On Not Being a Genius

It's tempting to say it's been the story of my life: wanting to be a genius, and knowing I'm not. But this would be misleading, in several ways. First, it might suggest that my primary drive is an intellectual one; but it's not. (Leaving aside, for the time being, the question of what my primary drive actually is. We'll get to that.) Second, it might lead one to think that I am – or believe myself to be – unusually intelligent. This is not the case either. I assume I am of somewhat more than average intelligence – but just how much more, I don't know. I suspect it is not all that much more. At the start of boarding school, in tenth grade, I took an IQ test, but never learned the results. To tell you the truth, I didn't want to know. I was scared. I didn't want to find out how much less than genius-level my IQ was. What if it was only a little bit above average? Not that I even believe in IQ anymore; I don't. I believe in Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which – as I understand it – has pretty much put the kibosh on IQ as an indicator of anything more than 2/8 of your intelligence. (According to Gardner, there are eight distinct kinds of intelligence, and IQ measures only two: verbal and logical-mathematical.)

No, I do not believe in the theory or practice of IQ, yet I am afraid to find out that mine is well below genius level. My SAT scores were not that great, so I guess I am extrapolating from that. It has been 47 years since I took the SATs, and I still feel bad about the results. Kind of pathetic, I know. But so it is. Learning my IQ at this point in my life (almost 64), even if I don't believe in it, would be both pointless and demoralizing. I don't want to know for sure what I strongly suspect already: that I don't measure up to a standard whose basis I don't even believe in. If I'm going to take any more tests, it should probably be an Alzheimer's screening exam. Which, of course, would terrify me. Though it would come as a tremendous relief if I passed, since – like many in my age bracket -- I live in pretty much constant fear of finding out that I may be, now or in the near future, in the early stages of Alzheimer's. (And if I didn't pass, I don't want to think about it.) Much better to live in the hope, uncertain as it is, that I don't have Alzheimer's, than in the knowledge that I do.

And third, admitting I have always wanted to be a genius and known I wasn't would also be pathetic, though in a somewhat different way than the whole IQ and SAT thing. Putting so much psychic energy into the question of whether

or not you are genius is a sad and useless and masturbatory endeavor, suitable only for losers. (Which is not to say I don't also consider myself a loser; I do. Just not that kind of loser. I consider myself a loser in a worthier cause. Never mind, for the moment, just what that worthier cause is. We'll get to that, too.)

There is perhaps also a fourth way in which saying that not being a genius has been the story of my life would be misleading. It seems to imply a kind of competitiveness that is not really true of me. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that it may be true of me, but I don't want it to be. The thing is, I have never been quite sure of just how competitive I am. I know I tend to choke in the clutch. I have known this since the days of softball at Tocaloma Boys Club, when I played catcher, and guys would always steal on me because they knew my throws down to second were more likely to end up at shortstop or third, or even in left field. This tendency to choke in the clutch has made me a poor competitor, whether in the areas of test-taking, sports, or even literary endeavor. Relative to the time I spend writing, I have succeeded in publishing very little, and have been rejected, it seems to me, a lot. Though probably not nearly as much as many writers who have published more. In a sense, maybe another problem of mine

is that I have not been rejected enough – because I have not tried enough. This possibility is perhaps more damning than anything else. Yet the self-recognition that I am, relatively speaking, a poor competitor, has not really taught me – even at my advancing age -- not to keep trying to compete. I retain the more competitive person's distinct awareness of ranking and pecking orders. I do not believe in those orders, yet I cannot help being unduly aware of them, and even judging myself by them. (Another example of measuring myself by standards I don't really believe in.)

