids from a local marching band, piano class, or Jazzercise troupe. The old man attended these regularly, but with skepticism. He could tell almost immediately if it would be worth watching simply by gauging the median age of the children involved. Teens obviously did not want to be there, and obscured their scorn poorly. Kids under the age of 8 were simply frightened out of their wits, and often sat paralyzed unable to go on until cattle-prodded by their handlers. Some of the residents found this cute. The old man did not, and favored 8 to 11 year olds. They were old enough to have some degree of self-awareness, but young enough not to know what to do with it. He tried to enjoy the performances critically, resisting the obvious vampiric spectacle of the arrangement, but he had caught himself on several occasions staring longingly at these budding humans, who were so effortlessly genuine.

After exhibition of the day's Hayes Code-era film, the home brought in a psych worker to lead a discussion with residents. Today's theme was the importance of change.

"Maintaining a dynamic attitude is a way to keep your mind and body healthy. Try to break free from your routine. If you walk the grounds every afternoon, try the swim aerobics instead, or, at least, take a different path around the garden. It's never too late to learn something new. It may seem like your options are limited, but there are plenty of things to do even in your own room, or the common area. Many elderly folks enjoy knitting. One of the nurses visits the library every day. Ask her to bring you back a book about something you've never done. You could learn all about a different country, or read all of the works of an author you like. Take advantage of your golden years, it's never too late for dynamic personal growth."

"Change is overrated," interjected the man.

"Excuse me?"

"They tell us the same thing all the time: break out of your routine! Mix things up! Learn something new! Keep up with the Joneses! It's all bull. I know what you want. The harder we work the easier we forget that we're going to die. And hey, that's cool. Nice try. But, I have a different take on things. You live as long as I do and you find you've lived through many periods when you do the same thing day in and day out. And I've decided that they're not any better than the periods where everything's uncertain, they're just different. So, maybe you go to the same 3 restaurants all the time. But you try everything on the menu. Or you have the same thing every time, but you notice, each time, how it was so subtly different from the last. Maybe it's only the 100th time you have something that you realize why you like it so much. Maybe, by doing nothing, by not thinking about every decision, your mind is allowed to wander, and you make

connections that you never thought of before. Maybe stillness even allows you to see and experience things in different times and different dimensions. I've seen such things."

By this point, the nurses had already intervened to help the old man out of the discussion circle, but he could see some of the others smiling and nodding as he was pulled away.

After dinner, the old man popped his pill. Nurses started escorting the more incapacitated residents back to their rooms. The building was locked down. But the old man convinced one of the nurses to let him out for a final short walk around the garden. The nurse stood at the door and watched as he ambled over to the fenced off quarter acre adjacent to the courtyard fountain.

Before the old man reached his vegetables, he noticed another person in the garden. A man from facilities was plowing one of the plots into oblivion, just driving the flowers and stems back into the earth.

The old man said, "I see we have a new opening."

The facilities guy stopped briefly, nodded somberly, and resumed.

The old man bent over his small garden and delicately touched the leaves. Then he noticed, in the near center of the plot, terminating from a tangle of thick green vine, the biggest, roundest, reddest tomato he had ever seen.

III

"The sage's mind in stillness is the mirror of Heaven and earth, the glass of the ten thousand things." -Master Zhuang

The man counted himself lucky to work at a job where informality was the rule. Nobody expected him to show up in a suit and tie. He called no one "sir" or "boss." And, most impressively, he could show up anytime he wanted, within reason. So he showed up at 8 AM every morning on the dot. It seemed unnecessary to most of his workmates, but he'd done the math, it all made sense. If he left any later, because of the traffic, it would actually take him as much as 15 minutes longer to get into work. If he left earlier there were fewer buses, so he'd probably make it to work at about the same time anyway. Try explaining this to a bunch of recent college grads who still felt that sleeping until noon was a cardinal virtue.

