



## What We Lose, What We Find:

ALAN Breakfast Speech, November 23, 2002

**O**ne young widow of September 11 said a few months later, holding her baby: “We are more than our losses.” And just a couple of months ago, millions of us heard Sandy Dahl, widow of Jason Dahl, the pilot of United Flight 93, say, “Adversity doesn’t build character. Adversity reveals character.”

I’m sure we’ve all, during the past year, tried to imagine our way into the positions that these women and their husbands found themselves in. What would such a trading of places reveal about us?

We all remember those first few days, when the questions were coming at us with breakneck speed: Were we suddenly supposed to change our way of life so “they” wouldn’t “hate us so much”? Or cherish ever more deeply the way of life that our forebears worked so hard to build and preserve? A way of life that has such good intentions and goes so wretchedly askew?

And as we’ve gone along through the next months, with what Walt Whitman called “the fever of doubtful news” (*Song of Myself*), and as we’ve kept trying to find the right questions to ask, the kids themselves have gone along being kids, right under our noses, trying to cope with the perennial conflict between their dreams and reality, and the question of whether or not to feel guilty for worrying about a soccer goal or a prom dress when so many thousands had died. It doesn’t seem overblown to note that we are all at what Joseph Conrad called more than a hundred years ago—and this is certainly the meat and potatoes of the English teacher—“the heart of a vast enigma.”

Of course, we do have our national memory. *The New Yorker* cover by Art Spiegelman from September

24, 2001, is entirely black, but by tilting the page we can see the “ghost shadows” of the World Trade Center Towers within all that blackness. This is one of the pictures that won’t leave our minds.

Today we’ve gone from the profound shock and mournfulness of those images to giddy extremes of red, white, and blue, in attention-getting stripes and lights and sequins and stars on household objects and car decorations and wearing apparel of all kinds, as if we were a grieving nation of Radio City Rockettes. Now a year later, I find in *The New Yorker* that I can order a little silver pin for \$29.95 that has little tiny Twin Towers with a little tiny halo around them.

Just a few weeks ago, in October, the public elementary school that my grandchildren attend in Maryland operated for three weeks in Lockdown on Code Blue. This meant the children couldn’t go outdoors at recess because they might get shot by the killers who were on the loose in their neighborhoods, and the kids had to go to the bathroom in bunches. Here is what my seven-year-old granddaughter told me on the telephone at the end of the first week of Lockdown: “But here’s a good thing about it. It was a hard week, and we were so good on Code Blue that we got to make our own ice cream sundaes in school on Friday ’cause it was such a hard week.” We expect the kids to rise to the occasion. As we have learned to do, over and over and over again.

So we working stiffs who write books for young readers go to our desks and stare at our screens, considering the impossibility of writing the perfect book for kids in this confusing and scary time, and we have to keep wondering: What *is* it that’s needed most?

History has shown us repeatedly that we can't really know yet. Here's one deafening example: After the fire-bombing of Dresden in 1945, nearly two decades went by before the world got two particularly potent testimonials reflecting on it—Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet in 1960 and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter-*

*House Five* in 1966. And in a recent *New York Times Book Review*, Walter Kirn (2002) wrote: "When the floor is still heaving it's tough to take the long view" (p. 7).

Here is our own Katherine Paterson, speaking in the new book *911/The Book of Help*, edited by Michael Cart (2002): "Art takes the pain and chaos of our broken world and transforms it into something that brings forth life" (p. 12). That means art of

all kinds. What kinds of art do we need now?

For one thing, I think we need the richness of comedy. We need the therapy of belly laughter. We have always needed it. When Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1600—I will gratuitously remind this room full of literature majors—Queen Elizabeth was still on the throne of England, political and religious corruption were mutilating Europe, and the bubonic plague had thrown a horrifying curve right across the plate of history, killing 25 million people. The intellectual climate of the times was such that within a very few years, Galileo would be forced to recant his scientific discoveries publicly, and be reduced to whispering, ". . . and yet the earth does move . . ." In that era of injustice, superstition, and plague, Shakespeare decided it was time to write a play in which we wake up and find ourselves in love with an ass. And that's just the beginning.

In the desolate climate of the first half of the 20th century, when the ghostly presence of The Great War still haunted America and the Crash of 1929 had sent millions of breadwinners into bread lines, Charlie Chaplin brought the Little Tramp to life. In dark theatres, for twenty cents, terrified and depressed people could double over with laughter at *City Lights* (1931)

and *Modern Times* (1936). (Of course, I always cry at *City Lights*, which is a comedy, but that's part of Chaplin's larger point, too.)

