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Contents

Big Box ~ Michael Quam

Dear Diary, Goodbye ~ Louisa Rogers

What I'm Holding On To ~ Barry Evans

Angie ~ Julie Clark

Working to Get Rid of a Demon ~ Angie Boissevain

The Lampshade ~ Suzanne

The I.D. Query ~ Maggie Shaffer

Three Jewels ~ Judith Louise

What Are I~ Mitch Trachtenberg

Christian and Henny~ Julie Clark



Back in October, Michael and I sent out his poem, Big Box, with a request: "Tell us what you are holding on to. And here's an alternative question to ponder: In times of turmoil, how do we/you see our/your current situation, see it clearly, and then let that clarity guide our/your actions?" In this issue are your responses: sangha dharma explored in many voices. At the end of this issue you'll find a piece which opens doors to further exploration of this conversation ~ and another request!

Big Box

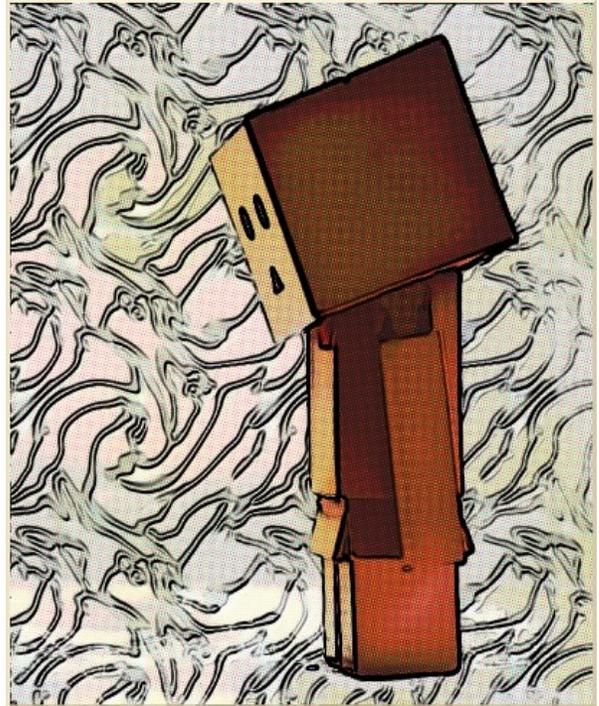
Michael Quam

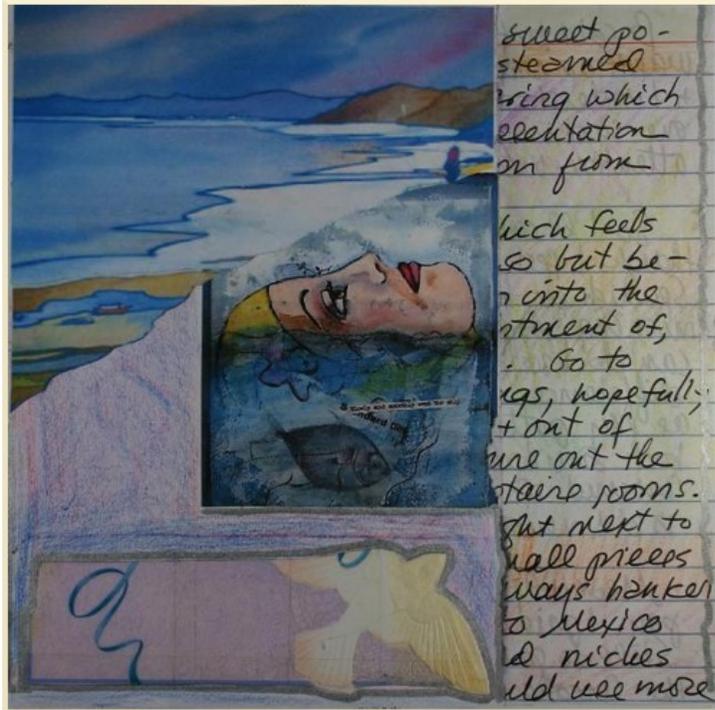
This is a story about an old friend of mine.
Life smacked him hard, a couple of body blows
And then one to the head, so he lit out
For parts unknown, but he made another
Major mistake: he tossed all his stuff
In the trunk of his Plymouth, including
A big box with 300 pages of the book
He was writing about his misery. Trouble was,

