

2010

In Media Vita

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Recommended Citation

Madden, Patrick. "In Media Vita." *The Iowa Review* 40.3 (2010): 157-184. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6960>

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IN MEDIA VITA

In media vita.—No, life has not disappointed me! On the contrary, I find it truer, more desirable and mysterious every year,—ever since the day when the great liberator came to me, the idea that life could be an experiment of the seeker for knowledge—and not a duty, not a calamity, not a trickery!—And knowledge itself: let it be something else for others, for example, a bed to rest on, or the way to such a bed, or a diversion, or a form of leisure,—for me it is a world of dangers and victories in which heroic feelings, too, find places to dance and play. “Life as a means to knowledge”—with this principle in one’s heart one can live not only boldly but even gaily and laugh gaily, too!

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

26 March 2006

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Today is my birthday. We’re gonna have a good time. Happy birthday to me!

My plan for the past long while has been to begin an essay today, my thirty-fifth birthday, because Dante did semi-likewise—began the *Divine Comedy* on his thirty-fifth birthday—in the year 1300. Here is how he begins, according to Longfellow:

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

So bitter is it, death is little more;
But of the good to treat, which there I found,
Speak will I of the other things I saw there.

Where Nietzsche seems utterly joyous in his revelation, Dante is rather gloomy, but each edge of feeling is at least authentic, if I may judge by my own experience. At more or less the midpoint of my own life, I find myself gainfully employed as a university professor, happily married to the girl of my dreams, contentedly harried by my brood of small children, meaningfully challenged by deep considerations sparked by confrontations with a wildly varied world that escapes my best efforts at apprehension. Most days, I awake refreshed and chipper, ready to sate my curiosity on the bits of experience and knowledge that come floating into my purview, glad to dance and play and laugh whether the path be straightforward or lost. But I'd be lying if I claimed that my life was always sun and giggles. Certainly there are times, too, when I edge close to despair and fear nigh unto death at the suffocatingly savage forest that seems to close in and close off the world of possibilities. Then I comprehend the psalmist, whose poem gave us the notion of thirty-five as "midway upon the journey of our life":

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We spend our years as a tale that is told. The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

—90:9–10

Solon, the Greek reformer, in counseling and reprimanding Croesus, sets the outer limit likewise:

A long life gives one to witness much, and experience much oneself, that one would not choose. Seventy years I regard as the limit of the life of man. In these seventy years are contained... twenty-six thousand two hundred and fifty [days], whereof not one but will produce events unlike the rest. Hence man is wholly accident.

—Herodotus, *Histories* I

I am aware, of course, that current actuarial research gives me and my kin a bit longer upon the earth, simply by virtue of our diet, environment, economic status, medical coverage, etc., so that the outer limit, according to the *Guinness Book*, and confirmed by local and global authorities on such things, may be 122 years, which is how long Jeanne Calment lived in her native Arles,

France, until her death in 1997. As you might expect, she was healthy and active long into her long life, learning fencing at 85, riding her bicycle until she was 100, living unassisted until 110. She smoked, too, until only two years before she died, ate a lot of chocolate, drank port wine regularly. But beyond those variables, says her biographer Jean-Marie Robine, was her seeming immunity to stress. Moreover, it seems to me that she had the soul of an essayist: “I dream, I think, I go over my life,” she said. “I never get bored.”



By way of contrast:

There is a sort of dead-alive, hackneyed people about, who are scarcely conscious of living.... They have no curiosity; they cannot give themselves over to random provocations; they do not take pleasure in the exercise of their faculties for its own sake;...they cannot be idle, their nature is not generous enough; and they pass those hours in a sort of coma, which are not dedicated to furious moiling in the gold-mill.... As if a man's soul were not too small to begin with, they have dwarfed and narrowed theirs by a life of all work and no play; until here they are at forty, with a listless attention, a mind vacant of all material of amusement, and not one thought to rub against another.

—Robert Louis Stevenson, “An Apology for Idlers”

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Who can doubt that Stevenson's straw man is the anti-essayist? It's certain from his rhetoric that he, and now I, and surely you, dear reader, want nothing to do with these living dead. We want vibrant, meditative internal lives, the ability to find pleasure, even joy, no matter our circumstances. Boredom, thus considered, may be a cardinal sin, or a shortcut to the grave.

But enough about generalities and strangers across the sea and centuries ago. I am thinking about my life, my prospects for sticking around, my character and my temperament, my successes and failures, my quest to find peace and contentment, which, I suspect, lie somewhere not only in the midst of life, but in its middle. Dropping any inclination toward a saccharine

nostalgia for my untroubled youth, when the future was bright and limitless before me, etc., I am disposed to take it from here, to take stock, to take it to the streets, take it easy, take flight. (Just now, as I attempted to utilize the zeitgeist to supplement my brain to discover more “take” clichés, I found that the only work known by the Internet to contain the following search phrase—“take stock” “take flight” “take it from here” clichés—is *New Moon* by Stephenie Meyer.) But where was I? Ah: the middle.

It’s an old notion: the golden mean, inspiration for Aristotle and Confucius and their followers, as well as for Montaigne, who gave us the essay, which may suggest, along with his many nods to the principle, that this form of writing is always and inherently interested in middles. Even so. Let me reveal my title:

One begins with the notion to write an essay from the middle of life, per Dante, per the Psalmist, with a yen for the exotic or the archaic lent by Latin, with a vague idea, the idea a curious Catholic would arrive at after listening to hymns and remnants in the Mass—supplemented by two years’ study of Russian in college—of Latin’s grammatical declensions, a knowledge that *life is vita* and *middle is media*. From here it is only a few finger strokes to the originless Middle Ages saying, survived in hymns and a Mass, “*media vita in morte sumus*”:

In the midst of life, we are amidst death

Or, as Montaigne frames it in “Of Experience”:

Death mingles and fuses with our life throughout.

This, though it was not originally part of my unwritten essay as it germinated in my mind, is my theme.

What Life Expectancy Calculators Say About Me

While the Psalms are inaccurate for modern life spans among citizens of the first world, they’re not *too* inaccurate, especially if we take *limit* to mean *mean*. Nevertheless, given that I’ve already made it to thirty-five, I increase my life expectancy beyond the typical 75.29 for American males. All those people dying in their cribs or in children’s hospitals or on city streets and highways

have brought the averages down. Thirty-five is a good vantage point from which to see the world, or to see what the world sees in me.

