

AWAKENINGS

What if no one had expected anything of you? No family framing what you should become. No society dictating a script.

This was the question for the Maugham Club on June 13. The six members met at Awakenings Saturday mornings at 7:30, before the chatter of regulars fresh from jogging, cycling or yoga shattered the stillness of the Hyde Park espresso shop that doubled as an evening wine bar. High school paintings on the theme of angels lined the walls as the members settled into bar-stool chairs nestled around a gnarled oak table. Beethoven's Ode to Joy played softly in the background.

This was their final meeting before the summer break, when Jack and Bernie fled to summer homes in Maine and Minnesota and the others turned to golf, tennis or fly fishing. The friends were semi- or fully retired, each supremely career accomplished. They uncorked the Maugham Club a decade earlier on the sprawling deck of Jack's Indian Hill home over cigars and port, while the five wives lingered at a dessert table festooned with pastel Ladurée macarons. That night the men revealed to each other a shared passion – they liked to write – they had to write. But the pressures of career and family had long suppressed this imperative. They vowed to change, and so they formed the Maugham Club.

Not the M-O-M Club. No, this was the M-A-U-G-H-A-M Club, in honor of Somerset Maugham and most especially his masterpiece, *Of Human Bondage*. Each man embraced, indeed embodied, the novel. It is civilized society that saves men from the bondage of emotion and animal passion that cause rejection and disgrace if we are not liberated by the forces of traditional family, professional reputation and wealth accumulation. Convention spurred each member to

reach the pinnacle of community respect in conservative Cincinnati, a town some feared was teetering on the precipice of becoming a liberal, libertine mecca.

Each week five of the members wrote short pieces based on a prompt provided by the sixth. Recent prompts included “A librarian, a politician and a stockbroker walked into a bar” or “Whoops – if only I hadn’t” or “Only her hairdresser knew for sure.”

A week earlier Reed, attorney of the group, announced the June 13 prompt in a most unconventional manner. He distributed envelopes sealed with a golden butterfly. Inside were words inscribed in Arial script - “If no one had expected anything of me.”

Alex read first. Former head of his Final 4 accounting firm’s Cincinnati branch, Alex spent 42 years in the swamp of federal, state and local tax codes, saving his clients from the disgrace of overpaying government by even one undue dollar, earning a reputation that made his signature on a return like mosquito repellent to IRS auditors. He toiled through daylight and evening hours in an office strewn with codes, bound files and loose paper, with calculators in the old days and more recently triple computer screens and keyboards substituting for decor. Mr. S was his office appellation, S not for his last name but for Serious, as staff knew that with him there was no time for banter. Then abruptly one New Year’s Eve, retirement to a riverfront condo. The highlight of his day was taking Sadie, the basset hound, for the same morning, noon and evening stroll, pausing halfway at the bench donated in memory of his beloved Margaret, whose pancreatic cancer announced itself on the first day of autumn four years earlier, the disease already victorious despite debilitating treatments that surrendered by the fall of the first snowflake.

Alex took a sip of his no-fat cappuccino. The obligatory prompt came first. “If no one had expected anything of me, I’d have been a stand-up comic.

Laughter would have been my language, punch lines my deliverable. 'Two men were walking their dogs and passed by a bar. Let's get a drink, said one. The other said – but the sign says no dogs. The first said, follow me, as he put on his shades, strode into the bar with his German shepherd, and was promptly served Dewar's on the rocks. The other man entered with his Ray-bans and leashed dog. But the bartender barked, Can't you see the sign – no dogs! The other said, But this is my seeing-eye dog. That's no guide dog, the bartender replied. It's a Chihuahua. Oh no, said the other, they gave me a Chihuahua?'

I'd laugh at everything, even tragedy. A fellow went to his doctor. The doctor said, 'I have terrible news – you have cancer and you have Alzheimer's.' 'Well,' said the patient – 'At least I don't have cancer.'

And I would have learned when puberty erupted that I could best do humor in the company of women. I'd team with Goldie Hawn, or if she weren't available, Lily Tomlin or Lucille Ball. We'd play Vegas.

She'd start. You know you should never let a man's mind wander.

Why is that, I'd ask?

Because it's too little to be out on its own.

I'd retort. God called down to Adam in the Garden of Eden. I hear you're bored. Tell you what. Give me an arm and a leg and I'll make you very happy. I'll give you woman. She'll cook gourmet meals, clean your stuff, make a tidy home and introduce you to a passion you can't imagine. She'll make you deliriously happy. Adam scratched his head and said, And what will you give me for a rib?

Oh, she'd say, you forgot God's opening line – After creating Adam, God said, I can do better than that!