After months on the road, the pages were
Jumbled in the box, and since he hadn't
Bothered to number them, when he tried
To put it all back together he couldn't
Make sense of his own biography. His story
Had no beginning, only an endless muddle,
With no bright thread to follow, just random
Stains and screwy scribbling in the margins.
He had no idea how he found himself one night
In July on a bluff high above the Missouri,
No moon and a sky filled with stars so blazing
You could count the hairs on the back of your hand.
In the stillness before dawn he began to feel
A lovely humming all around and tiny chimes
Like elfin temple bells dissolving all the edges.
An owl swooped past like a cool shadow,

And he saw that every night something comes
To an end and something else is saved
For one more day, to eat and sleep and hunt again,
No weeping for what's missing, just another
Chance to try one's luck in this one world.
Three weeks later he walked out of a bar
In Omaha and started baking bread for a living;
Flour-dusted and yeasty, he felt fairly good.

But, y'know, he's still got that damn box.





Dear Diary, Goodbye

Louisa Rogers

The year I was nine, I received my first diary. It was pink and pocket-size, with a gold latch and key. I recorded what I got for my birthday (a Tower watch), my teachers (Miss Eckhert and Mr. Brow), and which sister won the game of Monopoly (Arabella).

Fifty years later, I still keep a journal. On its lined pages I ask, plan, dream, storm and mull. Journaling has been my partner all my life. Exploring my meandering thoughts on the written page is not just helpful, it is purgative. And fun. My life would be thinner without the call of the open page.

Over the years I amassed cartons and cartons of journals that I schlepped from town to town, state to state, and country to country. I keep the journals, well, because you do. What's the point, otherwise? They're the record of my life. They're, um, "me."

Every once in awhile, over the years, I would think of the dusty cartons taking up more and more shelf space down in a myriad of basements, and imagine them gone. A sense of freedom and weightlessness would come over me. I mentioned this to my sister, who has planted herself deep in the same plot of North Carolina soil for 35 years. "But you can't throw your journals away!" said Jane. "You can't! I'll store them for you!"

"What, ship them all to you?" I said, idly wondering which would be cheaper—USPS, UPS or FedEx? Any way I did it, sending them all the way from California would be an expensive embarrassment.

Keeping a journal is one thing; revisiting it is another. On the rare occasion when I descend into the cave of an old journal, I usually surface feeling morose, relieved to be back in the sunlight. All that drama! All that venting! True, every once in, oh, 30 pages, I'll come upon an absolute pearl, and I'll think, "God, I was brilliant!" But then, along with that comes, "But where did that brilliance go? How come I keep forgetting?"

I debated for years (all the while amassing yet more journals) letting go of them. Always, I hesitated. I respect the value of documentation. Where would history be without records? And who knows? Maybe 100 years from now someone might come upon my journals and read with rapt interest what life was like in the 60s, 70s and 80s, just as we read diaries of the pioneers, or Civil War memoirs.

Plus, who would I be without my journals? On the other hand, maybe letting go of them would set me free. That weightless feeling...

Back and forth I went. Finally, somehow, I decided: I'd keep all the journals up to age 30, and out of the rest, pick 15 to let go.

“How about selling them on eBay?” Barry said. Yes! Less final, less abrupt than dumping them. And I liked the idea of someone else taking care of them--at a price, even! And find them fascinating, I hoped (more fascinating than I do). I imagined the reader (man? woman? either would do; I wasn't picky) poring over my journal pages late at night, looking up occasionally and staring out of the window into the darkness, wondering about this mysterious, compelling woman.

Yes. Well. We can dream, right? I suspect the guy who wrote was hoping for something racier. He didn't bite, and there was no late-hour bidding war.

