

INGRID IN IDAHO

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"The world is as it is." A statement simple and profound. Viewed reductively it means no more than it says, probably less. If the second "is" means no more or contains no more nuance than the first, then the sentence asserts that the world exists, and no more is or can be known about it. The "as it is" is surplusage. We are. It exists. There is existence. To some, this is a minimal assertion of bedrock reality, which is quite satisfying. It prompts them to go no further. To others, it is an excuse, offering them an easy out. With a shrug of the shoulders, they can refuse to push the world to its limits and beyond. Too bad. They learn nothing of the richness that the more optimistic or at least adventuresome experience as they explore that second is. Such a thinker takes a more expansive view: The world is as it is, but to discern "how it is" is to embark on the journey of discovery that life can be in all its multi-form splendor, or ambiguity. Granted, we are, but what does that entail, and how do we come to know it?

These questions I have been asking myself for almost six decades now, and I think perhaps I come closer to learning something about this world, how it is as it is as the days pass by. Tonight I want to share with you a journey of discovery along the path of the world as it is. It involves, as you might have expected, my frequent fellow traveler and co-student of the nature of being, former Cincinnati insurance executive, Thomas V. Blakeley, now a teacher of high school English at the Indian School in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

I gathered what I am about to tell you on a trip we took last summer. Susan and I had gone to a seminar, conveniently held in Santa Barbara, and stopped in Santa Fe on our way home to visit with Tom and his newish wife Sally. Because Sally was hard at work on Bill Richardson's successful gubernatorial campaign, we saw little of her. However, she did take the time to have dinner with us. As we settled down with after dinner drinks at Geronimo, a fashionable watering hole and restaurant along Canyon Road, Tom and I began to reminisce about our exploits during another tumultuous campaign year, 1968.

One August morning that year "Verg," as we called Tom, and I found ourselves high up the side of Mount Washington in the Cascade Range of Central Oregon. Fingers of fog splayed down the mountain. It was damp, and dew stuck to the branches of the evergreens sprouting out of the red, rocky soil. Climbing up the mountain on the long, generous rolling switchbacks, we felt as if we were looping up the mountain in aimless circles. We thought we had the mountain to ourselves, and indeed saw no one until we finally spied a slender young man, no older than ourselves slowly wending down the incline opposite us. Eventually he reached us. We traded laconic greetings. He passed

on, back into the fog that lay below us. We went on up the mountain a ways, where I sprained my knee and had to hobble back down and out with Tom's patient help.

This was good for some laughs about our advancing age and some rueful thoughts on my part that Tom looked as if he had been doing a lot more hiking than I have over the years I have been mired here in Cincinnati. But perhaps I had better get back to the subject of this paper. You've noticed that I am no place very close to Idaho, and no one named Ingrid has yet appeared. So we had better get back to Cincinnati, and only after a stop here head in the direction of Idaho.

This is what Tom told us later that night in Santa Fe, after he and I got through our reminiscing. It is probably best to let him tell it in his own words:

I was sitting in my den one hot Sunday afternoon in July a few years ago, watching golf. It was a hellish time, even though I had played a brisk nine earlier that morning. I was home alone. My dear wife Grace had died only a few months before, and I had barely begun to get used to the loneliness of a house that had once been occupied by another very near and dear. I felt as if my life was going in meaningless circles. The silence of the house was palpable and haunting, and so I had the television on almost all the time. I like golf anyway, and so I tried to kill two birds with one stone that sultry summer afternoon. It was one of those tournaments that follow each other in mindless procession between the grand slam tournaments and, in alternate years, the Ryder Cup. This was back in the early 90s, before Tiger Woods emerged in all his glory. Tiger is the white man's dream, a well spoken college graduate, who wears fitted trousers, speaks the Queen's English, hits the ball a mile and wins most tournaments, without even a hint that he would rape your daughter and steal your car, or even your stereo.

