

Leaving Identity Issues to Other Folks

PHYLLIS ALLEN

STANDING IN THE RAIN WAITING TO GO up the steps to the balcony of the Grand Theater, I gripped Mama's hand and watched the little blond kids enter the lobby downstairs. It was the fifties, I was "colored," and this is what I believed: My place was in the balcony of the downtown theater, the back of the bus, and the back steps of the White Dove Barbecue Emporium. When I asked Mama why this was so, she smiled and said, "Baby, people do what they do. What you got to do is be the best that you can be."

We got our first television in the sixties, and it brought into my living room the German shepherds, snapping at a

PHYLLIS ALLEN

young girl's heels. It showed children just like me going to school passing through throngs of screaming, angry folks, chanting words I wasn't allowed to say. I could no longer be "colored." We were Negroes now, marching in the streets for our freedom—at least, that's what the preacher said. I believed that even though I was scared, I had to be brave and stand up for my rights.

In the seventies: Beat-up jeans, hair like a nappy halo, and my clenched fist raised, I stood on the downtown street shouting. Angry young black men in sleek black leather jackets and berets had sent out a call from the distant shores of Oakland, California. No more nonviolence or standing on the front lines quietly while we were being beaten. Simple courtesies like "please" and "thank you" were over. It was official; Huey, H. Rap, and Eldridge said so. I believed in being black and angry.

By the eighties, fertility gods lined the walls and crammed the display cases of all my friends' houses. People who'd never been closer to Africa than a *Tarzan* movie were speaking broken Swahili. The eighties made us hyphenated: "African-American." Swaddled in elaborately woven costumes of flowing design, bright colors, and rich gold, I was a pseudo-African, who'd never seen Africa. "It's your heritage," is what everybody said. Now, I believed in the elusive promise of the Motherland.

In the nineties, I was a woman whose skin happened to be brown, chasing the American dream. Everybody said that the dream culminated in stuff. I believed in spending days shopping. Debt? I didn't care about no stinkin' debt. It was the nineties. My 401(k) was in the mid-six figures, and I believed in American Express. Then came the crash, and American Express didn't believe in me nearly as much as I believed in it.

Now, it's a brand-new millennium, and the bling-bling, video generation ain't about me. Everything changed when I turned fifty. Along with the wrinkles, softened muscles, and weak eyesight came the confidence that allows me to stick to a very small list of beliefs. I'll leave those identity issues to other folks. I believe that I'm free to be whoever I choose to be. I believe in being a good friend, lover, and parent so that I can have good friends, lovers, and children. I believe in being a woman—the best that I can be, like my mama said.

PHYLLIS ALLEN has sold *Yellow Pages* advertising for fifteen years. She spends about half her working hours in her car covering territory around Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas. She composed her essay in her car and practiced reading it aloud in the phone company's utility closet. When she retires, she hopes to pursue her first passion, writing.

In Giving I Connect with Others

ISABEL ALLENDE

I HAVE LIVED WITH PASSION AND IN A HURRY, trying to accomplish too many things. I never had time to think about my beliefs until my twenty-eight-year-old daughter Paula fell ill. She was in a coma for a year, and I took care of her at home until she died in my arms in December of 1992.

During that year of agony and the following year of my grieving, everything stopped for me. There was nothing to do—just cry and remember. However, that year also gave me an opportunity to reflect upon my journey and the principles that hold me together. I discovered that there is consistency in my beliefs, my writing, and the way I lead my

life. I have not changed; I am still the same girl I was fifty years ago, and the same young woman I was in the seventies. I still lust for life, I am still ferociously independent, I still crave justice, and I fall madly in love easily.

Paralyzed and silent in her bed, my daughter Paula taught me a lesson that is now my mantra: You only have what you give. It's by spending yourself that you become rich.

