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My Last Lecture: Hearing Voices, Seeing Visions

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I first realized that I was aging when, in an American Civilization class in the mid-to-late 1970s, I was talking about incidents that we remember forever. My example, so fresh in my own memory, was Kennedy's assassination. The class looked nonplussed, and I realized that they were all pre-schoolers when it occurred! My friends and colleagues Randy Smith and Randall Wight put a name and explanation to the concept I was presenting on that long-ago day. But such "flashbulb memories" are only an extreme example of the way that we all hear voices and see visions. Some of the voices and visions are shared, and of those we make institutional, regional, or even national mythology. Some of the voices and visions are highly idiosyncratic and belong to the dead, or the imaginary, those whose voices never were or have been stilled. I have heard those voices and seen those visions as long as I can remember.

When I think of my father, I hear his voice, with its pre-radio cadences and intonations formed by years of standing in pulpits in Southern Baptist churches and proclaiming the Gospel. His birth and rearing in south-western Alabama branded him on the tongue, and his pleasing drawl echoes through my mind particularly in connection with certain settings. For all my growing-up years, I heard him read Psalm 103 and Isaiah 53 each time we celebrated the Lord's Supper. Whenever I come across either passage, I hear him read it again, and always in King James English (but with an Alabama drawl). Illustrations marked my father's sermons, and looking back I realize that two major influences shaped his preaching style: Howard College and Louisville seminary faculties, and his realization that his Master always taught in parables. His preaching was semi-confessional and highly personal, with illustrations drawn more from experience than from reading. The air of authenticity that came from that mix and his seamless narrative style made his sermons accessible and memorable.

My early childhood pre-dated television, so I learned that The Shadow knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men, and I can still conjure up the sound of an insurance investigator ending the night's explanation of his expense account with "Yours truly, Johnny Dollar." I remember going with my parents to see the first television set in the small south-Alabama county seat town in which I grew up, a set on whose screen we saw mostly snow with vague shadows and from whose speaker we heard the staticky program. After we got a television when I was in the third grade, I learned a new set of voices. "The Wabash Cannonball" always resounds in Dizzy Dean's voice, and the dragon Smaug always speaks with the voice of Paladin.

My childhood physical environment partook of both sea and land. The Gulf lay about sixty miles due south and cloud and wind patterns warned us of Gulf storms. Limestone deposits throughout the county, with their visible fossil remains, proved that the area had once been sea floor. The land's predominant composition was red clay, which peeked from the substrata beneath the rolling hills, particularly once its covering of sandy loam disappeared. My created world atop that geology was small. We lived in the pastorium on a triangular block bounded by the Evergreen Baptist Church where my father pastored to the east, the Presbyterian Church to the south, the L&N Railroad tracks to the west, and to the north, across from its point, a high red-clay hill that anchored the bridge (which everyone called "the viaduct") that carried US Highway 31 from Montgomery to Mobile across the railroad tracks that bisected town, and then sent it south parallel to those tracks. At the block's point, almost beneath the viaduct, lay a small former service station that had been converted into the local library. As one

walked in, the children's section was to the right. Since no street separated me from the library, I visited often—and often alone—to return home with a large stack of books.

The Evergreen of my youth seemed to have more than its share of eccentrics, the people locals always called “characters,” whom I still see and hear. The unmarried Dean sisters fuss over their unmarried brother, whom everyone calls “Dizzy.” Mrs. Millsap still walks the aisles of my English class polishing her blue-and-white spectators (with a big R and L on their respective soles) brown and white. The Felton twins still teach mathematics in their strange intonations while wearing their hand-painted ties. Sweet Shop proprietor Mr. Pugh, ancient in my teen-aged eyes but whose opening his eatery for hunters and fishermen in his retirement confirms his age, always replies, when I ask what he wants to fish for, “I want to catch something that matters.” The small cotton patch at town's edge, owned by the old man who lives there and always has the county's first cotton, still has rows that seem to stretch to infinity when one has a cotton sack slung across one's body and the stalk tops are eye level. Auto mechanic Jack Frazier still uses the boat he made by wielding two old automobile hoods together at their bases to create a double-nosed canoe-like craft.

