

## Oddjob: Ruminations from Captiva or Narcissism Revisited

January 9<sup>th</sup> 2010... OK, here it is – I’ve finally started. I’m sitting in a hotel room at the ‘Tween Waters Inn resort on Captiva Island, Florida once again being an entertainer with the legendary Modulators from Cincinnati, Ohio. We are in the midst of a record-breaking cold snap (because of its protraction, it feels more like a long zipper). It’s actually record-breaking: nothing like it since the ‘20’s. Although the temps are in the mid 40’s, the wind is from the north, cold, cutting and gusting 25. It’s overcast and if the sun were out I’d probably still be playing tennis. But, it’s not; so it’s cold and this room with its rattan furniture, island paintings, and dolphin motif seems to be mocking me and since I’ve put off writing this paper for over a year, I’m out of excuses and procrastinations. So, I’m thinking, “what the fuck, let’s do this!”

He was mean and scary, like a great behemoth sumo wrestler, so he looked out of place in a 3-piece suit. I don’t think he ever spoke, just grunts, growls, groans and expressions; but not much nuance in his stark kabuki-like visage; representations of menace, anger, and rage was all. The most compelling part of the movie, as viewed by a seventh grader at the Pope Air Force Base Post Theatre (besides the sex kittens, all of whom seemed to have the “pussy” prefix in their names) was the Asian bad guy whose girth took up most of the screen and that deadly Frisbee bolo hat that, when flung correctly, could inflict a horrible death by de-capitation or worse. You guessed it, yes, Oddjob from Ian Fleming’s James Bond series in Goldfinger. He was a henchman to Auric Goldfinger and was impervious to pain and an archetype for ruthless strength in the Bond films.

But this paper’s not about him.

I came up with the idea of choosing a few of the most unusual, interesting and bazaar segments of my working life so far, nearly two years ago. By the way the definition of odd as strange doesn't occur until the 6<sup>th</sup> entry in the fourth edition of the New World Dictionary of the American Language the previous five being about numbers. Because, I've been kind of a Walter Mitty of part-time work, I believed I had a niche, an edge, a rarified work history that few of you have ever thought about, therefore engendering this little talk with something different, maybe funny, and even a little educational. My original idea was to tell a few stories tied together with ruminations on the philosophy of work, through mostly anecdotal and personal observation. But, after even a cursory review, I was astounded to find that the philosophy of work is a vast subject. Duh! Questions like "What's Blue Collar? What's White Collar? Are there other collar colors? How are Vocation and Avocation related? What is a Job? If it's fun, can it be work? And how does one define a career?" are just the tip of this philosophical iceberg.

It has been with much chagrin and embarrassment that I found that there are whole divisions and even university departments of Philosophy, multiple library shelves and endless essays written on the subject from Aristotle to Diderot and d'Alembert's 27-volume "Encyclopedie" published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (that lifted for the first time in print ,the trades and craftsmanship) to more recently, Stud Terkle's excellent book "Work" and Alain de Botton's new book "The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work". Suddenly this fun little paper about silly part-time and seasonal work was in danger of becoming heavy, boring and well out of the cerebral range of the writer.

(First Aside -Here I'm going to advocate once again the idea of a special dispensation for the music director/coordinator/performer in the Literary Club's Holiday presentation. After all, when I was in Jr. High, I represented my school at the regional forensic competition by singing the "Impossible Dream". So it seems to me that the powers that be in the club could come to an agreement that an

arbitrary number (say 3) of holiday presentations would equal one paper. If I ever make it into the hierarchy of this organization (and God help us all if I do), I'll work to make that special dispensation a reality.)

Here are a few rhetorical questions to ponder as I slog forward in whatever this paper becomes: "Do practice and study fall into a category of the definition of work? To what extent does sweat and manual labor constitute the euphemism of an "honest day's work"? Where does ambition fit into the equation? Does one need to be paid in order to call something work? & What is the relationship of value to work?"