So he'd be out of bed by 6:30 to stop the pain of the buzzing alarm. He'd experimented with brisk morning exercises before realizing that the nerve pathways between brain and limbs did only limited throughput until doused with very hot water. So it was right into the shower. Then he prepared one of three standard breakfasts. This day, he had the english muffin, one scrambled egg, orange juice, and yogurt. He enjoyed exactly one cup of coffee before leaving for work, brewed from fresh ground beans using the traditional cone filter method.

Very few people ever got off the bus at his stop. His office was in a post-industrial neighborhood that had yet to attract many post-industrial industries. So the only people who got off with him were either lost or homeless, and those people didn't keep rigid schedules. The man had inadvertently developed a mental game that, once it got into his head, he couldn't stop playing, though he knew it was stupid. It was called: Don't Pull the Stop Cord. The object was to not pull the stop cord unless he was the only person getting off at the stop. It was a game of chicken with the other passengers that only he knew they were playing. Wait too long to pull the cord and he risked missing the stop, but pull it too early and he could lose. He had a whole scoring system based on the number of people on the bus, the number of people who eventually got off at the stop, and when the cord was pulled. He wished he could stop playing, but the game concept was an intellectual virus. Telling himself to stop only reminded him that he couldn't help it.

At work, he slipped into his cubicle without a word to his coworkers and listened to classical music through a pair of large studio monitor headphones. A stack of papers awaited him in his inbox. He grabbed the entire column and inverted it onto his desk, slid the first sheet off of the top, and started working. The man had no illusions about his job, he was a paper pusher. He did one thing, and one thing only. By the end of the day, the stack of papers in his inbox would be full, but he'd have processed all of the documents from the day before. They hadn't determined a way to teach a computer to do his job, but he didn't think they ever would. Though repetitive, every document to process represented a complicated problem. Documents, depending on their content, needed to be routed, abstracted, indexed, sequenced, or categorized. The man was a

necessary bottleneck in the flow of information that kept the company running smoothly. He had many years experience at this now, so replacing him would take months of on-the-job training. He knew enough not to teach his coworkers too much about what he did. In a real way he was more irreplaceable and integral to the company than the CEO. Of course, he didn't make as much money. But he didn't care.

At about the quarter mark of the day's pile, the man pulled up a paper, the top of which bent back limply like a dead flower. He pushed the right edge up between his thumb and forefinger. The angle of the paper edge shifted as he pushed, and it sliced through the skin on the thumb. He sucked air through his teeth and clamped down the cut with his other hand. A beginner's mistake. He shook his head. Drawing away his other hand, he held the injured finger up for a closer look. Just a tiny line of red. But above that, he noticed for the first time that he had dirt under his fingernails. He couldn't remember the last time he had got them muddy. Was his hygiene so lax? He took a bathroom break and scrubbed his hands.

At lunchtime he discretely ate his turkey sandwich on the cross-town bus. The driver knew him well enough not to enforce the no food rule, and he had a soft spot for the man, because every afternoon he used his lunch hour to ride to the nursing home and visit his father. On the return trip, he often looked more sullen than when he had come, but he kept with the routine. These days, his face tended not to register anything.

The man walked into his father's room to see him staring into the top-most dresser drawer. He didn't hear the intrusion and continued to look in the drawer as the man took a seat on the corner of the bed.

"What are you doing, Dad?"

His father jumped a little and looked over his shoulder, back at the drawer, and then back at his son again. He closed the drawer and sat down, their shoulders brushing.

"What's in there, huh?"

"Gears. Springs. Other clockwork"

The two sat in silence for a while.

"So, how are you doing, dad? Are you having a good day today?"

"Um. The food here is terrible."

"I know. Here, I brought you some olives. Nice and salty. Don't worry, no pits"

He accepted the small container of rich purple globes floating in brine, popped one into his mouth and chewed quietly, nodding.

"How are they? Good? What have you been doing today?"

