

INTRODUCTION

It could start with a chart, or a withered family tree. Perhaps a bush with tendrils twisted around alcoholism, abuse and insanity, the roots of which span generations. It's complex and it's dense, perplexing those who ask. Now I just hand out a diagram, crammed with squiggles and broken lines.

My four great-grandchildren, all mixed race, were born out of wedlock, as was their mother, as was her mother, as was her mother, my wife Kathy. There is a lack of family cohesion and stability, yet everyone points to me as the family bastard, one subject to fits of rage, snark and sarcasm, an unappointed figurehead, just as confused and confounded as they, by the challenges of children no one seems to want.

Mental illness in myriad forms doesn't hide behind our suburban hedges. Kathy and I are recovering alcoholics. My brother had a drug problem and quit. My father had a drinking problem and couldn't. His father was an alcoholic. My mother suffered from alcohol-induced dementia for years, dying "dry" but too far gone. Kathy's oldest daughter, Dawn, whom I adopted, and granddaughter, Mellissa, are drug addicts, compounded by their being bipolar.

Kathy's mother and oldest brother were drunks. Her nephew died of a heroin overdose. While doctors diagnosed our oldest great-granddaughter, La'Nessa with Attention Deficit Disorder, the storms she unleashes remind me more of her mother and grandmother, so she may be bipolar as well. Her half-brother, Dave, has anger and abandonment issues, manifested in instant rages and sudden silences. Mellissa's third child, Tru, has developmental delays and her fourth, and hopefully last, was born addicted. We attribute at least part of all her children's collective problems to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, the result of her substance abuse during pregnancy. She continues to drink and use drugs, despite two

rehab stints. We expect more to follow, since Mellissa wallows in denial, as addicts often do.

A friend of mine refers to his own household as “dysfunction junction” and the term is apt. For us, there is no dividing line between nature and nurture. It is already in our nature not to nurture, since we weren’t nurtured ourselves. By “our,” I mean Kathy and me as well as our parents. What we nurture is our inherent nature of rebellion, defiance and anger, lying below the surface but subject to frequent and violent breaches. Not all our progeny have fallen prey to our genetic influence, but most have. Even one’s too many.

Those who hear our story declare us nuts or saints, as if it matters what they think, when we know it’s all God’s plan. Yes, “The Big Guy,” the master of immortal mirth, God the cosmic comedian, who put us here to amuse Himself. Unless, of course, we get the joke, which forms the first filaments of faith. Failure to laugh is a fundament of fear, or so I choose to believe.

Kathy and I have been married for over forty years. We met in Alcoholics Anonymous, where, after having weathered several previous, disastrous relationships, we fell in love. No one thought we’d make it, least of all ourselves, but despite our seemingly insuperable differences, our devotion is intact. Love is a many splintered thing.

When we married, Kathy already had, Dawn, from age nineteen, and I’d had a stroke at twenty-seven. Though not planning to expand, our blueprint got mangled, having two daughters with a miscarriage in between. I refer to Amber and Mariah as “the normal ones,” college graduates and beyond, like me, while Kathy and her progeny barely got out of high school.

I adopted Dawn, but we threw her out when she was sixteen. Her daughter, Mellissa, born a few years later, was farmed out to a foster family and then to her dissolute dad. She had her first two kids at eighteen and twenty-one, and Kathy and I raised them without help, eventually becoming their legal guardians. Our daughter Amber adopted Mellissa’s third child, Tru. The fate of

the fourth is uncertain, except for the certainty that her father, like Mellissa's other "Baby Daddies," won't get involved. We are determined not to get involved with this one — I don't even know her name. Amber is already divorced, having unknowingly married a drug addict, while Mariah remains happily married, with two boys of her own.

With me so far? When people ask if we have children, we hand out scorecards. Now, with La'Nessa in her teens, it may need another page. If she follows the family habit, I will be a great-great-grandfather before I'm seventy-four. Is this to be my bucket list?

When I started relating this saga of "skipped generations," someone said, "You know, it's remarkable you and your wife have stayed married all through this."

That never occurred to me. Sure, it's been a struggle, but in a veritable tangle of variables, our love remains a constant.

Another commented, "You know, it's remarkable that two alcoholics have stayed sober through all this."

That never occurred to me either. Sure, it isn't easy, with these and other difficulties. But our faith in a "Higher Power" that we call God, the "Divine Jester," is also a constant, as well as our sense of humor. If we didn't laugh we'd scream, or wake from haunted dreams in search of some escape. Instead, we choose to pray, and believe these doubtful blessings were bestowed for unknown reasons.

Most of all, we recognize and practice one of AA's central tenets: We take things "one day at a time."