So when did this whole genius thing start, anyway? I think I can pinpoint it to third grade, when one Sunday evening I watched a program about Beethoven on "Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color" (in black and white; we didn't get a color set until five years later). That show made a big impression. The cheesiness of the Disney treatment spoke directly to my eight-year-old sensibilities: The wild-haired Beethoven out walking in the countryside, getting caught in a thunderstorm, seeking shelter under a tree, and composing, in a sturm-und-drang scenario, the opening bars of the Fifth Symphony; then the older composer, now deaf, conducting his last symphony, and thrusting his baton-arm out at the orchestra in a fierce

gesture of command that I remember still. The next day, during noon recess at Bonner School, I got a pencil and paper and sat on a bench by the side of the playground in the LA sunshine and tried "composing". I couldn't read (let alone write) music, but that didn't stop me. Stop me from what, exactly? From wanting to make an impression approximating, as best I could, the image I retained from the night before: the genius in the storm, under the tree, composing. I wanted to be different; I wanted to feel something uncontainable inside me that had to come out, no matter what. I figured Mrs. Baker would surely notice what I was doing, and recognize me for what I wanted to be seen as, even if my classmates didn't. (I didn't have a lot of friends in third grade, probably because I'd been away from that school for a whole year, while my father was working abroad.) But that didn't happen either. Mrs. Baker didn't even ask me what I was writing, nor did she seem to care.

Then, in seventh grade, it was Einstein. I'd loved the unit on astronomy in our science textbook, and had gotten all A's in science that year; but all that was required for that was memorizing and regurgitating the facts in the book, which I was very good at. For my birthday that year, my parents gave me a juvenile biography, The Universe and Dr. Einstein, which I was very

taken with. Unlike my introduction to Beethoven, I was old enough by then not to try to foolishly enact my image of Einstein; there was no scribbling of formulas, or fidgeting with the clocks and rulers that figured in the book's accounts of "thought experiments". Many years later, though, when I wrote an (unpublished) autobiographical novel, I had the 12-year-old protagonist give a cutesy classroom "demonstration" of relativity, in which he puts on a fat suit to illustrate how your mass increases as you approach the speed of light. He uses an alarm clock and ruler as props, and also a packet of dry ice in water, and a fan, to portray the "ether wind". (Anachronistically, since the theory of ether had been conclusively debunked almost 20 years before the Special Theory came out. But in my novel, Mrs. Latta, the protagonist's sixth-grade teacher (and mine), didn't catch the mistake.)

In tenth grade, at Exeter (school of geniuses, with several of whom I was friends, and among whom I could never have been counted as one; though I found a kind of pathetic gratification in the mere fact of my association with them), I discovered Dylan Thomas, by way of John Malcolm Brinnin's Dylan Thomas in America, which enthralled me. The figure of the doomed, bow-tied, alcoholic genius-as-poet took over my susceptible imagination for a while. I

adopted bow ties as a staple of my wardrobe (though I stopped well short of even trying to write poetry; I was becoming ever more aware of my limits in the genius game).

In college I discovered Proust, and my fate as a would-be-genius was sealed. I have never quite recovered from the experience of reading Proust – the whole shebang, start to finish, in a 10-week course. The interconnections between biography, autobiography, fiction, vocation, hypersensitivity and eccentricity were both close and blurred enough, at least in Proust's case, to be a source of lifelong fascination, frustration, and fruitless comparison for me. My thinking ran more or less as follows: 1. If Proust could do it, that shows it could be done. 2. If it could be done, then maybe there was some hope that I could do it, too. 3. But no, that didn't follow, because Proust was a genius, and I wasn't. 4. OK, but I could still do something sort of like it, couldn't I?

But what was the "it"? Something like "the mysterious transformation of one's own life into art". A vocation as vague as it was lofty and devoutly to be wished. The vindication, it seemed to me, of one's existence. (As if one's existence needed vindication.) A pipedream, of course, but an understandable one for someone like me to be captivated by. Because you see, if one views life mainly

through books, then one is tempted to see one's own life that way, too: as something to be documented, transmuted, elevated and also justified through writing. Thus the great works of writing that stand as products yet also transmogrifications of the life: not only Proust's magnum opus, but also Wordsworth's Prelude, Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage and Don Juan, Whitman's Leaves of Grass, and Stevens' Collected Poems (though in the latter, the connections between life and art are more diffuse, and therefore all the more mysterious and tantalizing). Not to mention my modern prose masters: James, Bellow and Roth. But among all of these, primus inter pares, it was Proust who first got me going on the idea of my fanciful and dubious quest. It was for me, with Proust, as it was for Whitman with Emerson: "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil." Except I never quite came to a boil; my talent remained at a simmer.

