

Carlo Agonistes

or

No Time for Emerson

An Essay on the Vagaries of Hope

Last winter, after four years of a chronic, crippling, sometimes vegetative depression, and a series of ineffective medications with horrible side-effects - anti-depressants, mood-stabilizers and anti-psychotics, some of which would work for a short time and then stop working, and some of which didn't work at all - my friend Kate's husband Carl was diagnosed with catatonia. At first, when he had failed to respond to the medications, his doctors thought there might be something organic in his brain - a tumor, or a cyst. Then, when the brain scans came back negative, they thought it might be dementia - the kiss of death. But they weren't sure, and upon further examination at Stony Brook Hospital, the definitive diagnosis finally came back: it wasn't dementia, it was catatonia. For Kate, the news came as something of a relief, because with regular treatments of ECT (electro-convulsive shock therapy), catatonia can sometimes be reversible, whereas dementia never is.

So Carl has been getting ECT twice a week, and to give Kate a break on the driving, I sometimes take him to the hospital. Carl can't drive himself, since his license has been suspended until he can afford to pay his outstanding parking tickets. (Though with the catatonia, he wouldn't be driving anyway, even if he could.) Which is a double-whammy, because he loves cars. Always has. Every summer he loved to go to the Riverdale Raceway, on the east end of Long Island. I went with him once, and saw a giant four-wheeler a couple of stories high, it seemed like, casually trundle over a row of smashed cars, as though it were negotiating a bed of small rocks. Now Carl watches the NASCAR races on TV.

When he's feeling good, that is. When he's not, he has no interest in TV, or anything else. On those days, he just curled up in bed, in a fetal position: sometimes sleeping, sometimes not. Sometimes his eyes are open, staring - but, as they say, nobody's home. The ECT treatments start at 6:30 in the morning, the hospital's a half-hour away, and there are some mornings he just can't get himself up, and neither can Kate. Carl hates the treatments - who wouldn't? - though, by his own admission, they usually make him feel better afterwards, and more like his old self: joking, and curious, and aware of the world

around him, and even eager to start in on projects around the apartment: cleaning the grill, or repairing his bike, or watering the plants outside, on the border by the walkway (they live in a development), or working on an art project -- or even just watching the NASCAR races. On these days, the good days, Kate makes sure he sees the connection between how he's feeling and the ECT treatment he's just had. But when he feels bad, he forgets that he ever felt good.

As if the catatonia weren't bad enough, Carl - or Carlo, as I sometimes call him (he likes the moniker, maybe because it conjures up the image of an Italian hipster gunning his Ferrari through the streets of Rome) -- also has a severe learning disability, as well as a blood-clotting problem in his legs. He hasn't been able to work for years. Some days, when he's not having an ECT treatment, and is able to get out of bed, a van picks him up and drives him to a day program, where he gets occupational and art therapy. (Carl likes to make things; on the wall in their apartment is a piece he made out of dolls' shoes glued to a board, framed in a glass case.) But he's not crazy about this program, either - again, who would be? He'd much rather be working. This is a man who's been working at backbreaking jobs since he was 16:

carpet installer, power-washer, roto-tiller, schoolbus-driver - even, for a while, a chimney-sweep. He also kept a small vegetable garden for several years, in a plot of public land owned by the Town of Huntington. He'd like to be able to work again, but four years ago, he entered the shadow-lands, and hasn't worked since.

Kate is his primary caregiver. She herself suffers from bipolar disorder (first diagnosed when she was 12; she is now 61), and is on heavy-duty psych medication that has given her diabetes, and a pronounced tremor in her hands. She recently had five teeth pulled at the Stony Brook dental clinic, and was told she'd probably have to have the rest taken out and replaced with dentures. 50 years of psychotropic medication have caused her to put on weight, a lot of weight (though in high school she was shapely, and on the swim team). Three years ago she had to have a hip replacement. But she still suffers from arthritic pain, and walks with a heavy, rolling gait; the other hip may need to be replaced, too.

Grim as all this sounds -- and is -- Kate and Carl's life together is more - much more - than just a series of miseries. I think this is because of two things: love and poetry. I am not even so sure they are not, in the end, the same thing.

Kate is a poet - and I do not use the term lightly. She has the poetic gift: the gift of finding out the truth, the human truth - the big picture, and lots of little ones -- through an attentive regard, and then expressing what she sees in a way you don't forget. You can see this gift in what she writes, and hear it in what she says, and how she says it. Every word is spoken slowly (sometimes, to be honest, rather annoyingly slowly), and carefully chosen (though not too carefully; she's never pedantic), and carries the weight of truth. Carl's friends, in fact, used to call him "The Truth", for his tendency to call a spade a spade, and that goes for Kate as well. I call her "Mrs. Truth". Her laugh is wonderful, too: it comes in cathartic loud rolls, raucous and uninhibited -- almost orgasmic in its expression of a powerful relief.

