EPIPHANIES IN ACADEME or MEDITATIONS ON A FLAT CAT

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Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
About it and about; but evermore
Came out by the same door where in I went.
Omar Khayyam

I came back from The War in 1946 and went to Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College on the GI Bill of Rights—along with 700 other vets. Our first formal greeting on the SFA campus was by Dr. A. W. Birdwell in the old Aikman Gym in the fall of ’46. Dr. Paul Boynton was president then, and Birdwell was President Emeritus, having retired in 1942. Boynton was a mite jumpy, and I have always had the feeling that Boynton pushed the aged Dr. Birdwell on stage ahead of him—before that gym full of returning soldiers and sailors—to test the waters. Dr. Birdwell came out, unintroduced—and he was that cool that he didn't even have his false teeth in. He smacked a couple of times and said very seriously, “In spite of what you might have heard or suspected, I am not Stephen F. Austin.” When the laughter and applause died down, he said with perfect Bob Hope timing, “But I knew him.”

I have been connected with SFA ever since, one way or another. I got my degree here in ’49 and merged into SFA history when I married Hazel Shelton, the daughter of Coach Bob Shelton, who was the first athletic director and coach when the school opened in 1923. Coach Shelton was the Dean of Men until his death in 1964. I joined the SFA faculty in ’65. All of my five children attended here, as did my wife, who got her degrees here and taught history twelve years before she retired. At one time Hazel was teaching history, I was teaching English, and my son Robert was teaching geology on this campus. So as you can see, SFA is my home, and I am now and always have been completely committed to its welfare. And should I die in service, please prop me up in my chair in my office with a Snicker bar in my hand and a copy of Hamlet open in my lap; then roll in a great stone to seal the doorway to my sepulcher. — You don't need to come out and look on the third day. I'm not going anywhere.

But this paper is about epiphanies in academe, specifically here at SFA—By the way, an epiphany is not a coed of easy virtue, although we've had our share of those.— Epiphanies are sudden revelations, marvelous manifestations of ideas that change our ways of living and looking at life—light bulbs that go on in little balloons above our heads, as they did when Copernicus realized that the sun, not the earth was the center of the universe—and when Newton considered
the force of gravity on a falling apple—and when Einstein finally figured out what E=MC 2 meant.

For the scholars here, I do know about The Epiphany, which is a religious celebration of the revelation of the Christ child to the Magi. My epiphanies were not as religiously divine, but they were as significant to my profession and my life.

Epiphanies of varying degrees show up throughout our lives. Like realizing the reality of the Easter bunny and Santa Claus and suddenly and at an early age discovering that the ladies' underwear adds in the Sears and Roebuck catalog hanging in the outhouse have a significance far beyond their two dimensional representations.

And I stretch the definition for an SFA example: We had a biology prof here during the Forties and Fifties who was notoriously absent minded. One campus legend relates that Dr. Smith drove to the Texas Academy of Science meeting in Dallas, forgot he had his car, and took the bus home. Then, when he caught the Greyhound to go back after his car he bought a round-trip ticket.—Here's the epiphany.— This was the same professor who on one trip stopped to get gas, filled up, and then drove off, forgetting that his wife was with him and had gone to the restroom. — You can bet that Dr. Smith had one dramatic epiphany when that light bulb lit up.

But I think that most of our epiphanies, rather than exploding a new bombshell of an idea before our minds' eyes, have been the felicitous ordering of a jumble of ideas that already lay in a state of advanced gestation, like chicks late in a brood, just waiting to come forth in a hatch. I believe that we are continually epiphanizing, realizing, recognizing. — It is a long-time, long-term process.

During my forty-six years in academe, I consider the following as important, as three memorable intellectual epiphanies.

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Epiphany #1: I taught a lot of freshman early in my career, and believe now as I did then that those classes provided me with a more liberal education than I had ever received at the hands of my illustrious mentors in graduate school, who had me comparing the epic tradition in Virgil's Aeneid and Milton's Paradise Lost.