After two world wars, after Auschwitz and Buchenwald, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the McCarthy trials, immigrant Billy Wilder came up with the idea of putting Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in dresses, and giving them Marilyn Monroe and Joe E. Brown to work with, and we Americans laughed our heads off at *Some Like It Hot*. It was 1959.

And then President Kennedy was shot. Thirty-nine years ago yesterday. (And anyone of age 50 or older can, of course, tell you exactly where we were, what we were doing at that moment. I was feeding my baby daughter lunch in a high chair—a chair whose memory would resurface nearly 30 years later and unconsciously cause me to write a book called *Make Lemonade*. That baby grew up to become the mother of the seven-year-old who was so good on Code Blue that she got to make ice cream sundaes at school.)

But I digress. President Kennedy was shot. And the plague of assassinations came upon us. And trained dogs were sent to attack Freedom Marchers.

There could be no more comedy.

But of course there was. There was Dick Gregory.

And the very un-funny Cold War provoked Stanley Kubrick to bring us *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). And never after that would Americans really look at Sterling Hayden or George C. Scott with straight faces.

After Vietnam and before AIDS, Mel Brooks brought us *The Producers* as a movie in 1969. And that wasn't enough. Such a guy: he brought it to us again three decades later, on Broadway. We've probably all seen *The New Yorker's* cover from May 7, 2001, in which the entire theatre audience is laughing uncontrollably, except for a rigid, scowling Adolf Hitler, who has a very expensive seat for this play.

There's always somebody who knows how badly we need to laugh. And we never know where those generous minds will turn up next. Kierkegaard said that laughter is a kind of prayer. Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* (1998) offended some of the more ruminative among us—not because we're just proud to be grouches, but because that film did not seem to comprehend or encompass the whole horror it attempted to cheer us up about.

What will happen now?

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A year ago we were advised to wonder if there could ever be any more irony. But those who asked that question perhaps didn't notice, during these tragic and frightening months, that one of our chief gifts is that of perceptive distance: we seem to be wired so that we can't spend a day without irony. We look at the earliest texts, and they always contain the sense that death is leering around the corner, just as we're about to make the most decisive gestures of our lives.

During the Nixon era, someone wrote in *The Nation*, "Irony consists in a shared notion of the way the world should work." And there's some evidence to suggest that it may be the last thing we lose as a species, before we give the world over to the cockroaches.

Nearly a decade ago, *The New Yorker* published a cartoon featuring a booth, rather like the booths at a community fair. Its banner says "Marketplace of Ideas." One customer stands before the booth, and the man in the booth says, "Sorry, we're out of everything but irony."

At the core of comedy is this dictum: "Know not thyself." And perhaps that's where our own personal irony begins. As literature majors, we all know that the mirror that comedy forces us to look into is perhaps best used when we wake up and find ourselves in love with an ass. Intelligent comedy does not thumb its nose at the world's pain. Indeed, thoughtful laughter is based in the understanding that we are all hurting.

Nearly 30 years ago, someone wrote in the *New York Times*, "Comedy is interrogative." I've always remembered that. And a few weeks ago, in my town of Portland, Oregon, Lois Lowry said, "When we write for young readers, we don't provide answers. Rather, we re-ask the questions." And when young adult author Chris Lynch accepted the Michael Printz Honor for his novel *Free Will* in June of this year, he had this to say, "If one of my characters doesn't make me laugh pretty soon, I believe I am going to go berserk."

The sensitive point where laughter and tears converge seems to be where we are most intensely human. Finding out just who and what we are is both hilarious and tragic. A white-tailed deer and a Siberian iris are utterly gorgeous creations, but they cannot contemplate Brahms or Oscar Wilde. Or the Old Testament.

A couple of years ago, I attended a fine under-

graduate production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Only about a dozen people were in the audience. At several moments in the play, I was crying, but a woman directly behind me was laughing loudly at precisely the same moments. One of the things I loved about the evening was that the young college actors did not flinch. They were swayed from their appointed rounds neither by her laughter nor by my tears. We were all seeing our own play.

Ginny Moore Kruse of the Cooperative Children's Book Center in Madison, Wisconsin, has taught me much of what I know about kids' lit—although she is not to blame for the abysmal gaps in my knowledge. Ginny Moore Kruse says, "We each read our own book."

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But I was talking about loss.