But non-geniuses can have quests, too. And all the more fanciful and dubious, perhaps, in proportion as they are not geniuses. For example, it might constitute a quest for them to come to understand the ways in which they are not geniuses, and their non-geniusness must suffice (Stevens: "…the act of finding/What will suffice"). In my quest, in its early stages at least, what sufficed – or

what seemed to suffice – was eccentricity. Since geniuses were all eccentric in their own ways, then it seemed necessary for me to be eccentric as well. As an only child, I had discovered early in myself a talent for the eccentric, and I milked it to the max. Thus, at Exeter, the bow ties, the wild hair, the goatee, and – above all -- the Latin and Greek. The dead tongues (how I loved that phrase!) seemed like a natural home for me in my efforts to achieve the oddity, if not the substance, of genius. Besides being way off the beaten track of "normal" adolescent interests – and therefore of particular interest to me – the study of Latin and Greek had the added cachet of elitism, difficulty, magic (Greek especially, with its "secret" alphabet), and the image of a rarified excellence. When, many years later, I came across the epigram from Spinoza, <u>omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt</u> ("all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare"), I experienced a throb of nostalgic recognition. The quote brought back to me not only the gratifying balance of the "tam…quam" formulation (which I congratulated myself on being able to identify; you see, my "Exeter Latin" had not gone to waste!), but also the quixotic, elitist, and uncompromisingly puristic idealism of my classicized youth: an unquestioning dedication to the pursuit of all things

deemed fine, timeless, excellent and rare. Yes, I must have been in many ways an insufferable youth, in search of examples (in persons, the dead were to be preferred to the living, since the dead had the patina of historical validation: they had been sifted and elevated beyond reach and reproach, and so were also less of a threat to me in the insecurity of my non-geniusness) – examples of what I conceived to be a noble distinction, homage to which I imagined would make me stand out from the crowd as perhaps another such example. The study of Latin and Greek seemed to fit the bill perfectly: ancient, distinguished, uncommon and difficult.

But I think there was something more visceral going on as well. I found all the declensions and conjugations of Latin and Greek somehow comforting: the order and regularity and precision of grammatical inflections; everything in its place; the salutary rigors of precise syntax. The study of classical languages held, to my mind, the appeal of math and science, without actually have to do math and science, for which I had no aptitude. The A's in seventh-grade science, as I mentioned, were achieved through rote memorization and natural curiosity, not by any power of reasoning or problem-solving. As my late first wife Diane used to observe of me, teasingly,

affectionately, and only half-seriously: “not that smart, but knows a lot”. And one of the things I know is that I’m not that smart.

I knew it back then, too; but being in the company of geniuses helped me deflect that knowledge, and see myself in a more flattering light. I was unduly concerned, also, with how I appeared to others. I cared very much about what they thought of me; about the figure, in romantic terms, that I “cut”. And this too now seems to me yet another indication of my lack of genius. Perhaps this, then, is the “primary drive” I mentioned earlier: the wish to be thought well of by others. The wish not to offend; to please; to be seen in a good light. All signs of my profound non-geniusness in action: appearance over substance; style over content; opinion over idea; mystique over actual product. My friend Howard, in a series of soul-searching letters that we exchanged in our mid-20’s, once wrote what I instantly recognized as the unvarnished truth about our differing ambitions in life – at least as they stood then, for two young men of literary bent: “You have a mystique; I want a career.” In his characteristically acute way, Howard had hit the nail on the head. At the time, I didn’t relate his remark to my would-be-genius syndrome, but I see it so clearly and

embarrassingly now. The creation of a mystique, the cultivation of appearances, the preoccupation with eccentricity as a substitute for achievement (though eccentricity itself seemed to me then a kind of achievement; that was probably what made me work so hard at it) – they were all part of my campaign to stand out as someone extraordinary, praeclarus.

