

CIVILIZATION FOR MORONS



(A PERSONAL JOURNEY)

12TH DRAFT

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BY EVAN BEDFORD

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_____ ?

**This book is dedicated
to my younger self,
in the hope that he might
learn something.**

**All authorial proceeds
from the sale of this book
will go to the
Deliberative Democracy Consortium.
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Three Themes in Four Quotes

The smartest person in the world
is that person who knows
where the shoe pinches
on his/her own foot.

Paraphrase of an Irish proverb

If the pus from a dead dog's boil
gives enlightenment,
then it should be prized
as the finest elixir.

Paraphrase of a Tibetan proverb

Sooner murder an infant in its cradle
than nurse unacted desires.

William Blake (18th/19th century poet)

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion,
but not his own facts.

**U.S. Senator (1977-2001)
Daniel Patrick Moynihan**

**...or for those folks who prefer
the conventional dust jacket blurb:**

An individual with defects lives in civilization that also has defects. Gradually, the individual becomes somewhat less defective. As a result, he gradually figures out what it would take for the civilization to also become somewhat less defective.

This is also a book about a book.

It brings to light an ancient tome (from the 1990's) that has been hidden in the mists of obscurity.

It is an ancient tome that has unparalleled relevance in a world that is currently filled with demagogues and trolls and populist nonsense.

Read on to see how the individual with defects attempts to dust it off and shine a light on it.

The Dog's Breakfast

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chapter i: the early years

I came into my first big windfall when I was four years old. It involved money from a church offering plate.

In the early 1960's, my father was a United Church minister in the village of Hythe, Alberta.¹ His office was in our slightly dilapidated manse, which was right next to the slightly dilapidated church, which was right next to the post office, which was right next to the only grocery store in the village.



The grocery store was tiny, with narrow aisles and wooden floors. But it had a cooler at the back, which was full of sugary pop. So I took some of the money I found in an envelope in my dad's office, and I confidently strolled into the store for a six-pack of Coca Cola.

Like a lottery winner with more money than brains, I wasn't satisfied with a single bottle. A single bottle might have gone unnoticed. But the shopkeeper was quite aware that Coca Cola had never made an appearance on any of my mother's grocery lists, and

¹ Hythe is now better known as the home of Wiebo Ludwig, convicted oil and gas industry terrorist. But back then, it was just a tiny place on remote highway with a grain elevator, a Chinese restaurant, a bowling alley, two churches, a bunch of muddy streets, and rows of caragana hedges attempting to invade the wooden side-walks.

that a minister's salary was hardly sufficient to have permitted such an indulgence. So he didn't accept my money, and instead picked up the phone and told Mom about my new financial situation.

I next recall my father showing me a rather thin book with a photo of a happy family on the front cover, and a title that had the word "God" in it. As he turned the pages, it showed the family enjoying a picnic or walking to church or cheering a local sports team or playing fetch with a handsome collie. And each photo was accompanied by some inspiring words.

But the words didn't inspire me in the least. I knew I had done something wrong, and I knew my father was disappointed in me. But neither the words in the book, nor my dad's disappointment made the slightest impression on me...except for a vague feeling of unease and a longing for the lesson to be over with.

Another book in the house was Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care*. Whether it was the lessons in this book or whether it was the lessons from the Sermon on the Mount, Dad never used corporal punishment on us kids. He was (and is) a gentle soul. In my early years, I would sometimes cry at night, knowing that someday, he would, just like the rest of us, die.



In 1966, we moved to Fort St. John, B.C. It was only a couple of hours up the highway, but whereas Hythe was a village of 200 people, Fort St. John was a vast metropolis of 10,000. It had a Dairy Queen and a movie theatre and lots of paved streets that seemed to be made for 3-speed bicycles with banana seats, sissy bars, and ape-hanger handlebars (Peter Fonda would have been jealous).

Tommy lived across the street, and he had the best sandbox on the block. It was oblong, so that we could easily reach across from any point to drive our Dinky Toy and Matchbox vehicles. And it was on the north side of his house, so it was cool on a hot day, and the moistened sand didn't dry up too quickly.

Brian was another friend, who lived a few blocks away in a

much bigger house and had much finer toys (such as a pool table in the basement and a 90 cc Suzuki motorcycle in the backyard).

