

The Circle

“Writers are people for whom writing is more difficult than for others.”

–Thomas Mann

We were living in a furnished, fifth-floor walk-up in the Marais section of Paris. The place was somewhat the worse for wear (several hundred years’ worth) and had an odd mix of furniture, but it was Paris, after all, and there was no place we had to be for quite awhile.

I can still remember when my wife planted the reminder that started the snowball rolling downhill – or the endless pushing of the boulder uphill - depending upon how I’m feeling about my second career on any given day.

“Do you remember why we did this?” she said in passing, as if she were talking about an errand. By “this,” she meant selling our house in 2001, as well as our stuff, to include furniture, two cars, and a motorcycle; closing my California business; resigning from her partnership; and leaving the States for Europe with one suitcase worth of clothes and no plans. Well, almost no plans. Generally, we intended to shake up our head-down, eighty-hours a week, accumulative, acquisitive lives. Specifically, my wife wanted to spend time looking at the business world for opportunities that weren’t all-consuming. I wanted to write stage plays, and had since college, long before. It was time to test the theory preached by all parents, including mine...“You can always become an artist or whatever, later, but first, you gotta have something to fall back on.” We were about to let gravity take its course.

Although we stayed in a few hotels at first, just to figure out where we wanted to settle down for a while, that didn’t make any sense financially. So we rented furnished apartments (with kitchens) month-to-month, changing countries as our curiosity dictated. Since we weren’t still paying for anything back in the States, it cost no more to live in Paris or Stockholm or Siena than it had in San Francisco. And “home” is a moveable feast (with a nod to EH).

When you spend your life taking one week vacations that start with a couple of days of sleep and end with several days of rushing to see or do all that you had planned, it can be overwhelming to hang up your clothes (your only possessions) and realize that you have time to linger over a good book and coffee at a local café. If you don’t make it to the museum or the famous building or the park today, you’ll do it tomorrow, or the next day.

And now back to my wife’s question. She was asking it then because what had started out as a few months in Europe to think about our futures had turned into years. It was now 2006. The means to get at what we would do next with our lives was so full of the joy of discovery that we had almost let it be justified as an end in itself. And then there were the ever-present *Fraud Police*. Many years before, when I was struggling to get a business off the ground, that’s the name I gave to the feeling

of inevitable failure with which I wrestled when, in the midst of difficult odds, I would question my ability, or was desperate to silence the demons of doubt. I have since referenced its ubiquitous presence in one of my plays.

Neither of us was confronting the issues that had inspired this journey. However, we each had begun to feel the tug of what V.S. Naipaul calls “the void of non-achievement.” Although the entire European experience had been more exciting and satisfying than we expected, I had to admit to a gnawing sensation building in my gut. I had thrown off all that was predictable in my life principally to find out if I could now become the writer I had been saying I wanted to be ever since college, several decades back. I read the writing manuals, learned to use the industry software, poured over the canon, even dabbled in poetic form, all, I told myself, in anticipation of creating my own characters and dialog, but where were they? In retrospect, I think it was as much in avoidance of. I suspected a foreign contingent of the Fraud Police. I had allowed the surroundings and resulting distractions to become a rationalization.

We both realized that the only way to find out if our second career dreams could be realized was to return to the States – New York specifically - and begin planting some stakes in the ground. Thanks to the recommendation of a friend, we found a small, eclectically furnished one-bedroom apartment on the corner of Gramercy Park. It was owned by a woman who lived on the west coast and only used it as a pied-à-terre a couple of times a year. She liked the idea of someone living there while she was gone, so she set a monthly rent that we could afford, which was well below market. We vacated to visit relatives in New England whenever she came to the city. Since our only possessions were clothes, and she didn’t want to get bogged down in paperwork, we had a mutually satisfying relationship that lasted for two years. And when she was ready to sell the place, another couple in the building took up the slack. They had moved to Connecticut when the kids came along, but didn’t want to give up their apartment in the city. Knowing our story from the other landlord, they offered their place on the same basis, and there we stayed for another three years, but I’m getting ahead of myself.

For the thirty years before that Paris afternoon, I had been recording my thoughts and observations and plot ideas in journals. I was writing all along, but for a friendly audience of one. I took a stack of them with me to Europe, along with my good intentions. I hadn’t opened one of those journals until we were back in New York, and I had convinced myself that I was ready to start my first play.