Two people and one incident stand out most sharply in vision and in voice from among all the others in my Evergreen past. Mrs. Weathers, a throwback to an earlier time, never calls her husband anything other than “Mr. Weathers” in my hearing. She teaches me piano with a ruler and raps my fingers for every mistake, and teaches me Latin in her kitchen while she fixes Mr. Weathers supper. She is a terror who majored in math in college because she'd once had a high school teacher who said that, because she was a girl, she'd never master it. Now she teaches English, and in my mind she salutes her high school English classes as they march around the room, or, despite her diminutive size and construction for stability in high wind, jumps up and runs down a student who had just said, as he ran by her and out the door, “The bell's rung and you can't touch me now, you old bag!” He was wrong; she caught and pulled him back into the room by his right ear. And always she walks across the viaduct from her huge old Victorian home with her towel-covered pan. She never misses a new movie, and she's on her way to the picture show, where she will sit in the dark crunching the ice brought from home in her covered pan.

The police department still has no automobile for its sole officer who walks the downtown streets. Harry Riley looks like some hero from a western movie who has stepped from the screen directly onto our sidewalks. He appears tall, thin almost to gauntness, and has that air of quiet assurance about him that his sharp eyes and drooping white handle-bar moustache enhance. Only his clothes gave the lie to the illusion: he wears black shoes, a neat black uniform with a black Sam Brown belt, and a black straight-brimmed Stetson. He would never wear a blue uniform; that would betray his family heritage and his father's honor. His belt sports no pistol and the only semblance of a weapon he carries sometimes hangs from his arm, sometimes from his hand, and occasionally supports his weight. That simple hickory cane is his only symbol of authority beyond the silver shield on his shirt. He uses the chalk attached to the lower end of his cane to mark the tires of those who park in one spot too long—certain that they, in due time, will show up and pay their parking fine. He and his sister live together in the ancestral home west of town. Neither ever marries, too taken perhaps with the sense of class which haunts a Southern aristocracy of little wealth and much family.

Finally, in my mind's eye, furniture dealer Joe Brooks' old dog still slinks away, looking, in as much dismay and reproach as a dog can conjure, with occasional glances at a hole in the porch near where he had been sleeping. Mostly he looks at Mr. Brooks, who holds his Winchester Model 1897 12-gauge shotgun that I had asked to borrow for a dove hunt. He had warned me that its external hammer made it tricky, then brought it, loaded, to his back porch. As he explained its intricacies, he pumped it. It went off. “I told you it was tricky” was his only acknowledgement that he had almost killed the family pet.

The world of my youth taught me to value individuality and eccentricity and to tolerate a wide range of behavior. There I also learned that we all carry voices and visions around with us, and that we attach idiosyncratic importance even to shared experiences. What looms large to one of us may be forgotten by another witness, even if both witnesses were actors in an exchange. I remain fascinated that such visions and voices retain their vibrancy even until death. I also remain fascinated by how we weave the voices and visions into personal narratives, both individual and collective—the narratives we use to identify ourselves, the narratives that become part of myth, the stuff of legends. Those voices and visions become the backdrop to much of what we think about, and how we know the world and relate to it. My father, being a country boy and child of the Depression, invested his money in land just as he invested his life in ministry. In the woods, one could always distinguish his land lines as much by the change from monoculture to natural forest as by blazes or splashes of paint. Just as his voices and visions shaped his philosophy and determined the look of his land, so ours express themselves in characteristic physical poses—which prompt the exclamation “I’ve seen that look a thousand times”—and characteristic vocal phrasings by which, over time and close association, we become recognizable.

The world of my adulthood has largely been that of Arkadelphia; hence many of my voices and visions involve people from this place. I have thought much about those who, to borrow my dear friend Johnny Wink’s borrowed term, are shashas, the departed who live in memory. I use the term “departed” loosely, signifying those who have left as well as those who have died.

Sometimes the vocal phrasings of my shashas exist because of repetition. They may be particular sounds, like former philosophy teacher Jim Berryman’s characteristic throat-clearing or a sound made by former history professor “Everett” Slavens (not the one of which you’re thinking, Hal, but this one) which, in his personal Morse code, tapped out “Let’s go eat!” Sometimes the vocal phrasings are more articulate, like Slavens’ stock phrase “Go for it!” Or former Religion professor Bob Stagg’s colloquia identifications of a seemingly unending succession of airplane wings as various European cities. Or former English professor Tom Greer’s oft-repeated greeting “Shut up!” Or, one of my personal favorites, the sound of Minnie, a server at Walt’s, forerunner of the Commons, who always greeted those in line with a loud “hi-ya, hi-ya, hi-ya! How you doin’ today, honey (or sweetie)?” That banter ended when she disappeared after saying to a high-profile scholar here to present a Birkett Williams lecture—in her usual manner, but with a bit more edge than usual—“Oooooooh, you’re a cute one! What’s yo’ name, Sugar?”