About her poetry, I think I can speak with some authority. Over the last four years, since Carl's descent into the darkness, I have become a sort of editor to Kate - or maybe "coach" would put it more accurately. My coaching comes more in the way of general encouragement and suggestion than line-editing (though I do some of that, too). What I do is single out one or two lines that shine - points of light, you could say -- and have her run with them. Sometimes these lines happen in the almost daily

emails she sends me, and I tell her I think there's a poem in there somewhere. Maybe then she'll send the poem, and there'll be a few more lines that shine. And sometimes the whole poem shines. When that happens, my job is done, for the moment. No more assignments. (She sometimes calls me "Teach".) I don't love the moniker - it makes feel a little pedantic, which - unlike her -- I can be; but then it comes with the territory. I taught college English full-time for 22 years, until my school -- a small, private commuter college -- went belly-up last spring, right after graduation. This was no surprise, really - we'd seen it coming for years: no endowment, deep debt, precipitous drop in enrollment. At present I'm collecting unemployment, which is maybe why I've been thinking a lot lately about Kate and Carl (they're both on disability) -- that, and the fact that Kate is going through an unusually stressful time with Carl right now. "Caregiver burnout", she calls it.

A couple of days ago I got a despairing email from her. No poetry, no light - not even a point. It sounded like she was just barely hanging on. I probably should have phoned her right away - that would have been the right thing to do. But I didn't. To be honest, I didn't want to hear her voice. I'm not proud of this, but so it was. I was content in my little burrow of - well, contentedness,

my little comfortable contentedness of the moment -- and I didn't want to be disturbed by the sound of her voice.

(Sometimes it even bothers me to hear it on the answering machine.) It was all rather contemptible, I admit - but there I was, and I wouldn't be moved. Not even by the clarion call of human need - a friend's cry for help. And I think this "inconvenient truth" - the truth of my feeling so inconvenienced by her troubles, and even her voice - needs a fuller explanation.

The thing is, to talk to Kate, even for a few minutes (though it rarely ends up that way), requires fully entering her world. There is really no way around it. To do otherwise - and believe me, I've tried - means to experience a whole slew of feelings that end up being just not worth it: resentment, and feeling put-upon, and judgmental, and condescending, and impatient, and there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I. And I don't like feeling all that stuff. I've been there, and I don't like it. Besides which, it's no way to treat a friend.

And Kate and Carlo are friends - despite my occasional mean-spirited self-protestations to the contrary. They're friends because Kate was my late wife's friend, and Carlo is Kate's husband, and because - well, who knows why people become our friends? "Elective affinities", I suppose -

whatever that means. This mysterious phrase (and title -- though I never read the book) says it as well as anything else - perhaps better, in that it is, as a description, so... well, mysterious, and, as such, captures the fundamental mystery of friendship, cousin to the mystery of love. In any case, I've found that our conversations - Kate's and mine -- work much better, and my time is better spent, if I consent to enter her world. It's partly a selfish thing. I find I get more out of it - I actually get a lot out of it - if I enter her world; if I accept, as a given, the slow speech, and the more than occasional wry sighs, and the raucous, orgasmic laugh. (In catatonia-land, you take whatever kind of orgasms you can get; I know this from the horse's mouth.)

And once I do - once I make the decision to accept the Kate "pleroma", so to speak, and to enter her particular universe, the world of Kate and Carl (always the two of them, together), and to give myself over to this specific world (perhaps not unlike the way that Kate gives herself over to laughter), then a strange, gradual (but not all that gradual) change comes about. I would even call it a kind of transformation -- a transformation in myself; but not only myself; in her too, I think. In any case, I become a little bit different every time I talk to her. It

would not be wrong to say I become... a happier person. Perhaps even, for the space of our conversation, a better person. Certainly a more patient, and I think more understanding person. A more mutual person, if that makes any sense. (And if there even is such a thing. My resistance falls away - the resistance to the infringement of my time, and the comforts of my little burrow of convenience and self-sufficiency (a totally bogus self-sufficiency, as our conversations invariably reveal it to be). The resistance falls away, and there I am, in Kate and Carl's world. Mondo Carlo. But that world too, as I now apprehend it, is a little changed from what it was. It is no longer such a grim world - not entirely grim, anyway; and not nearly as grim as it had seemed to me before - before I gave myself over to it, and allowed myself to enter it.