When I was a kid, through grade school and high school, I, like many of you did the kinds of work that kids do. A few actual jobs and other work that fell into the category of chores. My dad had an Air Force career and twice in my childhood took year-long stints in Alaska leaving me and my mother in rural Georgia to live with my grandparents on her side. It was then that I learned about subsistence gardening and the chores related. Among the things I learned from my grandmother were shucking and cleaning corn, picking and cleaning field peas, beans and peanuts. To this day I have a love of working the soil and reaping its rewards. In those years, I spent a lot of time with mom and grandma in the kitchen and because of that, developed what I believe are fearless cooking skills. There really is nothing better than those little brown field peas seasoned with a little fatback or a ham bone served over rice with some corn bread....but I digress.

As pre-teen, when we lived in the suburbs of Fayetteville, North Carolina, I sold seeds door-to-door and made enough to get a BB gun. I also mowed lawns and collected bottles for spending money. But when I was 12, I believe because I was the biggest kid at school (I was the same height less 50 pounds that I am today) my dad got me a job, thinking I needed to learn responsibility. An ulterior motif I think, was to disperse some of my manic energy. At that young age, I was set up with a codger from

the trailer park. My job was to break up concrete slabs with a sledge hammer. In that hot humid Georgia sun I lasted no more than the morning shift.

Those were some of my nascent forays into the confusing, yet rewarding world of business. Later in high school, I worked a variety of paying and non-paying jobs including the Tastee Freeze (when fast food wasn't that fast), going to gigs with my 10<sup>th</sup> grade band director, Dennis Dixon, pulling and rebuilding the engine of a '57 VW and working on my Triumph motorcycle. For a short time I tried selling the Filter Queen vacuum cleaner door-to-door, thinking charisma was a practical skill that could be developed, but I failed miserably; although it was a great machine.

But of course there was practice. For at least 2 years I was seldom separated from my trumpet and I still attribute my endurance on the horn to my mother, who made me practice inside the car with the windows rolled up; again, in the hot Georgia sun. I'd last for 20 minutes, come out drenched with sweat and very near death, but could eventually play among other things the diminished 7<sup>th</sup> triad up, down, upside down and backwards in every key.

In Alain De Botton's "The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work", the author follows the creation of a biscuit (what American's would call a cookie) from the initial concept, through all the focus groups, branding and packaging to post-production. In that chapter, he answers the question "When does a job become meaningful?"

(Quote) "Whenever it allows us to generate delight or reduce suffering in others. Though we are often taught to think of ourselves as inherently selfish, the longing to act meaningfully in our work seems just as stubborn a part of our make-up as our appetite for status or money. It is because we are meaning-focused animals rather than simply materialistic ones that we can reasonably contemplate surrendering security for a career helping to bring drinking water to rural Malawi or might quit a job in

consumer goods for one in cardiac nursing, aware that when it comes to improving the human condition a well controlled defibrillator has the edge over even the finest biscuit.” (End Quote)

But even the work of cookie manufacture does, in a miniscule way, bring delight to the world. I mean, couldn't one be doing what seemed a meaningless job and only realize later that that job was a cog of a greater good, say being in a production line for Oreo's? And like looking in a rearview mirror, doesn't meaning become ever clearer with perspective? Still, to me, many questions remain about the nature of work and; Isn't meaningfulness subjective?

Through college and grad school I performed a number of non-musical work that paid the bills, including construction, landscaping, and especially hospital work. Hospital folk are a great clan ; real people. They are both hope-filled and realistic, cynical and loving. I learned a lot about life working in the trenches of healthcare. As an orderly and nursing assistant, I worked the ER, Intensive Care, surgical and medical floors and the psych ward. I've cleaned and prepped nearly every human orifice, held people down for shock treatments, and walked patients hand-in-hand through Burnett Woods to Graeters for a treat. I learned sterile procedures and performed catherizations. I subdued my share of belligerent drunks, took the dead to the cooler and, all the while, had the wonderful fringe benefit of helping nurses in every way. (There's something about a woman in a costume, er, uh,...uniform).