But I digress. I love golf. I played in high school and college. Not on any team though, but at local courses, and wherever I was invited. I gave the game up with the pressure of business as the Walt Blakeley Agency was taking off in the early 70s, and only came back to it when the kids were grown and gone. Work got easier then. I would get out to the Country Club a couple of afternoons most weeks and played early almost every Saturday morning. I often played with Tony and our friend Bill Borek. We were always dueling for the earliest starting time with some guys a lot of you would know. That Sunday afternoon was different than any I had experienced in a long time. The phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Dad, it's me, Ingrid." I knew there was trouble already. Ingrid never introduced herself. When she called, which was almost never, she just started talking. She knew I recognized her voice. It was just like her mother's, and her mother was gone. After Grace had succumbed to cancer earlier in the year, there had been a short spate of frequent calls between Ingrid in Idaho and me. But we were soon back to long stretches of silence, broken by brief chats, late in the evening, never on Sunday afternoon.

"Honey, what's up?" said I. I dared not say, "what's the matter?" Ingrid was a modern woman. She was sensitive and would view that as too intrusive, almost judgmental. She would take my inference that something was wrong in the world as an assessment that there was something wrong with her. For some reason she took everything I said the wrong way. Nevertheless, I hit the mute button on the remote, and listened to Ingrid's tale of woe. As her story unfolded, I half noted an extraordinary run by Fred Couples. When Ingrid finally hung up in tears, Couples had surged by the faltering Davis Love and taken the tournament by two strokes, birdying 18 while Love bogeyed two of the final three holes.

But back to her conversation. After a faltering start, with news of the kids and the art show she was going to chair in the fall, Ingrid blurted, "Daddy, Gene's moved out. We're getting a divorce. I don't know what to do." I was stunned, not least because I was genuinely fond of Gene, but also and maybe even more so because I had had no inkling that there was trouble.

The call was a plea for help, unspoken but hanging in the air. Ingrid may have done this, volunteered news of her own dismay and unhappiness, once or twice in her life. I remembered a tearful session following a bitter fight with her best friend over a boy in high school. I vaguely remembered another crisis of that stripe, but couldn't place it. Grace had always taken care of that kind of stuff, but now there was no one to turn to but me.

"Ingmar," I said. "I'll be there tomorrow night." I had done some quick calculations. Fred Henderson, my right hand man could handle the Agency--he did most of the work any way--and my secretary Teri would reschedule my lunches and golf game. I caught the tournament wrap up as I made my reservation. This all occurred blessedly in the days before next day tickets cost you \$1300.

Late the next afternoon, I arrived in Idaho Falls, anticipating a scene of disorder and early sorrow. I had only to pick up a car and drive down the interstate to Pocatello. Ingrid was about 30 then. She had gone to Denison and then to New York City to work in an investment house. Somehow and somewhere she met Gene. He was finishing up his Ph.D. in art history at Princeton. The tender green shoot of a gnarled but distinguished old New York family, Gene lived in the family co-op on the Upper East Side and commuted to Princeton as necessary. Gene and Ingrid fell in love and married. We had thought the marriage was lovely, with the service at St. Mary's and the reception in our back yard, under the obligatory white tent. Gene's parents were gracious if distant people. I had especially enjoyed the splendid round of golf that Gene's dad had treated me to on our obligatory "meet the parents" visit to New York. Gene's father belonged to a well appointed club in Westchester, and its spacious fairways were much kinder to my game than the narrow ones at the Cincinnati Country Club.

At any rate, Gene tried to hook on at Columbia or Yale, or even NYU so he could stay close to home, but a satisfactory post eluded him. Jobs were hard to come by. The only thing approaching a conventional appointment he could land was a three-year non

renewable stint at Wichita State. When that ended his doctoral adviser shoe horned him in at Idaho State, and that is where we find Ingrid as our story unfolds. She had done odd jobs, banks, brokerage house, before and after the birth of her two sons, my only grandchildren. Gary was four and Fred a little over two.

Gene and Ingrid lived in a neighborhood of larger older houses in a green area of town not far from campus. Their house had the customary look of one inhabited by young academics. Hand me down items matched to a degree some paint your own items. These jangled a bit against a few nice pieces that came from Gene's parents. Make shift bookshelves lined every available wall along with posters of art openings and museum shows of years past, and prints of old master works and French Impressionists. I noticed several items that I had forgotten shipping off to Idaho at Grace's behest. Other vaguely familiar pieces had probably come from the family manse in Cincinnati as well.