The first half of all freshman English courses during the 1950s and ‘60s—and even later, in some instances—was devoted to reading articles with important and debatable ideas and using these ideas as the beginnings of their own critical writings. I was as excited about the freshman introduction to Freud's Anatomy of Mental Personality and Darwin's hypotheses and the Malthusian Doctrine as I wanted my students to be.

And I remember the first time I read Jeremy Ingalls' essay “Catching Up With the Human Race.” I had a cataclysmic emotional upheaval, a full-blown epiphany, and I stood on my desk with glazed eyes gazing upward while angels in academic regalia chanted Latin verse to the twanging of celestial harps. Or something like that.
Ingalls' thesis—and it was not particularly world shaking in itself—was that when human beings arrive on earth they have thousands of years of accumulated knowledge stacked up and waiting for them to ingest and digest. Ingalls believed that the educated person's life is one long intellectual journey to catch up with the knowledge of the human race. — I had never really thought of it that way before.

Ingalls' thesis is that in the seven to nine months between conception and birth a person passes through all the evolutionary stages—from one-celled he becomes multi-cellular, is gilled, has a tail, and before he is born he accomplishes what took 600 million years of evolution to perform—that is, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny—and that part of the nervous system known as the brain developed greater power and sensitivity and memory than the brain of any other animal.

In his first six years the child progresses about 950 thousand years, and he enters the Old Stone Age of about 50,000 years ago. This is a four- or five-year-old child. He knows his friends and relations, can take care of small animals, can talk and tell stories, draw rough pictures and say prayers. When angered he resorts to sticks and stones. — I hope I am not doing cave men a disservice here.

In the next six or seven years through adolescence he advances 43,000 years to the Bronze Age of about 6,000 years ago. He feels the necessity of a tribal society and chooses his leader from the warrior class. He can read, write, count, use artisans tools with limited skill, and he understands the wheel, the screw, and the inclined plane. His ideas about his society are greatly limited, and he knows or understands little outside his own group or tribe.

When he graduates from high school, if he has persevered, he should have approached the stage of the Greek civilization, 600 years BC. He wonders now about man's relation to the universe, society, and his gods, about the working of the mind, about the basic sciences, and he recognizes the value of art forms.

By the time he graduates from college, if he has the IQ and the inclination, he has progressed a good part of the way through the last 2500 years and is catching up with the human race. Of course, he'll never make it, but running well the race is as important as a crown of laurels.

I won't give you the full lecture; but isn't that a neat hypothesis! I have kept the print of that orderly and evolutionary progression (perhaps a bit simplistic for some, but not for me) in my mind ever since, and I think that I always taught with the idea that I was passing a baton in a sustained sprint to catch up myself and my students with the human race.

As importantly, I was passing what I could of a seamless cloth of human culture that covered all races for all time—a study of the Oneness of the human race.

Professionally, my reading of “Catching Up With the Human Race” convinced me beyond all question that all (I say ALL!) college students should be required to successfully complete two-semester courses in World Civilization and World Literature early in their college careers. I don't think that a person has a chance of catching up with the human race unless he has an
understanding of the history and the culture of mankind back through the Neanderthals to the australopithecines and lemurs and the primal ooze. So add biology to the requirements. And art and music history.

And there is more, but the bottom line for me is that basic courses—in geography, for crying out loud! I had a senior student who could not find Scotland on the globe when we were reading Robert Burns' “Tam O'Shanter”—is that these basic courses in the fundamentals of our culture should be successfully completed before students elect such pop courses as “The History of Eroticism,” or “John Wayne” or “Rap” (God help us!). And bless their hearts, professors advertise these courses on billboards!

My ultimate fear for academe is that solid collegial departments will so trivialize the curriculum for the sake of student popularity that eventually their important, relevant courses will be dropped from the University's core of requirements.