In that mystique, too, were being cultivated not only the image of the genius, but also -- in an allied identity, or rather an identity that I thought was allied -- the image of the loser. The two images somehow got conflated in my imagination. (The classical trappings of my education were only a veneer over the basic romanticism of my sensibilities and desires.) I think this is what I meant before by a "worthier cause". Failure has long been, for me, a worthier cause than success. No doubt I get this idea partly from my Irish Catholic mother, who was apt to sentimentalize so many things, including lost causes and noble losers. But the mystification of failure has to do even more, I think, with the fear of success. The effort required to succeed, the putting myself out there and trying to compete with the big boys (and girls: though Tocaloma didn't have them, all my schools did), might still cause me to choke in the clutch; whereas the cultivation of

failure will keep me safely on the bench, out of the game. And more than that: the vain hope of being a genius – or rather of being seen as a genius – can continue to be nurtured, cultivated and entertained without fear of contradiction, if that hope is really to be a posthumous genius. To be recognized, after death, to be someone extraordinary – or rather to have been a genius all along, though no one knew it when one was alive – seems indeed a consummation devoutly to be wished. The dark horse of posthumous victory and vindication and validation – the three V's of the habitual loser. The "One never knows, do one?" perspective of notional futurity is greatly to be preferred over the verdict of actual, present-day life. Is not a Kafka infinitely preferable to a Dan Brown?

Canards, all of them; I know this; yet I continue to partly believe in them, despite my better knowledge. I know there is nothing necessarily noble about failure; one can as easily, probably more easily, have a contemptible failure; and success need not be sullied by compromise or paltriness. Kafka never aimed at popularity; Dan Brown, I think – I hope -- does not aim at art. (I could only make it 20 pages or so into The DaVinci Code; I was simply unable to read any more of his heinous prose.) Let them be what they are. Howard, it turns out, has had a career – of

some distinction – as a screenwriter and director. I have finally worn out my mystique, and have found my vocation as a teacher. Though I have not abandoned my dreams of someday – and before death would be nice; I see nothing ignoble anymore in pre-humous recognition, at least – being acknowledged as a writer who in some degree matters. What does that mean? Well, I suppose it means, for starters, to have readers. To be published. To be in print. That seems more like genius to me now. That, and Thomas Mann's salubrious prescription: "Genius is getting enough sleep."

And yet, the fragile, uncertain hope persists: I may be discovered, someday, to have been a genius all along. Popular opinion – or, more accurately, popular obliviousness – will be shown, after my "discovery", to have been wrong. (The future-perfect tense, incidentally – "will be shown to have been" – is the tense in which my pipedreams most typically formulate themselves: the projection, into the future, of a fait accompli; the gratification of a self-fulfilling prophecy, seem to contain exactly that quality of proleptic vindication that I seek.) The loser eventually triumphant; the innate potential at long last fulfilled. The exception to the rule, tolerated, accepted, upheld, and finally praised.

Such are the future gratifications I manufacture for myself.

The exceptionalism of my thinking is striking, troubling, and totally presumptuous. Who do I think I am to have such fantasies? Certainly not a genius; not successful; not even all that smart, really (as Diane teasingly and only half-seriously noted) – certainly not in proportion to my fantasies. The measure of exceptionalism in my self-conception does not please me to recognize; and I am, when I think about it, rather ashamed to see how naturally I can fall into it.

A memory is attached to this that I need to mention. I was 16 or 17 or maybe even 18 when it happened. Still at Exeter, or just graduated, and very much still in the thrall of my Latin and Greek and poète-maudit period. I was home in LA, so this must have been during vacation, or over the summer. I had gone to see a movie in Westwood, and there was a long line, so I cut in. Inconspicuously, I thought, or hoped; for once, my wish was not to stand out. And for minute or two, it seemed to have worked. The guy in back of me said nothing, and I almost came to believe my casual act had gone unnoticed. Then he spoke up.

"How do you rate?" he asked me.

"Excuse me?" There was a slight note of petulance in my voice.

"I said, How do you rate?"

"I think I rate pretty well, actually. How do you rate?"

He ignored my question, and went on, "I mean, how do you rate so you get to cut in front of me?"

"Look, this line is absurdly long," I explained. "You don't actually expect me to stand at the end of it, do you?"

He gave an incredulous snort. "Get real! I did. So did everybody else here. Which is why I ask: How do you rate?"