The other element in this story was the candy store, which sold 3 jawbreakers for a penny, as well as many other delights suitable for rotting teeth.

One day, I met Tommy out on the street. I was on my orange 3-speed, and he was on his black single speed, with its streamlined "gas tank" attached to the top tube.

"Want some Ton-O-Gum?" I asked.

"Sure."

I started to break off a mammoth chunk from the pink slab and casually mentioned that I had taken a dime from Brian's room to make the purchase.

Tommy looked away. "Uh...no, that's OK. I gotta go."

And then there was an uncomfortable silence as I had my first realization that not everyone was a jerk.



One day, a new student walked into our grade four class and our teacher introduced him. Tim had an English accent, curly hair, and a sweater with a few holes in it. When we were asked if anyone would like to help Tim get settled, my hand shot up. Perhaps it was due to the fact that Mom and Dad were born in Britain, and that we had gone on a vacation there a few years previously.



I hung out with Tim occasionally after school. I don't remember what we did, since my after-school recreation was the same, no matter who I hung out with. Most often, we took our bikes to a huge undeveloped lot behind Brian's place, where there was a

scrub forest criss-crossed with trails, and a frog pond teeming with tadpoles. And sometimes we hung out at the schoolyard with its menacingly hard-edged playground amusements and a surrounding fringe of willow bushes (the branches of which could, with a pocketknife, be fashioned into decent whistles).

I do remember that one day, Tim took me to see his house. It was on the outskirts of town and it seemed small and grimy. After that, I don't remember seeing Tim very much. He may have been transferred to another class or even another school.

A year or two after that, I was at home when the door bell rang. It was Tim.

"Hi! Remember me?" he said with a big smile.

"No, I don't remember you at all. Sorry."

"I'm Tim. Tim from school!"

"No. Sorry. I don't remember you at all." (Like Donald Trump, I had yet to develop any sense of shame.)

"Oh. OK." And with that, he simply walked away. And I shrugged, relieved that the burden of an inconvenient friendship had so easily disappeared.



I also remember this:

"McNab's fleas!"

"McNab's fleas!"

It was a cruel game of tag, which took place in our Grade 3 classroom. We pawned off imaginary fleas on each other from _____ McNab. She may not have been pretty, and she might have worn hand-me-down clothes, but we all knew damn well that she didn't have fleas.

Years later, in Junior High, the taunt was "Choke it!" "Choke

it!”, a cruel reference to the last name of ____ Choquette, a girl with an unfortunate DNA inheritance. I never called out the dreadful nickname, but neither did I have the intelligence or backbone to tell my friends to shut the fuck up.²



In Tommy's sandbox, we played with Dinky Toys. But in the late 1960's, Hot Wheels arrived. Dinky Toys had wheels that turned, but Hot Wheels had wheels that turned fast! And they had their own slippery, smooth tracks with loops and jumps. And there was a finish gate with a plastic checkered flag that impartially told us who had the fastest car.

But after we had sorted out which cars were fastest and which were slowest, and after we had exhausted all the other possibilities (like sending a speeding Corvette off of the ramp into the ribs of the family pet), the fun started to wear off.

But wait! Brian had the updated version. Now, we wouldn't be slaves to a mere clamp on a table edge. Brian had the new Supercharger set that accelerated the cars via a pair of foam-edged spinning flywheels that gave each car a boost as it went through the little plastic garage attached to the track. And when that got boring, along came Sizzlers, which were Hot Wheels with their own tiny batteries.

I couldn't afford those tracks, but at some point, an evolutionary dead end appeared in one of the stores that I could afford. It was heavily discounted, presumably because no one else wanted it.³ It didn't have batteries and it didn't have humming flywheels that ran off of household current. It had big rubber bands attached to a sort of catapult. Each time the car came around the track, I would have to

² The “sin of omission”, defined rather well in James 4:17 (“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”)

³ In fact, it was such an evolutionary dead end, that even with a fairly extensive internet search, I could only find one other reference to it...from "Jeff" on www.feelingretro.com.

reset the catapult, so that it would hit the back end of the car and send it whizzing off for another lap.

But even before I got back from the department store, my ten year old brain managed to form a very sobering thought. A comforting paradigm got shattered. I realized that the novelty of the new track would not last. I might play with it for an hour or two – or maybe even a day or two. But the glitz and glamour would rapidly vanish, and like all of my other toys, it would gather dust. I had discovered the Buddhist concept of *anicca* (or impermanence).