To get the most accurate estimate on my mortal duration, I must use the latest technology, which is to say that I sit idly in my chair, facing a screen, typing in answers to health and “lifestyle” questions, to find out that according to _____, I’ve got _____:

MoneyCentral.msn.com: 81 years
gosset.wharton.upenn.edu: 87 years
Northwestern Mutual Life: 84 years
LivingTo100.com: 85 years
BBC: 82 years

Despite Jeanne Calment’s example, I’m staying away from tobacco and alcohol, which seems to please these computers. Not only that, but I always wear a seat belt, I exercise and play sports regularly, I eat fairly well, and I’m married, which can keep you alive longer, I assume, not only because you have companionship and a reason to live, but you have someone to find you soon after your heart attack or stroke. My wife, Karina, learns that she should live well into her nineties (between 92 and 98), a fact that troubles her greatly, she says, precisely because she doesn’t want to live without me. Perhaps my favorite question, from nearly all the quizzes, is, “Do you have a bowel movement at least once every two days?” I wish I could get extra credit, but that was not an option. In any case, I’m keeping it in mind. When one’s bathroom routine involves a good book, one moves one’s bowels as often as possible. Sometimes it’s the only way to get a break from it all.

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In any case, my frequent and regular forays may stave off or ameliorate the effect of genetics: my grandmother died of colon cancer when she was only 50. Keeping things moving seems to reduce the probabilities of such cancer by decreasing contact and stagnation time. It makes sense.

Of course, nothing is certain. While you’re guarding your back door, you may not see the frontal attacks. Montaigne, whose kidney stones led to his death at age 59, kept a regular schedule.

Both kings and philosophers go to stool, and ladies too; public lives are bound to ceremony; mine, that is obscure and private, enjoys all natural dispensation;...wherefore I shall say of this act of

relieving nature, that it is desirable to refer it to certain prescribed and nocturnal hours, and compel one's self to this by custom, as I have done; but not to subject one's self, as I have done in my declining years, to a particular convenience of place and seat for that purpose, and make it troublesome by long sitting: and yet, in the fouler offices, is it not in some measure excusable to require more care and cleanliness? . . . Of all the actions of nature, I am the most impatient of being interrupted in that. I have seen many soldiers troubled with the unruliness of their bellies; whereas mine and I never fail of our punctual assignation, which is at leaping out of bed.

—"Of Experience"

Me, too!

As for the life-expectancy calculators, I'm partial to my academic colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania, who give me until age 87. I'm hoping their experiment outmatches their web design. Or, better yet, that their calculations are inspired by or mired in the present moment's medical technology. Decades of research before my demise may yet overcome our most common killers and extend my life even longer.

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Things I've Only Recently Discovered

The way this has been going, you might think that my interest lies only in morbidity. Not true: I want to think of middles. I want, what's more, to perform this "experiment of the seeker for knowledge." Yes, I am somewhere in the middle of life. Yes, the years seem to fly past ever more speedily with each revolution about the sun. Yet, there is more for me to learn, to live gaily. Here are some of the things I've only recently discovered (usually through some mental effort or epiphany, though sometimes through questions and research):

- That our months are named numerically: September (seventh), October (eighth), November (ninth), December (tenth); my daughter, age 8, has also realized this, beginning with "octo" for eight. I looked up the discrepancy (that October is our tenth month now) and found that the Roman (pre-Julian) calendar included also the months Quintilus and Sextus, and that about 61 winter days were not assigned any month,

which feels to me like an escape from the order imposed by systematizing men. I consider this a good thing.

- That “wish[ing] they all could be California girls” is not necessarily a slight to girls elsewhere, but a desire that they could all be closer at hand.
- That “play[ing] it cool by making [one’s] world a little colder” is the action of “a fool.”
- That “with a name like Smucker’s” a company would have died out long ago if its products weren’t so “good.”
- That “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” has the same melody as the Alphabet Song has the same melody as “Baa Baa Black Sheep.”
- Etc. (“He’s a Jolly Good Fellow” and “The Bear Went over the Mountain”; “Frère Jacques” and “Where is Thumbkin?”)



What’s more, I’ve only recently verified by observation the origins of the clichés “like water off a duck’s back” and “the blind leading the blind.” The latter I witnessed one night while awaiting a bus on the corner of Minas and La Paz in Montevideo. Just across the street, near Palacio Peñarol, a sports arena, I saw two intrepid men, both in dark sunglasses, the first with an outstretched stick, the other with a hand on the first one’s shoulder. They shuffled deliberately to the other side of La Paz, then into the imperceptible shadows.

Zeno’s Paradox of Motion

I think the two blind men have stayed with me not only because their appearance gave an image to a linguistic expression, but because I admired their pluck. They seemed to challenge the challenge of Jesus’ parable:

Can the blind lead the blind? shall they not both fall into the ditch?

Maybe not, I thought. Or, not yet.

This may or may not speak to the strength of the human spirit, which may or may not take the time to analyze its moves and motivations, but which may at times become overwhelmed by the seeming impossibility of even the simplest tasks, but usually not. For Zeno, at least in theory, even motion was impossible, given that for an arrow to arrive at its target, it must first traverse half the distance to the bull's-eye, and before that, half the distance to half-way, and before that, half the distance to a quarter way, and so on, infinitely dividing distances in half, with no half too small to be again divided. Once you've divvied up your distance into infinite subdistances (while sitting in your chair, thinking), you get lost in the dark wood of thought, and it gets rather daunting to pull back that bowstring, or take that first step toward getting somewhere else.