So I gave Barry the 15 journals, with the agreement that if within a month, I had not asked for them back, he would 'release' them (the phrase 'throw away' hurt). Out of respect for my earlier self, I tore out random pages and collaged them into my art journal. So who-I-was-then is grafted into my current life.

(For the record, I never did ask him for the journals. I forgot all about them. So they have met their maker.)

Fifteen journals lighter, fifteen pounds lighter. Now I only have another 60 or so to go....



What I'm Holding On To

Barry Evans

*And I lift my glass to the awful truth
Which you can't reveal to the innocent youth
Except to say it isn't worth a dime...*

Leonard Cohen, Closing Time

- My (naïve, touching) belief that age confers wisdom. Memory lapses, gray hair, wrinkles, yes. Wisdom no. I'm as dumb as I was thirty years ago, maybe dumber. (But not forty years ago. I figure I peaked at about 35.)
- My belief that technology will save the world. It might, if it wasn't up against human nature, which is stuck in the Pleistocene. We're screwed.
- My belief that ongoing happiness is to be attained. Now I'm content to watch my happiness index, so to speak, rise and fall like the tides of the Bay. Evolution took care of that.
- My belief that Barack Obama represents a sea change for the USA.

- My belief that Clapton's Layla will be played in its full 7 minute 6 seconds version at my funeral. Loud.
- My Kindle. You'll get it from my cold, dead hands.



Angie ~ photo by Julie Clark

Working to Get Rid of a Demon

Angie Boissevain

Sit very still. Listen. Be brave.
Make music of the Demon's voice.
Say: I hear your song. It is beautiful.

Sit very still. Watch. Be brave.
See the Demon clearly:
sleeves and hems, hair, especially eyes.
Say: I see you Demon. You are a Myth
with a voice.

Sit very still. Wait. Be brave.
Watch incense smoke curl and rise.
Say: "Demon, rise with this smoke,
and go.... Go!"

Now: allow this Demon,
although you cling to it,
to go.



*Earnest trainees, do not be amazed
by the true dragon.*

*The zazen of one being, even if only
for one instant, is the zazen of all
beings throughout time and space.*

~ Dogen

The Lampshade

Suzanne

every once in a while
you see a lampshade
by the side of the road
and you wonder
at who and how
and the surprise
of the naked bulb
at the end of the journey



The I.D. Query

Maggie Shaffer

Time after time I've been taken for Maggie Nystrom, the head librarian of the Arcata Branch Library—and not only or always because of our name. Again, among Zen Group members and Zen teachers I'm mistaken for Milli. Milli and I laugh about it; most recently one of the people adding stitches to Rose's okesa turned away from that group, where Milli was the sewing helper, and said, "Hi, Milli," to me as I entered the door.

When I tell these stories of mistaken identity, people say, Well, you are about the same size, the same age, it's not so strange. But it's new to me, and it does feel strange. The mask I wear isn't so distinctive after all, and that "impression" that's supposed to be crucial to influencing people—I haven't made it.

I asked Jacqueline Suskin to write a poem for me, about continually being taken for another person. Jacqueline is the attractive young woman who can often be found perched on a camp stool on the sidewalk, typing poems to order on an Olivetti. On the upturned case of the typewriter the words POEM STORE advertise her trade. She smiled and nodded at my request, rolled a four-inch strip of cash register tape into the machine's carriage, and without hesitation produced this poem:

To be taken in as someone
else says much on
multitudes
that live within.
As if the body and what its
core pours forth can be
hefty with so much feeling
or idea that other persons
spring forth and so we are
lucky enough to be many
if not all at once.

This interpretation opened a window for me.

Jacqueline Suskin said she would be pleased to be quoted in our newsletter. If anyone reading this would like to buy a poem on some cherished or puzzling topic, she may be reached online at yoursubjectyourprice.com.