...at least for month or so. My birthday was approaching, you see, so the concept of *anicca* lost ground to the much more enticing concept of Kenner's Smash Up Derby! ⁴



At that age, I looked forward to the next MAD magazine like I currently look forward to the next Atlantic Monthly. MAD in the late 60's and early 70's was a refreshing antidote to anything authoritarian. Plus, it was a secret entry into a lot of the adult pleasures that I wouldn't normally have access to – in particular, the sardonic send-ups of movies that I still was too young to see in the theatres.

I first came across MAD in a department store in Edmonton (a rare family trip, since it was a full day's drive from Fort St. John). I grabbed a copy off of the stack and showed it to my dad, asking if I could buy it with my hard earned nickels. He thumbed through it for a while and gave me the nod. I don't think he had ever seen it before, either. But I suspect that certain aspects of it – such as its anti-Vietnam war slant – resonated well with both United Church theology and his NDP (New Democratic Party) voting patterns.

I'm not sure how much the MAD ideology rubbed off on me, but it certainly gave me a window on the world which I had previously ignored. Before MAD, I was so ignorant of world affairs that I

⁴ “..crash, bang, crash ‘em up. Put ‘em back again. Crash, bang, smash ‘em up. It's smash up time, my friend.” (Sung with a slightly southern-Country twang)

thought Martin Luther King was a prime minister of Canada. After all, it was just a couple of weeks after he was shot that Pierre Trudeau became our head of state.

MAD magazine may have been a learning tool, but it was also a commodity to be coveted and hoarded. Our grade eight Language Arts teacher, Mr. Lawrence, had a big stack of them at the back of the classroom, and he allowed us to read them if we finished our classroom assignments before the bell. But his stack was way bigger than my stack. So naturally, I got into the habit of inserting the occasional issue in amongst my school books. However, at some point, he raised the alarm, and a search of our home-room desks ensued. Luckily though, the detective work was assigned to our class clown, so it became a slapdash effort, and I dodged another bullet.



In the early 70's, we moved to Calgary. It was a traumatic experience, moving from a town of 10,000 people to an endless metropolis of half a million. Not only did I have to leave familiar surroundings and friends, but there seemed to be a different atmosphere about the place. A harder edge. An air of indifference. It was like Hythe versus Gotham City.

I first noticed it during recess at our Junior High School. I had just switched over from an elementary school, so that transition was difficult enough. But now the big city became personified in the form of an older bully who went around giving gonchies⁵ to the younger students. It was the first day of class, and he was having a delightful time, going from victim to victim. Fortunately for me, I was still dressed in Fort St. John attire, which meant un-hip trousers and a fairly snug belt. It was the belt that saved me, since the bully attempted for a minute or so to reach down past it, but soon gave up

⁵ More commonly known to fans of The Simpsons as wedgies, where the perpetrator seizes the rear waistband of the victim's underpants and hauls upwards, causing a goodly amount of material to get wedged between the two halves of said victim's bum cheeks. Also potentially uncomfortable for the scrotum, due to the increased pressure being transmitted to the front of the underpants.

in order to stalk easier prey.

The main irony in it all (which occurred to me even before I knew what the word “irony” meant) was that the bully had his own belt with a large buckle in the shape of a clenched hand with the index and ring finger extended in a "V".⁶ "Peace, man!" said the buckle.⁷

However, even though I noted the irony, the message that I took away from the experience was not one of peace, but of the importance of belligerent swagger.

Not long after that, I had my first and only fist fight. I was walking home from school down one of the back alleys⁸ when I came upon a group of kids about my age from the local Catholic School. I thought that it was necessary to keep my direction of travel, and so I swaggered through the lot, and managed to bump one or two.

⁶ This symbol was used by the hippie movement in the 1960's, but also by Winston Churchill during WWII to denote victory. It was thought to have originated centuries ago, when archers held their hands up to foes and allies alike, showing that they were still quite capable of pulling back a deadly bowstring with the two fingers, and that they had not been captured (which often entailed having the two offending digits amputated).