Sometimes those vocal phrasings are one-offs that seem perfectly to sum up a person or a setting and thus stick in our minds and even become part of our personal or collective lore. I think of former head of financial aid Jim McCommas, sitting in a boat on DeGray Lake when everyone in four boats together, except for himself, had a fish on the line, throwing down his rod and reel and exclaiming, exasperatedly and profanely, “I grow weary of this shit!” Or former president Dan Grant saying to a young, untenured history professor at the end of a Birkett Williams lecture on the Dracula legend, “Tom, I THINK this will be all right.” Or former history professor Lavell Cole’s explanation, in a colloquium presentation, of the problems inherent in his 3.5” floppy disk. Or Tom Auffenberg’s recounting of his lecture on medieval tortue devices or former Religion professor George Blackmon’s automatic confession that “You’d have to kill me to take mine!” in response to the question of whether Sampson had to kill the Philistines to take their foreskins. Sometimes those one-offs remain wordless: the sound of the outside door of Terrell Moore opening and closing, rapid footsteps to a nearby office door, the sign that says “Your grades are ready. Please call me at home at 246-8261.” being ripped down, more rapid footsteps, and the outside door opening and closing again.

The visions and voices that I have always seen and heard produced a conviction that one of my tasks has been—and remains—to give some of them substance. I used to say, half-jokingly, that I became an historian so that I could read other people’s mail and diaries with impunity. In reality, it was

more a case of wanting to make people and places live again in the sunshine of my mind's imagining, and convey that imagining, that renewed life, to others.

Former archivist Wendy Richter and I used to laugh together about our propensity for coming up with "yet another project." My eclectic interests have brought me to the point where I resemble the anonymous quotation that "God put me on earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now, I'm so far behind I will never die." Many research projects lie unfinished in folders in desk and filing cabinet drawers—or atop my desk! I find that voices and visions emanate in equal measure from finished and unfinished business. I also find that some of them have larger significance, while most are mundane, poignant, or exotic.

Some of you have heard me talk about William Hope "Coin" Harvey, his "Arkansas Pyramid," his run for the presidency of the United States, and his impressive string of financial and political failures brought on by personal shortcomings. Some of you have heard my story of personal animosity between Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun, an animosity exacerbated by Floride Bonneau Calhoun and her pious, spiteful snubbing of another cabinet member's wife, and the effect of that personal animosity on the Nullification Controversy in South Carolina in 1832. Some of you heard my stories about two "angels" (a woman from Cairo, IL and a man from Camden, SC) and Walt Whitman. Some of you know about Arkadelphia's second Second Baptist Church and Southern Baptist missionaries to China. And some of you have heard me talk about the effect of the 1918 influenza pandemic on Clark County. But there are other, as yet untold, stories, most of which, like those already told, have to do with how our personal voices and visions affect our humanity.

I doubt that you've heard about the chapel car *Evangel* borrowed from American Baptists by the Arkansas Baptist State Convention and sent to railroad towns, like Gurdon, as a means of starting new Baptist churches in the 1890s. Nor about John Romulus Brinkley, illegitimate son of a North Carolina mountain doctor and itinerant preacher and his wife's niece, who passed the Arkansas Eclectic Medical Board Examination in 1915 at age 30, made a fortune by hawking a bizarre surgery to restore male sexual vitality over his coast-to-coast radio stations in Kansas and then Del Rio, Texas, with a blend of fundamentalist religion, children's bedtime stories, and invitations to listeners to write him about their medical problems. When another doctor offered the same services at a cut rate, Brinkley moved back to Little Rock to operate at the former St. Luke's Hospital and offer rehabilitation care at a building on Arch Street Pike that later became a Carmelite monastery. Law suits, that began when a *Journal of the American Medical Association* article exposed "the Brinkley operation" as no more than a vasectomy and his famous Formula 1020 for restoring male virility as little more than colored water and led an appeals judge to brand him "a charlatan and a quack," forced Brinkley into bankruptcy in 1941, just before a federal grand jury indicted him, his wife, and six former employees on charges of using the mails to defraud. He died in mid-May, 1942, before he could be brought to trial. Nor have you probably heard the following pair of stories, which at the moment resound so in my ear and mind.