And if you will allow me a concluding, personal aside—I enjoyed teaching English—ancient and modern, but never trivial—because I believe without any doubt that literature is the most necessary course for catching up with the human race and is the most important creation of all mankind, greater than Beethoven's Fifth or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or the landing on the moon. I believe that humanity is what it reads and is the stories that it tells about itself. Its culture develops from what it receives from its literature—from the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, the King James Bible, and *Pilgrim's Progress* and from Horatio Alger, and 007 and Rocky and even the governor of California.— Once upon a time I hitchhiked to Alaska because of reading Jack London, Robert Service, and an Alaskan nature magazine I borrowed from a neighbor.— And I believe that the Arthurian legends and Chaucer and Elizabethan drama and Mark Twain and T. S. Eliot are relevant and necessary to a student's catching up with the human race.

Another epiphany in academe: I remember this happening as if it were a snapshot in my professional Kodak book. It occurred in 1967, when the School of Liberal Arts was still in the Birdwell Building. I met sociologist Charles Vetter on the sidewalk as I was coming back from coffee, and he collared me and began lecturing me on this book he had just finished reading. It was called *African Genesis*, it was written by Robert Ardrey, and it was about ethology, the study of animal behavior, a relatively new field at the time but one in which Vetter and I had discussed before.

I read Vetter's copy of *African Genesis*, bought a copy of my own which I read again, and awakened in wonder—I epiphanized!—to a scenario of new and old ideas brought together in a startling but orderly and understandable way. Ardrey included man, of course, in his ethological investigation of animal behavior, and he came up with a conclusion that four basic genetically inherited drives—sociality (herding instinct), dominance (the pecking order), territoriality (space!), and sexuality—governed the behavior of all animals, including man.

I began looking with greater focus—with an ethological focus—on the activities of my fellows—both literary and otherwise. I saw much of narrative literature as the battle for dominance and
territory, from the earliest Biblical stories of the Canaanites taking over their Promised Land through Fenimore Cooper's tales of the conquering of the Indians and the America frontier to modern struggles for space and prestige in TV's *West Wing*. The conflict in narrative literature is through the continual struggle for dominance and territory — between Achilles and Hector, between Macbeth and Macduff, and between Captain Kirk and the evil forces of the universe. Hercules and Theseus endure all manner of physical and mental tests to reach the room at the top with its prestige and territory, as did Cinderella and Pretty Woman Julie Roberts.

Literature is an exercise in ethological basics.

Outside of literature, Ardrey's thesis is wonderfully illustrated in the world of games we play, such as King of the Mountain, where the strongest holds the pinnacle—and football, in which the Cowboys struggle to protect their own territory while trying to invade and capture the Redskins' camp—or baseball, where an individual Atlanta Brave makes a raid within the Cleveland Indian's territory and tries to get home safe and unscathed. Not to mention chess and checkers, Red Rover, and London Bridge.

I observed that strongest of human drives, sociality, or the herding instinct, on campus. I watched attentively as students herded up into select social groups in the old student coffee shop (Perhaps now better illustrated in the mall in front of the library). The males came in first and claimed the territory, a table or two, and the females came in and joined them—jocks and their babes in one bunch, black-hatted kickers in another, African-Americans making their own circle, the Greeks in closed cliques. They each had a territory, a personal and social space which was close to inviolate. And one could watch long enough and pick out the pecking order, the dominance, in the group by watching who held the floor and who was being groomed and looked at and talked to the most.

As Ardrey pointed out, the male animal's energies are directed to acquiring status (dominance) and property (territory) and the maintenance of a stable social system (sociality). The energies of the female (I'm into sexuality now.) are directed toward continuing the species by choosing a male of the highest status and best possible territory. The female—according to Ardrey—is the sexual selector and is responsible for all consummation, excluding rape.

I illustrate the sexuality drive with a once hallowed tradition on the SFA campus—the panty raid. In case you wish to revive this custom, all that you need are several dozen males from the boys' dorm marching on a conveniently located girls' dorm. Once they arrive, the boys place themselves under the girls' windows and begin a chant—It's like birdsong or a coyote's howl— which should be fairly easy to learn. It's “Panties! Panties! Panties” shouted innumerable times. The females who are attracted to this chant, go of their own volition to their windows, choose the males below who capture their various tastes and fancies, and then bestow on them their nether undergarments, sometimes personally identified with names and phone numbers. Nowadays they might include email addresses. The panty raid is a perfect example of animal sexuality in action: The males sing, howl, and whistle an invitation; and the females choose those on whom they would bestow their favors—in this case, symbolically, of course—and the species is guaranteed its continuation.
An ethological epiphany helps in understanding certain social insanities.