There is a passage from Wordsworth - from his poem "The Poet's Epitaph" - that comes to me here: "And you must love him, ere to you/He will seem worthy of your love." Wordsworth's idea is a characteristically subtle one, and also paradoxical. It describes a kind of cart-before-the-horse situation: the act of loving precedes any kind of judgment about the worthiness about the love object; and any such judgement is really only a rationalization after

the fact - after the act. Loving is a leap of faith, and whatever justifications or explanations we later claim are secondary matters. Wordsworth's poetic formulation conveys the radical mysteriousness of loving -- the inscrutable nature of the "elective affinities" that lead us, willy-nilly, to make deep connections with other people.

But wait a minute, professor. Fond as I am of Carlo, I don't love him. I just mostly feel sorry for him. I'm not even sure I love Kate. My wife did, but I'm not sure I do. I feel friendship towards her - but I cannot say with certainty that I love her. But wait another minute. Maybe that's not even the point, whether or not I really love Kate or Carl, or just feel sorry for them. (And Carlo is no fool, either. He once told Kate, who told me, that he thought I left sorry for them. I said nothing; I just pretended I hadn't heard her.) Maybe the point is just that Kate loves Carl, and Carl loves Kate. Maybe that's the whole point of the thing. Or a large part of it, anyway. And the other part is friendship - another mystery. It's the commitment to friendship (the act, not the decision) that lets me - that makes me - enter the Kate-and-Carl world. That world becomes "worthy" of my love - and of my time, my "precious" time -- over my resistance, and my convenience, and my comfort -- only

after the fact, because I am their friend, and have already made the plunge.

But wait a third minute. Can you be friends with someone and feel sorry for them at the same time? Can you really even be friends with someone you feel sorry for? Isn't pity, in whatever degree, incompatible with genuine friendship? I will admit there have been times when, seeing from caller ID that it was Kate calling, I have not picked up the phone. When I told myself I couldn't "deal with her right now". At those times, when she called, I have even left the room, so as not to have to listen to the message she was leaving - or the voice that was leaving it. Because if I didn't listen to the message, or the voice, I somehow could not be held responsible - or feel guilty - for ignoring them. But of course I felt guilty anyway. Even though I felt I was being imposed upon - that my good will was being taken advantage of, and I resented this - I still felt guilty. Because, of course, I knew better than I knew. I was aware all along of my bad faith. A bad faith that included pity as well as resentment. And if you pity and resent someone, if only a little, can you really be said to be their friend?

That's the crux of it, isn't it? I knew there was something bothering me about my relationship with Kate and

Carl, and now I think I've found it. I'm a hypocrite. I'm pretending to Kate and Carlo that I'm their friend, but I secretly (and really not so secretly, since Carl knows) feel sorry for them, and resent the time they take up in my life. What an asshole!

But wait yet another minute. It was my idea to let them take up time in my life in the first place. It was my idea to volunteer to drive Carlo to the hospital. It was my idea - is my idea - to give myself over to conversations with Kate, because I get something (a lot, actually) out of them. And it was my idea to call Carl Carlo, and to create his alter-ego, the Italian race car driver. But no, I didn't even really create Carl's alter ego Carlo; I just discovered him. Because somewhere deep down, in an essential sense, Carl IS an Italian race car driver. If I were into metaphysics - the bogus kind, not the philosophical kind - I would say that in a former life, Carl WAS an Italian race car driver. In any case, that may be one of the reasons why he likes the appellation Carlo - because it is in some profound sense true, and he is, after all, The Truth. And so is Kate. And that's why, real as they are, my resentment and pity are really only skin-deep. And so is my hypocrisy. I'm still an asshole, but less of one than I thought.

Getting back to Kate's discouraged email -- I sent her, in response, a quote from Emerson. It was that wonderful passage from the first chapter of Nature, just before the famous "transparent eye-ball" passage:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear.

