

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Cassius and the Kid Soften the Curmudgeon

Eric · Wednesday, July 15th, 2015

Yeah, ok, so I'm a curmudgeon. A parsimonious tough guy. On first approach, I have a stern face and a menacing growl. I put people off. I'm not very open to meeting new folks and not very easy to get to know. Some take it for arrogance, but c'mon, you know that's not the real me. I'm just a big, over-sensitive softie. Inside, where it counts. All that barking and menacing? It's just a front... a defense... a performance persona... to keep the hostile world at bay.



The most infamous curmudgeon

It's been that way ever since... well, forever. Or at least ever since I became an awkward social misfit in junior high school... instead of the popular Ivy League, Mr. Joe College I was groomed to be. Can you believe it? I used to be popular? And clever. I once arranged for myself to be elected 6th grade class president, in a "private meeting" in the boys bathroom with Tony Guillespi, Dave O'Connor, and Brian Lefkowitz. It was my first experience with back room politics. Very astute – with the racial mix in the room. "You vote for me and I'll play first base on the softball team and run third on the relay team. We'll win the 6th grade championship." It was agreed. I won the election and we won the championship.

But then, in the 7th grade, as I've already calamitously reported, my Mom sentenced me to the hated "E-program" for smart kids, and my former legions of friends abandoned me. I didn't play on the school sports teams anymore, and the same dudes who voted me president the year before now hypocritically passed me by in the green-tiled hallways, either in silence, or with muttered barbs and insults under their breaths.

It hurt. I was no longer popular. No dates, no girlfriends, no fraternities. What was I supposed to do? I closed up. Became angry. Made like I didn't care. Withdrew into myself and my awkwardness. Tried to act cool. But I definitely wasn't.

And it stayed that way until after college graduation, when I created an emotionally violent scenario for myself to cut the smothering metaphorical umbilical cord asunder. I "hit the road" and moved far away from New York. I ended up in Chicago. And I eventually became an artist.... a

clown.... who used humor and performance... and professional accomplishment... to cover up the hurt, anger, and sensitivity.

I never had a girl friend for more than a year or two. Who needed one? I was a wild and wooly, hippie-artist polygamist who needed to compensate for my early adolescent repression by notching female conquests on my new freewheelin' belt. Marriage? Children? Who needed them? It was the late 60s and 70s, then the 80s and 90s... and me, Bob Dylan, and Muddy Waters were rolling stones. We gathered no moss. A marriage license was a compromise to convention. I didn't need or want it – ever. I was a uncompromising artist-warrior-clown.



Warrior Clown Mifune

I was also, admittedly, a self-involved narcissist. Me. Me. Me. Everything was, ultimately, about... me. My needs, my goals, my ambitions, my career. My appetites, my travels, my accomplishments. My friends, my clowning, my cancer, my failures. Sure, I could blame it on being a self-centered Leo, or just on being a baby boom member of the infamous "me generation", but c'mon, how much "me" and "my" can a single narcissist or generation lay claim to?

But then... inevitably... the new millennium rolled around. I was 53 years old. Living in LA. Women here were no longer wowed by my smarts, by my sense of humor, by my former good looks or my love of freedom. Beauty was a commodity in LA, and women wanted something in return for their good looks. Money, security, maybe some help in "their careers". And sure, I had grown from "starving artist" to working "college professor", but I couldn't provide any of those things for the women I wanted. So.. I...

... got a dog instead.



Clay, the Dog

1998. Clay was the young, husky mutt's name. He was found in nearby Elysian Park and I slept with him the first few nights on the hard linoleum kitchen floor. I had just broken up with the last "love of my life" and I was lonely. Vulnerable. Clay and I bonded. My mother was happy for me. I was no longer alone; I had a dog. I could learn something about responsibility, longevity, friendship and love. I could open up and trust another sentient being. Not quite human yet, but canine. It was a start.