After finding my way to the house with some difficulty, I alighted from my rental car just before what I thought would be dinner time. Instead of a weebegone Ingrid I found Ingrid nowhere in sight. Gary, my four year old grandson, heir presumptive to the Blakeley fortunes second in line only to my son Walt Whitman Blakeley, met me at the door, dimly recalling an old man he had seen somewhere sometime before--but clearly not someone to let into your house when your mother wasn't home.

"Gary," I scared him with my peremptory tone. "I'm your grandfather. Open the door. Where's Mommy?"

"She's across the street. She said she would be back soon."

"So let me in." There must have been some softness in my tone, because lo and behold, he did. This left me to get acquainted with the boys. They were busy in the glassed in porch, probably enclosed thirty or forty years before, that served as their play room. Toys, clothes, balls and books were strewn everywhere. The TV blared to the cavorting of a purple blob that vaguely resembled a dinosaur. Confronted with this, I tried futilely to gain the attention of my grandsons.

Thankfully the door opened a few minutes later. Instead of falling disconsolately into my sheltering arms, Ingrid pecked me briskly on the forehead, avoided a clinch and shot up the stairs, a dress under her arm.

"Dad, you'll take the boys down to Pizza Hut for dinner, won't you? I'm really late."

Late for what? I would have objected to this rude request, but when I saw the look of delight on the faces of the two boys, I demurred. Instead, after a few shouts upstairs and down, finding out just where this glorious Pizza Hut was and how to get there, I started to get the boys ready. I cleaned Gary up and even changed Fred's diaper, a task I had managed to avoid on almost all occasions three decades before. I couldn't stand the thought of facing the chaos in the playroom alone, so I organized a work detail. The boys were reluctant to join in until I explained to them in what I thought was high

good humor that there would be no pizza until the area was policed to spotless order. This went nowhere, but when I stumbled onto turning it into a game to see who could fill a basket or a milk crate faster, things shaped up. I probably did no more than 80% of the work.

As we three pizza hunters were going down the walk to my car, we got a hearty hello from a swarthy, muscular young man striding purposefully up it. The boys knew this athletic figure as "Marco." They were delighted to see him.

My speechlessness lasted until we were situated at the Hut and had ordered our pizza. After that I quickly learned that Marco was Mommy's friend. The boys liked Marco. He was a coach on the football team, and took the boys to see the stadium and threw balls with them. Daddy didn't like Marco. Daddy and Marco had had a fight. Daddy pushed Marco when Daddy came over one morning, and knocked Gary's cereal all over the floor. Daddy called Mommy a bad name and left.

I chewed on all of this more than on my extra crusty deep dish pizza as I took the boys home, only getting lost for ten minutes, gave them baths, read them stories, and tucked them in for the night. My darker fears disappeared when Ingrid silently appeared about 11:30, smiling softly and not at all disheveled.

"Ingmar--" I began. The smile disappeared as she cut me off. "My name is Ingrid. Please don't call me that idiotic name any more. I've always hated being called the name of that moronic Swedish boxer." Things didn't get much better from there. I tried to register my dismay at her offhand welcome. I hadn't come halfway across the country to be a babysitter. I made the mistake of questioning her going out with this Marco character so soon after splitting up with Gene. When I referred to her date as Marco Polo, she exploded.

"Can't you take anything seriously? I really like him, and I am finished with Gene. I hope he crawls back to his shitty parents in New York City. I don't know what I am going to do. I'm sorry I ever let you come here. You don't have any idea what my life is like."

That got my attention. I certainly did not know what was going on. I took a deep breath and decided to back off and ask some questions in as non-threatening a tone as I could summon up on short notice. Why was she so angry with me? I was just there to help. The rejoinder was that Gene had never taken her seriously, and I didn't either. He didn't need her. He only pined away at not being back in New York and didn't give a damn about her life. And I had always been the same way. Marco was different –

This got things started. We talked for hours. She railed at me at first, but calmed down when she sensed, after I was able to shed my initial confused defensiveness, that I was really listening. She rightly saw that I was genuinely interested in what she had to say.