So what exactly was I thinking when I sent her this quote, in response to her despair over being caregiver to her catatonic husband? Well, to be charitable, I think it had something to do with finding beauty, and perhaps unexpected inspiration, in adversity. It had to do with the vagaries of hope. In not knowing where hope - any hope: hers, or Carl's, or mine -- might come from. And it seemed like a good enough idea at the time. The only thing was, I wasn't in Kate's world; I was somewhere else. Emerson's world, perhaps -- or my own. Or somewhere in between. Not a bad place to be, even; but not what Kate needed just then. She didn't need a pep talk; she didn't need Emersonian inspiration - a fine thing, a very fine thing, in its place. But that place wasn't here and now, and Kate wrote back a curt response, beginning with "No time for Emerson." I felt expostulated upon, my desires corrected (in the Wordsworthian sense: see "Expostulation

and Reply", and Book 11 of the 1805 Prelude, the second "Spots of Time" passage, where he's remembering the time just before his father died). I wasn't operating on her wavelength; I wasn't with her; I hadn't let myself enter her world. And perhaps deliberately: I'd had enough of her misery - enough of the Kate and Carl Horror Show.

And I also think I felt that I knew better - I knew better than their simple suffering.

What was it then that I knew, or thought I knew? Hard to say. It seems I was in the grips of a kind of Emersonian detachment - that Olympian detachment that gives him his famous apothegmatic purchase on a higher reality. The transcendental truth, uttered with the poet's turn of thought and phrase. How could it not speak to Kate, also a poet, with a poet's gift for apprehending and expressing the human truth of the matter? Easily, as a matter of fact. It very easily could not speak to her. And I must have sensed this myself, because in my email I had prefaced the Emerson quote with an acknowledgment of the difficulty of reading, of finding solace in the written word, when one is going through hard times. But my acknowledgment had been a superficial one, because I was bent on my way of thinking - my belief in the infallible ability of literature to meet, and master, the multifarious travails

of life. I would not be put off in my venture of enlightenment - my determination to enlighten Kate, to help her conquer and transcend the limitations of her life. But I had not been listening to her; or at any rate, I had not heard.

Yeah, what an asshole.

Am I being too hard on myself? My friends - Kate included - think I have a pronounced tendency in that direction. My answer to them is usually that what they see as self-flagellation is really just candid truthfulness. But maybe that is just a more flattering explanation, which presents me as the disinterested truth-seeker. (A less ingenuous version of Carl "The Truth", or Kate as "Mrs. Truth.") Another way to look at my perceived self-flagellation would be to see it as a kind of moral fishing for compliments. A desire to assume the moral high ground in the matter of stoic self-assessment. Indeed, the element of stoicism is a dead giveaway that pain is involved - pain is being inflicted, by me, on myself, rather than the simple truth (as it seems to me, and as I tell myself, and my friends) being observed and stated.

It was no wonder, then, under the circumstances - Kate and Carl's circumstances - that it was Emerson the Transcendentalist who was being invoked in my answering

email. For it was, apparently, my wish for Kate to somehow transcend the circumstances of her and Carl's life - to reach a different, higher point of purchase on their reality: a sort of supreme vantage point from which they might be able to apprehend a different, larger, higher truth. Because for the transcendentalist, there is always a higher truth. To paraphrase Emerson from somewhere else ("The Oversoul"?), the circumstantial realities of the physical world are only signs and symbols of a more permanent, spiritual reality.

Not that I was intending to offer up any of these Transcendentalist pearls to Kate at that moment; no, it was more for my own satisfaction that I was quoting Emerson. That was one problem. Another was that it (the quoting of Emerson) did not really satisfy me -- not even me, Emersonian that I was. His transcendentalist wisdom was indeed from another world - and there it remained. Sign and symbol, yes - but of no use to this particular poet right now, in this particular situation: of no use to Kate, who remained mired in the woes of the Kate and Carl World. Which I, this time, was not entering.

Ironically, it was a failure of the imagination (that Transcendentalist touchstone, along with "nature") on my part, the kind of imagination that was called for under the

circumstances - the particular circumstances that Kate and Carl were laboring under at the moment: particulars that would not, could not, be transcended.

I am reminded of a conversation I once had around 35 years ago with a colleague at Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank, where we were both working as scriptreaders in the early 1980s. I think it was right after the screening of a movie we were both "covering" as readers. I don't remember the movie, but I do remember that we had gotten onto the topic of suffering, and how people deal with it - how the people themselves that were suffering could deal with it. It mattered a lot, I said, how you grasped the problem: how you apprehended it, came to understand it, and even imagine it. Because both perception and understanding, I went on (as I could go on -- and still can!) also had to do with the imagination - with how the brain processed sensory and cognitive information. (At the time, I was taking extension philosophy courses at UCLA, and seriously thinking about going to grad school in philosophy. I hadn't yet read Coleridge's Biographia Literaria, where he talks about sense perceptions being connected with what he calls the "primary imagination", which is unconscious.)