I'm sure many of you know Sven Birkerts' book, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. In the book, he has this to say about his own adolescent reading:

When Finny died at the end of John Knowles' *A Separate Peace* I cried scalding tears, unable to believe that the whole world did not grind to a sorrowful halt. (2006, p. 37)

And sorrowful halts are as good a place as any to begin saying a few things about my own work. First, I should explain that I really do fit in with this crowd this morning. I am a schoolteacher, just a lapsed one. I spent 30-plus years in classrooms: six years of little kids, ages five through eight; about three years of middle school kids; and 20-something years in high school English.

I've been to more faculty meetings than picnics in my life, have read more student essays than novels, have been to more parent conferences than editorial ones, have had more hall duty than hairdresser appointments; have been to nearly as many pep rallies

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as operas. I've written more lesson plans than book chapters, and I have been condescended to by more school administrators than celebrities.

Like every teacher, I spent all those years learning: learning how genuine are kids' responses to life, how naïve and candid are their opinions, how poignant are their disguises. How funny they can be. How various and amazing are their grammatical inventions, both by accident and by design. And how

efficient are their Geiger counters for hypocrisy. And in those 30-plus years, I learned just what every teacher learns—that no two kids are alike.

Bearing in mind that we must “only connect” (E. M. Forster, *Howards End*), certain notions are with me at all times as I do

my own writing. I'm going to cite five of them.

1. The first one comes from Ursula K. LeGuin, who has said, “Adolescence is exile.” We know it's usually not like the Dalai Lama's exile, or like that of the Old Testament Jews, but just try telling us that when we're actually going through it. The Irish poet Eavan Boland speaks of being in what she calls “the supremely inconvenient moment of 14 years . . . I felt awkward—and imposter, waiting for my differences and mistakes to be noticed.” Then she read the Yeats poem, “The Wild Swans at Coole.” In the poem, she found “a place where I might no longer be an imposter.” Isn't it often just luck? And the right English teacher at the right moment?

2. The second of my basic notions comes from my many years of violin lessons. They've taught me that a little bit of work will produce little bits of results. And about two-thirds of my life spent in orchestras have given me my basic lessons in teamwork and team play.

3. And the third notion that I hold dear. It was in the writing of *Make Lemonade* that I even discovered that I knew it. It's this: it's criminal for children to have to live surrounded by ugliness. I had to see the absence of beauty in order to learn it.

One night when I was a privileged college kid, I was dancing with a boy in a fraternity house somewhere in Connecticut. He asked me what I wanted

out of life. I said, “to seek beauty.” About a half-hour later, I heard a gathering of guys over near the beer keg, saying, “. . . to seek beauty,” and laughing their heads off. That has stayed with me. I have lost the dates of the Reign of Terror from my European history class notes, but I have retained the memory of a group of college boys laughing at what I wanted out of life.

4. When I was working on a book called *The Mozart Season*, I was quite mixed up—that is, more mixed up than usual. But realizing that I was on the wrong path taught me so much. And out of that confusion came a sort of guideline that I've tended to follow since then. I say it to myself and to each protagonist, but it's meant for the reader as well. Sententious but true:

Seeking what you want will surprise you. It will become far more complicated than you at first imagine. You will change. And—painful as it is—you'll grow into an expanded and deepened self. And what you want may turn out to be *not* what you want.

5. Then there's human myopia and William James, who said, “Many people think they are thinking, when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.” I watch my characters doing it, and I ponder our ability to live our lives that way. Here's Bertrand Russell's memorable conjugation of the verb “to be.” He said, “I am firm. You are stubborn. He is a pig-headed fool.”

The question of how we move from being children—open to new ideas, eager for colorful discoveries, delighted to find the unfamiliar, the exotic, the contradictory—to being adults who hold onto our prejudices as if they were life preservers: always fascinating, yes?

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Certain literary precedents are always with me, too. They are: a song I learned before I could read; a novel I found at a rummage sale when I was 15; two plays—one I saw when I was 18, the other a few years later—and a short story I was introduced to in college.