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When I was young, my father told me a kind of logical riddle, which now resides in the same brain-file as Zeno's paradoxes. It went something like this: a prisoner is brought before the king. The king tells him, "You will be executed within one week's time, but you will not know the day." The fretful prisoner, sent once more to his cell, sets his mind racing to discover a way to live. He realizes, soon enough, that if he can know the day of his execution, the king's word will be nullified, and he will be set free (for this king inhabits the puzzle world; his actions advance the plot). He keeps himself awake at all hours, straining to hear the conversations of his guards. He sends for the doctor, hoping the man will take pity on him. He promises the slop boy riches he doesn't have to give. Nothing works. The guards, the medic, the slop boy seem to know nothing, in any case. But he has made it to the end of Saturday and he is still alive. Suddenly he has this revelation:

The king cannot kill him on Friday, because then all the other days will have passed, and he will know the day of his execution. He cannot kill him on Thursday, either, because, excepting Friday, he would know that Thursday is the only option. Moving backwards through the week, then, Wednesday is out because both Friday and Thursday must be. Tuesday is exempt for the same reason. Monday, too. And Sunday: well, you don't execute people on the Sabbath, do you? (Plus, once you've discounted all the subsequent days, it's too obvious that the execution would have to happen on Sunday, so then he'd know.)

The prisoner convinces his guards to bring him once more before the king, who, confusedly impressed by the prisoner's logic, sets him free, sending

him on his way with riches more than the prisoner had promised to the slop boy. The end. Oh, also, the prisoner was a nice guy, wrongly imprisoned, etc.

The fun thing about this logic puzzle is that it *seems* to work about as much as it *seems* not to. The no-Friday realization is acceptable enough, and maybe even Thursday, too, which makes me believe that the regression through the week makes sense, but once I arrive at Saturday night again and look forward, I'm no longer convinced that I *know* the day of execution must be today. In fact, wouldn't it be kind of funny if the king said, "That's very clever," then winked at the executioner standing just behind the prisoner, and the executioner took a running sidearm swing with his axe and took the prisoner's head right off? "Betcha didn't know that was gonna happen today!"

Obviously, the riddle depends on the time frame. Had the king said that he'd execute the prisoner "sometime," there'd be no last day from which to discard days based on the promise that the prisoner wouldn't know the day. So does knowing that I've got an outer limit of 87 years affect my existence today? Of course, I have no promise (from God?) that I won't know the day, nor, if I had such a promise, could I rightly expect to escape death. How many of us know the day of our demise? There's a certain comfort in sensing the approach of death: one can set one's affairs in order, say one's goodbyes, make peace with God and with fellows. Still, the acceptable death I envision happens only late in life, far beyond where I am now.

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And those who keep themselves going with the thought that some span of life or other which they call "natural" promises them a few years more could only do so provided that there was some ordinance exempting them personally from those innumerable accidents (which each one of us comes up against and is subject to by nature) which can rupture the course of life.

—Montaigne, "On the Length of Life"

There are days when the perils of life rise up in my imagination to give me pause before I step out my door in the morning. I could be in a car accident. I could be struck by falling construction debris. I could have a heart attack, an aneurism. I could be shot or stabbed. I could fall down the long flight of stairs I take to my weight lifting and basketball. I could contract a fatal disease. The belligerent, unrepentant plagiarist I nudged on his way to expul-

sion could show up at my office door with rage in his heart. I could be sliced in two by a detached helicopter blade. I could be conked on the head by a turtle dropped from high above by an eagle. For me, “natural” death is a long ways off, down a path strewn with obstacles and traps. The newspaper and television bring me stories of other kinds of death, at other times, and the obituaries, which my wife peruses religiously and leaves open on the kitchen table, remind me that there is no age that is safe, no mile marker along this highway that does not afford an exit. So I finish my cereal, slip on the shoes I left last night at the front door, pull on my coat, and go outside.

What the Horoscope Says About Me

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The fact is, I cannot know, at this point, with relative good health and no ominous sense or bad dreams, what might befall me. I don't put much stock in mystical prognostications, especially the kind published daily in the newspaper by strangers for everyone born in a certain range of dates, no matter the year. That first logical step trips me up: how could my birth date determine my fate? (Immediately, I begin to think of ways in which my birth *year*, at least, in general or relative ways, has determined my clothing, my haircut, my musical taste, etc.) I appreciate the sometimes uncanny coincidences people find within the horoscope, and I can believe that some folks find direction or cosmic comfort in the advice, and if the advice is good, it's good no matter when you were born, so that's fine, but I've never believed that such things held a power beyond what any sensible human being could muster. You will forgive me this skepticism, I pray. The beliefs I do hold must certainly seem untenable to certain others.

The easy confidence with which I know another man's religion is
folly teaches me to suspect that my own is also.

—Mark Twain, note on the flyleaf of *Sacred Anthology*
by Moncure D. Conway

When I was younger, I had a maroon and gold bookmark with an Aries poem below a golden ram. Though I forget most of it now, I remember the last lines: “The first to begin, the last to succeed.” I may have believed, for a time, that this ditty described me, but it doesn't. Not at all. I'm also curious about this recent bit of advice I found, which tells Aries: “your usual *modus operandi* is ‘get things done. NOW.’” While this is not a direct contradiction

(one could intend to get things done quickly, begin immediately, and fail), it damages the credibility of the enterprise.

I'm much more inclined to trust the rhetoric of a seasoned essayist, whose approach is less finger-pointing, or more personal. Alexander Smith says:

You have lived for more than half your natural term; and you know the road which lies before you is very different from that which lies behind.

—"An Essay on an Old Subject"

"Very different," while linguistically noncommittal (it could mean that you've now got the money to buy that boat), obviously equals "much worse." And this from a man who had lived half his life by age 18. Despite the evidence, I'm inclined to protest: Not necessarily, friend! But the sages gather, to chant a similar message from before and beyond in different tones:

After thirty, a man wakes up sad every morning excepting perhaps five or six until the day of his death.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal*, 1 August 1835

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Once I used to mark the burdensome and gloomy days as extraordinary. Those are now my ordinary ones; the extraordinary are the fine serene ones.

—Montaigne, "On Some Verses of Virgil"

My own life experience is that when I thought I had things sorted and I was in control, something happened that completely undid everything I had wanted to do. And so it goes on. The illusion that I had some control over my life went up to about my thirty-fifth birthday. Then it stopped. Now I'm out of control.