She had always felt that I was more interested in Walt, her brother than I was in her. I was disappointed at Walt's not getting into Columbia, but thought that Denison was good enough for her. I took Walt to see the Reds and Bengals and didn't do much with her at all after she was too old to enjoy the Nutcracker. And I paid no attention to her friends at all although I seemed to know everything that Walt had been up to, even his pot smoking when he went to Walnut Hills.

Some of this criticism was unfair, although I held my tongue most of the time. I had shown a lot of interest in Ingrid's education. I couldn't count all the times I had encouraged her to study more, work harder, and when her SAT scores came in, it was I who consoled her at being a little short of qualifying for the Ivies. I showed her just how good the Ohio private schools, like Denison, Wittenberg, Kenyon, Oberlin and the rest could be. She and I made a memorable swing through Central Ohio to look at colleges her Junior autumn at Seven Hills. I remembered the foliage as being lovely that year. I did have to admit to myself that she was righter than she knew about her friends. I had to admit that I hadn't paid much attention to them, with a few significant exceptions. The girls I did remember were either over at our house at all hours of most days and nights or so well endowed that I couldn't begin to forget them. This is something I never admitted to Grace or anyone else, and I didn't stop Ingrid in the middle of her tirade to tell her about it, either.

After a long, long ramble, she calmed down. I helped out by not being angry or defensive. I focused on the present. I only mentioned that I was there to support her. I had come all the way from Cincinnati, in the middle of a very busy time for me--this was a lie--just to help her out.

This part was true. She was probably distraught because her mother wasn't there to comfort her in this very difficult time. God knows I certainly felt my wife's absence, now more than ever. Grace had always dealt with the kids' psychological and emotional issues, and I felt very much at sea in having to deal with Ingrid, including the fact that she was lumping me in with all men: not only had Gene failed her. I had done so too.

I went to bed but could hardly sleep. I was depressed by her split with Gene and felt anxious and guilty at my own inattention to her welfare. How much was I to blame? I had the sickening feeling that I had been too concerned with my own problems, and had neglected the very real heartache of my one and only daughter.

When I got up after a fitful night, the house was still quiet. Ingrid was still asleep. I put on the coffee and started prowling in the cabinets for utensils and provender. As could be predicted, I opened the food cabinets while searching for bowls and plates, and the cabinet for glasses when I went back to get the cereal. I opened and closed the knife and fork drawer three times before I discovered that Ingrid kept her spoons in an ancient earthenware Dundee Marmalade crock--not unlike the one we used to have in our own kitchen. Maybe it was the same one.

The stylistic and tactical echoes of Grace, my wife and her mother, did not escape me, although I did not instinctively get the hang of where things should be in the kitchen. Grace had often criticized me for this, and I was glad that Ingrid was not there to see that I had failed to notice her instinctive modeling of her own nest after her mother's. Why did that instinct elude me? I asked myself that question as I spied the Marmalade crock. The disturbing conversation of the night before must have jarred me into some old memories and into at least one new perception. I had failed to absorb my wife and my daughter's instinctive sense of domestic harmony.

As this rueful thought began to dawn on me, I was interrupted by the approach of Fred with a clearly loaded diaper, and Gary with his nose leaking like a rusty faucet. I was getting the hang of things in the infants and boys' hygiene department, for I was able to clean up the young lads fore and aft with minimal confusion and without a rising gorge. After fighting a losing battle with the boys over whether they should eat Special K or Grape-Nuts, grandpa's favorite cereal, I gave them heaping bowls of Coco-Krispies. It was only after I had ushered them into the playroom, dressed them for the day and cleaned up the kitchen that Ingrid emerged from her boudoir. I had heard discreet rumblings from upstairs during breakfast. I surmised that my service as default babysitter was part of the initiation ritual for me that seemed to be in progress.

Ingrid was cheerfully chatty about the movie she and Marco had seen the night before. Conversely, she was shy and diffident about our conversation of the midnight hours. She would not look me in the eye. As we drank our coffee we talked desultorily and gradually planned the day. She would run to the supermarket while I rode herd on the boys. Then we would go to the municipal pool and watch the boys swim--splash in the water, that is.