"Nothing on."

"What?"

"Never anything good on."

"Oh, the TV. OK. Let's see if we can find something."

The man reached up to the suspended television set and flicked it on.

"You won't find anything."

He spun the ancient dial, encountering static at nearly every interval.

"Don't know why they don't have cable."

"Cable is naughty. Can't let us see naked ladies. We're children, you see. Children."

"I know, dad."

The man stopped on one of the channels that afforded marginally clear resolution.

“Do you remember this show?” asked the man.

“Of course I do. My memory is just fine.”

“Man, this was bad. I like John Ritter well enough, I guess. But, what a stupid show.”

Just then the station interrupted for a bit of breaking news. A boy who had gone missing a week past had been found dead.

“Well that sucks.”

But he looked over at his father and saw him staring wide-eyed at the screen during the entire interruption. When it was over, and the station switched back to John Ritter tripping over an ottoman, the man's father looked at him with a kind of awareness he hadn't exhibited in months.

“Son.”

“Dad, what is it?”

“Son, you have to believe me. Say you'll believe me. This is very important. I'm not crazy. Say you'll believe me.”

“I believe you. Of course I do. Go on.”

“They say I'm losing my mind but I'm not. None of it's real, you see. They cured death. They cured death but didn't know what it would do to us. Our brains couldn't handle it so they did all this, stuck us here. But I can see it. And now they're trying to stop the one who did it before he invented the drug. Do you understand?”

“No. What do you mean? I don't...”

“The one who did it, it's...”

But then it passed, and a glazed look seemed to come over his father's eyes and they moved back to the screen.

“When is my wife coming home?”

“I don't know, dad.”

When he got back to the office, he tore into his pile of papers. He worked at a frenzied pace, scanning and digesting whole documents in seconds, hardly blinking. He became, at that moment, a kind of paperwork savant, hardly even thinking about what he was doing. He burned through the whole stack, and the stack for the next day, and finished well before quitting time. Then he just sat and stared at the cubicle wall, in a trance. Improbably, one of his office mates, a project manager, noticed this, and he ambled over.

“Hey, buddy, what's up? Are you OK.”

It took a few seconds for the man to snap out of it and focus his attention on the interloper.

“Um... yeah, I guess. Did you know, when I was a boy, about 9 or 10, I believed that I was the reincarnation of a very important person? Some big inventor, if I recall.”

“Oh.... yeah. Is that right? Well, I guess it's better than being the reincarnation of some loser. Heh, why doesn't anybody ever think they're the reincarnation of the gardener, or something?”

“God, I remember that time so well, it's almost in my bones. I did the same thing every single day. I think, if somebody built an exact replica of my house at that time, and put me asleep in my bed, I'd wake up and do everything I did then, automatically. I wouldn't even remember that I was an adult now. I'd just accept it. Who knows, maybe that's how this is. Maybe I'm really an old man but I woke up in my old bed in my old

apartment this morning, and so I came into work. Or maybe we live whole lives in our dreams, and forget them when we wake up. We're always the same age, we just dream we have childhoods or grow old or die."

"Hmm. Interesting, but don't go thinking you're some original philosophical genius, or anything. Sounds a lot like Zhuangzi."

The man was taken aback.

"What?"

"Chinese philosopher. My college degree was in philosophy. Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly. When he woke up, he didn't know if he was a man dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was a man. Or something. It's been a while."

"Huh. That's kinda nice. What does it mean?"

"I don't know. Maybe that things can be many different things at once, depending on your frame of reference."

"Well, some things seem pretty absolute."

"Yeah, well, philosophy doesn't exactly pay the bills, does it?"

"No, I guess not."

"Some of us are going to go out tonight and, you know, get wasted. Wanna come?"

The man considered it. He never did anything with the people from work. But he had more important things to do.

"I don't think so. I'm done with my work here. I think I'm going to go pick my son up from school. I don't spend nearly enough time with him."