First, the song. And *where* I learned it is important. My brother and I spent our childhood in the woods, not in a town, in the Pacific Northwest. It was a time that was dreadful, horrifying in the rest of the world, but not in our small nest of Douglas fir, Western red cedar trees, apple and pear orchard,

Sunday School, grandparents, summers in tall grass and winters in deep snow, a gas shortage, and rationing for some war that was going on somewhere, way far away. We lived in a large log house that our father had built before the days of the chainsaw. It had five bedrooms, two bathrooms, a grand piano, a massive stone fireplace, huge ceiling beams, and books and paintings all over the place. A lodge-like house. Just no electricity. Our mother was a very fine pianist, and between Beethoven and Rachmaninoff and Bach and Chopin, she taught us this song:

The North wind doth blow  
and we shall have snow  
and what will the robin do then, poor thing?  
He'll sit in the barn  
to keep himself warm  
and hide his head under his wing.

This association of a little bird shivering in the cold appears in every book I've written, but it is never a bird. I caught this figure in my own work only just this year. (My mother had no idea that her daughter was going to turn into a writer, but she would not let me go through a day of my childhood without music.)

Next, the novel, which came along during my lopsided adolescence. (By this time, we had electricity in our house.) When I was 15—my worst year—I found *Catcher in the Rye* at a rummage sale. I took it home and it became my life. You know: the crush on a book. My older, college-student brother scorned the book for its banality, and my mother found out it had Those Words in it and hated it for its vulgarity, although she did not read it. I had in my hands, then, a perfect instrument of rebellion. That book became my armored car, in a way. I could go through the house or the orchard knowing that book by heart—I was one of *those* Salinger readers—and could make my mother and brother angry just by walking past them. I had this potent knowledge inside me, and they could not ignore it. It was perfect for alienation. Our dad had died several years before, so he had no vote in the matter. Can you imagine how many years I've wondered what his vote would have been? (My family didn't suspect that I was going through the painfully slow and sideways steps and missteps of becoming a writer. They wouldn't have believed it if anyone had told them. Nor would I.)

I began to use Holden Caulfield's criteria for making judgments about life and people. I think my gen-

eration was full of kids who did exactly that. Later, in college, I met them. So *many* things happened in my life because I had read *Catcher in the Rye*, and most of them are really not appropriate for this morning's breakfast gathering.

I had such a serious case of adolescence that my mother could barely tolerate being in the same room with me. In one of her never-ceasing attempts to cure me of it, she decided—the summer just before I would begin college—that she and I should lock ourselves inside the un-air-conditioned family car and drive ten hours together to a Shakespeare Festival. So on a balmy summer evening, in a stage storm of wind and rain, thunder and lightning, and a lot of haunting blue light,

King Lear (my very first *King Lear*), who had banished those who truly loved him and had been discarded by those he thought loved him—his Fool was the only one who had not abandoned him—looked into the raging weather and he commented on Man: "Is man no more than this? Consider him well . . . . Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal . . . ."

And something happened in me. Into what appeared to be the vacuum of my mind, King Lear and his Fool tumbled, trembling, windblown, and nearly naked.

Shakespeare had found *language* for the agony of living with one's own mistakes. There were *words* for finding yourself alone with your own failures, phrases in this play for discovering that you were wrong, all, all wrong, wrong, wrong. Looking back, I know my mind took a kind of Copernican leap that night toward finding some language of my own. Another 30 years would go by before I would actually begin to write a book for young readers.

So that's the first of the two plays.

In college, I met Nikolai Gogol's story, "The Overcoat." Gogol finished this story in 1841, during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I. Its fusion of comedy and tragedy was perfect for my college years. I'm sure many of

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you know the story, about pathetic Akaky Akakievich in the freezing-cold winter of St. Petersburg. A couple of years later, I saw Marcel Marceau pantomime this

story in New York. I had thought the overcoat was only in my mind, but it turned out to have been in Marcel Maceau's mind, too. Not only has Gogol remained one of my favorite authors—for his hilarity and his gloom—but in some of my more morose moments, I've wondered if everything I write is simply an attempt to make a kind

of companion piece for Gogol's "Overcoat."

And now the second play:

It was after college, and I was living in New York, and I saw Luigi Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Actors sat on stools and read from scripts. And I had an internal power surge: "I want to do that! Write for people to sit on stools and read from scripts!" And immediately the counterattack came from inside: "You can't do that. You don't know anything. You could never do that." The argument remained unresolved for decades. I could not have said then that I would ever actually write a book. Life itself was too overwhelming at the time; I can't remember whether I ever mentioned those yearnings to anyone or not.

