

In Praise of Hangovers

December 17, 2003

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He didn't usually get hangovers, but today he had a doozy. It wasn't that he seldom drank, just rarely to excess, and he usually observed the rule about grape and grain. How did that go? With beer and wine and whiskey, any two will make you frisky. But if all three you drink in course, you'll awake with great remorse. Was that how it went? He was prevented from improving the doggerel by the jackhammer in his head.

Somehow he had enjoyed a cocktail after work and washed down his dinner with Sam Adams' best. Had things ended there his head would not be his current worst enemy. But he had gone for a moment to the O Club to look for someone and run smack into a birthday party thrown by two-star Bob for his four-star wife. Bob's stars had come from the military bureaucracy for meritorious, if unspectacular, service.

Brenda's stars had come from God himself. She was Bob's mid-life-crisis second wife and was rumored to be a spectacular, if not meritorious, spouse. She was a gifted flirt and the glass of champagne she held out had been accompanied by one of her smiles - a smile that could warm the cockles of his heart, or he mused, the heart of his. . . By the time his mind had returned from the completion of that thought to the party at hand, Brenda had charmed him in to accepting more champagne.

For a military man, he reflected while his temples felt like Desi's congas at the Copa during a particularly vigorous rendering of "Babalu," his defenses had been breached because he had acted on what he wished was true rather than what, on sober reflection, he should have known to be true. Ah, sober reflection, that was the real rub. If he had relied on sober reflection in his youth, he would never have specialized in peacekeeping at War College. No, he would have gone into armor or commando or even communications. In the stratified world of military status, peacekeeping rated below even the most prosaic career choices. Hell, even procurement offered the opportunity to accumulate wealth, either through outright bribes or as entree to the post-retirement world of defense contracting and lobbying.

Yet here he was, ranged with the regular brass around a large table, engaged in devising the after-preemption plan, wondering why he seemed so often to regret the consequences of his weaknesses, wondering why his weaknesses seemed so often to be linked with what he thought his best, his most generous impulses. And pondering how often these impulses had led him past the brink of intoxication.

Last night was clear enough. He had arrived at the O Club with a bit of a buzz, and Brenda's smile which promised so much but delivered so little had led him to buy the sizzle even when he knew in his heart he would never taste that particular steak. While the blood vessels in his head throbbed like an orange-barreled freeway at five PM complete with semis, road rage, and air-care collisions, his thoughts drifted back to other intoxications and their consequences.

With his first wife the intoxicant had been love leavened by youth and spring, superheated by her beauty and sexual prowess. He had been a rather straight-laced unimaginative lover. He had had sex, but with her he had SEX!!! in bold caps with

several exclamation points. For the first weeks of their relationship he had moved through life with a glow on, always tired, slightly disoriented, and smiling dreamily. He had proposed a few weeks after their first encounter, thrilled with the prospect of a lifetime of fabulous sex with a beautiful, intelligent, adventurous woman.

Things were wonderful until, a few days before the wedding, invitations sent, church booked, friends and relatives drifting into town, he had overheard a couple of junior officers retailing stories of sexual encounters. One claimed he knew a woman who could suck start a Harley. It wasn't until the description expanded to include an intimate birthmark identical to one his fiancé had that his self-assured happiness had crumbled and the hangover had begun. He felt he had been kicked in the chest. He stood there with his mouth agape while his future turned from promise to purgatory. It was only his shock that had kept him from confronting the men. In an instant he understood the guarded looks from the others when he had announced his engagement. Those looks had been, he understood now, a mixture of pity and contempt. His humiliation was so complete and his need to salvage his pride so profound that he could admit his chagrin to no one. He had known he was not her first, but public discussion of her indiscretions had laid him low. He should have known, and now he was cornered by his own need not to appear weak and foolish.

So he did what any self-respecting military man would do who has been outmaneuvered and trapped by superior forces. He surrendered. He went through with it. Somehow he had grinned his way through the crossed sabers and smirks, the nagging fear that the story had traveled to every new posting and explained any sideways glance, any otherwise inexplicable smile. And though the arrival of children and the passage of time made the fear smaller, it never entirely went away. There were probably enough other issues to explain the eventual divorce, things would probably have fallen apart anyway, but he would never know.

Yet somehow, despite the hardened, hidden place in his heart, his basic optimism and generosity had survived. He seemed incapable of believing the worst about human nature, no matter how overwhelming the evidence. Indeed it was this contrarian streak that had led him to a military career when the rest of his generation held it in lowest esteem, and had led him to choose peace-keeping as a specialty, when his friends and advisors had warned him of its dead-end status. He had followed his instincts and his career had had a hangover ever since. It wasn't that the nation hadn't found use for his talents in a wide-ranging collection of trouble spots. It was just that peacekeeping relied on soft, unmilitary skills like diplomacy, psychology, and public relations. There was no easy way to do it and never any clear-cut victory. The peace might pretend to be kept for a while, but any two-bit terrorist with enough diesel fuel and fertilizer could give the lie to the best-spun claims of success. Here again, his stubborn contrariness had been his guide. If the work was difficult and unpromising, so much the better.