But, in the summers between 1974 and 78, I had three jobs that could really be called "odd". For two years in college, through the generous altruism of a wonderful general practitioner & gentleman farmer, Dr. Robert Boyd, my friend Tommy Tucker (yeh, that was his real name and he did occasionally sing for his supper ) and I became the caretakers of Dr. Boyd's civil war-era farm house and property shared with 100 head of longhorn Herford cows. The farm property was just outside the town of Winchester, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley on about 800 acres of rolling hills with a creek ,a good size spring fed pond and a 200-acre apple orchard. Dr. Boyd had heard there were two college students

who were working part-time as orderly's and offered to let us stay in the vacant property for only the cost of utilities, which was minimal as the house was heated only by a wood stove. In the cold winters of '76 and '77 it was a constant battle to keep the pipes from freezing. There was some heavy equipment: a bulldozer and a couple of tractors along with four mini bikes in a shed area next to the farm house and having someone in the house would curtail thieves, vandals, and other riff raff. The house sat up on a hill and had a sight line a mile down a rocky road to the paved country road. The living portion was a 100 year old two story white frame house with an adjacent stone edifice that was a kitchen and had been requisitioned in the Civil War and used as a hospital. We were sure there were ghosts, and going to the kitchen in the dark almost always involved something of the paranormal. They'd manifest themselves in little things like low moans, sparkling lights and the fridge always coming ajar, then again, it could have been the pharmaceuticals. Among our responsibilities were making sure the cows didn't jump the grate between fields...they were especially prohibited from the orchard. If and when they did, they'd eat apples until their stomachs would explode and die. In two years, it happened once; since we were full-time students and part-time orderly's and weren't always around to catch them. But when we were, we'd jump the mini bikes like crazy cowboys and herd the errant cow to the proper field.

In the spring we helped with the birthing and gelding of animals with Dr Boyd's hired farm hands. During those years, I gathered, chopped and split an inordinate amount of wood, learned to jump start a tractor, hunted game, planted gardens, courted nurses and sopranos and generally had the most idyllic life a young man in his 20's could have. About 25 years ago, I went back to Winchester to see the farm. The cows were gone and the fields had been planted in corn and the frame house had burned down; but the stone portion remained and I'm sure is still haunted by the ghosts of grisly civil war field surgery.

Another odd job I had was a tour guide in Jamestown, Virginia. If you ever go to Jamestown, make sure you see the scale replicas of the Susan Constance, Godspeed, and Discovery, the three ships that brought the settlers to Jamestown. The Discovery was only 38 feet long! For reference the Santa Maria of Columbus fame was at least 100 feet. You'll be taken aback by the courage and determination it must have taken to sail those frighteningly small ships across the Atlantic at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. I can't remember how I got the gig, but this was the gist of it. There was a tour boat that would take visitors up and down the James River. I was the deckhand, first mate and tour guide. In preparation I was given a 5-page *spiel* to memorize. It contained local history, stuff about the river and the tragedy that was the Jamestown colony. As the *spiel* became a more and more rote experience, it was fun to tell a lie or two and see how tall you could take your tale before the trusting tourists caught on.

The boat was your typical 40-foot excursion flatboat with a wheelhouse in the middle. We carried 30 or so tourists on bench seats on a 40 minute trip up and down the James River. We did 6 trips a day. The man in charge was short, squat and grizzled, in his 60's and in almost a cartoonish way, was always grumpy. He was Captain Sam Cunningham. As captain, his job was not only to pilot the boat and see to the safety of its passengers, but also to berate the young wiper-snapper tour guides. Once a humongous navy battleship came alongside us; its wake nearly capsized our little craft full of tourists. It was the only time I ever saw fear in his eyes.

I still remember that every time the boat would pull away from the dock perpendicular to the river before we turned at the beginning of my *spiel*, I'd say, "50 miles to your left is the opening of the James River" and each and every tourist would look to their left as if they could see 50 miles to the mouth of the James. Captain Sam would always snicker with an aside about the stupid tourists (his "bread and butter"! ). So maybe that job wasn't so odd, but.....

In the spring of '74, Anheuser Busch opened a new theme park close to Williamsburg. It was called "The Old Country". The concept of the park was to recreate, in what turned out to be silly pseudo historical ways, Old Germany, Old France, Old Italy and Old England, whatever that meant. (It's actually a little jarring to walk from a facsimile of 16<sup>th</sup> C France to a facsimile of 18<sup>th</sup> C England in just a few hundred yards.) One visiting the park would see the prerequisite bird and animal shows, musical reviews, ride world class coasters and walk along paths that led through lovely landscaping and beautiful horticulture into mock villages that represented (in someone's mind), Old Europe. My favorite part of the park experience was a Tram that ran over to the brewery where folks 18 and older could sample the Budweiser product for free.

