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November 2008 COSMIC RACCOON

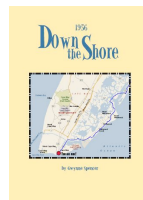
This is my second autumn in the Willamette Valley and it is still quite astonishing to see the hills turn golden as the grapes settle in for winter. The hard maples and hickories turn blood red, and there is a riotous rugby scrum of colors from the trees all around and then a hopeful fuzz of green in the wheat fields about a quarter mile from my little house. It's pretty as an endcap display at Wal-mart.

I suspect that this will be a harder winter with more rain than last, so I'm out looking for weenerdog rainduds so my ancient dogs don't catch "pah-noomia" as my brother used to mispronounce it. And of course I am seriously looking forward to the university putting up my two-hundred foot tall Christmas tree with no work at all on my part except a stroll over to the campus to supervise the lighting one of these days. It's like I've moved to America, I tell you.

Sometime back in second grade or maybe seventh, some teacher might have taught you to say the words, "Plot is what happens in a story." Well, that's wrong. Plot is what **matters** in a story. A lot of stuff happens, and a lot of stuff in a story tends to obscure what matters. It's always hard to tell which is which, especially when it's not a novel, it's your life. Try writing the six word memoir—or a six word book report. I think it's a promising new genre.

So, this past month I've been given the time and opportunity to look at what I've been doing with my life, mulling over the proposition put forth by Marshall McLuhan (The Medium is the Message, 1967) that "We walk backwards into the future." Which accounts for why we end up with our heinders stuck in a Stargate so often.

I suppose it all comes from paying attention to what has already happened more than what is going to happen, and easier, too. You can usually make sense and find the pattern in the stuff that's past; the challenge is figuring it out for the future.



I suspect that knowing what is coming depends 100% on knowing what has happened in the past. So it is with an indecent amount of pride that I can now announce the birth of my first book of memoirs, DOWN THE SHORE 1956, now available on amazon.com. It is a collection of adventures of me and my monkeyface double-cousins in Cape May in the summer of 1956. But it is my fondest hope it is also a delightful way for readers of all ages to remember that it isn't always bad walking backward into the future; memories are golden.

I just flew back from Tennessee and not only are my arms tired, but my whole body is screaming for no more travel. I think the only way to fly any more is naked, or as a nun.

The wedding was in a historic old lodge up in the Appalachians, the previous site of a CCC Camp and WPA, thoroughly a wonderful event. The mother of the groom doesn't do much, and since I'm not a hankie kind of a gal, I didn't even make any noise. It was a delightfully unique ceremony, and the setting was idyllic.

However, just before I left Oregon, a horrible thing happened. One day, I let Henry Weener out front for about three minutes and he came back in with his eyeball all bloody. I could not imagine how this happened, and took him to the vet to see whether there was something in it. Nothing. And just after I got him back home from the vet, Emily ran out front and in thirty seconds she came back with her eyeball bleeding and let me tell you I was in a conventional dither. After much examination at the ground level I figured out it was the big honking leaves off the big ugly tree right out front all hard-edged like a knife, and at just the right height to nail a weener dog in the eye. I think we are past the worst of it, but I fear Henry is mostly blind in that eye now. But it doesn't seem to affect his ability to sniff and detect signs of intruders. So we make the best of it and I let him watch television with his good eye getting the best seat.

Maybe I'm just compulsively a writer, constantly vigilant for stories, always saying, "There must be a story in this somewhere!" because I know there is usually a story in the important stuff that happens. We have to peel away the not-important stuff first. It's like mining coal: you have to move a ton of overburden to get a pound of coal. And most people don't have the tools or the stamina or the time or the willpower to do it. So they don't.

They don't tell stories either. Most people I meet shudder visibly at the thought of telling a story, even to a kid. Tell me the Three Bears. Yikes, they run away in panic. Tell me Cinderella without the Disney coating. No way. Tell me about what matters in this world. Tell me how to deal with evil. Tell me how to leave the world better than I found it by telling me a story. Heidi Unlikely, as they say in the Alps.

So, I'm thinking of what is the best way to help people actually write their stories? Do you teach them how to use the onboard voice recognition in their computers? Or do you encourage them to tape their stories and let somebody transcribe them? Or do you just let it go and say, "Oh well." I'm seriously considering an online writing class on memoirs using the hero journey as a roadmap for writing your story. Its elegance and simplicity seems to help people slam words down on the page. Let me know your thoughts on this.

I'm hoping November will be simple and productive, after the train wreck that was the month of October. I'm hoping to just write, and edit, and do the writing equivalent of knitting Christmas stockings. Since it is the season when you are besieged with "gifting ideas" I would like to plant this simple idea: give everybody a book. When the hard times come, it is stories that get us through. Books are the present you can open again and again. If you are flummoxed by what to give somebody (still operating on the assumption that if you give them the perfect present you get some kind of superduper bonus points, akin to the notion that your Halloween costume determines your candy

haul on trick-or-treat night). I say instead, give them your favorite books. Chances are they'll love what you chose. Foisting your books on everyone is a good policy. Remember, reading isn't the most important thing....it's the ONLY thing.

So until you are past the turkey-coma stage, and have been seriously pulled by the lips into commercial excesses of America, I wish you good reading, solid writing, and hopes for the best leaf-raking season in the history of the world.