Paula led a life of service. She worked as a volunteer helping women and children, eight hours a day, six days a week. She never had any money, but she needed very little. When she died she had nothing and she needed nothing. During her illness I had to let go of everything: her laughter, her voice, her grace, her beauty, her company, and, finally, her spirit. When she died I thought I had lost everything. But then I realized I still had the love I had given her. I don't even know if she was able to receive that love. She could not respond in any way, her eyes were somber pools that reflected no light. But I was full of love, and that love keeps growing and multiplying and giving fruit.

The pain of losing my child was a cleansing experience. I had to throw overboard all excess baggage and keep only what is essential. Because of Paula, I don't cling to anything anymore. Now I like to give much more than to receive. I am happier when I love than when I am loved. I adore my husband, my son, my grandchildren, my mother, my dog, and

frankly I don't know if they even like me. But who cares? Loving them is my joy.

Give, give, give—what is the point of having experience, knowledge, or talent if I don't give it away? Of having stories if I don't tell them to others? Of having wealth if I don't share it? I don't intend to be cremated with any of it! It is in giving that I connect with others, with the world, and with the divine.

It is in giving that I feel the spirit of my daughter inside me, like a soft presence.

*Novelist ISABEL ALLENDE was born in Peru and raised in Chile. When her uncle, Chilean president Salvador Allende, was assassinated in 1973, she fled with her husband and children to Venezuela. Allende has written more than a dozen novels, including *The House of the Spirits* and a memoir, *My Invented Country*.*

believe that there are moments when one must rely upon the good faith and judgment of others. So, while each of us faces—at one time or another—the prospect of driving alone down a dark road, what we must learn with experience is that the approaching light may not be a threat, but a shared moment of trust.

WARREN CHRISTOPHER was U.S. secretary of state from 1993 to 1997. As President Carter's deputy secretary of state, he helped normalize relations with China, win ratification of the Panama Canal treaties, and gain release of the American hostages in Iran. A native of North Dakota, Christopher now lives near Los Angeles.

The Hardest Work You Will Ever Do

MARY COOK

THE DAY MY FIANCÉ FELL TO HIS DEATH, it started to snow, just like any November day, just like the bottom hadn't fallen out of my world when he freefell off the roof. His body, when I found it, was lightly covered with snow. It snowed almost every day for the next four months, while I sat on the couch and watched it pile up.

One morning, I shuffled downstairs and was startled to see a snowplow clearing my driveway and the bent back of a woman shoveling my walk. I dropped to my knees, crawled through the living room and back upstairs so those good Samaritans would not see me. I was mortified. My first

thought was, how would I ever repay them? I didn't have the strength to brush my hair, let alone shovel someone's walk.

Before Jon's death, I took pride in the fact that I rarely asked for help or favors. I defined myself by my competence and independence. So who was I if I was no longer capable and busy? How could I respect myself if all I did was sit on the couch every day and watch the snow fall?

Learning how to receive the love and support that came my way wasn't easy. Friends cooked for me, and I cried because I couldn't even help them set the table. "I'm not usually this lazy," I wailed. Finally, my friend Kathy sat down with me and said, "Mary, cooking for you is not a chore. I love you and I want to do it. It makes me feel good to be able to do something for you."

Over and over, I heard similar sentiments from the people who supported me during those dark days. One very wise man told me, "You are not doing nothing. Being fully open to your grief may be the hardest work you will ever do."

I am not the person I once was, but in many ways I have changed for the better. The fabric of my life is now woven with gratitude and humility. I have been surprised to learn that there is incredible freedom that comes from facing one's worst fear and walking away whole. I believe there is strength in surrender.

MARY COOK works on the ground crew for an air taxi company in Gustavus, Alaska, a community of four hundred surrounded by Glacier Bay National Park. In addition to loading and unloading planes, Cook handles the mail and tends the town's only coffeehouse. She also serves as a hospice volunteer.

breaks the silence, and by doing so breaks her isolation, begins to melt her shame and guilt, making her experience real, lifting her pain.

I believe one person's declaration sparks another and then another. Helen Caldicott naming the consequences of an escalating nuclear arms race gave rise to an antinuclear movement. The brave soldier who came forward and named the abuses at Abu Ghraib Prison was responsible for a sweeping investigation.