By eleven we were at the City Park, sitting at the edge of the children's pool. The park took up a whole city block. The children's pool was close to the street. Across the street was a row of nondescript red brick houses stretching down the block to the next corner and for several blocks in each direction, as far as I could see. There was little car, and virtually no foot traffic. Looking up that street, in a moment out of time, I saw it all. The original ocean that covered the entire earth. The Rockies emerging from the muck, rising into the sky. Century upon century of nothingness, then strange creatures I cannot even name, then dinosaurs, and only some thousands of years ago, the woolly mammoth, the saber tooth tiger. Finally the buffalo and the Indian.

For thousands of years, many eons before the houses appeared, this place had watched the steady progression of wind and weather, the march of winter into spring, of summer to fall, and winter again. And as we sat watching the boys splash happily I felt that this was good, better than anything that I had ever perceived. Back in reality, the boys continued to cavort happily as Ingrid and I talked at sixes and sevens. We subsided after some time into silence. My reverie continued. I gazed up the street at the mute immemorial houses. After a brief, efficient period of extermination of the Indians, Pocatello arose and these houses that I saw and their inhabitants presumably oblivious to all I contemplated in that epiphanal moment.

And yet as I looked up this anonymous street, unknown everywhere outside Pocatello and largely unknown within, and of no importance anywhere, I perceived what I had been striving to find my whole life, however fitfully. The world is as it is. No amount of ambitious striving ever adds to or subtracts from this bedrock fact. All of my calculations and harried effort were as nothing to the witness of this street, pregnant with indomitable silence. Here I was nothing, but the realization was everything. The street had existed for some years before I was born and before that for ages it had been an empty field, occasionally trafficked by coyotes and buffalo, but the same whether it was me there or a passing prairie dog. The only thing that mattered was that I was there with my daughter and my two grandsons at a very important moment for all three of them.

The anxiety I had felt since Grace's death, welling up almost at the moment I saw her draw her last breath, fell away. I looked at her avatar, my daughter Ingrid. Her domestic troubles had only increased my disquiet. But now as I gazed at her, and saw her looking contentedly at the boys, I sensed that she felt the same oceanic feeling as that welling up in me, the fullness and ongoingness of life. Our boys would live, with only a little luck, long into the 21st century. She was unaware of my gaze at her. The worry lines that I had not remembered on her face, but which had been there the night before, had for the moment melted away. She was serene and at peace.

I appreciated for probably the first time that she was a mature woman. I could see the bond that she had with her boys. I also knew for the very first time that she could suffer the same trepidations and fears that I did, and I sensed that she had the same feelings of hope and despair, and yes, the same feeling of reckoning with an anonymous universe, one that is what it is, one to which we conform, because it will bend only so far to accommodate us. And if we realize that, the accommodation is all the more easy and fulfilling. I ruefully realized that she had not just come to awareness of it, as I did. She had gained it sometime before. Or had she had it forever?

Feeling anxious myself, I pulled both of us back to the moment with a question about the future. What did she plan to do? She told me that she would stay in Idaho. She had a good support system in a number of women who were counseling and comforting her as she went through the throes of divorce. There were still the issues of support, custody, and visitation to work through, and the divorce would be settled in the local courts. She had to stay. Finally there was Marco. She really liked him and he had another year on his contract with the University.

Then she faltered. She told me how uncertain she was about almost everything, and wondered whether her staying in Idaho wasn't just emotional paralysis caused by her fear of change. The scene was absolutely clear to me. I was totally focused on what I needed to say. It was a defining moment, and I couldn't be glib in the face of her unhappiness. I took a deep breath. I chose my words carefully, summoning up the simple concepts that I normally passed off as wisdom, the random accumulation of perceptions gleaned from particular events that I applied generally to my own and indeed to all human experience. I told her to take it easy. She should wait a while, two years

maybe, before moving on or making any serious commitments. In the end, everything would work out fine. She was young and had most of her life ahead of her. If she looked at her past actions and learned from them, she would make good decisions about her future. Especially if she took her time making them, if she didn't panic.

Amazingly these bromides seemed to have a soothing effect on her. Her tears dried, and she was actually grateful. She thanked me, and as we bestirred ourselves to leave the pool, she hugged me for the first time since I had arrived on this harrowing mission. We swabbed the boys down and headed for home.