I want to invoke Hazel Rochman here. She said a few weeks ago in Portland, Oregon: "Great books should make us think about what we thought we knew . . . Books open up what had seemed certain." All these things were working in me, somewhere so deep I don't even know where it is, during the years when I was getting ready to write. Several necessary decades intervened. I reared two children; I taught school. My first book for young readers was published when I was 51 years old. And, 31 years and 3000 miles away from Pirandello and New York, one day I began to write a story in funny-shaped lines about a 14-year-old babysitter, and within a few weeks, I realized I was making good on my old and passionate desire to write Readers' Theatre. And so I'm always delighted to hear that someone is staging a reading

from *Make Lemonade*. That was why I wrote it. And its companion, *True Believer*.

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I began this morning by insisting that we need comedy, and then I've gone on to cite *King Lear* and poor Akaky Akakievich. Happily, we as literature students can include them in the same room, the same paragraph. Disequilibrium is our stock in trade, and we can reach our arms out wide to embrace the laughter and the tears and the whole thing. It's not by accident that the theatre (which is, after all, literature made visible) has not one symbol but two: the face in joy, the face in pain. The whole baffling paradox of being alive.

I'll read, if you don't mind, a short piece from each of two books of mine. One is about the need for tragedy and the other is about the need for comedy. First, from *True Believer* (2001), section 69, about a beetle on a sidewalk:

On my way up to The Children's Hospital  
I stopped to watch a shiny beetle  
creeping along the sidewalk, leg by leg.  
It came to a big pebble in its way, stopped,  
waited for something, some nerve impulse maybe,  
adjusted its position and went around to the right.

I said the Greek name of its order: *Coleoptera*.  
These are more highly evolved than cockroaches.  
The beetle kept pacing along,  
it came to one of those cracked-out places  
that sidewalks have,  
scraped and broken  
like a small excavation. The beetle crept down into it,  
pushing along, millimeter by millimeter,  
and when it came to where it had to climb up again,  
it paused for another moment,  
and then it climbed.

I said to myself, LaVaughn, imagine if you were this  
beetle,  
with all the feet and bikes and skateboards  
and in a few minutes it will try to cross the street  
and along will come the Number 9 bus  
and splat.  
And then the whole tragedy came over me.  
The whole thing. How life is so thin and fragile,  
How you never know. One instant you're here  
and then you're gone. (210-211)

But I'm getting a little bit tired of that kind of writing now. "I saw something by the side of the road

and now I'll suddenly make it into a metaphor for life . . . ." Maybe I've just been reading too much of that stuff lately.

I'll end by reading a bit from *Make Lemonade*, in which I spent most of my time thinking about people whose lives move from one threshold of pain to the next. Here's a section about an unruly TV set. I wrote this eight years earlier than the passage I've just read, and LaVaughn's language is a bit more primitive.

Jolly's TV set has got no vertical hold  
and one night we turned the sound off and did our own.  
Everything was rolling up the TV screen  
and we said their words for them in different voices.

Jolly was the man with the weather map  
and she reported with a bass voice,  
"The whole world is rollin' up into the sky  
with the high winds from the northeast  
and there is increased speeds of everything  
disappeared into space."

And I got on sports and reported,  
"Everybody hit home runs today,  
all the balls went up, none came down,  
and be sure you buy this brand-new car,  
no money down, don't pay nothing till—  
till—"

And Jolly she finished it for me,  
"Don't pay nothing till you want to,  
we'll just keep adding a kazillion percent interest,  
oh, there goes the new car,  
oh, there goes my toupee,  
up into the sky . . . ."

And we laughed like fools.  
Jeremy and Jilly didn't wake up.  
Little spinning spongies flew out of the sofa  
and the whole world was helpless,

rolling up colorful into the sky,  
out of control  
like tossing silk, like steady flame, like a joke.

This is definitely not what I tell my Mom.  
"You maybe got a point there," I tell her,  
to make her ease up on me. "I'll be careful."  
"That's my girl," my Mom says. "You got college to go to."  
"I know. That's why I sit the kids," I say,  
and eat my eggs with pepper.

That was so funny, that night we did the TV voices.  
Maybe it was only a couple of minutes. But.  
You ever laughed so hard  
nobody in the world could hurt you for a minute,  
no matter what they tried to do to you? (pp. 42-44)

And with that adolescent thought, I thank you so much for inviting me to join you this morning. It's a treat for me to be with you. Thank you.

**Virginia Euwer Wolff** is the winner of the 2011 Phoenix Award for her 1991 novel *The Mozart Season*. Her 2001 novel *True Believer* won the National Book Award, and her newest novel for young adults, *This Full House* (2009), is on the American Library Association's *Amelia Bloomer List*.

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