Tuesday, November 1, 2011

THE PHILOSOPHY OF KARL MARX

"Even if the capitalist buys the labor power of his laborer at its full value as a commodity on the market he yet extracts more value from it than he paid for, and in the ultimate analysis this surplus value forms those sums of value from which are heaped up the constantly increasing masses of capital in the hands of the possessing classes." Frederich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific.*

"Karl Marx...was trained as a philosopher. His early works are philosophical. Later, along with Fredrich Engels, his work took a practical turn and advocated the political/economic system of revolutionary communism. This adaptation of his philosophy to a practical account was, at its height, the most dominant ideology in the world (quite an achievement.)" Michael Boylan, *Philosophy: An Innovative Introduction, Fictive Narrative, Primary Texts and Responsive Writing.*

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "You studied Marxism while in college. Today few people seem to be strong advocates of Marxism (or socialism). Might not a little Marx in our lives explain our economic blues?"

I think it's pretty obvious that if we wish to understand the intellectual world of our time, it is crucial that we understand the major thinkers who shaped our world. In that sense, then, an encounter with Marx is inescapable. In my early twenties I did consider myself to be a Marxist. Why? Well, because almost every major modern black intellectual that I read felt it was necessary to make reference to Marxist thought. So I studied Marx and Engels. I devoted my master's thesis in philosophy to Marx, Freud and Wilhelm Reich. Then I taught the history of Marxist thought in a course called "Radical Thought" at SUNY-Stony Brook when I was a doctoral student. I was the kind of Marxist you would not have liked because, at age 24, I was rude, arrogant, insulting, aggressive, self-righteous, and overbearing. For a brief time I even kept a daily record of capitalist and racist atrocities I felt I experienced every day on a personal level. (It embarrasses me to look at those notes now.)

But a funny thing happened to me along the way to the Worker's Paradise. You cannot study Marx without studying Hegel, for Marx during his time as a student at the University of

Berlin was a younger member of the group known as the "Young Hegelians." You discover the indebtedness of Marx's "material dialectic" to the dialectic of ideas or spirit in Hegel. And if you then study Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* to better understand the origin of Marx's ideas, you find yourself entering the door of a phenomenalistic outlook. Hegel will lead you directly to the philosophy of Kant with its spatiotemporal manifold. And the proper study of Kant will lead you to the man who awoke Kant from his "dogmatic slumbers," *i.e.*, to David Hume. And Hume will, of course, lead you to the person he is reacting against, John Locke, who will in turn direct you to the man *he* is quarreling with, Descartes (especially on the question of innate ideas).

Marx himself claimed that he only contributed one original idea to philosophy, the idea of "class struggle." While so much of our thought about labor and economics and alienation is intertwined with very influential Marxist ideas, it's important to evaluate Marx, a philosophical system-builder, with the same rigor we would bring to an analysis of any other thinker. His and Engels's theories of social causation and historical determinism can be troubling. In *The Communist Manifesto*, we read that "man's consciousness changes with every change in the conditions of material existence, in his social relations, and in his social life. What else does the history of ideas prove than that intellectual production changes in character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class." For Marx, ideas (art, religion, even philosophy) are reduced to being epiphenomena or passive by-products of the economic forces that determine our lives. This reductionism is problematic. (It makes Marxist literary criticism one-dimensional and abysmal.) It reduces all previous epistemologies or knowledge (including Marxism itself) to the status of being an incorrect ideology. As philosopher W.T. Jones points out in A *History of Western Philosophy: Kant to Wittgenstein and Sartre*, "From the pragmatic point of view stated in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, dialectical materialism is only another form of scientism, a rather naive version of the traditional metaphysics that differs from it only in relying on an allegedly scientific method instead of on perception and reason." (And I would note, that "scientific method" is pre-Einstein.)

Furthermore, Marx's faith in progress and the science of his time places him in the same camp as Jeremy Bentham and the positivists. Clearly, he---like Hegel---is influenced by the idea of the importance of "development" as a means for interpreting history (*i.e.*, evolution, Darwin, etc.) But there is something a bit dreamy and fantastical about Marx's thought when in *The German Ideology* he describes the future after capitalism this way:

"In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, or critic."

"Each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes?" This abolition of the division of labor and specialization is a little hard to imagine in our complex, 21st century societies unless one is an *über*-Renaissance man or woman capable of working competently as a particle physicist at the Large Hadron Collider in the morning, as an economist in the afternoon,

a classical pianist in the evening, and a Sanskritist after dinner. (Okay, now I'm being playful, but I think you get my point.)