—W.G. Sebald, "Interview with Joseph Cuomo"

I've arranged these quotes in order of increasing appeal, partly by their rhetorical flavor (Smith directs himself to me personally, and I say, *not I*; Emerson makes a general statement applicable to all; Montaigne and Sebald both focus on themselves), partly by the palatability of their claims (Emerson moves the hump back five years and allows a maximum of six happy awak-

enings thenceforth; Montaigne doesn't delimit the fine, serene days, though they're still extraordinary; Sebald sees his later lack of control as revelation or resignation). I'm most sympathetic with Sebald, probably because the others scare me, though that doesn't stop me from trying to control my life, and nothing in what he said indicates that he had either. Part of my resistance to the seeming pessimism evident in the others is my belief that essays can make people happy, and that they're perpetrated by optimists. On the balance, this is probably yet true, for individual essayists and for essayists as a group. And perhaps that phrase I've carelessly tossed in is significant: "on the balance." An essayist seeks the golden mean.

Solon, who belongs to those old days, nevertheless limits the extreme duration of life to seventy years. Shall I, who in all matters have so worshiped that *golden mean* of the past, and have taken the moderate measure as the most perfect, aspire to an immoderate and prodigious old age?

—Montaigne, "Of Experience"

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Montaigne made it to 59, felled by kidney stones, as we've discussed, in the middle of a Mass performed in his room. He seems to have seen it coming. Emerson held on until 78, through years of memory loss, then compounded a cold with a walk in the rain, contracted pneumonia, and died. Sebald was only 57 when he had a heart attack while driving, lost control of his car, and parted this life. Alexander Smith spent his last years in deep melancholy. Unable to rest his weary mind and body, he eventually succumbed to typhoid fever, on January 5th, 1867, five days after his thirty-sixth birthday.

We've made it back to a consideration of longevity, with barely a mention of the horoscope. I'll remedy that now. With all the possibilities, I decided to consult the newspaper for March 26, 2006, the day I began this essay, the day I turned 35. I sought the "If you were born on this date" horoscope, on the premise that it would be more specific, although I notice that several phrases are stock. No matter, let's see what's in store:

You'll express your ideas with confidence as you come to value your personal views above all else. Your determined efforts to build financial stability will pay off over the next three months, and by the end of the year, you'll be able to splurge on a trip or purchase

that has always seemed beyond your reach. Insist on more balance between work and play, as you have a tendency to overdo one or the other.... You can increase your capabilities at work by gathering information on the internet or in relevant publications.... Your lucky months are May and January.

Not bad, I suppose. As an essayist, I do value my personal views, though I try to express my ideas with lively trepidation, as befits a seeker for knowledge. I've not yet established any kind of financial stability, nor are my efforts determined, yet I did purchase a Fender Geddy Lee-model Jazz Bass at a Black Friday sale, so perhaps that's my splurge. I think my work and play are actually in a decent balance. I do tend to use the Internet for work (as evidenced). I'm more interested in my lackey moths than my lucky months (though I did wed my true love long ago in the merry merry month of May). Ultimately, I find the advice listed here generic and undaring, which may be the salient feature of newspaper articles in general.

What the Palm Reader Says About Me

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Economically speaking, if you've got your airfare and hotel covered, you would do well to get your palm read in Mexico City over Redondo Beach, California, for instance. So I am content that the young woman I awoke one Saturday morning on Airline Highway was unwilling to let me record our conversation. It would interfere with the cosmic vibrations, she said. OK, lady; I'll keep my twenty bucks. A month or so later, I avoided the question of permission altogether by having my friend Steve hunch nearby with a digital recorder in his shirt pocket.

This is what Briston, sitting under a blue tarp on a diagonal path through the middle of Mexico City's Parque Alameda, told me for about two bucks:

The life you have is a long one, but any kind of strange symptom in your organism, or pain, you should get checked with a doctor. There's a small operation they can do for you, but you can avoid it. Here we have the line of success or triumph. It tells us of an economic stability, but right now there's a situation; you'll have to wait for your plans to improve to achieve everything you want. On this side, we see that sometimes differences could present themselves between you and your family, because there have been prob-

lems in the past that have caused you to leave for a while. Here, the lines represent that you'll speak to a person or have a business transaction, something that will mark your destiny, or give you a new work opportunity.

Now...you were born to speak of God, to belong to a congregation that speaks of God, because that's your destiny. And in your hands you carry a gift of healing...

While encouraged by the promise of a long life, I get mired in the easy generalities of avoidable health problems and delayed economic stability. I do belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as does Steve, and we'd both served missions to Spanish-speaking countries; our facility with the language and interest in literature led to our reason for being in Mexico: to meet Eduardo Milán, a poet we'd been translating into English.

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The reading gets more interesting from there, with a person who's trying to hurt me, but can't, because of a "block" on my palm; there's news of a family sickness, a reencounter with a long-lost friend, the possibility of a stable romance with my wife, as long as we talk about it, a threat of solitude if not. All of these seem unspecific, not all true, but otherwise easy to place in the inevitable events of any life. Briston seems to have been using context clues: that I take a lot of trips; that I will take a trip to a place with water; again with business plans that can be "favorable." Sure. Not long after this, Karina and I went to Iguazú Falls to celebrate our ten-year anniversary. I remember no business conversations there, though we did discuss our marriage, and things seem stable and romantic. Playing the odds, Briston predicted for me one...no, *two* children, or maybe two sons (the Spanish *hijos* leaves ambiguous the question of gender, ultimately, because the masculine noun is grammatically dominant), but only after some "block." Because I already had four children, I took this prediction with a knowing smile. But later I revisited it: this was soon after Karina had miscarried. What's more, I can tell you through the telescope of time, that there *were* two more sons on the way, in relatively close succession. One is just walking; the other will be born soon.

Perhaps more bizarre was the palm reader's revelation that I have a "mental energy," manifest in strange dreams and visions, as if my imaginings were real. This I should "try to decipher," and I have: my sleeping dreams slip almost always and almost entirely into oblivion, but here I am writing, mediating imagination and reality, or reality through imagination, to a

textual reality, deciphering experience. This could be that “mental energy”! Briston also found palmic evidence that it was raining when I was born, cold and thundering (my mother says she can’t remember), so I should wield the “lightning stone” for “good luck” and “positive vibes” in my destiny. This revisitatio passed right through my mind when it was spoken, but now, listening again in the early morning, I am ineluctably brought to César Vallejo:

Me moriré en París con aguacero,
un día del cual tengo ya el recuerdo.
Me moriré en París—y no me corro—
tal vez un jueves, como es hoy, de otoño.