He had come to think of peacekeeping as a military hangover. First the binge of raw power and cathartic combat, then the long slow recovery as things were slowly, tentatively put back into messy, civilian shape, where victories were measured by the absence of drama, where loud noises were to be avoided and calm treated as a virtue for its own sake. Peacekeeping was a lot like the nostrums used to ameliorate the effects of too much alcohol. He thought of it as a giant ice bag. Keep things cool, muffled, and

numb. Suppress the forces of chaos until another dose of military mayhem was required to prepare for more peacekeeping. Never mind the cure, just treat the symptoms.

Sadly, he mused, this approach to peacekeeping mirrored much of his spiritual life. Like many Americans of a certain class, he had sought comfort from his religion. He had wanted to be assured that it was OK for his left hand to know what his right was up to, that turning the other cheek was really enabling the violent tendencies of others, and therefore not required. He had taken his camel from church to church looking for a needle with a large enough eye and had been gratified to be told that worldly wealth was a sign of God's approval. Most urgently he had needed some assurance that his profession was within the pale, that there might actually be someone that Jesus wanted him to kill. The more his churches had offered him comfort, the less comfortable his spirit had been.

But today his discomfort was profoundly physical. There was no sense wishing he hadn't drunk too much, just as the military planners around this table spent no time talking about not being in this mess in the Middle East. As he listened he heard more talk about shock-and-awe tactics to make the suicide bombers behave themselves. He knew it would be a while yet before they got around to his specialty, that the high-tech warriors had yet to realize that their bombs were smarter than their tactics. Even the removal of fear, while an important step, was not enough. It was especially not enough to replace fear of a former dictator with fear of shocking, awful military force.

His mind drifted to thoughts of the patron saint of American peacekeepers, George Marshall. He, better than most of the victorious World War II alliance, had understood something about the importance of what comes after victory has been declared. What was it he had said in his speech at Oslo, on the occasion of his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance? He had said that tyranny would be overcome by the "gospel of freedom and self-respect. But we have to recognize that these democratic principles do not flourish on empty stomachs and people turn to the false promises of dictators because they are hopeless." For Marshall, the ultimate weapon had been hope.

But what hope could our hung-over general with the throbbing skull find amid these proposals for making war on an enemy we could only occasionally locate? Each beat of his heart sent, through the magic of hydraulic pressure, a message of remorse to the constricted vessels of his head. Dumpbump dumpbump, no buzz can hide the pain inside, dumpbump dumpbump, no wine will show what you should know, dumpbump dumpbump, you've sinned again now just give in. He didn't give in. He stopped feeling sorry for himself and began to fight through the pain and fog.

When taken as a whole, his intoxications had been about something more than drowning his sorrows and fears. In every case he had been reaching for something, affirming something that he couldn't help saying yes to. There was something vital in having a woman seduce you with smiles, even though you knew the flirtation would lead nowhere. There was something life-affirming about giving in and opening yourself up and loving another, knowing you are not her first or her only love, knowing that love like this dies more often than it lives. He wasn't sorry he had flirted with Brenda, only that he had drunk too much champagne. He wasn't sorry that he had married the woman who had initiated him to physical passion, only that he had been unable to forgive her for not living up to his fantasy. Why couldn't she be an experienced woman and a virgin at the

same time? He had never been able to completely rebuild his hopes and dreams around this very human woman. Yet he knew the fault had been his. He could neither ask her about her past nor stop imagining it, so he dwelt, like Sisyphus, unable to escape his labor or bring it to an end.

Despite all this they had lived a reasonably good life together for long enough to have children, whom they had raised to be reasonably decent and successful adults, who had married reasonably tolerable spouses and produced reasonably intelligent, healthy, and good-looking grandchildren. None of this had just happened, but had resulted from the difficult, messy, sometimes heartbreaking, never-ending efforts of all of them. And few families could, with any honesty, claim greater success. If he had let his fear and insecurity answer at the altar, none of this would have happened, and he wouldn't undo it for anything. Despite the fear and angst of marriage begun in doubt, the toil of parenthood, and the pain of divorce, pain he had thought would overwhelm him, he had survived. And he had given all the love and life he could, however inadequate.

Now his thoughts turned to the business around the table. No matter what the politicians had claimed and no matter how these claims had been spun by the media, he knew that the service people on the ground believed they were doing something good. They suffered from dangers unseen, watched as their friends and comrades in peril were killed and wounded, pined for home and family, yet continued to soldier up and face the next new day in ways that made him proud - proud of his profession and proud of his country. He knew the only way to make their services and sacrifices worthwhile was to do the difficult, dirty, and dangerous work of peacekeeping. We must, he thought, offer the citizens of this ravaged country hope. To fail in this simply laid the ground for the next dictator, and then all will have been in vain. If the children and grandchildren of this dictator-ridden land were to live in freedom, they must have self-respect, honorable work to do, and above all hope.

Those around the table stood and stretched as the session broke for lunch. Now, he knew, was his chance. If he was going to contribute anything worthwhile to this planning, he had to clear his head. He knew the only sure way to vanquish a hangover was the time-honored hair of the dog. Not enough to dull the wits or provoke nausea, just enough to dilate the blood vessels and allow that sense of euphoric well being, remembered from last night, a short encore. The surest way to deal with the effects of too much alcohol was more alcohol. Just as the only way to tolerate the effects of too much life was more living, more pursuit of the best in us, more hope. He retreated to his office and poured a shot of something and reached for the glass.

Gentlemen, may all your hangovers be caused by too many good things, and may you always find more good things to cure them. I offer a year-end toast to life and love and hope . . . and more life.