In Marx's correspondence with one of his associates, there is a letter in which he refers to a third person as being a "nigger." (You can imagine how I felt about that.) He knew zip, nada, zero about non-Western philosophical and religious traditions, and probably felt they were pre-scientific, primitive, and unimportant. In 1973, writer John Gardner made the comment to me that he felt Marxism was intellectually "easy." I'm convinced he was right about that.

So, in short and to answer today's question, I think we *already* have "a little Marx in our lives," whether we like that or not. And like Marx himself when he was at his best, we are obliged to subject that presence to rigorous analysis and critique.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 8:11 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/philosophy-of-karl-marx.html

Friday, November 4, 2011

IN SEARCH OF SARTRE AND THE NOTHINGNESS OF BEING

"Now when I say 'I,' it seems hollow to me." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea.*

"I am still persuaded that the hypothesis of a transcendental subject is useless and disastrous....Consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being...Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being---like a worm...Man is a useless passion." Sartre, *Being and Nothingness.*

"For poetic vagueness and linguistic extravagance, this is in the best of German traditions...It is as though one were to turn Dostoevsky's novels into philosophic text-books." Bertrand Russell on Sartre in *Wisdom of the West.*

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Why should writers read Sartre today? What can we learn from his work and ideas?"

JEAN PAUL SARTRE

One might say that Buddhism begins where existentialism, particularly Sartrean existentialism, ends. Or breaks off. In the West, I think European man's experience as expressed by existentialism can be regarded as a first step on the path that Shakyamuni Buddha walked 2,500 years earlier. No, I am not saying that Sartre was Buddhist. From what I can tell, Eastern philosophies and religions never appeared on his radar screen. But the similarities between Sartre's description of nothingness and the Buddhist definitions for emptiness or the void are simply too striking, numerous, tantalizing, and begging for comparison to ignore. The Buddhist experience is simply the human experience. (If, as Sartre wrote, "Existentialism is a humanism," then the same can be said of the *Buddhadharma*.) Therefore, the wisdom that one finds in the Dharma will naturally arise wherever human beings are, East or West, in the distant past (See Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*), the present or the future. These claims are broad and sweeping, I know. So let me unpack them more slowly.

Jean-Paul Sartre, a genius, was many things, among them the winner of the 1964 Nobel Prize in Literature, which he refused to accept. His gifts as an artist (novelist, playwright, essayist) and thinker (he was truly a "public intellectual" and activist) are such that he defies conventional categorizations. Heavily, the influence of Husserl, Heidegger, and (later) Hegel (to name only a

few) erupts on his pages. He is both the poster boy for existentialism and an original if sometimes flawed phenomenologist. As an existentialist, his journey to the discovery that consciousness is nothingness takes him through Nietzsche (God is dead) and Kierkegaard (in a world of such uncertainty, man must make a "leap of faith"). But it is as a phenomenologist critiquing and challenging Husserl's Transcendental Ego (which many later phenomenologists regard as a kind of cop-out, a slip back into Berkeleyan idealism; Sartre himself felt Husserl was unfaithful to his own conception of phenomenology, fell into merely being a phenomenalist, and in his account of human existence made it bodiless and sexless, problems that Sartre and Merleau-Ponty corrected by presenting consciousness as embodied) that he achieves an insight perfectly compatible with the Dharma: namely, that *shūnyatā* (emptiness, the void) is the fundamental reality for all phenomena, and this revelation makes possible our freedom at any moment. What Sartre experienced on the most intense personal level (dramatized in his novels and plays), and as a phenomenologist, is that the self, personality, the I is merely a construct spun from words and concepts---like any other object onto which we project our layers of interpretations or "conceptual paint," as Bhikkhu Bodhi puts it. In *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (Volume Two), Herbert Spiegelberg writes:

"While Sartre admits that whenever we reflect upon an experience we always find it associated with an experiencing 'I,' he claims that in the unreflected experience, for instance that of reading a book, all that is given is the book and its characters but without the reading 'I'...Sartre's main reason for denying the 'I' transcendental status is that he finds it to be unnecessary and hence useless, a reason which sounds more like the logic of Occam's razor than like phenomenology."

It also sounds, I should note, like David Hume's denial of the self's existence. What all this means is that there is no original text for anything, as Sartre's character Roquetin realizes in the novel *Nausea.* There are no certainties. There is no safety net. For Sartre, this nothingness, this emptiness, is initially the occasion for despair or nausea. How shall we act---how shall we live---in a world where everything is so unsubstantial? Where the bourgeois (white and black and otherwise) lives blindly---and inauthentically---within the presuppositions of the Natural Attitude, engaging in "bad faith" because it believes its fictitious constructs to be real. As Roquetin observes in Sartre's novel:

"And just what is Antoine Roquetin? An abstraction. A pale reflection of myself wavers in my consciousness. Antoine Roquetin...and suddenly the 'I' pales, and fades out. Lucid, static, forlorn, consciousness is walled-up; it perpetuates itself. Nobody lives there any more...the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer...I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nausea, to my own life. In fact, all that I could grasp beyond that returns to this fundamental absurdity...The world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence..."