I will die in Paris, under clouds and rain,
on a distant day I’ve already seen.
I will die in Paris—I won’t run away—
in autumn, a Thursday, like today.

Briston’s final words, before small talk and fixing a price, were “Also, there could be a situation of conflict...” Exactly here, the only loud truck of the afternoon passes, smothering the last warning under a blue tarp of grumbling reverberation.

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Media Via

I can imagine that a reader will see my incessant returns to the subject of mortality and decide that this is trickery or artifice: the writer constructing a subcutaneous theme to trump his stated objectives. But as I write, I am repeatedly surprised. I laugh. Where did that Vallejo poem come from? Only from the poetic notion that it was raining when I was born, just as Vallejo predicted rain when he died (my research tells me that he died at age 46, on Good Friday, in early spring, just as the Fascists conquered the Republicans in his beloved Spain; he did die in Paris; I’ve not discovered a weather report). So, another recalibration: an exhortation to avoid extremes, to find contentment in contemplation of the middles of life, within my consideration of the middle of life, a consideration of the middle itself?

Popular opinion is wrong: it is much easier to go along the sides,
where the outer edge serves as a limit and a guide, than by the

middle way, wide and open, and to go by art than by nature; but it is also much less noble and less commendable.

—Montaigne, “Of Experience”

Montaigne assumes a hallway, it seems, rather than a mountainside path, but even in the latter case, there is one solid edge to hold to, even if the other edge may crumble beneath the weight of a wayward step and send you tumbling to a painful death, or, metaphorically, the fall may lead to despair, or madness. His writing, and by extension essay writing in general (What Would Michel Do?), is ever a quest for the middle, a constitutional aversion to the extremes of opinion and living, some utopic wending through life failing at finding the ideal contentment of excellence through mediocrity. My friend has said it better than I am able:

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One of an essayist’s aims is self-analysis sometimes, but *via* writing—that is, through *relatively* limited but continuous discursive forays, inquiries into areas of one’s existence, unified by style. Style? By the discovery of a form, *via* discipline, *this* particular discipline of *the essay*, toward a kind of “middle” position, ground, stance, voice, attitude, state of being and consciousness and awareness. This middle isn’t a persona, front, or façade—it’s genuine and hard earned and the truth.

I periodically swelter and welter (perhaps abjectly, with all lines-of-differentiation between self and external world dissolved, un-differentiated?), burn for, again, the middle, not *a* middle. I’m moderately flexible, adaptable, but *a* middle would be too relative. If I am only an assortment of specific centers, or enthusiasms—and perhaps I am—or loves, or interests, or curiosities, occasional angers, passions, intensities both bad and good, perhaps, but *the* middle that is appropriate for me, personally—then I am lost beyond hope.

—Michael Danko, “Whistling in the Dark”

When I read my undergraduate students’ essays, I find myself again and again controverting their assumptions, arguing with them, writing in the margins the exceptions to their assertions. When I review the copies of my own early essays with my professor’s comments, I find the same quarrel happening, in

questions and exclamations: “Really?” “Are you sure?” “Not necessarily!” I think what we’re doing is humbling one another, cutting short unfounded bold pronouncements, tempering hawkish or mawkish judgments, reminding each other of the inherent splendor in this complex world, recognizing that, although each individual has an important story and a right to opine, we are all simply middling, middlebrow, muddling meddlers, meandering through a world sometimes beautiful, sometimes hostile, usually better with companionship and contemplation.

What the Handwriting Analyst Says About Me

Which is essentially the motivation behind not only essaying but all this otherworldly analysis in the search for self: something to think about and someone to share it with. I had heard of the wonders of handwriting analysis, both the comparative, forensic kind and the mystical, prognosticative. I have handwriting that I would describe, insensitively, as schizophrenic (not the writing of a schizophrenic, but writing that is itself Jekyll-and-Hyde-ian). At times, it seems to me quite elegant, or handsome, or interesting, in a sloppy kind of way. At other times, it becomes verifiably ugly. Always it is small. But what might this reveal about my character? Like A.A. Milne, I thought I’d give it a whirl.

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A woman, who had studied what she called the science of calligraphy, once offered to tell my character from my handwriting. I prepared a special sample for her; it was full of sentences like “To be good is to be happy,” “Faith is the lode-star of life,” “We should always be kind to animals,” and so on. I wanted her to do her best. She gave the morning to it, and told me at lunch that I was “synthetic.”...I begged her to tell me more, for I had thought that every letter would reveal a secret, but all she would add was “and not analytic.”...I had no idea what it meant.

And how do you think she had deduced my syntheticity? Simply from the fact that, to save time, I join some of my words together. That isn’t being synthetic, it is being in a hurry. What she should have said was, “You are a busy man; your life is one constant whirl; and probably you are of excellent moral character and kind to animals.” Then one would feel that one did not write in vain.

—A.A. Milne, “The Pleasure of Writing”

After a failed (or interminably delayed) attempt that revealed only that I was “intelligent and organized,” I found a friend of a friend who struggled a bit with my customary print (cursive is easier, she said), but ultimately discerned that I am evasive and deceptive, private (“though outwardly he presents himself as a personality who gets attention easily”), practical and methodical, self-sufficient, emotionally restrained, self-motivated and ambitious, aggressively firm in my resolve, and averse to change.

Any alteration, on this earth of mine, in diet or in lodging, puzzles
and discomposes me.

—Charles Lamb, “New Year’s Eve”

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I’m generally pleased with the accuracy of the interpretation, though of course I deny the charges of evasion and deception. It’s true, though, that I am generally firmly resolved, unemotional, ambitiously methodical, etc. What’s worse, I often feel that this is the only way to be, and others’ sloppiness or impracticality distress me more than change does. (I am thinking of you, children of mine!) More deeply than I know my foolish consistencies, I know “changes aren’t permanent, but change is.” At some level, all is change.