And I'd come back – You know the definition of a successful man – a guy who makes more than his wife can spend.

And she'd retort - 'What's the difference between government bonds and men?' I'd shrug my shoulders. 'Bonds mature.' Caboom.

I'd find the humor in everyone, embracing all humanity – women, men, gays, prom queens, drag queens, bankers - every stripe of humanity, every shade of gray – there are more than 50, you know - and white and black and violet, more colors than in a double rainbow. I'd become each, a week at a time. I'd be Marilyn Monroe, then Jimmy Hendrix. I'd become a 15-year-old video gamer with zits, a desert hermit, a woman of the night, a Cirque de Soleil muscle man – all seeking the same ultimate thing without knowing it or sharing it for fear, always riddled with dread of what others might think, always reaching for what it is that will make us appreciated by another and by our own soul. And with each avatar, I would plumb the humor and the wonder, the fulsome freedom of being each incarnation. To laugh in celebration of how we clothe our souls in an infinite variety of adornment.

And after the fantasy of youth, I would find my Margaret and we would spend our lives laughing every day. I would revel in her jokes and bathe in her joie de vivre, laughing out loud and embracing life, knowing this is how time can be. That would have been my life, if no one had expected anything of me.”

No one signaled the barista. Silence - as though a pause button were pushed. Heads gently nodding without smiles or frowns, as though lips were not receiving instructions from the

brain how to respond.

Jack downed the dregs of his double espresso. Former CEO, now non-executive Chairman, of a Fortune 500, Jack had been star quarterback, homecoming king, youngest of the 40 under 40 in Queen City business history, youngest of the Chamber's Great Living Cincinnatians. His grandfather was President of the Second National Bank, whose marriage to the daughter of the Fourth National Bank's Chairman led to a merger notorious in banking history. Because the Fourth was two thirds bigger than the Second, the merged bank took the name Third and a Half Bank, earning it a place in the Branding Hall of Shame. Jack followed a Yale College/Harvard Business School path to the CEO chair of an insurance empire that reaped premiums from higher risk persons, and there were so many of those that they outnumber the rest of us. His life became private jets, power lunches and analyst circuits, global conferences that swallowed all hours as virtual technology extracted every available minute, as though drawing blood from his veins. Wife Katarina spent increasing time in their Southwest Harbor and Siesta Key homes as the calendar pages turned. Jack earned a quarter page in Forbes' 2005 Where are the Leaders? issue in praise of his requirement that any memo to him had to be half a page or less, diagrams preferred. He hid that this stemmed from his dyslexia and attention disorder.

Jack read, though he appeared to have memorized the words. "If no one had expected anything of me, I would have followed Jesus, and from him I would have understood that the real need is not for leaders but for followers, because there isn't much room for leaders, as the great mass of us need to be followers, so schools should teach following a lot more than leading, since followers are the bigger audience, but people just don't understand this, which is why when you visit a book store you find shelves of \$29.95 hard covers like Montezuma's Seven Secrets for Managing an Empire and its sequel Cortés' Manual for Disruptive Leadership, or Genghis Khan's

Battle Plan for Capturing Consumers and other tripe about teamwork and measurement and bold action and getting the right people in the boat, when the real reason people buy these books is to learn how to get to the top, including how to step on the heads of others and get the big bucks and be the person who walks into a cocktail party and everyone says “Isn’t that...,” and when you become the big boss you can change the veneer of a business by how you dress but fail to change its essence by looking down from the mountaintop, and so I would create the Followership Institute and be a Follower, and the Institute would promote the great learning of how to follow, without exultation of the ego, and so carry out the great injunction that what matters is what comes from above, as Jesus knew, and so did Siddhartha turned Buddha, and Muhammad, may his name be praised, and Abraham and Job and Mother Theresa and Mahatma Gandhi and everyone who submits to the will of the great spirit and follows it instead of trying to be its rival, its Satan, and the Followership Institute would enroll 99% of humanity in an app called the Followership that understands this is not about me but about others and our immutable need to serve, so that the janitor who cleans latrines superbly is a finer servant than the CEO who stumbles from quarter to quarter, and I would know that it is service beyond measure that counts, listening – really listening – meaning that at least an hour every day would be spent in silent meditation even if no deep bass voice answers what to do, and the Institute would put up posters in the hallways of call centers and brokerage houses and factories telling workers that for an hour a day on company time they should observe Silence Time, turn off their cell phones and unplug their devices and do nothing but dwell in the infinitude of the great spirit who communes with us in silence, and so find our place in serving women and men and children and the creatures and plants and rocks of the earth, and then following what the master says, no – not the chairman of the board but the supreme one, speaking to our hearts so the mind gets the message and acts upon it, and my life would have been a quest to

follow, and all else would have been without meaning – if no one had expected anything of me.”