⁷ This juxtaposition of the symbol with its antithesis was common in the 1970's, which had the counter-cultural message of non-materialism, along with the capitalist urge to make money off of it. At about the same time as the gonchie incident, I put brightly coloured, hollow plastic straws on the spokes of my bicycle wheels, because they looked cool and sounded cool as they slid up and down the spokes. The name of the product was called Cycle-delic, taken from the word psychedelic. So while the Latin root of “psychedelic” means to make “manifest” the “soul”, “Cycle-delic” was simply an inane form of kiddie bling sold in the 1970's equivalent of a Wal-Mart.

⁸ Alleys were fairly important thoroughfares for young pedestrians, since they were often short-cuts, and they often provided some degree of cover for activities that grown-ups would frown on. A favourite in our time was to fling a tin can that had been flattened by a few vehicles. This deadly frisbee would fly half the length of a football field in an unpredictable manner, and it amazes me that – as far as I know – we never managed to break a window or put an eye out.

"Fight him, Joe! Fight him!"

Joe was even shorter than me, but he obviously had experience in this arena before, so he promptly showed me who was the boss. Luckily, this was the early 1970's, before swarmings, and before our



culture went from shoot-em-up westerns with a modicum of civility, to shoot-em-up video games, where it is apparently justifiable to kill policemen on a whim. So it was a fair fight, with fists only, and after a few minutes, I exited the scene without so much as even a bloody nose.

For a few years after that, however, one of Joe's buddies would often notice me on the way home from school and give me a slight jostle in front of my friends.

"Hey, here's the tough guy! How's it going, tough guy!?"

I pretended not to know who he was or why he was taunting me.

But a few years later, I bumped into him again...figuratively, this time. He was at my friend Sam's⁹ place, in the backyard, checking

⁹ Not his real name. I've given most of my friends and acquaintances pseudonyms.

out our motorcycles. Sam had a 1969 Honda 90 motorcycle, and I had a mid-sixties Ducati 100, and even though Ducati is generally acknowledged to be a *much* more coveted trademark, at the time I got teased about it, since it looked so different, compared to the average Japanese import.

Joe's buddy pretended not to notice that I was the idiot who long ago picked a fight with Joe. And he seemed genuinely interested in the Italian bike. He knew about craftsmanship and aesthetics, and he encouraged me to appreciate the weird European contraption.

"It's a classic. You could get good money for that some day."

But not only was I an idiot; I was also a tinkerer. So one day, I tore apart the carburetor to see what was inside. There was an adjustable circlip on the air/fuel metering needle that looked ripe for adjustment. So I adjusted it. And on the next trip down the highway, the piston seized and I came to a sudden halt. Soon after, the whole bike found its way into the Calgary dump, which in those days seemed to be just a big mess of unwanted appliances by the side of a gravel road. I suspect that the old Ducati is now many meters below the Deerfoot Trail freeway. And I suspect that if Joe's buddy owned the bike, it might be sitting proudly in a museum somewhere.



Shoplifting was fun. Sam and I would skip school and go to Kresge's or Woolco or some other ancient equivalent of WalMart and try our luck at the old five finger discount. Generally, we would steal either junk food or just plain junk. I doubt if anything we ever lifted was worth more than a dollar or two.

There were some close calls. Like the bag of potato chips from the confectionary in the mall. I was so cocky that I did it without even glancing to see if the owner was watching. But he was. And he hurried out of the store and grabbed me. An old man sitting on a bench yelled out, "Give it to 'im good! Give it to 'im good, so he'll never do it again!"

But the owner, realizing the potential hassle of calling the police

over a bag of chips, just let me go. And needless to say, I didn't learn anything.

The next time the noose tightened, it was both Sam and I who got caught. I had a blank cassette tape stuffed down by my crotch, and the store detective came along and hauled us into a small room.

"One of the salespeople said that you stole something."

"No. I didn't take anything. Honest."

So he searched around a bit, but I suspect he was a bit nervous, having to feel around the crotches of a couple of young guys. So he let us go, telling us that he didn't want to see us around there again.

As we walked out into the parking lot, I let out a joyous little "whoo-hoo!" But Sam was more subdued.

"I don't think I'm going to shoplift any more."

"No? Well, I'm still going to."

And I probably still did, at least for a while after that. But without a partner in crime, it just wasn't as much fun as it used to be. So the habit waned and died.

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