Naming things, breaking through taboos and denial is the most dangerous, terrifying, and crucial work. This has to happen in spite of political climates or coercions, in spite of careers being won or lost, in spite of the fear of being criticized, outcast, or disliked. I believe freedom begins with naming things. Humanity is preserved by it.

EVE ENSLER is a writer and activist living in New York. Her play *The Vagina Monologues* has been translated into thirty-five languages and was performed more than two thousand times in 2004 alone. Enslar is founder of *V-Day*, an organization supporting efforts to end violence against women and girls worldwide.

A Goal of Service to Humankind

ANTHONY FAUCI

I BELIEVE I HAVE A PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY to make a positive impact on society. I've tried to accomplish this goal by choosing a life of public service. I am a physician and a scientist confronting the challenge of infectious diseases. I consider my job a gift. It allows me to try and help alleviate the suffering of humankind.

I have three guiding principles that anchor my life, and I think about them every day.

First, I have an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Knowledge goes hand-in-hand with truth—something I learned with a bit of tough love from my Jesuit education,

first at Regis High School in New York City and then at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts. I consider myself a perpetual student. You seek and learn every day: from an experiment in the lab, from reading a scientific journal, from taking care of a patient. Because of this, I rarely get bored.

Second, I believe in striving for excellence. I sweat the big and the small stuff! I do not apologize for this. One of the by-products of being a perfectionist and constantly trying to improve myself are sobering feelings of low-grade anxiety and a nagging sense of inadequacy. But this is not anxiety without a purpose. No, this anxiety keeps me humble. It creates a healthy tension that serves as the catalyst that drives me to fulfill my limited potential.

This has made me a better physician and scientist. Without this tension, I wouldn't be as focused.

I have accepted that I will never know or understand as much as I want. This is what keeps the quest for knowledge exciting! And it is one of the reasons I would do my job even if I did not get paid to come to work every day.

Third, I believe that as a physician my goal is to serve humankind.

I have spent all of my professional life in public service, most of it involved in research, care of patients, and public health policy concerning the HIV-AIDS epidemic. When I

chose to concentrate on AIDS in the 1980s, many of my colleagues thought I was misguided to be focusing all of my attention on what was then considered "just a gay man's disease." But I felt that this was my destiny and was perfectly matched to my training. I knew deep down that this was going to become a public health catastrophe. I am committed to confronting the enormity of this global public health catastrophe and its potential for even greater devastation.

Failure to contain it cannot be an option. I believe that to be even marginally successful in working to contain this terrible disease, I must be guided by these principles. I must continually thirst for knowledge, accept nothing short of excellence, and know that the good of the global society is more important and larger than I am.

As a boy, DR. ANTHONY FAUCI delivered prescriptions by bicycle for his father's drugstore. Currently director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, his research focuses on HIV/AIDS, asthma, allergies, and other ailments. He advises the government on the global AIDS crisis and threats related to bioterrorism.

my business, pretty well-known. I'm a guy who could retire to the golf course tomorrow, where the worst that could happen is that my Bloody Mary is watered down. So why do I continue to subject myself to this sort of thing?

The answer is simple. Disrupting my comfort zone, bombarding myself with challenging people and situations, this is the best way I know to keep growing. And to paraphrase a biologist I once met, if you're not growing, you're dying.

So maybe I'm not the best surfer on the North Shore. But that's okay. The discomfort, the uncertainty, the physical and mental challenge I get from it—all the things that too many of us spend our time and energy trying to avoid—they're precisely the things that keep me in the game.

BRIAN GRAZER is an Oscar-winning movie producer and an Emmy-winning television producer. He cofounded Imagine Entertainment with longtime friend, director Ron Howard, and together they created blockbusters including *The Da Vinci Code*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Apollo 13*, and *Splash*. The Producers Guild of America honored Grazer with the David O. Selznick Lifetime Achievement Award in 2001.