I remember at the time feeling a little confused by this question, and also irritated that he was being so persistent, rather than just accepting my place in the line. There was also some embarrassment and shame mixed in – more embarrassment than shame, I think; embarrassment that I had been caught – but not nearly as much as there should have been. Those were to come – especially the shame – when I thought, later that day, and then over the next 46 or 47 or 48 years -- about what I'd done, and what I could have been thinking. At the time, what I felt – or what I was most conscious of feeling – was irritation and

petulance, as well as foolishness, because my "plan" had so obviously failed. I left the line in a huff, but I did not go to the end of it. That would have been too obvious an acceptance of defeat. Instead, I went home – as if someone had done me wrong, rather than the other way around, and I needed the comfort of home to recover from the offense. I suppose I recognized, somewhere deep down, that I had done wrong, but I was not in a state of mind at the time to let that awareness come to the surface. I was in the full flower of my exceptionalism, and so it was very hard for me to back down. What if I did not rate higher than anyone else? What then? The back of the line for me? No way! Better not to play the game at all.

The shame of this incident has outlived its significance. My assholatry is still breathtaking when I think about it – hardly unique, but still breathtaking – and small as the incident was, I do not believe I will ever quite be able to live it down. What really gets me now is how unthinking and instinctual it was – not only the act of line-cutting itself, but the attitude I assumed once I'd perpetrated it. The petulance, the annoyance, the regal condescension. The Prince of Poland could have gone me none better in that regard. (Said royalty being somewhat more than a figure of speech for me, ever since I

discovered, a few years ago, a piece of music by Vivaldi entitled "Concert for the Prince of Poland". The riffs coming out of this were unavoidable: "Who do you think you are – the Prince of Poland?" "Well aren't you just the Prince of Poland?") I find myself experiencing, often, a strong desire to hit the rewind button and apologize to that guy in line. The impossibility of this wish does not preclude its persistent recurrence; nor does the wish itself cease to be a kind of corrective to me in my daily life -- a corrective much less momentous, but along somewhat the same lines as what Wordsworth meant when he said, in a famous crux in The Prelude, that his father's death, ten days after the 13-year-old Wordsworth returned home from boarding school for Christmas vacation, was a "correction of his desires". I think he was referring to the shocking disparity between his innocently looking forward to Christmas vacation and then experiencing his father's death. In light of the latter, the former seemed to him a horrible and presumptuous mistake that deserved "correction". No doubt it's an overstatement to say that I try to conduct myself, in my everyday life, in such a way as to correct that mistake I made almost 50 years ago. But it's not entirely wrong, either. The fact that I am, in at least some ways, that same guy who cut in the movie line is

never entirely absent from my mind. My exceptionalism lives on, if only in memory.

No, not only in memory. Because this whole genius thing is nothing if not exceptionalist. As I've matured (somewhat), and grown (somewhat), and learned (somewhat), my exceptionalism has been whittled away and corrected by life experience; but it's never entirely disappeared. And here's the thing. The thought that it ever should or even could entirely disappear is itself an exceptionalistic hope. For we are all exceptionalists, in our different ways. The will to excel, to stand out, to assert our uniqueness in some – in any – way above the crowd, is itself an exceptionalistic instinct, isn't it? Who doesn't in some way – in any way -- want to be different from the rest? Who doesn't in one way or another, want to be a "genius"? Maybe I should start a game show called "Who Wants to Be a Genius?" We could ask really difficult questions, and give really difficult books as prizes: Kant's Critique of Pure Reason; Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit; Heidegger's Being and Time. (I have read no more than 10 or 20 pages of any of these books; though it was from a study of Heidegger, by George Steiner, that I got the aforementioned epigram from Spinoza, which Steiner used as his epigraph.) Furthermore, all of the prizes would be

in the original German. I know I myself would never qualify to be a contestant on this show. But that's as it should be. I would be the host of the show, the master of ceremonies: the Monte Hall, the Regis Philbin, the Dick Clark. These, finally, are more my kind of people. In their company I feel at home. With them I find – I will have found – my place in the pantheon of genius. From Beethoven, to Einstein, to would-be poète maudit, to hopeful Classics scholar, to recognized "player" in the art of the personal essay, and – missing all those -- ending up as an Alex Trebek: a steady, life-long decline in aspiration from the heights of international genius to the plains of a fully-American mediocrity. And there, to make my final stand. To "become what I am": a kind of Nietzsche of the also-rans, the non-geniuses. Is that not too a consummation devoutly to be wished?