It has been, and will remain, a long journey, with a lot of days to come. Where else would we go? And what else should we do? But we know the Divine Jester has not yet had His last laugh. And I still don't get the joke on these two drunks. Not by a long shot.

WHITE CHRISTMAS

*That when I became a man
I put away childish things*

– 1 Corinthians 13:11

My mother is the matriarch of the five generations jammed into our family room. She sits quietly beside me, barely conscious of the chaos through the fog of her advanced dementia.

Mom has become, at best, morbid and morose; at worst, cruel and cutting. To her face, her grandchildren call her “Grandma Jeanne.” Behind her back, she is “Grandma Mean,” a bitch whose sneering putdowns inflicted too many scars on grandkids whose names she never remembered. She got worse after my father died, untethered from the man who kept her partially roped into reality. Over my family’s familiar objections, I sprang her today from her nursing home (“Hell’s waiting room,” my brother calls it), pledging parental control despite her unpredictability. I feel obligated to do so, my pity and shame overwhelming my better judgment. Mom thankfully slept through Thanksgiving, but this Christmas is awake. Since it may be her last one, I practice patience and tolerance — not inherited traits.

A California Christmas is graced with greenery uncommon in the frosted Midwest of my youth. No sleds or mitten piles adorn our redwood deck. The plastic tree dragged from our garage stands beside the gas fireplace, with stockings carelessly hung.

It’s still Christmas, though, with kids stoked on sweets, ripping open packages too fast to pose for pictures. The adults sit placidly amid the noise and haste, fortified by coffee and cake, surrendering to the surroundings of abounding youth. Mom stares into space, then dozes. I sit by her, ever vigilant, should she make one of her usual unfortunate remarks. I am soon rewarded.

“Who is that black boy?” My mother asks too loudly, suddenly awake.

“That’s my great-grandson, Dave,” I tell her, not for the first time. “And we say African-American, not black. Besides, he’s brown — and keep your voice down.”

“Hmph. In my day, we said ‘Negro.’” She maintains her volume, ignoring me as always.

“Yeah, I was there during your day and heard you call them worse.”

My parents were casual bigots. They tepidly accepted civil rights but not civil disobedience, preferring “those people” stay with “their kind.” They and their friends made racist jokes and comments, steered clear of darker neighborhoods, and deplored the rhetorical excesses of activists — then, on Sundays, they went to their all-white churches and spoke of the Golden Rule. The bigotry was bad enough, the hypocrisy was worse, and yet, as a boy, I absorbed and expressed similar attitudes and beliefs. But that was then, and our tolerance for prejudice is as low as was their threshold for change.

To be fair, Dave, with his cocoa-colored skin and curly black hair, does stand out in a sea of white. His half-sister, La’Nessa, with her dusky complexion and green eyes, appears more Latina than “Halffrican-American.” My father didn’t live to see this, and for now, I’m grateful he is gone. Coping with one bigot is enough today.

Kathy looks at me nervously, afraid the colloquy she’s overheard will provoke appalling epithets she’s sure my mother will spring. But the moment has passed, and mom retreats behind rheumy eyes, witness to another world, one that no longer exists, we hope, except in her fevered imagination.

A few minutes later, my mother snaps alert and again asks me, “Who is that black boy?”

This time I don’t explain. Even though I brought her, I wish she’d go away. In a way, she already has, but why must she always drag us with her, down forgotten roads of racism?

It makes me remember my own forgotten roads, lost in a reverie of my own. Only the tea and madeleines are missing.

A SENSE OF PLACE

I was raised in Deerfield, Illinois, “The Little Rock of the North,” just outside Chicago. Despite the city’s diversity, Deerfield held fast to its position as a suburban site of white flight.

Kathy lived in an opposing clime, “The People’s Republic of Fairfax,” liberally sprinkled with radicals, biker bars and psychedelia, a California dream state nestled north of San Francisco.

There were no gates or fences then, just invisible barriers. We roamed the leafy streets, astride Schwinns without a helmet and never needing locks, like the front doors we left open to strangers never looming in the shadows of our spreading lawns. Women wore hats and gloves, men snap brims and sack suits, a gray tableau in a color-coded community.

Our family alighted during the darkened days of our village history, amid a racial scandal incited by developers seeking to build an integrated neighborhood. Kathy’s family fled across the Golden Gate, to a homogeneous county also awash in white. Any Negroes, as we knew them then, always lived in other towns, near enough to be spotted, just not next door.

When my high school opened, soon after our arrival, it was uniformly white. The color scheme had failed to change when I entered ten years later. Even Kathy’s school, with its leftist slant, was similarly complected. Neither has changed much since then, though “wokeness” left its mark. Kathy’s school later changed its name from honoring the slave trader, Sir Francis Drake, to Archie Williams, who took gold in Berlin and taught there for twenty years. Ironically, the school still sits on Sir Francis Drake Blvd. My town changed some signs as well to erase its racist past, notably on the land bearing the name of the man who condemned the new neighborhood and annexed it as a town park.