Prescott Ford Jernegan, a Martha's Vineyard sea captain's son who attended Newton Theological Seminary, shaved his luxurious walrus moustache to pastor Connecticut's Middletown Baptist Church, gave up the settled life to itinerate and, in 1896 when he was about 30, surrendered preaching to pursue what he later described as over two hundred experiments designed to extract gold and silver from seawater. God, he said, had given him a vision of how this modern-day miracle could be accomplished. With childhood friend Charles E. Fisher and the financial backing of former parishioners, in early 1898 he incorporated the Electrolytic Marine Salts Company in Boston as a public company, capitalized at one million dollars with ten million shares of stock to sell at \$1 each. Jernegan and Fisher sold their secret process to the company in exchange for 45% of all stock sales. The company purchased a former grist mill in eastern-most Lubec, Maine and installed several "accumulators" to extract bullion from the sea. As Vice-President and General Manager, Jernegan oversaw building and production, invested in bringing telephone and electrical service to Lubec, and

ensured that all workers attended Sunday services. He gathered prospective investors, particularly Baptist ministers or their widows, on a pier at Lubec where they watched him lower accumulators into the sea, then returned twenty-four hours later to see them brought up and witness the bullion that had been separated out. In March, Jernegan sent a shipment to the New York Assay Office, which reported that the samples were one-third gold and two-thirds silver. Stock sales soared on the witness and Assay Office reports, even as the stock price also soared to \$1.50-\$2 per share.

In July, Fisher disappeared. Jernegan and his brother, in a series of convoluted cash transactions, purchased government bonds worth \$80,000-\$350,000 by various estimates. Jernegan sailed for Europe under a false name with his wife, son, and the bonds, leaving company President Arthur B. Ryan a letter saying "I fear something has gone wrong with F. He has disappeared from New York, after telling me that the apparatus was ruined, and has carried away the formula relating to making the machine...." and expressing his "fear that he may have deceived me, even in the experimental stage." Assuring Ryan that the machine worked, he stated his intention of finding Fisher in "a few weeks" and urged the Directors to develop a "rigid scientific test" that would prove the apparatus practical. The *New York Times* called his trip an "unexpected departure," an assessment refuted by the company, which called it an "open secret" of some months' standing.

Jernegan's departure caused consternation among stockholders while the Directors tried to calm public fears. Authorities sought his extradition from Havre, which the French rebuffed while Jernegan moved to Brussels. The company shut down operations in Maine in late July and reported that a plant inspection revealed "no trace of gold" in the remaining accumulators. By October, Jernegan declared himself ready to return and "let the law take its course." Upon his Boston arrival, he turned over some \$75,000 to the company. By mid-1899, stockholders and directors were battling in court over what money remained. Jernegan himself, unaccompanied by his former wife and child, went to the Philippines, where he taught and penned that nation's first textbooks in English on local civics, history, and geography. After more than a decade there, he moved to Hawaii as Principal of Hilo High School until 1924. He lived his last years out in the Arizona desert, where he died in 1948.

The Jonesboro Church War began when the First Baptist Church and Jonesboro Bible College invited actor-comedian turned traveling evangelist Joe Jeffers to hold a tent revival beginning June 29, 1930. Jeffers proved wildly popular and preached throughout July. Some of his admirers used charges of immoral conduct to force First Baptist pastor A.W. Reaves to resign in early August, then engineered Jeffers' selection as his replacement. When a large group of parishioners rightfully claimed not to have been part of the election, Jeffers took a leave of absence. Eventually the congregation chose Dow H. Heard of Big Spring, Texas, as their pastor and Jeffers left Jonesboro.

A year later, Jeffers returned to inaugurate an ongoing revival meeting. His sermons included warnings that the Second Coming would occur in May, 1932, as well as charges of immoral conduct against Heard and Mayor Herbert J. Bosler. Jeffers and Heard supporters brawled at First Baptist in early September. Police arrested a Jeffers supporter as the instigator and at his trial the next day, Jeffers led followers to the courthouse, where he asked God to strike the mayor dead and his supporters attacked the mayor and Police Chief.

To restore order, Governor Harvey Parnell called out National Guard troops who patrolled town for a week, particularly near Jeffers's tent, which at times held 5,000 people. Two days after the soldiers left, someone dropped a tear-gas bomb outside Jeffers's tent. Tensions escalated until the First Baptist congregation expelled twenty-one Jeffers followers and the revival tent burned down shortly thereafter. Jeffers' followers built a tabernacle a few blocks southeast of First Baptist, named it the Jonesboro Baptist Church, and started meeting there.