Then, two years later, and over a decade after I had been softened by cancer, I met her: a pretty brown-skinned Indonesian girl, on the streets of Kuta Beach, Bali. I asked her for directions to the "Matahari" and she said she would show me. Instead, we walked around aimlessly for three hours on the streets of Kuta and along the beach. She didn't speak more than a few words of English, but we were both lonely; me for the reasons above, and she... because she had moved to Bali from her native island of Sumatra and she missed her family. Somehow we communicated this. Or intuited it. And the next day I was on a plane back to Bangkok and back home to LA.

Would you believe that this is the woman who would become my wife?

She was 31 years younger than I was. Not only didn't she speak English, but she didn't know who Richard Nixon, Bob Dylan, or Sam Cooke were! We had nothing in common. Yet... after communicating in broken English by email for about 4 months, I invited her to visit me in LA. She refused... but said I could come back to Bali and visit her for my Christmas vacation. I did.

And 8 months later, on August 3, 2001, Surya moved to LA. On a 5 year multi-entry visa that I somehow wangled from the US Consulate in Surabaya. I think I just wore the poor guy down with persistence. He wanted me to get a 6 month "fiancé visa", but I told him that "I didn't want the pressure of marrying a girl I hardly knew... within 6 months." He must of understood, or magically known that... a year and a half later, on February 14, 2003, Valentine's Day... Surya and I would tie the knot at City Hall near the LA airport.



Wedding Dance

My mother never got to see it. She died suddenly of a stroke in 1999. But I knew she would be happy... her 54 year old son... finally... married. Finally with someone to care for and to share his life with. She was worried that I never would. Well, ma, look at me now...

Still married. 13 years later. The hardest and best thing I've ever done. I truly believe that a "lesser man", or at least one who one with less patience, less need, and less tenacious commitment, would never have been able to sustain this marriage. Would have been out the door. Or have been left inside the door. Many times. Our marriage has had soooo many eruptions... and near fatal confrontations... and daily silences... and threats of leaving. Yet... here we are. "Still going strong," as my wife likes to quote Shania Twain. Trial by fire. I've had to learn. To listen. To compromise. To apologize. And to mean it. I've learned that I'm opinionated and rigid and judgmental, and that a curmudgeon is not a very easy man to live with. And I've learned to love and appreciate this young woman who has somehow, against all odds, managed to put up with me... for fourteen years. No easy task.

Clay, the Dog, died in 2013. He was fourteen and he'd slowed down a lot in the last couple of years. When I brought him to an orthopedist in Orange County to examine his hip, the doctor took one look at him and said, "I'm afraid this is not just the hip. Your dog is very sick and there's nothing to be done at this point." It was cancer and it made Clay slow and feeble. He was in daily pain and sometimes incontinent. No dignity left. So... I decided right then and there, after I called Surya who had come to love Clay as much as I did, to put the old boy down. It was really sad. I teared up and held on to his face as he received the lethal injection. And I will never, ever, forget the look in his eyes as he looked disbelievingly at me for the last time... before his eyes rolled back into his head... and up into dog heaven.

I vowed I would never get another dog. One was enough and his name was Clay. People said I was "a one dog owner" and I guess I agreed. Until... about a year and a half later, just outside the tennis courts where I play at Slauson and Van Ness in South LA, my homeless friend, Huston, called me over to his shopping cart one Monday morning. "Hey, man," he said motioning me over to him, "I want to show you something." I came right over, and inside his shopping cart, inside a dirty blue plastic milk crate, were two crying pups. "I found them this morning inside a blue garbage bin." "You're kidding," I said in disbelief. "You mean someone just threw them into the garbage?" "Yep," Huston said, who had seen a lot worse than this in his neighborhood: his brother in law being shot in the street just weeks before and now his sister having to have her foot

amputated from a gangrenous ingrown toenail. "Jeez," I said, "what kind of person throws out two puppies?" "I don't know," Huston says stoically. "Which one you want?"

Huh? He wanted me to take one of the abandoned pups right on the spot. "Yes, sir," he smiled his big, barrel-chested, ex-con enforcer smile. "Well, I'll have to ask my wife first," I said hesitantly. "No problem," Huston said confidently. "Which one?" I looked at the two whimpering pups in the milk crate. I was immediately drawn to one, the male pup. He looked up at me, as if Clay's spirit had come back into the body of this tiny, abandoned pup, and I said, "Well, I'll take this one.... but just for a week. As a trial. Let me see how it works out." "No problem," said Huston, undaunted. "Take the milk crate and towel. Just bring them back next time."