In Sartre's cycle of novels, *Roads to Freedom,* the character Mathieu Delarue comes to a similar conclusion: "Everything is outside...Inside, nothing not even a puff of smoke, there is no *inside,* there is nothing. Myself: nothing. I am free."

Given the nothingness of consciousness, we are *condemned* to be free in a world that, sans God, is necessarily *absurd*, where the only meaning we find is the meaning that we ourselves have the

courage to create. As a young man in my late teens and early twenties, the existentialist vision exerted a powerful influence on my thoughts, and on the way I interpreted what was happening around me (the Civil Rights, then Black Power Movements; that influence is surely the reason I made Chaym Smith such an existential character in *Dreamer*). Our social world---and especially the world of racial experience---abounds in examples of Bad Faith and essentialism (racial, gender, nationalistic, ethnic), where men and women flee from reality (for example, that racial identity is an illusion); from the fact that "Existence precedes essence"; from facing the fact that, moment by moment, we *choose* our lives and the meaning of our lives (the final meaning for which will not be determined until our death when we can act no more, when we become, as Alfred North Whitehead put it, no longer Subjective Aims but instead Eternal Objects.)

But where the experience of nothingness for Sartre led to despair and nausea, the experience of *shūnyatā* for a Buddhist is the occasion for joy; it is a guarantee that we can change and eventually realize liberation from suffering. The lack of ontological foundation that leads to Sartre seeing the world as absurd, leads in the East to two thousand years of robust Buddhist humor based on that very absurdity, especially in the Zen traditions. (In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre puts it this way: "It follows that my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that *nothing*, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation.") And where Roquetin feels that in an absurd world where there is no reason for doing any one thing rather than another, a Buddhist guided by the Eight-Fold Path and Bodhissatva vow knows that "one thing" will cause suffering to oneself and others while "another" will not. For Buddhism, man cannot be a "useless passion," for the Dharma teaches us how to understand desire and passion, and how to master them, as opposed to desire and passion exerting mastery over us.

Sartre's philosophical vision is rife with problems. Spiegelberg points out that, "In general Sartre is apt to begin with descriptive analyses but to push them in the direction of hermenutic interpretations far beyond what immediate inspection would seem to warrant." He had a fondness for paradoxical formulations, some of them probably influenced by Hegelian dialectics. His embrace of Marxism (with its assumptions and presuppositions) is often a war with his positions as an existentialist. His personal idiosyncrasies often impair his analyses---for example, Sartre's famous "look" or gaze that fixes the Other has about it the tincture of being a threat; why not instead, Spiegelberg notes, use for analysis the "look" or gaze one receives from a friend or loved one? (And another experience Sartre was fond of using as an example was "shame.") One might say, as I have on occasion, that the Thing (*en-soi*)---or things of the world---frightened Sartre with their opacity and viscosity and his feeling that they would completely overwhelm consciousness (*pour-soi*). By contrast, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Sartre's competitor of sorts) does not present problems of this kind, and is a much more careful, reliable, and convincing phenomenologist.

Much has been published in recent decades about the thematic overlaps and interplay between the philosophy of existentialism and the philosophy of Buddhism. That comparative study still remains fertile ground for exploration.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:52 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/in-search-of-sartre-and-nothingness-of.html

Friday, November 4, 2011

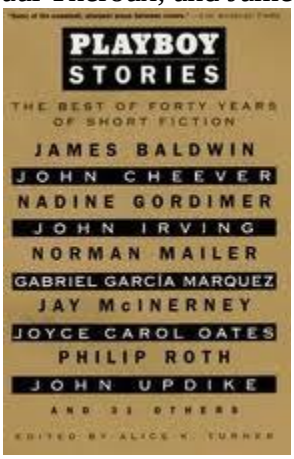
SHOW ME THE STORY - NOT THE BUNNY.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Your story 'Kwoon' was published in Playboy magazine in 1993. Did you ever have second thoughts about publishing in this magazine?

This is a question we can dispatch pretty quickly.

The answer is, no. Only one person other than Ethelbert has ever asked me this question since "Kwoon" was published. I can't defend Hugh Hefner for producing a salacious publication that exploits and objectifies women's bodies. But I'm not a prude. Nor am I especially politically correct. Furthermore, "Kwoon" is about the martial arts, not sex, and has a conclusion that is spiritual, one that dramatizes Buddhist Dharma. Since the 1950s, *Playboy* magazine has employed editors who have very good taste in fiction. It also pays its writers and cartoonists top dollar for their work.