Monty raised his bushy eyebrows. The others held back physical manifestations of amazement. But this was fiction after all, wasn't it?

Bernie was next. Walnut Hills, Colgate and the Harvard Medical School drew him on a journey into pediatric oncology. At Children's Hospital, age 33, he was credited with conquering the multiple cancers of a Saudi royal child. Over a 40-year career he was recognized as one of the world's leading physicians who treated children sentenced to what others had pronounced terminal disease. Bernie infused his practice with his Bangalore born wife's ayurvedic techniques. Secretly he wondered whether that was the real reason he succeeded, treating child patients with a broad smile and a laying on of hands, as though that could lift their death masks. He was pockmarked with loss, so many young lives extinguished, and most particularly that of his best man's only son, a boy who succumbed at age 10, because, Bernie secretly knew, of an over-prescription of poison injected to slay the cancer dragon, a dose that scarred the boy's lungs beyond function. This unconfessed mistake haunted Bernie. As the years passed, he turned to Shakespeare for escape, acting in community theater, then the Shakespeare Festival, culminating in the role of Lear before a crowd that believed Lear himself appeared before them, in the depths of loss and betrayal of reason. Iambic pentameter became Bernie's shelter from medicine, a world of hopes rewarded and crushed.

Bernie unfolded his paper.

If none expected anything of me,

I would have been a seeker of the God,

The only God of earth and sky and man

And woman too for all that is and was

And will be 'til the end of time itself.

I'd walk the path of Zoroaster first

Dividing life between the light and dark

And knowing which to choose and which to shun

To Worship thus the fire, not the ice.

And then I'd be a Bodhisattva sent

To earth to seek ahimsa, the release

From suffering of my own and all the youth

Who come to me for healing and repair.

And in the great absurdity of grief

I'd scrape it all away and thus reveal,

In union with the Holy One is truth,

Release from pain and wretchedness the point

So in the incarnation of the next

We'd come together closer to the heart

Of what the Dalai Lama means to say

That all is passing, all a wisp of time.

And then I'd be a Hindu for a while.

I'd venerate Shashthi, goddess of youth

Protectress of the young through sixteen years.

So many Hindu gods and goddesses

That every day can be a festival.

And then I'd be a Jew and every day

I'd read Torah and pursue Kabbalah,

The path to wisdom and to Elohim

With study and debate the point of life

More so than acts of healing or of care,

Because Hillel and Shammai never meet,

And it is in between that meaning rests.

And after mast'ring that I'd turn to Christ,
Christ Jesus and the Trinity and all
That overcomes the majesty of death
And gives the sinner love that forgives all.
And then Islam would be my calling so
Submission to Allah would be my prayer,
Five times a day a minimum and more,
Reciting the Quran in Arabic
To know the poetry of Allah as
Received, recited since it was revealed.
And then I'd read the Book of Mormon through
And lift up serpents in Kentucky hills
And as a Sufi master I would swirl
In circles as a dervish, and would seek
To take in Rumi's teaching to my soul,
So life would flow from heart and not from mind.
And finally I would know that life is but

A quest for finding God and knowing that

It is our path to seek that unity

With what created all and all to come.

And on that journey I would be the truth

And that would be enough and everything,

If none expected anything of me.

Eoghan nodded, adding a silent exclamation point, acknowledging it was his turn, while the Maugham Club absorbed the unexpected from a man who had never proclaimed his faith before, and seemed not to have done so yet, and yet he had. Archbishop of Cincinnati, Eoghan was revered as a loving spirit. He cancelled his predecessor's teacher loyalty agreements, remarking "who needs a contract when we have the Gospel?" and often invoked the Argentinian Pope's remark – Who am I to judge? – when challenged to discipline miscreants by the shouts of the rigid, priests and parishioners who seemed to spring from the Inquisition rather than Vatican Two. Long a popular pastor at St. Rosa's, he was elevated to Archbishop as a placeholder, many thought, at an age when other priests began their pensions.

"If no one had expected anything of me," Eoghan began, "I'd be a Protestant, that's for sure. In my youth I'd explore the mysteries of skirts and training bras, with the passion of Don Juan and the daring of Casanova. I would set sail in the wake of Gauguin. To Tahiti and islands of mangoes and bare-breasted women. To Papeete and Papeari, to Atuona. I'd caress every female curve, brush their hair, kiss their lips ... and more.