When I got sober, I lived in a cheap flop in one of Marin County's few diverse communities. "The Street of Dreams," my father sneered because it was filled with pimps and prostitutes, where juiceheads and junkies littered the cracking sidewalks. When Kathy got sober, she and her daughter Dawn subsisted on welfare in subsidized housing, a pocket of need sewn inside wealthier surroundings. Her beater car was conspicuous on side streets and hilly avenues replete with status symbols.

Now we live on a windswept hill, looking down on all our neighbors. Our flagpole flaps a "freak flag," near the large deck by our pool, to remind us and others of where we came from and who we are. Grateful Dead indeed. We've arrived, as some would have it, with views of mountains and spacious land, oaks and eucalyptus surrounding our estate. Yes, I used the words "estate" and "flagpole." We remain so out of place.

Before I moved to Marin County, nearly fifty years ago, the county highway ran through our town before it meandered north. Cut off from the county seat, the culture and wealth spread south. Novato was the end of civilization in Marin terms, and proud of its separateness. This largest town in Marin is a gateway to wine country, with more dairy farms than urban charms dusted over other towns. Until recently, we had our own phone and cable companies but continued to keep separate health and water districts. Novato is also known as "Coptown," though its many safety officers commute to San Francisco. So we still see red in the rainbow, a part of the county but still apart from it, which is how it will likely stay.

Things that seem so different now, are really not that much. Where we live is a lot like where we're from. This makes our great grandchildren stick out in school and sports: La'Nessa with her springy hair and dark complexion and Dave with a curly black mop atop other African attributes. Two biracial children among their Anglo peers, too easy to identify in a place where difference matters.

Kathy and I, of course, stand out as the oldest parents in the crowd. Our peers believe we're crazy and younger parents don't disagree, all thinking we should know our place, finding somewhere else to be, as if we had a choice. We rarely mix or mingle; we don't drink anyway. Always the outliers, whom no one wants to know.

The fact that Kathy and I are together may be the oddest thing of all. The flower child of a Bohemian mother who, despite childhood polio, was involved in protest marches, married the product of Republican ranks marching to a less radical beat. The biker chick on heroin who got her GED in jail, and the boy imbibing the lush landscape of a booze-soaked Eastern college. The teenage mom and the man who couldn't keep a relationship. Altamont versus fraternity parties, San Francisco Sixties versus the staid Midwestern Seventies, a few years apart in age that straddled distinct generations. A relationship, in short, that could never work but does anyway. Because we are so stubborn, because we are in love, because we have enough in common to fill in common cracks. Children, obviously. A community and a circle of similar friends — and alcoholism. Our shared life is also our shared recovery and how it shapes our lives: a commitment to the program of Alcoholics Anonymous and an unending spiritual quest to know “God’s will for us and the power to carry that out,” per AA’s “Big Book”. In times of flagging faith, we turn outward, inward and toward each other, raising questions, searching for evidence to detect the divine, until the dismaying mess of the moment has passed. Of course, our differences are on display. Even in matters of faith, meaning and child management (which, we now know, is an oxymoron), we tend to disagree, as our neighbors can attest. We’ve seen marriage counselors and shared our problems at both individual and group levels. Years ago, we got a “fiscal divorce” so violent were our financial fights. This was ironic because they intensified just as I was making real money. Now Kathy owns some things, and I own some things, and so long as we maintain separate books, all is quiet in the kingdom.

Our lives have separated anyway, less to conflict than circumstance. COVID, kids and retirement kept us too close, so I work and read outside while Kathy stays inside, or work at my desk upstairs as she stays down. That includes the bedroom she uses at night, our differing nocturnal habits having bred disaffection.

There are fewer things to talk about as our interests have diverged, and Kathy will disappear for a day or two to babysit our grandkids, leaving me home to fend with the “gruesome twosome.” Our grandsons love their Nana unconditionally, which is more than she gets at home, with feuding siblings and a husband always other-focused.

I could be flip and say we stay together anyway, out of habit if nothing else. That would be unfair to Kathy, and untrue. While our similarities solidify things and our differences divide us, with nerves on edge or on display as our young charges charge through our lives, there is something that I can't define, the feeling that prose and poetry still fail to completely capture, when Kathy looks at me and smiles. Her eyes widen to reveal an inner light, the lines and creases of age and weathered concern disappear, and I find the gap between her front teeth fetching. Best of all, it's often due to something I've said or done; again, I've made her happy, which she deserves, and it remains my constant joy to create.

Despite the drama of our lives, in those moments when Kathy graces me with her glow, and I see the love that lingers...I sense the place I want to be is always right beside her.