

AWAKENINGS

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

This was the puzzle 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 quiet of the Hyde Park espresso shop that transformed to wine bar after dark. High schooler paintings on the theme of angels graced the walls as the members settled into bar-stool chairs nestled around a gnarled oak table. A soundtrack softly mixed Leonard Cohen, Mariah Carey, and Creedence Clearwater Revival.

This was their final meeting before summer break, when Jack and Bernie fled to summer homes in Maine and Minnesota and the others turned to golf, tennis, and fly fishing. The friends were near or in retirement from careers accomplished. They uncorked the Maugham Club a decade earlier on the sprawling deck of Jack's Indian Hill home over cigars and port, while 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. Obligations had long suppressed this imperative. They vowed to change and so 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, perhaps even thinking each embodied, the novel. It is civilized society that saves men from the bondage of emotion and animal passion that cause rejection and disgrace if not liberated by the rescuing forces of traditional family, professional reputation, and wealth accumulation.

Convention spurred each member to the pinnacle of community respect in conservative

Cincinnati, a town some feared was nearing 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 were “A librarian, a politician and a stockbroker walked into a bar,” “Whoops – if only I hadn’t,” and “Only her hairdresser knew for sure.”

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

--- Alex ---

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 repellant to IRS auditors. He toiled through daylight and evening hours in an office strewn with 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, the disease already victorious despite debilitating treatments that surrendered by the first heavy snowfall.

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, they gave me a chihuahua?

I’d joke about everything, even tragedy.

A fellow went to his doctor. The MD 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 from puberty that I could do my best in the company of women. I’d team with Goldie Hawn, or if she weren’t available, Lily Tomlin or Lucille Ball. We’d storm 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 an experience you can't imagine.

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 say - What's the difference between government bonds and men?

I'd shrug my shoulders.

Bonds mature.

Caboom.

I'd find the humor in everyone – 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 be a 15-year-old video gamer with zits, a desert hermit, a woman of the night, a Cirque de Soleil acrobat – all seeking the same ultimate without fear, not riddled with dread of what others might think, always reaching for what makes us appreciated by another and by ourselves. 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.

After the fantasies of youth, I would meet my Margaret, and we would laugh 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 nodded without smiles or frowns, as though lips were not receiving instructions from the brain how to respond.

--- Jack ---

Jack downed the dregs of his double espresso. Former Fortune 500 CEO, now non-executive Chairman, 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 brand history. Because the Fourth was two thirds bigger than the Second, the merged bank took the name Third and a Third Bank. 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 devoured every available minute. 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, plus diagrams. 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 to be a leader but a follower. There isn't much room for leaders, so the great mass of us must be followers, which means 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 canoe, 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.

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 nothing – 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 ---

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 multiple cancers of a Saudi royal child. A 40-year career grew his reputation as one of the world's leading physicians who treats 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 error haunted Bernie.

As the years passed, he turned to Shakespeare for escape, acting in community theater, then the Shakespeare Festival, culminating in his role of Lear before a crowd that believed Lear himself was on stage, 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 suff'ring 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 ---

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 perhaps 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 sail on the seas 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 door to 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 have been my life – if no one had expected anything of me.”

Pierre, Awakenings' former 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. Only Monty's offering remained to be shared.

--- Monty ---

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. A financial advisor, he was one of very few to invest heavily in the Shanghai B index for the

decade it rose over a thousand percent. When a bank bought his advisory firm, newly installed compliance bureaucrats prowled the halls like Soviet censors and they ruled 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 stock staunchly retained the *value* label as it slid to under \$5 a decade later. *Value, right, like yes means no*, 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 evident 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 sprout on the lawns of spring. The hedge fund dramatically outperformed the S&P, embarrassing Cincinnati's investment establishment.

But money success was not replicated in the bedchambers.

Monty looked up from a red binder where he kept his papers.

"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.

I'd feel good – like I know that I would

I'd feel nice like sugar and spice,

Cuz 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 ...

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 ...

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

I should have listened to a different mama when I was 16.

Try to get yourself a bargain, son.

Don't be sold on the very first one....

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 – yes, that was the journey to take. This was the music of our youth.

But then, where did all the flowers go? And Marvin asked What's Goin' On. And he told us 'war is not the answer, for only love can conquer hate.'

And we lost the groove, the feeling Camelot could be real, that we shall overcome, and then there was the Day the Music Died. And 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 have been 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 of gangs. And yet, gangsta rap transformed could be lyrics of a way in 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 at highway intersections. 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 benediction. The Maugham Club exhaled a collective sigh.

Jack said he would email the prompt for September. “You'll have it by July. But Reed, you can't get away with saying nothing. What if no one had expected anything of you?”

--- Reed ---

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 stones never ended. They 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 for the battle. 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 an 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 drank the elixir of civilization, and it shaped who we became. 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 knows, far beyond the I'm fines, 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.

Joseph J Dehner, April 2021