Auditions were held for performers like magicians, jugglers, singers, dancers and instrumentalists. I had just turned 18 and had moxy and confidence up the wazoo and knew there would be something I could do as a singer/entertainer/musician. I had studied voice with my Peabody-trained high school choir director, Hattie Webb and already knew some of the standard Italian songs in the classical repertory. At the audition, I was asked to sing my Italian songs, and improvise acting a few scenarios. A week later, I was hired as an entertainer with no indication of what I would be doing. Would I be dancing and singing with some hard-bodied cuties and gay guys in one of those cheesy reviews – thus giving me ample chances to get laid and fulfilling music and theatre's greatest perks to young, curly-headed, physically fit straight guys? (It's a ratio thing and I had hair then). Or better yet, would the powers that be in the Busch gardens entertainment division see that I was the next great whatever and headline me on one of their stages happy to say they discovered a rising star on what would become a future career of international fame? Whichever, I was a happy camper the day the notices arrived in the mail telling me to report for orientation and training.



(Second Aside . I've never been great with pets, although, in the past 30 years I've co-owned a few excellent cats. But as a child and especially later, as a self-absorbed, narcissistic teenager, I had no time or place for an animal)

So, imagine my surprise when, after orientation, I was culled from the herd of hard bodied hotties and gay guys and taken to the zoo section of the park. There, I was to meet my partner for the next three months. It wasn't that I didn't like animals; it was more that, at that time, I had no empathy for anything other than myself.

Now, when you go to the zoo, what animal fascinates the children the most, but more often than not leaves the parent's with "a little 'splainin' to do"? Which animal likes to make faces and will mimic you one second and the next be hurling poo in your general direction? That's right, they paired me with a monkey --- I shit you not, my friends....a fucking monkey.

Two monkeys, in fact. Claude and Junior were cute little capuchin monkeys that soon (I received all of 90 minutes training) would be my charges for six hours a day, six days a week for the next 10 weeks. Now you may be a great lover of animals, even owned a monkey or two, but I'm telling you, they have, at least to me, a peculiar disposition. Why, I thought at the time, would I be paired with a monkey; I mean, with my voice and all? It seemed the geniuses in the entertainment division at Busch Gardens decided I had the curly-haired swarthy italianish gypsy look of an organ grinder; and what's an organ grinder without a monkey? Even Churchill said "Never hold conversations with the monkey when the organ grinder is in the room!" I'd like to know the context of that quote. I wonder what he meant by that.....

Anyway, to their credit, they did have me sing little arias and Italian Folk songs like "O solo mio" & "E Campare" to the accompaniment of a very realistic, but decidedly fake electronic hurdy gurdy. I

would learn very quickly that my costume, my look, my voice and faux hurdy gurdy were all just a backdrop to Claude and Jr., the alternate stars of my little show.

The routine was this: In the mornings I'd enter the zoo area, put on my outfit and go to the 3 ft. by 3 ft. cage in a spacious concrete floored utilitarian room to dress and leash the monkey. In my brief training session, some animal expert showed me that all I needed was a grape and a thick canvas glove. Just open the cage, show the monkey the grape with your left hand (thereby distracting him) and grab him deliberately behind the head with the right. All the while being careful and avoiding the sharp and potentially painful canines. (Yeh, right, I thought!). It worked once.....after that the monkeys would begin screaming monkey hissy-fits the moment I entered the room. Pavlovian I presume. Hell, I'd try to bite a narcissist teenager if he grabbed my head and scared me shitless!

It was then I learned that monkeys, in general, had a low opinion of work and a terrible work ethic indeed. After a traumatic five minutes of capturing the monkey, avoiding the aforementioned canines, I had to dress the squirming devil that wanted nothing to do with the little outfit that resembled my own three-piece suit. It was sewn together into one piece with a hole for the head, two holes for the arms, two for the legs and finally one for the prehensile simian tail that had a mind of its own. All the while, with the monkey Incessantly Screaming Bloody Murder! I did this all with only one hand. Remember, I had to control that head of teeth with my right hand. To this day I don't know how I ever got that monkey dressed. In total, the whole ordeal was a very stressful way to start a day. As soon as the zipper was zipped up the back and the leash was fastened, he became your typical oo-oo-oo cute little monkey resigned to the task of taking coinage from the hands of children. With the aid of peanuts and a little clicker thingy, I was able to train the little buggers to eschew all but the higher denominations by only rewarding them for quarters and larger and thus imbuing them with an artificial intelligence well beyond their species.