Science Nourishes the Mind and the Soul

BRIAN GREENE

ONE DAY, WHEN I WAS ABOUT ELEVEN, walking back to Public School 87 in Manhattan after our class visit to the Hayden Planetarium, I became overwhelmed by a feeling I'd never had before. I was gripped by a hollow, pit-in-the-stomach sense that my life might not matter. I'd learned that our world is a rocky planet, orbiting one star among the one hundred billion others in our galaxy, which is but one of hundreds of billions of galaxies scattered throughout the universe. Science had made me feel small.

In the years since, my view of science and the role it can play in society and the world has changed dramatically.

While we are small, my decades of immersion in science convince me this is cause for celebration. From our lonely corner of the cosmos we have used ingenuity and determination to touch the very limits of outer and inner space. We have figured out fundamental laws of physics—laws that govern how stars shine and light travels, laws that dictate how time elapses and space expands, laws that allow us to peer back to the briefest moment after the universe began.

None of these scientific achievements has told us why we're here or given us the answer to life's meaning—questions science may never address. But just as our experience playing baseball is enormously richer if we know the rules of the game, the better we understand the universe's rules—the laws of physics—the more deeply we can appreciate our lives within it.

I believe this because I've seen it.

I've seen children's eyes light up when I tell them about black holes and the big bang. I've witnessed the self-worth and confidence a young student gains by completing even the simplest of mathematical calculations. I've spoken with high school dropouts who've stumbled upon books describing the amazing achievements of science and returned to their studies with purpose and zeal. I've received letters

from young soldiers in Iraq, telling me how reading popular accounts of relativity and quantum physics has provided them hope that there is something larger, something universal that binds us together. Such is the capacity of science, not only to explain, but to inspire.

Which is why I am distressed when I meet students who approach science and math with drudgery. I know it doesn't have to be that way. But when science is presented as a collection of facts that need to be memorized, when math is taught as a series of abstract calculations without revealing its power to unravel the mysteries of the universe, it can all seem pointless and boring.

Even more troubling, I've encountered students who've been told they don't have the capacity to grasp math and science.

These are lost opportunities.

I believe we owe our young an education that captures the exhilarating drama of science.

I believe the process of going from confusion to understanding is a precious, even emotional, experience that can be the foundation of self-confidence. I believe that through its rational evaluation of truth and indifference to personal belief, science transcends religious and political divisions and so does bind us into a greater, more resilient whole.

I believe that the wonder of discovery can lift the spirit like Brahms's Third Symphony.

I believe that the breathtaking ideas of science can nourish not only the mind but also the soul.

*A native New Yorker, BRIAN GREENE teaches physics and mathematics at Columbia University. He is a proponent of string theory, which attempts to unify all the forces of nature into a single framework. He authored *The Fabric of the Cosmos* and *The Elegant Universe*.*

In Praise of the "Wobblies"

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TED GUP

FOR YEARS I REALLY DIDN'T KNOW what I believed. I always seemed to stand in the no-man's-land between opposing arguments, yearning to be won over by one side or the other, but finding instead degrees of merit in both.

I remember some thirty-five years ago, sitting at a table with the editor of the *Washington Post* and a half dozen Harvard kids. We were all finalists for a *Post* internship, and the editor was there to winnow our numbers down. He asked each of us what we thought about the hot issues of the day—Vietnam, Nixon, the demonstrations. The Harvard kids were dazzling. They knew exactly where they stood.

Me, I just stumbled on every issue, sounding so muddled. I was sure I had forever lost my shot at the *Post*. Why, I wondered, could I not see as clearly as those around me?

When the lunch was over and everyone rose to leave, the editor put his hand on my arm and asked me to stay. We talked again about the war and how it was dividing the country. A month later he wrote me a rejection letter. He said I was too young for the job but he liked my attitude. He told me that he “hunched I had a hell of a future” and to keep bugging him. I did.

Seven years later he hired me.

But that first letter, now framed in my office, had already given me an invaluable license. It had let me know that it was okay to be perplexed, to be torn by issues, to look at the world and not feel inadequate because it would not sort itself out cleanly. In the company of the confident, I had always envied their certainty. I imagined myself like some tiny sailboat, aimlessly tacking in whatever wind prevailed at the moment.