What My Co-Workers at the Alfred Dunner Warehouse in Parsippany, NJ, Say About Me
During my wandering time, after I served a mission and before I entered graduate school, I worked for a season at a warehouse, shuffling plus-sized women’s clothes from one end to the other, losing at dominoes to my Puerto Rican co-workers during breaks as the Jamaicans slipped melodiously into their pidgin, which beat my ability to comprehend. When I explained that I would be returning to school soon, to study English, one of the foremen let out a long, three-syllable “No-o-ohhh,” and a lecture: “You have the brains, man! You have to become a doctor and help people!” He was stuck at Alfred Dunner, but I had a chance. If he had half the brains I had, he’d learn the medical arts and save people’s lives.

I did become a doctor, of course. (Insert here favorite joke about the (f)utility of a PhD.) But, like Roland Barthes, “I must admit that I have produced only essays.” Or, with William Hazlitt, I feel to cry out,

What have I been doing all my life? Have I been idle, or have I
nothing to show for all my labour and pains? Or have I passed

my time in pouring words like water into empty sieves, rolling a stone up a hill and then down again, . . . What abortions are these Essays! What errors, what ill-pieced transitions, what crooked reasons, what lame conclusions! How little is made out, and that little how ill! Yet they are the best I can do. I endeavour to recollect all I have ever observed or thought upon a subject, and to express it as nearly as I can.

—“The Indian Jugglers”

The thing is, I’m not quite convinced that essays “are the best I can do.” Maybe they’re not even “the best I do.” I love my wife and children, try to support her and raise them well; I teach young people (my children and yours) not to be so self-centered and knuckleheaded; I give my time, money, and efforts in small ways to serve my fellow beings. I do all of this insufficiently, sometimes halfheartedly, rarely boldly. And if Hazlitt was serious here, lamenting that he’d never learned to juggle, or perhaps that painting was only a hobby for him, or that his biography of Napoleon had bankrupted his publisher, then there is a part of me that thinks: I probably *could* have become a doctor, the kind that heals people with his hands. I think I have the brains for it, and probably the self-discipline. (I could also, I believe, be a better thief than the thieves you hear about, but that is a subject for another essay.) And as much as I love essays, and believe them to be salubrious for writer and reader alike, I cannot, in my more reflexive moments, believe them to be more important than the proverbial “cure for cancer.” I’ve lost people I love to that festering crab.

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If I could be sure of doing with my books as much as my father did for the sick.

—Marcel Proust (comment to his maid, Celeste)

Still, whether or not it’s truly “too late,” I don’t intend to change my life so drastically. I’m mostly happy where I am, a place I believe to be somewhere in the middle of it all, looking out, contemplating the world of dangers and victories. Even on my bad days, when I can’t find a purpose, or when I feel I’ve wasted my time, I can recall the great teaching of Montaigne:

We are great fools. "He has spent his life in idleness," we say; "I have done nothing today." What, have you not lived? That is not only the fundamental but the most illustrious of your occupations.... Have you been able to think out and manage your own life? You have done the greatest task of all.... To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books, and to win, not battles and provinces, but order and tranquillity in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately.

—"Of Experience"

Which sounds suspiciously like the platitudinal consolations your friends offer when you're down on yourself, wondering what your purpose is and where the time has gone. But maybe this is literature: to say what has already been said, or will be said long after, in words (even translated words) that sing.

What the Myers-Briggs Personality Test Says About Me

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When I dance, I dance.

—Montaigne, "Of Experience"

I shall keep dancing: When I seek insight from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, answering personal questions about my punctuality, my objectivity, and my perception of humankind's destiny, I find that I fit in the "rationals" quadrant (the other three are "guardians," "idealists," and "artisans") under the one-in-sixteen title of "mastermind." Because I have always enjoyed that secret-code-guessing game (enough to create a Fortran version in my numerical methods class in college), this appellation is appealing to me. In acronymic terms, this means that I am an INTJ, which means that my preferences are for:

Introversion (over Extroversion)

iNtuition (over Sensing)

Thinking (over Feeling)

Judging (over Perceiving)

From Dr. David Keirse's website, I learn that masterminds are the least common personality type, accounting for only about 1 in 100 people, which makes the sexdecant doubly pleasing. If we're all torn between a desire for belonging and a desire for uniqueness, introverts like myself lean harder on the uniqueness side, even while recognizing the value of the middle road. I am not surprised to see the humorously bushy mustache of Friedrich Nietzsche gracing the gallery of famous masterminds from history at the top of the page, along with other folks I respect and have wanted to emulate: Isaac Newton, Niels Bohr, Stephen Hawking, all physicists. This recognition, too, massages my ego: I thought I was a physicist once, but I left that behind to become an essayist. I consider this a kind of moral evolution, or a sort of living transmigration from a lower form to a higher. Given my nearly balanced "thinking/feeling" score, and my barely dominant judging over perceiving, I fantasize that I am built to be an essayist; not only that, but (leaving behind my recent doubts for a moment) "essayist" is the highest calling one can attain.

Yet I also find, in answering so many questions about my leisure habits, my imagination, and my mind/heart preferences, that my natural inclination, or at least my regular practice, may be at odds with the ideals of the essay, which, since Montaigne, but especially since the British periodical essayists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has privileged leisure, idleness, fancy, speculation, etc. So maybe I'm catching up to the bewildered people who, upon first meeting me, find an inherent contradiction in my path from physicist to essayist, bachelor's degree in the former, doctorate in the latter. What I mean is: who has the time to be so damned leisurely nowadays? I do my best (with no BlackBerry, no cyborg earpiece, a cell phone that functions only as a walkie-talkie between Karina and me), but with five children, a dog, a mortgage, a job, two cars, a half acre, deadlines, expectations, inefficiencies, pressures... The test asks, "Is it worse to have your head in the clouds or to be in a rut?" Well, *du-u-uh!* And yet I am more often in a rut.