Three Jewels

Judith Louise

I awake
feeling gloomy as the weather,
how well I remember this state
it's been so long, I thought it was gone for good
I turn towards practice
watch my feelings
do exercises
meditate
I take refuge in Dharma

I drive to Sunday morning
zen coffee hour
a field that was empty is
now occupied by a scattering
of attractive black-faced sheep
lying with feet tucked under them
I feel an inner shift
I take refuge in Buddha

I drive into town,
park and walk into the cafe
where a group sits chatting
I pull up a chair with the people
who share my practice
I take refuge in Sangha

What Are I

Mitch Trachtenberg

Imagine, please, an unusual tree. This tree started life as an Oak. It grew the usual gnarled branches, the usual awe-inspiring canopy. But today, a strange thing has happened. By a mechanism no one understands, the individual leaves of this Oak have each become sentient.

Each leaf now realizes, in an admittedly leafish way, that it exists. It realizes it needs sunshine to continue existing. It knows death will come, but neither fully believes it nor gives it much thought. It seeks to put death off for as long as possible.

As we've already accepted a thinking leaf, let us grant the leaf some ability to act independently in the world. It can extend its stem, reaching above other leaves for sunshine. It can hoard nutrients from the rest of the tree and build local stores, so that as fall descends to winter, it can draw on its stores.

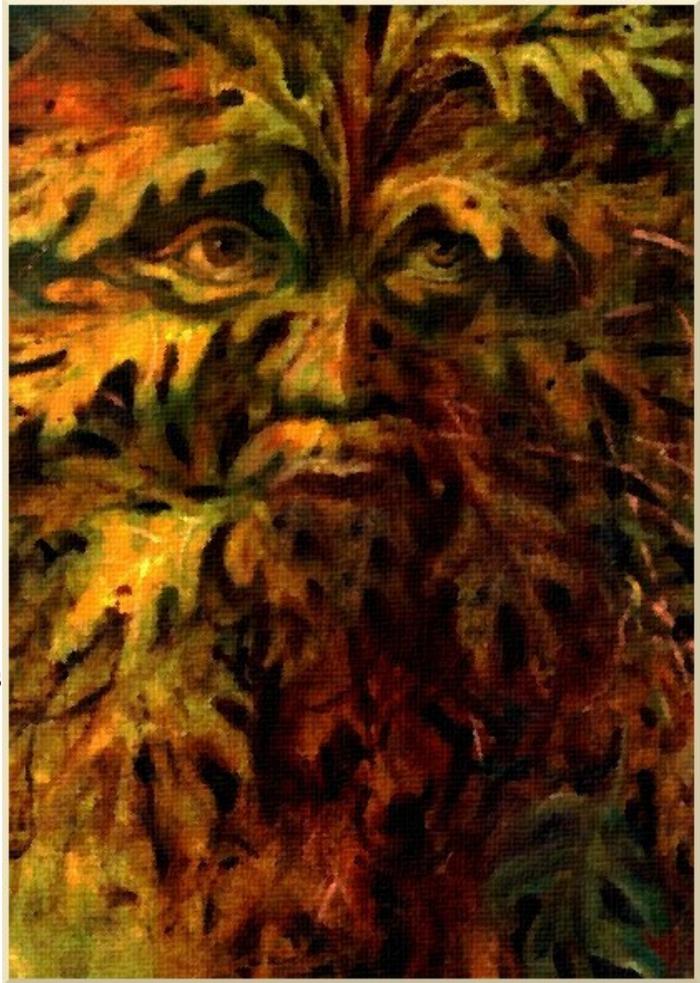
What changes will take place on the tree? We can imagine that the leaves build longer and longer stems, thick enough to stay aimed upwards. The individual leaves will become heavier and heavier as they deposit the products of their photosynthesis locally. The trunk will hollow, as it is offered less and less nutrition from the leaves.

As time goes by, the tree will topple from its roots. The leaves, unable to get water without a functioning trunk or root system, will die. Give the heaviest leaf its due: it may die a day after the rest.

Or perhaps the tree will survive. Perhaps the leaves will communicate with one another, realizing that their individual concern for survival has played a nasty trick on them all. An AI Gore of leaves might sound an alarm throughout the tree, warning that the tree, mother to them all, is in danger of collapse. Perhaps the leaves will agree to allow more nutrients to reach the shared infrastructure of roots and trunk. Perhaps they'll go so far as to police one another, and demand nutrients from leaves that don't contribute their fair share. Perhaps a genius leaf will realize that, if each leaf grows its stem exactly one inch longer, they'll all still have the same relative position as one another as they attempt to harvest the sunshine. The leaf will plead with the others to stop their stem race against one another, and simply accept a share of the sunshine falling every day on the tree.