But in time, I came to accept, even embrace, what I called “my confusion,” and to recognize it as a friend and ally, no apologies needed. I preferred to listen rather than to speak; to inquire, not crusade. As a noncombatant, I was welcomed at the tables of even bitterly divided foes. I came to recognize that I had my own compass and my own con-

victions, and if, at times, they took me in circles, at least they expanded outward. I had no wish for converts—where would I lead them?

An editor and mentor at the *Post* once told me I was “Wobbly.” I asked who else was in that category and drew comfort from its quirky ranks. They were good people all—open-minded, inquisitive, and, yes, confused. We shared a common creed. Our articles of faith all ended with a question mark. I wouldn’t want a whole newsroom, hospital, platoon, or—God forbid—a nation of us. But in periods of crisis, when passions are high and certainty runs rabid, it’s good to have a few of us on hand. In such times, I believe it falls to us Wobblies to try and hold the shrinking common ground.

TED GUP has written for *Time*, *National Geographic*, *the New York Times*, and other publications. He wrote *The Book of Honor: Covert Lives and Classified Deaths at the CIA* and teaches journalism at *Case Western Reserve University*.

The Power of Love to Transform and Heal

JACKIE LANTRY

I BELIEVE IN THE INGREDIENTS OF LOVE, the elements from which it is made. I believe in love's humble, practical components and their combined power.

We adopted Luke four years ago. The people from the orphanage dropped him off at our hotel room without even saying good-bye. He was nearly six years old, only twenty-eight pounds, and his face was crisscrossed with scars. Clearly, he was terrified. "What are his favorite things?" I yelled. "Noodles," they replied as the elevator door shut.

Luke kicked and screamed. I stood between him and the door to keep him from bolting. His cries were anguished,

JACKIE LANTRY

animal-like. He had never seen a mirror and tried to escape by running through one. I wound my arms around him so he could not hit or kick. After an hour and a half he finally fell asleep, exhausted. I called room service. They delivered every noodle dish on the menu. Luke woke up, looked at me, and started sobbing again. I handed him chopsticks and pointed at the food. He stopped crying and started to eat. He ate until I was sure he would be sick.

That night we went for a walk. Delighted at the moon, he pantomimed, "What is it?" I said, "The moon, it's the moon." He reached up and tried to touch it. He cried again when I tried to give him a bath until I started to play with the water. By the end of his bath the room was soaked and he was giggling. I lotioned him up, powdered him down, and clothed him in soft pj's. We read the book *One Yellow Lion*. He loved looking at the colorful pictures and turning the pages. By the end of the night he was saying "one yellow lion."

The next day we met orphanage officials to do paperwork. Luke was on my lap as they filed into the room. He looked at them and wrapped my arms tightly around his waist.

He was a sad, shy boy for a long time after those first days. He cried easily and withdrew at the slightest provocation. He hid food in his pillowcase and foraged in garbage

cans. I wondered then if he would ever get over the wounds of neglect that the orphanage had beaten into him.

It has been four years. Luke is a smart, funny, happy fourth grader. He is loaded with charm and is a natural athlete. His teachers say he is well-behaved and works very hard. Our neighbor says she has never seen a happier kid.

When I think back, I am amazed at what transformed this abused, terrified little creature. It was not therapy, counselors, or medications. It did not cost money or require connections or great privilege. It was love: just simple, plain, easy to give. Love is primal. It is comprised of compassion, care, security, and a leap of faith. I believe in the power of love to transform. I believe in the power of love to heal.

JACKIE LANTRY is a part-time hospital clerk in Rehoboth, Massachusetts. She and her husband have adopted two girls and two boys from China. When Jackie asked her children what they believed in, they said "family."

The Power of Mysteries

ALAN LIGHTMAN

I BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF THE UNKNOWN. I believe that a sense of the unknown propels us in all of our creative activities, from science to art.