I did. I brought the homeless pup home. And the milk crate and towel back. And what can I say? Surya and I fell in love with the tenacious little pit bull-shepherd right away. He was feisty and rambunctious, and cuter than hell. For a while we thought he might be deaf, but it was probably just because he was in shock from his geographical trauma that he just didn't respond to sounds for the first few days. But he came around, and he hears just fine, believe me. He is protective of the yard as an alarm system, and he can detect movement in the street long before we ever know anyone's approaching. And... he barks like hell. We named him "Cassius," sort of a nominal "predecessor" to his predecessor, Clay.



Prince Cassius

And just like Clay, and my wife after him, Cassius takes my time and devotion. Not to compare a dog to a wife, but my mother must have been on to something. Or maybe, love just has a way of doing that. It simply demands time and devotion. Patience and forgiveness. Generosity and acceptance. Just as I had to sit down with my wife at the dining room table to help her learn English, I had to sleep on the kitchen floor with Cassius the first many nights, the same way I had done with Clay. Trust takes time. And commitment. How can the other count on you unless you're entirely countable on? My wife got to know that however she tested me, and she came up with some super doozies, that I would never leave her. Likewise, Cassius, having been abandoned in a blue plastic garbage bin, learned that I was the alpha dog, and that he could always depend on me... for food, for shelter, and for love.

My wife said in her last birthday card to me, that I was "the most loyal man she's ever known." Quite a compliment to this former philanderer. And Cassius, in his own way of acknowledgment, soaks my face with scores of kisses every morning when I wake up. He exudes buoyant and boundless young pup energy, and he absolutely wants to play with every single dog in Elysian Park. My wife and Cassius are lessons in love and devotion.

And... just like that, the "me, me, me", and the "my, my, my" have slowly, but astonishingly, become "you, you, you" and "them, them, them." What a humbling lesson for a lifelong, self-confessed narcissist!

And now... guess what? Just as my mother could have never dreamed, Surya and I have brought our 8 year old Indonesian nephew here to LA from Sumatra. In another unanticipated curve ball

life has thrown me, or rather, offered me, “while I’ve been waiting for my plans to work out,” there’s still another unplanned miracle. A young, happy boy in my life. One who laughs and teases and jokes and clowns... albeit, once again, with no English. But what an opportunity... for the boy – coming from a dead end third world country to the “land of opportunity,” limitless America. For my wife – who is overjoyed at having this chance at maternity and with being able to help her family even more than she has thus far. And for me – getting a chance at being a “parent” this late in life, signing him up for school, teaching him English, taking him to the Zoo, to the amusement park, on boundless road trips, and being able, perchance, to pass on a legacy.

With any luck, we may even be able to adopt him. And... just like Old Scrooge on that epiphanous Christmas day... old curmudgeonly “Trules” has both gradually, and suddenly, evolved into “Pak Tru-les” (silent “k”), nurturing uncle and guardian to “the X-man”, Exsel, the kid’s actual given name.



The X-man

Last year around this time I wrote a story called [July 4th, Rediscovering America Through Immigrant Eyes](#). It was about my coming to appreciate America through the eyes of my immigrant wife.

And this year, besides Cassius running away for 24 hours from the shock of his first fireworks, it was another fine Independence Day... and another good time to take stock of my own, and my country’s stock in the world. Certainly, America has more than enough problems and challenges: entrenched terrorism, inadequate health care, broken infrastructure, broken immigration, income inequality, a venomous political system... the list goes on... and on.

But as for my own personal American experience, it keeps coming back to these two Indonesians... who I now call my family. Surya and Exsel. Without them, perhaps, I’d be turning into a rigid, arrogant and judgmental old man.



“Bo Ani” and nefu, Exsel

I guess this year’s is a companion piece. A left-handed, but genuine, thank you – to my country, the good ol’ US of A, who along with Cassius and Clay, Surya and Exsel, have given me...

... a lot to be grateful for.....



Pak Trules and the X-man

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