"Well," said Jody (who'd already done a year or two in grad school at UCLA, in English), "you're saying we can

transcend our environment. I don't think we can. Our environment is real. You can't escape reality."

"No you can't," I agreed. "But I'm not talking about escaping reality. I'm talking about dealing with reality. And you need your imagination to do that."

"But the imagination can't change reality."

"No, but it can change our perception of reality."

"So? The perception of reality is not the same thing as the reality."

"True. But it can't be separated from it, either."

"You're arguing semantics," Jody said.

"No, it's not semantics. I'm thinking about the role of the imagination in reality."

"They're two different things. The imagination is in the mind. Reality is the outside world as it is. Unless you're talking about some sort of 'inner reality'. But that's a different thing again," Jody said.

"But it's not so easy to separate 'outer' and 'inner reality,'" I said. "I mean, the world as it is, as it exists physically, can be changed by the imagination."

(I had not yet read Wallace Stevens, either - The Man with the Blue Guitar:

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.")

"That sounds to me like wishful thinking," said Jody.

"Maybe - but not just wishful thinking," I replied.

"I'm interested in the role that the imagination plays in reality."

"Well, now you're talking philosophy," Jody said.

I don't remember how that particular conversation ended. I do remember feeling that Jody, whose cynical intelligence and wit I sometimes appreciated (and sometimes didn't), probably thought I was being too idealistic. And I probably thought he was being too cynical. He was the son of a very successful film producer -- a "child of Hollywood", as I saw it; I believe he'd grown up in Beverly Hills, and gone to Beverly Hills High. (We'd both gone to Berkeley at about the same time - mid-70s - and this formed a kind of loose connection between us.) But wait a minute -- was I not also a "child of Hollywood"? After all, my father was a screenwriter, who'd also had his measure of success. True; but in my view, I was not a "child of Hollywood" in the same sense that Jody was. I hadn't grown up in Beverly Hills - I'd grown up in Pacific Palisades, and gone to Exeter. (Not exactly a package of deprivation, either.) So who was I to be contemptuous of Beverly Hills?

The truth was, I was an intellectual snob. And Jody, for all his Hollywood cynicism (or maybe because of it), wasn't. He wasn't any kind of snob. Which is to say, he was under no illusions (for better or worse; worse, because some illusions can be salutary - especially those connected with a benign innocence. I am big on benign innocence; I call it "blamelessness," and wrote an essay called "On the Desire for Blamelessness.) Or at least, Jody's illusions - both nurtured and then exploded by the movies more than anything else, I am guessing -- were of a different cast than mine, which were fostered by books. I was always more of a "book person" than a "movie person" - which was probably why I never really felt I fit in at Warner Bros. (I left after five and a half years, to go to grad school - also in English - at USC.) And my father the screenwriter used to say to me, with equal parts rueful irony and straight sincerity, "If you want to be a writer, be a real writer, not a screenwriter." (I took him at his word -- and became neither. Which is to say, I became an academic.)

Funny how that casual conversation, so many years ago, has stuck with me. Jody, I see from googling him, is now a successful TV writer and producer. No surprise there; with all his smarts and connections, he surely wasn't going to

stay a scriptreader for very long. Yet here I am, these many years later, still feeling for some reason superior to him, no doubt by now a very rich man. On the grounds of what do I feel superior, other than my by-now inveterate inferiority complex? (For those with an inferiority complex feel somehow morally superior to the people they feel inferior to, do they not? But that is probably the subject of another essay.)

I think it may be on the grounds of Kate and Carl that I feel superior to Jody. Just as I felt superior, many years ago, on the grounds of my idealism, as opposed to his cynicism. Because the grounds of Kate and Carl (which include the grounds of the subsidized tract development, where they live, and also the grounds of the ECT leads that send current through Carlo's brain) are also the grounds of my peculiar brand of idealism: the grounds of suffering, and outward grimness, and inward imagination, and hope. For it is imagination, as I said to Jody many years ago, that gives hope in the midst of suffering. It is imagination that allows the mind to (partially) transcend reality (that "partially" is key), in the way that Emerson wrote about - and in the way that Jody did not think possible. (I have my doubts, as well.) But they remain doubts, and not certainties - or perhaps they are that

peculiar mixture of poetic doubt and certainty that allowed my master, Stevens, to write:

It is possible, possible, possible, it must
Be possible...

Sing it, Wally. Sing the song of hope and the imagination. Sing the song of Kate and Carlo, and their world: its suffering, its hope, its immanence, and its partial transcendence, through the imagination. The song of all of us. Even Jody.