My quest would be the *vahine* of my soul. Every woman is beauty, some more generously

endowed than others, I acknowledge, but the touch of every woman is a gift, each embrace a thrill, every liaison a passageway to the sublime, to revel in the great contrast of male and female God gave us, a compassion of the Holy One.

I would find her – hair of midnight black, hazel eyes, supple neck, slender waist, pear shaped hips, toned calves, feet to be massaged, toes to be caressed. I'd pursue her, casting rose petals from the door to the table where I'd spread a candle-lit feast, baked Alaska for dessert, its flames a symbol of heat that burns within me, melting the ice below. And she would come to know that she is the center, the mate of my soul, the one who without I am half a man or less. And I would on my knees proclaim my love and pledge my honor. And when she consented, every day thereafter we would elevate the practice of love. At the breakfast table, in the garden, strolling in the park, making dinner over a gas flame stove, even when we scorched a pot. We would build a nest. A family we would make, toddlers and teenagers and yes, the pain of their taking flight, and then the two of us alone, but a deeper form of love then, a union of souls, knowing what the other thought, finishing each other's sentences, laughing, and always feeling. We would find the sags of flesh and errant hairs and extra pounds beautiful, marks of constancy and plenitude of time, of timelessness itself. And that would be my life – if no one had expected anything of me."

Pierre, Awakenings' proprietor, entered and tipped his faded blue baseball cap as he always did to the Maugham Club on Saturday mornings, not wishing to interrupt the flow. This time he paused, as he observed the group transfixed, or was it transfigured, as though an electric current was circulating through the band of six. Pierre moved behind the ancient bar and began stroking his HP desktop. Only Monty's offering remained to be shared.

Monty appeared deeply moved by Archbishop Eoghan. He was the only Maugham Club member who had been to Papeete. After Pomona College and return to Cincinnati's west side, Monty endured five marriages and divorces, one issued by a Ukrainian court. His fidelity was to money, not so much having it as playing with it, as though it were the currency of a video game. As a financial advisor, he was one of very few to invest heavily in the Shanghai B index for the decade it rose more than a thousand percent. But when a bank bought his advisory firm, newly installed compliance bureaucrats prowled the halls like Soviet censors and they declared him out of bounds, restricting him to conservative *value* stocks like GE. Monty protested the appellation *value* for GE when it was \$60 a share in 2000, but the firm staunchly retained the *value* label as GE stock slid to \$10 by 2010. *Value* for whom, Monty guffawed privately. Monty saw that the strongest growth was where 90% of the world lives, beyond the USA and Europe, but the censors ruled that any allocation of more than 10% in foreign securities was unduly risky and would not permit what was so obvious to Monty. So he left and launched America's first frontier hedge fund, plunging dollars into upstarts in India, Africa and Latin America, where companies grew 40% or more as normally as dandelions sprouting in the lawns of spring. The hedge fund dramatically outperformed the S&P, embarrassing Cincinnati's investment establishment. And yet, success in money was not replicated in Monty's bedchambers.

Monty looked up from his notes. "If no one had expected anything of me, I would have married music. Our white-guy soul band of the 60's would have mastered the moves of the Temptations, the Four Tops, James Brown.

(JB scream) I feel good – like I know that I would

I feel nice like sugar and spice,

So nice, so good, I got you!

We'd have back-up singers with sleeveless sequined gowns and take our show on the road.
To West Berlin, we'd bring Motown. Then to Mao's China, Nehru's India, Nasser's Egypt.
We'd have Norwegian toes tapping in lutefisk cafés. We'd get the French to sing in English –

I got sunshine on a cloudy day,

When it's cold outside I got the month of May.

Well, I guess you'd say

What can make me feel this way.

Well it's My girl.

Rhythm and lyrics of our youth, about wholesome longing and heart-felt loss,

I know you want to leave me, but I refuse to let you go

If I have to beg, plead for your sympathy

I don't mind, 'cause you mean that much to me.

Ain't too proud to beg, sweet darlin'.

It was a time when mamas taught their sons an important lesson.

Try to get yourself a bargain, son.

Don't be sold on the very first one.

Pretty girls come a dime a dozen,

Try to find one who's gonna give you true lovin'

My mama told me, You'd better shop around.

When music was melody, when drums snuggled with guitars and brass, when music swayed us
and we felt it in the pit of our souls.

But then, where have all the flowers gone, and Marvin asked What's Goin' On –

Mother, Mother, There's too many of you crying.

Brother, brother, brother – there's far too many of you dying.

You know we'll find a way to bring some loving here today

Yeah, Father, father, we don't need to escalate.

You see, war is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate.

You know we've got to find our way

To bring some loving here today.

Oh, oh, oh, picket lines and picket signs

Don't punish me with brutality

Talk to me, so you can see.