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

—Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windemere's Fan*

It's no wonder that "masterminds" are often found in jobs requiring technical proficiency and intellectual problem solving. They are scientists and engineers, geneticists and medical researchers, business analysts and

“strategic planners,” according to Dr. Keirse. Also, university professors, which is where I fit in. Masterminds may also be artists, which I’m going to take as confirmation of my unpaid profession. Why not? There have never been enough essayists in the world to constitute a “representative sample.” Representative of what? Each essayist is his own star in a galaxy far, far away. In any case, I might discover more about myself and my quest within the broader descriptors scattered here and there across the vast Internet:

- Do I understand complex operations involving many steps?
- Do I prefer not to lead, though I am able?
- Am I a “thoroughgoing pragmatist”?
- Does inefficiency (human & material) drive me nuts?
- Do I resist traditional rules & authority?
- Am I allergic to slogans and catchwords?
- Do I trust my own mind above other sources?
- Do I work fanatically in pursuit of my goals?
- Am I stimulated by this work?
- Do I focus my criticism on the positive instead of the negative?
- Do I make decisions firmly, after sufficient research?
- Am I strong-willed and self-confident?

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Like everything else in this essay, personality theories abound and conflict, filling library shelves and days’ worth of web surfing, potentially. And the grain of salt I take with the largely validating and praiseworthy character traits I find here is: yeah, but couldn’t this describe anybody? What say ye, dear reader? Where do you find yourself in the list above? Or: what do the other types say? Maybe I can fit my personality into any or many of the sixteen. At random, I chose “champion” and found that maybe that’s not me: great passion for novelty? enthusiasm for telling everyone about experiences? Nah. But: keen observation and writing toward understanding? OK, that’s me. How about the “inspector”? High sociability? nope. Ignorance of latest fashions? yep. Zealousness for rules and institutions? Here I am torn: I *used* to feel this way, but not anymore. This evidence that one can change one’s inclinations would seem to undermine the notion of fixed types, yet I’m not certain that any of these descriptors claims to *determine* thoughts/feelings/actions.

In any case, underneath all this seeking for belonging, or affirmation (a kind of “test for echo” shout out into the void), I think what I really believe is that no personality test, no reading on my physiology or graphology or astrology can contain me, because I am unique, *mi generis*, neverbeforeseen in this world.

You, too!

Right?

I mean, these indicators and prognosticators can only be marginally useful, or they’re as useful as we allow them to be. We find comfort or irritation, we conform or resist; we choose to define ourselves by the definable characteristics, or we defy the characteristic definables. The same might be said of the activities we engage in or the television shows we watch, the websites we browse or the essays we read. If at a party I am happier to talk with a small group of friends rather than meet new people, if I am rarely late for appointments unless I’m traveling with my wife and children, if I do not relish adventure yet enjoy reading and camping and walking unknown streets and woods: these facts can only approximate a life that is not all adventures and appointments and parties. And perhaps I might determine that my punctuality is less important than my peace of mind, or I might skydive or bungee jump one of these days (I won’t).

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I double back again, to see these tests more compassionately: they are like essays, or *we* are like essays—

I shall essay myself to be!

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

—making stabs at understanding a self/a world that is inherently inscrutable, yet this is the best we can do, and when we relinquish the need for completeness or objectivity, we find ourselves awash in the joy of bewildered discoveries, which may sum to some knowledge, but never to omniscience. So let’s try one more.

What the Tarot Card Reader Says About Me

Economically speaking, if you’ve got your airfare covered and you’re staying with relatives, you would do well to get your tarot card reading done in Montevideo, in the extra bedroom of a divorcée with high-school-aged daughters who does, in addition to her tarot, reiki, deep massage, color

therapy, and anything else currently popular among “New Age” folks, as she told me candidly, after she’d gotten to know me a bit. She confines her tarot ads to the *Util Publicidad* weekly, while her reiki and so forth go forth in *Colón Hoy*, which, she presumes, is read by more respectable people who want nothing to do with questionable occult practices (her words, my translation).

As with Briston in Mexico, I planned to record my reading on an old iPod hooked into an after-market microphone. As I stood outside Jacqueline’s apartment building, I hit RECORD NOW on the device, then slipped it into my voluminous cargo pocket before I knocked on the door. During the interview, as she shuffled two worn decks—one large, one small—and laid out trios of cards in rapid succession, with or without comment, I sometimes fiddled with the bunching of my shorts and the location of the iPod, to keep it open to the air. Jacqueline was talkative, running through a brief life history and explanation of her “color theory” books, so I ended up staying for over an hour. By the time I left, my brain was a bit frazzled, and I didn’t quite remember everything she’d said, only that she repeated herself often, as if trying to hone in on some vague recognizable correct prediction, based on my responses to her questions or my expressions to her statements. Relieved, I walked away briskly, and once I was out of sight, I pulled out the iPod, intending to stop the recording. This was when I realized that the thing hadn’t recorded at all.

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When I got back to my in-laws’ home, my brother-in-law Fernando, who knew Jacqueline because her apartment is near his best friend Willy’s, said that this was proof of the power of Jacqueline’s voodoo. So I quickly sat down with Karina and told her everything I remembered, in condensed form, without redundancies. This is yet another condensation of what I remembered:

- That I was headed for a falling out, perhaps with my wife, but we could overcome our difficulties.
- That I was about to embark on a big journey, which might be the cause of my problems, because Karina didn’t want to go, did she? eh? right?
- That the baby’s whole life would be blessed; we wouldn’t have to worry about him. But his sister Sara would give us trouble.
- That it takes two to tango. If she wants to argue, just keep your mouth shut; don’t fight back; let her vent.
- That I was on the verge of a great change, perhaps good, perhaps bad; it depends on how I take it.

- That I was headed for economic improvement, likely because my book would do well. *El Mago* meant that I had put my magic into it. *El Diablo* meant that it would find material success. *El Mundo* meant that it would find its way into many hands.
- That I would soon sign a contract with an older person, and this would bring great benefit.
- That I should listen to the advice of an older man who loves me (perhaps my father).

I never explained to Jacqueline that I was doing skeptical research for an essay, and she kept fishing for the source of my anguish. I was forthright in all my answers, but not expansive, so she knew I was up to something, but she couldn't ferret it out. Like Briston, she gathered from my accent that I was a traveler, so her revelations often pitted my rambling against the stability I must be seeking. I'm guessing she's used to seeing people only when they're troubled, so she returned often to my reasons for consulting the tarot. How could I tell her that my principal interest came from Rush's "Peaceable Kingdom," an intelligent and veiled 9/11 song that plays tarotic metaphor against Quaker Edward Hicks's postapocalyptic paintings? The kicker was when I asked her to tell me when I'd die.