Shortly after occupying the tabernacle, Jeffers left again. The new church, at his suggestion, hired Dale Crowley of Denton, Texas as its pastor. Eleven months later, Jeffers returned to Jonesboro and demanded his church back. He had eschewed his previous fundamentalist beliefs, and he and

Crowley fought as much over theology as over control of the church. Sometimes, the two factions of this new church would hold simultaneous services, complete with competing sermons and choirs. After a mid-August, 1933, fistfight at which some brandished shotguns, the matter went to court. In October, the Chancery Court ruled in Crowley's favor.

Crowley later said that when he went to claim possession of the tabernacle the next day, J.W. McMurdo, whom the Jeffers faction had hired as watchman and janitor, opened fire. Crowley was unharmed; his bodyguard was wounded; McMurdo was fatally shot three times. Crowley was arrested but claimed self-defense. An unknown assailant fired a machine gun through Crowley's Craighead County Jail cell bars and the judge changed the trial's venue to Piggott where, on January 7, 1934, the jury acquitted Crowley of murder.

Jeffers left for Miami shortly after the shooting, later renounced his Baptist ministry, organized and led the Pyramid Power Yahweh cult, and spent time as a convict and as a self-proclaimed prophet in Missouri. Heard and Crowley soon left Jonesboro, too; Reaves never pastored again.

What is the point of these voices and visions? All of my stories reflect my essential belief about personal voices and visions: that, like politics, all history is local and personal. Contrary to what Michael Corleone constantly avers once he goes into the family business, rarely is what happens strictly business instead of highly personal. I find myself agreeing with Alexander Pope's famous maxim that the proper study of man is man, even while the discipline in which I trained has wrapped itself in the mantle of the Social Sciences, casting off its former identity as one of the Humanities as if that identity were a shabby and outdated coat of which fickle Clio is ashamed. The History Department at Florida State made the change shortly before I started graduate studies there; the Social Sciences got a new building, and History preferred modern high-rise architecture to Seminole Gothic. In order to legitimate itself in the eyes of its new family, History became enamored of "cliometrics" and the use of statistical models to explain all things. Having eschewed Marxism, even when disguised as simple economic determinism, and viewing New Left historians with suspicion, many of my teachers found themselves caught up in the same sin Edwin O'Connor's character, Father Hugh Kennedy, confessed. He realized that he had always wanted to leave the parish he served "to go back to the place I loved, to the people among whom I belonged." He had merely marked time. Oh, he'd, in his words, "always behaved well, I'd never hurt them or scandalized them, I'd always treated them with decency and kindness." His one fault was that he failed to give them what they deserved; he never once saw them for who they were. He ignored their humanity.

My friend and former Religion colleague Randall O'Brien used to say that we spend much time listening to the snake, and my mother used to tell me to always take time to smell the roses. Here, I think, is the problem's nub. There are many voices and visions, and we often find it difficult to know which ones are descriptive and which prescriptive. Too often we find ourselves, particularly in academe, ignoring George Smiley's concern in *The Looking Glass War*: that so many view technique as an end in itself. In talking to Leclerc, he warns that "It's so easy to get hypnotized by *technique*." and to Avery: "It's such a mistake, I always feel, to put one's trust in *technique*." Thus we find ourselves in the position Rachel Maddux captures near the end of her novel *A Walk in the Spring Rain*. Middle-aged California law professor Roger Meredith and his wife of twenty-five years, Libby, dine in a restaurant in rural West Virginia "which was on a national highway and catered to tourists," a place where the food was good and the air-conditioning very pleasant. Roger has taken a sabbatical, a year at half-pay, to live on a friend's farm near the the restaurant and work on the book he's always intended to write. When, as he butters a roll, Roger indicates that their half-year has perhaps not been a total loss, Libby presses him: "Loss? Why, Roger, what's wrong? Don't you like it here? Is it wrong for you?" He admits that "the same thing would have been illuminated for me any place." When she observes that he's waited so long for the opportunity, he continues: "That's the way I should have kept it, I guess. All those years I didn't have time to do it, I could always imagine it would be brilliant and original. People are amazing, aren't

they? Imagine going on half salary for the privilege of finding out one is quite mediocre, really, when one could have stayed on full salary and maintained the illusion of brilliance.” When she tries to dissuade him, Roger concludes “It’s not *bad* work. It’s adequate. It’s scholarly. It will help toward promotion. It’ll serve its purpose, all right. It’s just that it’s not what I’d hoped.” [65-6]