When I was a child, after bedtime I would often get out of my bed in my pajamas, go to the window, and stare at the stars. I had so many questions. How far away were those tiny points of light? Did space go on forever and ever, or was there some end to space, some giant edge. And if so, what lay beyond the edge?

Another of my childhood questions: Did time go on forever? I looked at pictures of my parents and grandparents

and tried to imagine their parents, and so on, back through the generations, back and back through time. Looking out of my bedroom window into the vastness of space, time seemed to stretch forward and backward without end, engulfing me, engulfing my parents and great-grandparents, engulfing the entire history of earth. Does time go on forever? Or is there some beginning of time? And if so, what came before?

When I grew up, I became a professional astrophysicist. Although I never answered any of these questions, they continued to challenge me, to haunt me, to drive me in my scientific research, to cause me to live on tuna fish and no sleep for days at a time while I was obsessed with a science problem. These same questions, and questions like them, challenge and haunt the leading scientists of today.

Einstein once wrote, "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science." What did Einstein mean by "the mysterious"? I don't think he meant that science is full of unpredictable or unknowable or supernatural forces. I think that he meant a sense of awe, a sense that there are things larger than us, that we don't have all the answers at this moment. A sense that we can stand right at the boundary between known and unknown and gaze into that cavern and be exhilarated rather than frightened.

Scientists are happy, of course, when they find answers to questions. But scientists are also happy when they become stuck, when they discover interesting questions that they can't answer. Because that is when their imaginations and creativity are set on fire. That is when the greatest progress occurs.

One of the Holy Grails in physics is to find the so-called Theory of Everything, the final theory that will encompass all the fundamental laws of nature. I, for one, hope that we never find that final theory. I hope that there are always things that we don't know—about the physical world as well as about ourselves. I believe in the creative power of the unknown. I believe in the exhilaration of standing at the boundary between the known and the unknown. I believe in the unanswered questions of children.

ALAN LIGHTMAN is an astrophysicist and novelist teaching at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is the author of *Einstein's Dreams* and *A Sense of the Mysterious: Science and the Human Spirit*. Lightman and his wife, Jean, started the Harpswell Foundation to help disadvantaged students in Cambodia obtain an education.

The Artistry in Hidden Talents

MEL RUSNOV

I BELIEVE IN CULTIVATING HIDDEN TALENTS, buried and unrelated to what we do for a living.

In ordinary life, I'm a civil engineer. I make a satisfying, comfortable living working quietly in my cubicle. But in my other life, I am a pianist, bringing to life, with my own hands, the genius of Bach, Mozart, and Chopin.

While earning my engineering degree, I worked as a waitress in the dining hall of a retirement community. One day during a break, I discovered a piano in a meeting room. I sat down to play a few Bach Two-Part Inventions. Those crisp, driving rhythms and harmonics flew out into the

MEL RUSNOV

hallways. Residents, numb from ceaseless easy-listening radio, tentatively peeked in, then sat to listen.

Disbelieving, they saw plain, old, invisible Mel, the lunch waitress. "She plays the piano?" "Where did you study?" "How long have you played?" "Can you play Rachmaninoff?"

They no longer wanted me to quickly and quietly disappear from their dining tables. "Mel, wait a minute. Who do you think was better, Gould or Horowitz?" I answered "Gould," and a raging debate ensued.

For over twenty years, absorbed in my engineering career, I let my musical life die, but I was always reminded of it when I'd encounter the secret creative life of others. At a holiday concert, I heard a tenor voice so glorious, it brought tears to my eyes. It was the sweetest, most touching performance of "Silent Night" I had ever heard. This masterful voice belonged to a colleague, Steve, with whom I had worked for years, side-by-side in adjoining cubicles.

I had narrowly defined him, and so many others, by their occupations. Since I had let myself get consumed by my job; too tired and spent for anything else, I assumed all other hardworking people had, too. But Steve's artistry reminded me of my own hidden talent. I began to practice again and started taking lessons from an inspiring teacher who pressures me every week to keep at it, play better, get to that next higher level.