Once I settled on a story line, I sketched out character descriptions and the first scene stage directions. Finally, I had begun to write a play. Halfway through the first page of dialog, it hit me like a truck. I had expected to feel excitement and relief at getting under way. All I felt was terror. Maybe that’s why it took me five years to type “Act I.” I had spent the better part of my life saying that what I really wanted to be was a writer. And now I had turned my life upside down to make it happen. What if I were awful at this, or, worse yet, hated writing altogether? I couldn’t

return to my fall back position six months from now without feeling like I'd failed at becoming what I'd been saying for years I wanted to be more than anything else. The Fraud Police began to whisper in my ear, "Easy out...stop now...you can't fail at something you don't try."

Although I stared at the screen without typing another word for the rest of that day and the next, two things came to my rescue on the third, when I tried again. One was memory - I had tried two or three other things in my life when the odds were against me, and succeeded. Actually, it was my wife's memory. She was tired of my blank stare, so she reminded me. And two was ignorance - I didn't know how absurd it was to expect any level of success when starting this late, with no experience, credentials or network in the theater world, and no training in stage play composition or structure. That ignorance was initially my greatest asset.

I was underway. In spite of the ongoing and often heated internal dialog with the FP, I kept at it. It took me about six months to finish a decent first draft of that script, titled *Matches*. After revisions, I changed it to *An Ignorant Man*. I didn't know at the time how appropriate that was.

In addition to the writing, I began to organize my relationship to this new world. I joined the Dramatists Guild (NY) and the Playwrights Center (MN), both of which are large theater advocacy organizations, providing a wide variety of information and advice, including legal help, both face-to-face and online. Each of them also provides an annual, updated list of submission opportunities for contests. Since I couldn't ease into this world (I hadn't come out of an MFA program), and had no established network, I opted to enter every national contest available, hoping to get attention by winning one.

Initially, I also joined some writing groups, but found them unsatisfactory. I was sure there were some good ones out there, but I didn't have enough time to keep looking. As is the case in many creative fields, there are a lot of wannabees. They like the idea of being a professional writer, but they're not crazy about the personal commitment and learning curve necessary to becoming one. They were content to call themselves writers, but unwilling to get anywhere near the crucible that Beckett referenced when he said, "Try again, fail again, fail better." I could paper a small town with my rejection letters. I opted to forego commiseration until I ran into someone who took the whole thing as seriously as I did.

In my previous life, I had successfully started a graphic design business from scratch. Lacking advice to the contrary (lacking advice, period), I approached playwriting the same way I had that enterprise - as a numbers game. Assuming my writing was good, the more people who read it, the greater the odds that I'd generate interest. I don't mean that I approached writing as a commodity. It was and is for me an expression of things deeply felt. Having read and seen a lot of theater, I felt good about my work already - the depth of my early characters and the quality of the story line. I believed that my plays were "about something," and

that people would leave the theater wanting to talk about what they had just seen. But I wasn't naïve. I knew that in order to work with the best people in the field and to attract an audience, I needed to move beyond "Richard Who?" as quickly as possible. In architecture, there is the inspirational, passionate part, which is the design of the house, and then there is the building of the house, which involves hauling lumber and hammering nails. I divided my time between writing and hammering.

On the writing side, I spent another couple of months fine-tuning *An Ignorant Man*, after which I knocked on enough doors to attract the attention of some New York actors and a director. They liked my use of language – one of them called it a "literate comedy." After some rehearsing, we scheduled a public reading. The audience was made up of friends of the actors and of mine. It was harrowing to hear my words come to life for the first time in front of a little but live group of people. And it felt like such a big deal that these professional actors were enthusiastic about my work. As I was to discover over time, it was a tiny step (on any given night, there are dozens if not hundreds of readings going on in Manhattan), but I could feel the tug of momentum for the first time.

On the hammering side, I began to send out the script to national contests. That's an organizational challenge all its own – essay-format questionnaires, secure packaging, the cheapest mailing alternatives, deadline management, etc. Once again, my business experience came in handy. My first play was well received. It won three national contests, was a finalist in five others, and a semi-finalist in three more. One of those win's resulted in a full production by a community theater in W. Virginia, which they paid me to attend. I was sitting in a real theater, looking at a set designed just for my play. I sat next to people who had bought tickets, and who were responding without any knowledge of my presence in the audience or my history. I was getting closer to what I imagined when I began to keep those journals.

Scroll down another year and I have another play, a broader network, more experience, and an expanding file of rejection letters – one of the most memorable was stuffed in an envelope that I had provided when I submitted the entry. It was a form-letter note the size of a postcard, flimsy, crumpled, and stained with a coffee ring. Thick skin is a must.