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**This third and final epiphany** is entitled “Meditations on a Flat Cat.” This part deals with matters philosophical that impinge on the boundaries of academia. It began when Maggie and I found our cat Tigger, flattened like a piece of cardboard in the road at the bottom of Pillar hill. He was instantly recognizable by his stripes and his hind leg, which had been splinted by a practicing (literally!) veterinarian and thereafter walked like he had a back wheel with the axle off center. Alas, poor Tigger, a cat of infinite ways and wonderful wisdom, of darting eye and flashing claw, a feline of fanciful intellect and multitudinous meanderings whose far-seeing imagination was catfull of the most delightful and delicious designs! But he had come to this! And I meditated on this flat cat and wondered what became of the mouser that once inhabited this now very thin and furry and smelly piece of hide.

I will return to Tigger in a nonce.

I don't remember having an epiphany in my seventh grade General Science class, when Mr. Bristow informed us that matter could be neither created nor destroyed. (What??!! How 'bout Tigger?) Having destroyed squirrels and rabbits and pennies on the railroad track and my parents' peace of mind, I was skeptical, but I did keep that scientific principle in mind for the sake of future examinations on that subject.

This law of the Conservation of Matter drifted in and out of my consciousness through the seventh grade and during my maturing and later professional years and was regularly expanded upon by the poets, priests, and philosophers whom I met along the way.

Thus, I came to believe with the Apostles Creed in “life everlasting.” [And matter everlasting—and Tigger everlasting] I also believed with the god Shiva when he told Arjuna in the *Mahabharata* that: “There never was a time when I was not nor when you were not and there will never be a time when we will not be.” I believed with Emerson in “The Brahma”: “If the Red Slayer thinks he slays or the slain think they are slain they know not well what subtle ways I keep and turn and pass again.” And I believed with cowboy poet Wallace McRae (speaking of “subtle ways”) as he explains the resurrection process to his buddy Slim in his verse “Reincarnation.” Slim hypothetically dies, returns to the soil, and comes up as a daisy, which an old brindle cow eats and then leaves greenly in a pile on the ground. The poet, riding by and observing the fresh cow patty, is moved to serious contemplation and on wings of poetry says: “I think of reincarnation./ Of life, and death, and such./ And come away concludin': ‘Slim,/ You ain't changed all that much.’”

The epiphany occurred when I read Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. Bryson created for me a vivid picture of this great mass of atoms that occupies the universe and *is* the universe and goes back to the Big Bang! beginning—and really, beyond. This cosmic all-encompassing atomic soup contains the stuff of all life, of all matter and all energy that has ever existed, including Tigger. It is the pre-Alpha and it is the post-Omega. It is the All-Father-and-Mother, the Praise-God-from whom-all-blessings-flow! It is space and time and energy being
curved and flowing into each other in a great flood of atoms—and we petty people coagulate and partake of it all and become a part of its majesty.

And as this eternal atomic Everywhere nurtures us, we give of ourselves to it. We aspirate, exfoliate, expectorate, defecate, urinate, ejaculate, and regurgitate our matter, constantly giving of ourselves even as we borrow from the universe's vast supply. Bryson says that we are all recycled reincarnations, that we all contain some of the atomic stuff of Plato and King George III and Charles Lindbergh, which should give us all some claim to more than fifteen minutes of fame and greatness.

I enjoy contemplating the panoply of the past from Bryson's reincarnal perspective. We have all lived before as diatoms and dinosaurs, as fleas and flies, as tigers and terrapins—as the earth on which our ancestors walked as they wandered out of Africa—as the snow which fell on the Neanderthals as they stalked the mastodons on the plains of Europe—as the atoms of air that Shakespeare breathed when he thought about tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

And this body which you see before you is but one of the many that I have worn in the eighty years of my cogitation, ergo sum I am. It is forever changing and eventually will melt and thaw and resolve itself into a universal dew on which future life will forever feed and thrive.