I stayed a few more days, and we talked about the future, and the past. However, the defining events of the visit had taken place. As *pater familias* I took Ingrid, the boys and Marco out to dinner one night--not at Pizza Hut, but at a somewhat more distinguished Italian restaurant that actually had cloth napkins and table coverings. The food wasn't far superior to the Hut's though. Marco presented as a fine young man, with some emphasis on young. A little deft questioning revealed that he was five years younger than Ingrid. My guess, which later turned out to be true--thank God--was that this romance would burn itself out.

One afternoon I ran into Gene when I went to the supermarket to pick up some Pampers. He seemed almost sheepish when he saw me. I had the sense that he would have ducked into the next aisle if I had not already stopped him with a hearty hello. There seemed to be a young woman lurking just out of my circle of vision who was keeping an eye on us, but I will never be sure of that. Companioned or not, he was forced to stop and chat for a few minutes. We agreed that we were both fine fellows and that it was all a shame that things had not worked out. When we shook hands I felt that this was a valedictory that would last until someone in the family died or one of the boys married. This has so far turned out to be true. I quickly pushed down the rueful realization that I would never play golf again at his father's truly lovely country club in Westchester County. That has sadly been true as well.

My last day in Idaho, I had a flight out at mid afternoon. Late in the morning I was out in the yard with the boys practicing some short iron shots, introducing them to the wedges, when there was a call from Terri, my secretary. We still called secretaries' secretaries then rather than administrative assistants. Someone from Acordia, the big insurance conglomerate had called. Would I meet him for dinner one night next week? Thus were planted the seeds for my sale of the agency and removal to Santa Fe, only months later.

We will leave Tom there in Idaho for a few more hours, playing with his grandsons. You already know about his removal to Santa Fe and his career change. Indeed, he is still teaching at the Indian School. He and his new wife, Sally are quite happy. Susan and I traveled with them to Italy late last November. We had a great time. Sally was recuperating from her hard work on Bill Richardson's successful campaign for the governorship of New Mexico. Sally has a very responsible position in the governor's

office. Perhaps we will hear more about that some day, as I am sure we will about Bill Richardson.

By the way, when Susan and I were out in Santa Fe visiting Tom last summer, who stopped by the house but Ingrid, and her boyfriend - not Marco but a good looking, intelligent and very pleasant geologist from the Earth Sciences Department at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Ingrid is working on an advanced degree at the university. She and the geologist, recently divorced himself, seem to get along very well. The boys, now in their early teens, look tanned and fit and wear their UNM Lobos tee shirts with a great deal of pride and panache. Tom and Ingrid seem to have a much improved relationship. He knows all about her studies, and rattled off to us a litany of what she, the boys and their geologist friend were up to. We were treated to a lengthy slide show of the boys' exploits on the soccer pitch and of Ingrid's house on the north side of Albuquerque. Ingrid likes the location because she makes the trip up 1-25 to see Tom and Sally often. After all, she moved to New Mexico to be close to her father.

I was going to stop right there. But I have been having a disturbing dream over the last several weeks that I must share with you. I guess the story I have just told has been on my mind. God knows I was worried about the reception it would have here, as you might imagine. Anyway, the dream is always the same. It takes me back to that mountain in Oregon where we left Tom and me some thirty minutes and thirty-five years ago. This time, in my dream, Tom and I are standing on the same trail on Mt. Washington, where we climbed so many years ago. Groves of aspen, their leaves ablaze sway back and forth in the wind, their foliage like banners aloft, rushing to and fro. The same young man comes down the opposite slope, no older than he was back in 1968, and in the same 1960s costume, a scraggly beard, bandanna, tie-dyed shirt. It all seems so real, the mists of thirty-five years of forgetfulness fall away as if the intervening years never existed. Now, however, when the young hiker pulls even on the curve of the trail with Tom and me, Tom, my guide, turns and without a word of farewell walks off with his new companion down the path and out of the valley.

I awoke almost with tears in my eyes the first time I had the dream. It is still disturbing to me. I don't know what it means. But I can't get that final image out of my mind. At the end, it is me, alone on the trail, on the side of the mountain.