That second play – *Life is Mostly Straws* (a tragic drama)- did well nationally also (three wins, three finals, four semi-finals, and a reading in London). But one win in particular brings me back to the question posed by my wife in Paris.

I won the Pillars Prize, which was awarded once every two years by Georgia College and State University (GCSU) – the program has since lost funding, the sign of a growing trend, which deserves an essay all its own. The prize included a full production on campus, which incorporated sound, costume and elaborate set design, as well as extensive public relations and publicity efforts. The actors were chosen from the theater program grad students.

As part of the prize, my travel and lodging expenses would be covered for the full run (eight performances). As well, I'd be given a check for \$2000, which is rare in the playwriting world. I was happy for the win, but, living a theater-sheltered life in New York, I didn't expect much from a student cast in the Deep South. About two months before the performances were to start, I picked up a voice-mail from the director, asking if she could discuss elements of the script.

Relevant digression - one of the critical aspects of the play development process is the move from the solitary world of the writer to the collaborative world of the stage. If it's the right team, mysterious, magical things can happen.

I was still too possessive about my work to know the potential of that collaboration, and too biased to expect anything from a campus in Georgia. I was on the defensive when I returned the call.

Over the course of two one-hour calls, while fine-tuning character motivation and discussing plot and pacing choices, I discovered that she (director) had read the script many times. She loved the depth of the characters and the use of language, and she wanted to breathe as much life into the performances as possible. I sensed pretty quickly that I could learn something from this experience. At the end of the second hour, I asked if I could come down early to participate in the process. She welcomed the idea.

The University put me up in a Bed & Breakfast that bordered the campus and was a short walk to everywhere I needed to go. When I expressed an eagerness to learn, they gave me the opportunity. I sat in on design meetings and rehearsals. I gave interviews to the school paper and the local radio station. When they heard of my business background, I was asked to speak to marketing classes as well as playwriting seminars. What struck me then, and stays with me now, is their enthusiasm for theater in general and my work in particular. Everyone involved worked their tails off because they believed in the play and what it had to offer.

Once the public performances began, however, my world changed irreversibly, at least as it relates to playwriting. Each evening, I'd watch the show from a back row. After every performance, mostly students would bunch up around my seat to ask questions – serious, thoughtful questions about the craft of writing, sure, but also about life. For them, my play had not only entertained, it had challenged them to think deeply about the nature of human relationships. During the days following performances, I'd be approached by the townspeople, as well as students. I lost count of the conversations I had at the university library, at a favorite café, and even on the street, where people would stop and ask for a few moments. They had listened, had paid attention to my words, and in very small ways, their lives had been changed, if only for a few hours. That delighted some and provoked others and surprised still others, and they wanted to talk about it. And that ended up changing my life, but for a lot longer.

A circle of sorts was completed for me for the first time in Georgia. I turned my words over to a smart director, who filtered her interpretation of them through her own life experiences. She then handed them with guidance to the student actors, who earnestly brought their short lives to bear on the material and added another level of interpretation. And last, there was the audience, who responded differently each night, but who always completed the circle in ways that could be heard or at least sensed by the actors and by me.

My writing is so much a reflection of who I am that I could call the play a vital organ without feeling that I had stretched the metaphor. For the two months or so that the preparation and performances entailed, I had entrusted this vital, creative part of me to all of these people, all of these strangers, really.

Not only was it returned to me healthier and vibrant, I was more eager to get back to the keyboard than I had been since this crazy adventure began.

That was not the last time I enjoyed such a rewarding experience. My third play did well too (three/six/two, and a requested reading at the Actors Studio-NY). The one after that (completed in 2012) won the Ashland New Plays Festival and the Gassner Memorial Playwriting Award, it was a finalist for the Woodward/Newman Award (second year running) and was the only American play to make it to the final three for the international STAGE Award. As well, it just finished three weeks in full production at the Beckett Theatre on 42nd street (NY), which was an experience filled with another level of “firsts.”

But Georgia was seminal; it was a turning point in my unlikely career.

Because of business commitments, my wife was only able to make opening night. I didn't flesh out my overall experience until I returned home a week later. When I'd finished telling her what I detail above, and we had toasted the experience with a glass of Scotch, I leaned in to add, 'In Georgia, as I was falling off to sleep late one night near the end of the run, it came to me, the answer to your question in Paris... *this* is why I did this.'