Sentient leaves! It's silly enough to think of sentient trees!

And yet, here I are. I -- you! -- are a leaf of an enormous tree of life, which came into being no one knows when and no one knows how, and has been branching and blooming and leafing since the first



cell split in two.

And here we are. At some point, the universe appears to have played an enormous trick. No one knows how and no one knows when, but we became sentient. We are sentient by design, whether a God exists or not. And for more on this, a digression into evolution.

For we've all been in one big logically-inevitable process since the first gene container somehow made a copy of its gene. Inevitable this way: First, the more copies of a gene version that get reproduced, the more copies of that gene version there will be. Second, resources from which genes can create gene containers are limited, so the genes whose containers allow them to harvest more resources more quickly will be able to reproduce more than others.

Generations of mutations and variations which, to our minds, might as well be infinite, have led from that first cell to the magnificent canopy we see today, though I at least have enormous trouble finding the trunk.

Among plants, the process operates when one plant "crowds out" another. Trees are tall to intercept the sun's energy before other trees. Not in a competition, because a competition requires participants who know there's a competition going on. Just in a logically-inevitable process.

More inevitabilities: some life forms develop the ability to relocate, others develop the ability to obtain nutrients by taking in the bodies of plants, leading to yet others developing the ability to obtain nutrients by taking in the bodies of organisms which took in the bodies of plants.

Once animals existed, it led to animals which were successful at being predator and not prey for long enough that their genes could reproduce. Smart predators led to the evolution of smarter prey. Smarter prey led to the evolution of smarter predators. And on and on.

In a world with animals, a critical part of being successfully-not-eaten turns out to be making predictions, and quickly.

Early "predictions" were embedded in the genes of plants, predictions like "water will be found in the direction gravity pulls," and "light will be found opposite the direction gravity pulls."

As the process of evolution continued, more predictions became relevant to the gene containers of which life on earth is composed. Gradually, the questions for which predictions were needed became more and more complex, even if nobody was quite home to ask them. With plants, embedded predictions worked well: if sunshine had been "up" for eons, it worked for plant genes to assert "for light, send leaves skyward." As animals evolved, the vital questions changed, and required that predictions be updated from moment to moment: "where is food, NOW?" As animal-eaters evolved, "where is safety, NOW?"

To predict where safety lay required more and more dedicated information processing. It was no longer sufficient to rely on the first-principles which evolution had embedded in the gene containers. The containers now had to come complete with information processors able to model an environment containing predators, so that each predator's actions could be predicted reliably. To not predict properly, at least until a gene container had reproduced, meant the end of the contained set of genes. And, as neuroscientist/philosophers now propose, if a gene container has information processing

sufficient to model the predators out in the world, it has the equipment necessary to model its... and so the word finally enters the garden of life... self.

And, again, here I am. From this perspective, it's all a bit crazy. Each of us is a leaf on an enormous tree of life, a single entity which has developed a canopy able to draw in and process the sun's energy falling on our planet. And each of us has models of the world, because if our ancestors had not had those models to pass along to us in our genes, we would never have come to be. And, at the center of each of our models, we have a master illusion which contains enough destructive power to bring down the whole tree -- a self.

Almost by definition, our self is a model of our individual gene-containing body. The process of evolution acts on gene-containers, so it is gene containers which evolve, and the "self" is a product of that evolution. And yet, the self is merely a model -- an illusion useful for making predictions -- that contributes to the success of a gene-container at reproducing prior to being destroyed. So here we are, dreams dreamed up by our gene-containers, thinking we are separate, when we are really all leaves of a huge single canopy.

How separate are we, really? We are constantly taking in new material and shedding old, and we are constantly taking in new sensations to update our model of the world. Anyone who has watched "their" mood shift after speaking with someone else, or even after a change in the weather from stormy to sunny, must have some realization that our selves are changeable.