One time, feeling bold, I played a Mozart Sonata in an airport lobby, between connecting flights. People slowed down or even stopped to listen; readers looked up from their chairs. I saw smiles and heard a smattering of applause. I thought: No one smiled and clapped after my presentation on the site engineering for a new strip mall.

I believe we are more than the inhabitants of our cubicles, more than engineers or even parents, husbands, and wives. I believe we are transformed and connected by the power and beauty of our creativity.

MEL RUSNOV is a civil engineer in Woodbury, Connecticut. Her love of music came from her father, who played in a Croatian folk group and who took her to orchestra concerts in their hometown of Cleveland. In addition to playing the piano, Rusnov enjoys tutoring local high school students in math.

My Fellow Worms



CARL SANDBURG,

AS FEATURED IN THE 1950S SERIES

THE MAN WHO SITS DOWN AND SEARCHES HIMSELF for his answer to the question "What Do I Believe?" is either going to write a book or a few well-chosen thoughts on what he thinks it might be healthy for mankind to be thinking about in the present tribulations and turmoils. I believe in getting up in the morning with a serene mind and a heart holding many hopes. And so large a number of my fellow worms in the dust believe the same that there is no use putting stress on it.

I can remember many years ago, a beautiful woman in Santa Fe saying, "I don't see how anybody can study

three things, a country that offers nothing but the promise of being more fully human, and never guarantees its success. In that constant failure to arrive—implied at the very beginning—lies the possibility of a permanently fresh start, an old newness, a way of revitalizing ourselves and our civilization in ways few foresaw and one day many will forget. But the point is now. And the place is America.

ANDREW SULLIVAN was born in England and educated at Oxford and Harvard. At twenty-seven, he became editor of *The New Republic*, a position he held for five years. As a writer, commentator, and blogger, Sullivan addresses political and social issues and advocates for gay rights.

Always Go to the Funeral

DEIRDRE SULLIVAN

I BELIEVE IN ALWAYS GOING TO THE FUNERAL. My father taught me that.

The first time he said it directly to me, I was sixteen and trying to get out of going to calling hours for Miss Emerson, my old fifth-grade math teacher. I did not want to go. My father was unequivocal. “Dee,” he said, “you’re going. Always go to the funeral. Do it for the family.”

So my dad waited outside while I went in. It was worse than I thought it would be: I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of Miss Emerson’s shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, “Sorry about all

this,” and stalked away. But, for that deeply weird expression of sympathy delivered twenty years ago, Miss Emerson’s mother still remembers my name and always says hello with tearing eyes.

That was the first time I went unchaperoned, but my parents had been taking us kids to funerals and calling hours as a matter of course for years. By the time I was sixteen, I had been to five or six funerals. I remember two things from the funeral circuit: bottomless dishes of free mints, and my father saying on the ride home, “You can’t come in without going out, kids. Always go to the funeral.”

Sounds simple—when someone dies, get in your car and go to calling hours or the funeral. That, I can do. But I think a personal philosophy of going to funerals means more than that.

“Always go to the funeral” means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don’t feel like it. I have to remind myself of it when I could make some small gesture, but I don’t really have to and I definitely don’t want to. I’m talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but the world to the other guy. You know, the painfully underattended birthday party. The hospital visit during happy hour. The shiva call for one of my ex’s uncles. In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn’t been good ver-

sus evil. It’s hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing.

In going to funerals, I’ve come to believe that while I wait to make a grand heroic gesture, I should just stick to the small inconveniences that let me share in life’s inevitable, occasional calamity.

On a cold April night three years ago, my father died a quiet death from cancer. His funeral was on a Wednesday, middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful, and humbling thing I’ve ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral.

DEIRDRE SULLIVAN grew up in Syracuse, New York, and traveled the world working odd jobs before attending law school at Northwestern University. She is now a freelance attorney living in Brooklyn. Sullivan says her father’s greatest gift to her and her family was how he ushered them through the process of his death.