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"Why are you so worried?" she asked, nearly taking my hands in hers.

"I'm not worried," I countered.

She threw the big cards, which were primed to reveal events close at hand. The first card was *La Muerte*.

I laughed. When she said, "No no no. 'La muerte' doesn't always mean *death*," I laughed again. When she said, "You will live well past your seventies," I breathed a sigh of relief, just to humor her. When I returned home to find Karina and Graciela chatting, Fernando upstairs playing video games, my mother-and father-in-law preparing a stew for the evening's supper, my children and niece and nephews lying on the floor or bouncing toy cars off the walls, I was witnessing a rare and beautiful convergence: the Cabrerias and their



progeny congregated from far away not only for exceptional events but for the mundanities of coexistence, even if briefly. This was the fulfillment of their desire: to gather their children and grandchildren in their home, to pass the days without adventure or fanfare, in tranquillity and order. There were conversations and arguments, deep questions and petty grievances, gentle shouts over the voluminous children's movie playing on the west wall, an abundance of herbs emanating from the kitchen to the north, and as I stood amidst the hubbub I thought, as I have often thought when in Uruguay, nestled among silent streets under swaying trees, that I had found contentment.

I did not consider, then, that the family was incomplete, that Bernardo was gone forever.

Plena Vita

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On the way home on the 174, as we passed the Cementerio del Norte's southeast corner, where the Army Pantheon stands shining dully in the mist, my father-in-law said, softly, "There's my son," half to me, half to himself, or to the air, or to God. Sometime later, the next minute or next year, I imagined it translated instead, "Behold my son." I knew. I had been there before. I said, "I know." Then we traveled on in silence until he said, "Just imagine the millions of dead." The bus stopped, people got off, people got on, a woman embraced a bouquet of flowers, children played in the fields, an old man sat against the cemetery wall holding his maté, we traveled on in silence.

My father-in-law is home today, I imagine, or chatting with his friends at the central market, haggling over vegetable prices, loading up his bags of garlic, counting out worn pesos with worn hands, buying a ticket north; and I am sitting, thinking, remembering . . . but aren't we also still on that bus, because I have written it?

Children their kites a-flying,
Grandsires that nod by the wall,
Mothers soft lullabies sighing,
And the dead, under all!

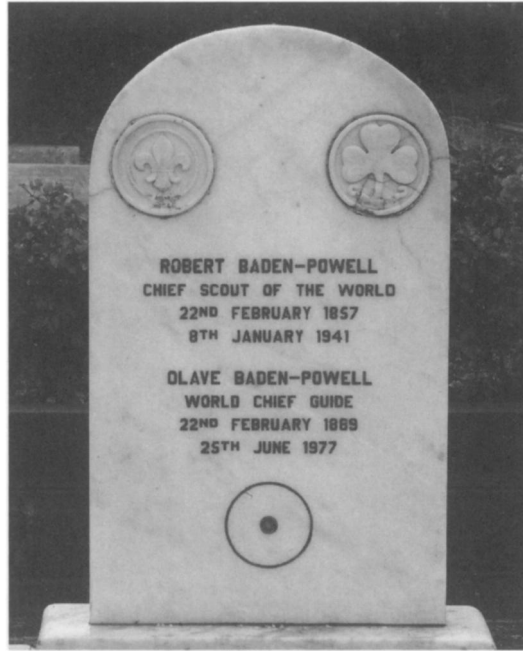
—Willa Cather, "In Media Vita"

When I have the chance to write, most of my time is not spent writing, because I am collecting and piecing together, not drawing entirely from my previous experience. This is a serendipitous quest, moving from one thing

to another, in a pattern reminiscent of thought, wanting to come together to become something meaningful. It is a joy to sit down to write when the children are off to bed and my wife is away at work, or in the early hours before even the dog has the energy or motivation to follow me downstairs. Then I can concentrate enough to string words and ideas together.

In the course of these explorations, I believe I have found the answer to a question I had forgotten almost entirely, a question a friend asked me one third of my lifetime ago. We were

eating at the only Chinese restaurant in Uruguay, his treat, discussing the deep things that friends discuss, things that seem new, never-before-thought-of, to the parties at the table, though they seem drivel and dreck to an eavesdropper (there were none, I assume, that day in Montevideo; we were speaking English; everyone else, Spanish). All of this is lost or hidden from my mind but the one question he asked that I couldn't answer: *What would you have written on your headstone?* I told him instead what Robert Baden Powell had engraved on his: the circle with the dot in the middle, the Scout trail sign for "I have gone home." I was worried then about originality, so I wouldn't copy Powell, but I wanted a similar punch of meaning in so little. Perhaps I wanted a bit of an enigma, a riddle for the living to puzzle out. Now I am not so much obsessed with originality. Perhaps I don't believe in it anymore. After all, my father proposed to my mother singing the Beatles' "When I'm Sixty-Four." When Sir Paul reached that stately age, Linda had died years before; he was divorcing from his second wife. I had expected some festivities, a television special or somesuch. But there was nothing. When my father reached the milestone,



his children and grandchildren, gathered at my home from far away, playing piano, guitar, bass, and drums along with a clarinet recording, sang him a slight variation of the Beatles song. By 64 his own father had lost his mind to Alzheimer's. So I don't mind borrowing a clever inversion, a phrase used by composer Robert Simpson or poet Steven Curtis Lance, a phrase that has already adorned the death notices of theologian Heiko Augustinos Oberman, who in turn borrowed from Martin Luther:

If you listen to the Law, it will tell you: "In the midst of life we are surrounded by death," as we have sung for ages. But the Gospel and our faith have changed this song and now we sing: "In the midst of death we are surrounded by life!"

MEDIA MORTE IN VITA SUMUS

25 March 2007

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As I sat atop a hill overlooking Utah Lake and the sprawl between, my children tumbled down wrapped in a blanket. Below me stood my son, arisen from his roll, enshrouded in the quilt with its pale squares, and I thought: he is a jawa or a shaman or a ghost or, better still, Father Time himself, hobbling toward me. But look: the quilt is long, and he has stepped on the hem of his robe; he trips, falls flat to the rising earth, and I laugh; Karina at my side laughs; my children laugh. What is Time to us?