We speak to one another, and our brains actually change in response to being spoken to. (Every new bit of information we obtain, after all, must mean some change in our material brains.) We've woven webs of activity such that "I" can cause a pizza to arrive at my door simply by vocalizing well-tailored sounds into the sound gathering part of a telephone. Do "I" end at the end of my body, or must "I" somehow encompass the system that responds to my vocalizations with a pizza? More fundamentally, how long would "I" exist without my stomach bacteria as active participants in keeping "my" gene container going? And why can I assert, with blind confidence, that "I" am the owner of the body, bacteria and all, and not just a means stomach bacteria have come up with for producing pleasant environments for themselves.

Most of us, I'm certain, have had moments in nature when we just feel better knowing that our distant cousins are around us, whether we are seeing Redwoods, or redwood sorrel, or a ladybug landing on our sleeve. We say that the ladybug is not part of us -- can we be so certain?

The boundary between what we think of as our selves and what we think of as all the rest is not the only concept that fades into mist under close examination.

Cognitive scientists are coming up with astonishing experimental results, results which suggest that our "selves" -- the part of us we think is issuing the orders -- may instead simply be coming up with post-hoc explanations of whatever action we -- whatever that is -- just performed. Working with people who have damaged or lacking connections between the left and right hemispheres of their brains, doctors have experimented by issuing instructions to only one side of a person's brain. When the person carries out a request, the doctors ask the other side of their brain for an explanation of what they've just done -- the resulting explanations, generated by the side ignorant of the request having been issued, are just sheer fantasy, yet the subject is sincere and convinced that they acted of their own accord.

Here's brain scientist Dr. Michael Gazzaniga describing one such experiment: "Anyway we did the experiments, we just finally asked the patients after they did one of these things that was really the result of the right hemisphere directing it, we were basically asking their left hemisphere why did you do that? What we discovered was that the patient immediately comes up with an explanation that's consistent with what they are thinking about in the left hemisphere. They tie it in to their ongoing story, their ongoing narrative. And so we call this capacity that the left hemisphere seems to have, the interpreter, it's always interpreting our behaviours, our fluctuating moods, what they mean. But it's also kind of doing it after the fact. So even in the normal brain our intentions are probably formed and made and done by the time we are consciously aware of them, but we instantly refer that event forward in time to thinking it's going on simultaneously and that we are in charge."

So the brain, which, after all, is designed to come up with consistent explanations for what is happening in the world, does the same job even for what is happening inside us -- what we think is "self-directed activity" is certainly emerging from our bodies, but the part of us that feels so much like it is in charge, our self, may simply be interpreting what we've just done, rather than initiating it.

Descartes may need updating -- rather than "I think, therefore I am," we may be forced into a more humble formulation, something like, "I think I am." The part of us in which "our" sentience resides looks more and more like an unreliable witness who offers us our only everyday chance of accessing reality.

It would be shocking enough to discover that while we've thought we were talking to the owner of the house, we were just being fooled by the maid. But we're not talking to anyone -- we ourselves are the ones fooling ourselves. Perhaps we've convinced ourselves we're the owners of the house, when it turns out we're just... what, exactly? The butler? The refrigerator?

Which leads back to "what do I think I am?" A tiny part of something large? An independent being? One of billions of local illusions created by a single genetic system as it spreads throughout a planet? All of the above? None of the above?

Is science telling me I'm a side effect? That would be quite a comedown from being created in the image of God.

I'm most comfortable, for now, with an image of myself as a leaf on a tree. And, as a sentient leaf, I spend time wondering where the trunk of my tree is. And wondering further how each of us beautiful dreams can find that trunk before, in our misunderstanding and arrogance, we've hollowed the trunk past the point of no return.



Now it's your turn again ~ we're asking for responses to Mitch's piece, indeed to the whole Voices. Essays, poems, artwork - whatever your part of this continuing conversation could be! You can send your responses, and any other items you have for the next issue of Voices, to Michael (mmquam at sbcglobal dot net) by April 1st, 2011.



Christian and Henny ~ photo by Julie Clark



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