Now I know it was just a summer job, but to daily walk past other young workers at the park, folks you saw every day and to never, ever be called by name; to never be asked about my singing...only things like “How’s your monkey? , “Hey Claude, Who’s your friend?”, “What’s little Junior up to today?”, “Hey you,! Is that a monkey?” and my favorite, “Which one’s the monkey? Ha, Ha”... made for a very long work day.

(Final aside --- Did you know that unlike most cats who are very furtive and discerning about their private functions, monkeys are ,in a word, scatological. Daily I put up with a monkey on my head or shoulder relieving himself of taking a dump. Here could easily be inserted the punch-line from the hackneyed old joke, “ WHAT, AND GIVE UP SHOW BUSINESS!?!” There’s really nothing like the smell of monkey piss and poo in your hair – and contrary to popular belief, chicks don’t dig it! Overall, it was the most demoralizing summer of my young life.

It is with some accomplishment, with shame and pride on either border, that now, as I’m entering geezerdom, have never had a regular (what’s regular?) 9 to 5, 5-days a week, full-time employment for more than 3 months at a time in my life. This was the course I took after about 25 years of schooling and music study.

And by music study, I mean really working at it: in the class, stage and practice room at two conservatories and in the “hardknocks academic” of life experience. I’ve studied through application and practice the trumpet, the voice, conducting, percussion, guitar and piano – all in a myriad of genres and styles. I’ve studied the history of music, and theory of music and even the history of the theory of music.

So, where does music work fit into this story?

For almost 30 years now I've juggled the incongruities of being a club musician on Saturday nights and a minister of music at church on Sunday mornings. But music is music, right? (I really believe that music in itself is a kind of ministry and over the years the two have become inseparable in my mind.) Add to that I've led and directed many secular choral programs from the Sycamore Singers to the Cincinnati Choral Society to the Chris Miller Chorale to the Cincinnati Camerata and also the wonderful once a year October Festival Chorus. Let's not forget the Literary Club Chorale and the special dispensation! Tack on dabbling in academia for 6 years total at Raymond Walters, Mt. St. Joseph, and South Avondale Elementary, a little music theatre (once as a singing waiter one frantic holiday season at Forest View Gardens), conducting and playing in ensembles large and small, some studio work, teaching private lessons, doing solo gigs, and most recently playing jazzy cornet in a gypsy band.

There are many stories and anecdotes about sex and drugs and pure joy and fun and ecstasy and love and true out-of-body experience in my music work life and history, especially in connection with Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church, the Camerata and the Modulators (Cincinnati's greatest living dance band). That's not saying there wasn't also a fair share of bullshit. Maybe that's why it's called work.

But that part of my life exists and bounces freely between and often residing in the gray area between avocation and vocation. It simply is what I do, my *raison d'être* and besides the fact, that there are many unbelievable stories, there's really nothing odd about being a musician; besides, for me playing till 2 a.m. and getting up at 7:30 on Sunday to lead a church music program. (Years ago I faced many a moral dilemma getting stoned after a gig or on a break by some hottie bar-fly and in just a few hours metamorphosing into a pious church musician.) After some years of therapy, the dilemma is now more about getting sleep and less about morality.

Finally and again, my life and work as a musician isn't odd. It's just different than most of your experience. Now I'm happy to say that through my work over the years as a musician, I've had the privilege of touching, transforming and lifting (if only for a while) thousands of people with music's magical transcendent power, thus fulfilling De Botton's definition of meaningful work.

That being said, I hope to share in the future some of the myriad stories of my music life; perhaps in a budget. Well I've asked a lot of questions and provided few answers...but ain't that philosophy

Anyway, I'm outa here. The sun came out and my buddy Mikey B. just called and needs a fourth for doubles.

Christian Miller

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