And I pause now to remember Archer Fullingim, the Printer of the Big Thicket, Editor of The Kountze News, with whom I shared the presidency of the East Texas Pine Box Burial Association. We established this organization for the purpose of returning ourselves with dispatch back into the soil of the natural world. Archer always insisted on coming back, not as Slim's daisy but as a pileated woodpecker. So if you are in the Thicket and see a pileated swooping through, wave at him. He might be toting some of Archer's matter.

I believe in Bryson's Great Universal Recycling System, and have long believed, and have taught it as part of my discipline and my philosophy, but Bryson created the complete and ordered and convincing picture and excited the final epiphany. The picture—for the present! for today at least—is complete, and my meditations upon the flat Tigger cat have achieved an equilibrium between sadness for his loss and confidence in his eternal future and everlasting usefulness.

This epiphany has strengthened my belief in Life itself, which is God The Father Almighty, maker of all the heavens and all the earths—and in Jesus Christ his son and in Mary Magdalene his daughter and in Anthony and Cleopatra and Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor and Brad Pitt and Angelina Joli—All, by God, the sons and daughters of eternal Life—even as you and I are the sons and daughters of eternal Life—and even as is the girl on television whose theme song is “What If God Were One of Us.” He is all of us, of course, including Alas, poor Tigger.

All three of these epiphanies in my academic career have shown me the oneness, the unity of all things. Jeremy Ingalls' “Catching Up With the Human Race” impressed me with the unity of all of the cultures this earth has known, one great fabric of humanity. Robert Ardrey's African Genesis reminded me of the kinship—physically, mentally, and socially, of all animal life. And Bill Bryson's A Short History of Nearly Everything convinced me of the Holy Oneness of all life, of all matter, of all the energy of the universe.
Life hovers over our universe with Ah, bright wings and enfolds us all in the arms of Eternity.

This androgynous Father-Mother—this Great Grand and Gorgeous Life that we swim through in our three scores and ten—blesses us with all that we meet that teaches us about the beauty and the excitement of our earthly days, every time some bright thing or some dear body shows us how to touch, taste, see, hear, or smell a piece of this undying time and space.

Life came to me completely in the form of family.— I could wax on indefinitely on the virtues of my wife and five children and six grandchildren, without whom I would be a tattered coat upon a string, a soul without a song to sing. And the only straight and solid line in my stumbling years has been the love and friendship of my wife who has formed the stable platform on which my life has stood.

Life has blessed me from the beginning with people who sang and made music with me, who taught me the times tables and how to read and how to drive nails and saw a board and scuba dive and cast with my left hand—who have hunted and fished with me and shared with me the love of East Texas' water and its woods.

And my most heartfelt blessing goes to those great teachers—here at SFA, many of them, like Sheley and Fox—who have shown me the magic of literature and the fascination and excitement of learning about mankind and life itself.

And please allow me to mention one particular person: My life has been epiphanized and adventurized by one Dr. Robert W. Mitchell, a nature photographer and wildlife biologist of San Antonio, whose courage and strength, energy and intellect have expanded my horizons far beyond the circumference of this earth. He led the way to twenty years of exploring the caves of Mexico and the Yucatan; to the barrancas of Chihuahua; the back roads of Baja; the headwaters of the Amazon; the game preserves of India; the wilds of Africa; plus Borneo, Burma, and Nepal—to mention just a few of the trips we have made during our fifty years together. — For a lasting and life-enhancing education I thank my buddy Mitch and his equally adventurous wife Linda Mae.

These saints who come marching into our lives to excite our imaginations and to stimulate our great epiphanies are those who show us how best to live our few precious years, who show us best how to make some difference. Our smallest push against the wheel of time affects all of history, affects all of the atoms and all of the energy that waits for us in eternity. We are as One with Tennyson's Ulysses, who meditates on the finale of his peripatetic life:

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield!
Verviele doch! Du bist so schoen!

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