What's Going on

What's Going on.

Yeah, what's Going on.

And we lost the groove, the feeling Camelot could be real, that we shall overcome some day, some day, and then the Day the Music Died. Out of the inferno came disco, like an alien from a human gut, and heavy metal and punk and funk and techno and grunge and rap.

And the purpose of my life would be distilled in a flash. I'd be a synthesizer of a new age, calming a broken spirit. I'd record with Enya and Arkenstone and Paul Winter. We would escape, from 9/11 and Vladimir Putin and Rush Limbaugh and the Taliban. We'd find a stairway to heaven with music that soothes and sings we can make it if we try, because we are the world, we are the children.

And then it would strike me like lightning, like the Beatles meeting Ravi Shankar. Gangsta rap – what power it holds in its pounding cadence, its in-your-face defiance of undeserved power, lyrics so violent, desperate, misogynistic, gun toting, death and drug embracing. Sex without love. Poetry for gangs. And yet, gangsta rap transformed could be lyrics of a way out for those left out. So I'd turn it upside down. I'd try a little tenderness on the gangs of LA and Brighton Beach and Avondale. Like this:

Evil spelled backward is Live, live, live.

Spell evil backward and it's Live, live, live.

When the cops call you out, stuff flowers down their guns,

When the boss makes you cross, make him laugh, using puns,

Let your anger abate, walk it off, take a break.

We're the master of our fate, it's our lives to make.

Black and white, gay and straight, it's our common fate

To celebrate and agitate to make our city great,

Because we won't wait, oh, it's not to dominate,

But our town we'll integrate and we'll eviscerate the hate,

And then after that, after all we have to give

We'll know that Evil spelled backward is Live, live, live.

Spell evil backward and it's Live, live, live.

When I look inside, I see th' reflection of

The man I can be if I could only love

You like I should and I will 'cause now you're my gang,

I've taken up the prize of the heart and the pang

Of love that never dies, It's the love of you

And the warmth that it brings, I'm comin' home to you.

Let's erase the disgrace that's all over this place,

And embrace with loving grace the whole human race,

We'll create a world where we're all here to give,

And there's nothin', no there's nothin' that our God won't forgive.

You know that evil spelled backward is Live, live, live.

Spell evil backward and it's Live, live, live.

In my dotage I'd start the Hallelujah Street Choir. I'd recruit beggars with cardboard signs along the sidewalks and intersections of Cincinnati. We'd sing in angelic harmony music of the streets on Fountain Square, in the Queen City Club parking lot, in Phyllis Smale Riverfront Park. We'd make Cincinnati a mecca for street musicians, and City Council would exempt music from the tyranny of permits. Wherever you walk, you'd be sound surrounded with voices and steel drums and flutes - even bagpipes would be legal.

Until the curtain descends, I would be music. I'd merge with melody, no separation, no divorce – if only no one had expected anything of me.”

A gaggle of joggers burst into the coffee shop, shattering silence that honored Monty's words. The Maugham Club exhaled a collective sigh. Jack said he would email the prompt for September. “You'll have it by July,” he promised. “But Reed, you can't get away with saying nothing today. What if no one had expected anything of you?”

Reed paused. The prompt giver was exempt from writing a piece. As a schoolboy Reed dreamed to be President of the United States, thought this was his destiny, so he could change the world for the better, wasn't that what politicians are meant to do? He pursued law as a stepping stone. But the law had other plans. It led Reed to forty years as a big-firm litigator, a gladiator in the coliseum of money – battling over who had it, got to keep it, had to raise it, had to repay it, was entitled to more from it, or had to pay it out. He deployed courtroom daggers and shields and lances that determined the wealth of others, his clients paying tribute to him in the process. That was his service, rather than the public good. Uncharacteristically, Reed was speechless in the

face of Jack's challenge. But a truth arose from within some deep nook that had not before been a source of words.

“If no one had expected anything of me, I would have lived the great secret. And what is that, you ask? It is to love and to be loved. The rest is sand slipping through the hourglass.”

Perhaps each member was thinking, yes, Maugham was right. We are men who bind our emotions, and it is that which sets us free. We drink the elixir of civilization, and it shapes who we become. We must be grateful.

And yet, as the members bid farewell for the summer, they had shared seeds of what could have been and so what still could be. In that moment they looked, for the first time perhaps, beyond eyelids, beyond the I don't know, far beyond the I'm fine, into each other's eyes as icons, windows into souls. Perhaps each would try this summer to live into the fiction they had shared, if fiction it had been.

Have a summer of wonder.

Joseph J Dehner, June 15, 2015 – For the Literary Club Summer Outing

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