Take a look at the book *Playboy Stories: The Best of Forty Years of Short Fiction*, edited by Alice K. Turner (Dutton, 1994). The writers included in this volume are James Baldwin, Jack Kerouac, John Cheever, Nadine Gordimer, John Irving, Norman Mailer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jay McInerney, Joyce Carol Oates, Phillip Roth, John Updike, Nelson Algren, Charles Beaumont, Jorge Luis Borges, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Ray Bradbury, Robert Coover, Andre Dubus, Bruce Jay Friedman, John Gardner, Herbert Gold, Joseph Heller, Shirley Jackson, Charles Johnson, James Jones, Ursula K. Le Guin, Bernard Malamud, Richard Matheson, Thomas McGuane, Bharati Mukherjee, Haruki Murakami, Vladmir Nabokov, Sean O'Faolin, Irwin Shaw, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Paul Theroux, and James Thurber.



If one publishes a story in a magazine with a track record of featuring the work of outstanding authors such as those in the above paragraph, what is there to have second thoughts about?

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 8:05 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/show-me-story-not-bunny.html

Sunday, November 6, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON AND THE MAGIC OF NATURE

“Only come to know the nature of your own mind, in which there is no self and no other, and you will in fact be a Buddha.” *The Zen Teachings of Huang Po: On the Transmission of Mind*, translated by John Blofeld.

“Man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are and of things that are not that they are not.” Protagoras.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "With your interest in science as well as Buddhism, I find it surprising that you don't write more about the environment and nature in your essays. Is this a correct conclusion?"

This is a very good and a fair question. In my body of published non-fiction one finds little that could be strictly called traditional nature-writing. And there is a personal (as well as philosophical) reason for that.

Nothing pleases me more than quietly sitting in a natural setting, especially the kind provided by the Pacific Northwest, just sitting and listening to wind wuthering through the plumage of trees, watching birds flying in formation, and my dog Nova as he stares at squirrels swinging effortlessly from one branch to another. I sit. I breathe. All sense of twoness falls away. I finger a branch from the tree I am leaning against, marveling at the rough, hard texture of its bark, and of the way fall leaves around me wrinkle and stiffen and change color. During these times I empty my mind of interpretations and concepts. I just sit, letting myself “occur” or “be” in the midst of so much beauty. Nature is the ultimate Other. However, I do not know any natural object---the tree, the leaf, the squirrel--- "in-itself," but only as it appears *for* me as it unfolds in a series of perceptual profiles. Those profiles (or meanings) are inexhaustible (and include profiles only science can reveal) so they retain a degree of mystery. Therefore, as a writer, as a thinker, I find myself reflecting upon the means *by* which I "know" nature and the other, *i.e.*, as I quietly sit, as I observe, I am led by nature and the environment from the outside to the inside, from thinking about the object to thinking about the subject, from the object of consciousness (tree, leaf, squirrel) to the operations of my consciousness itself.

This is clearly an idealistic tendency that I have within me.

Epistemological idealism is probably inscribed deeply in my philosophical DNA, perhaps because I'm very non-materialistic. I'm conscious of this, and so (I hope) work at not taking an extreme position by privileging the experiencing subject over the experienced object. (Think of Capt. Falcon in *Middle Passage* when of other people he says, "I suppose they've never been real to me. Only I'm real to me. Even you're not real to me, Mr. Calhoun, but I think you like me a little, so I like you too.") But that privileging of mind over matter, of subject over object can be found in Buddhist history (as well as in Hinduism). Consider these verses from Vasubandhu's *Trisvabhāvanirdeśa* (Treatise on the Three Natures):

If anything appears, it is imagined.
The way it appears is as duality.
What is the consequence of its non-existence?
The fact of non-duality!

What is the imagination of the non-existent?
Since what is imagined absolutely never
Exists in the way it is imagined,
It is mind that constructs that illusion.

One should think of the illusory non-existent
As threefold:
Completely ripened, grasped as other,
And as appearance.

The first, because it itself ripens,
Is the root consciousness.
The others as emergent consciousness,
Having emerged from the conceptualization of seer and seen.

Like an elephant that appears
Through the power of a magician's mantra---
Only the percept appears,
The elephant is completely non-existent.

In Jay L. Garfield's superb essay on Vasubandhu, which appears in *Buddhist Philosophy: Essential Readings*, edited by William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield (Oxford University Press, 2009), he writes that in contrast to Nāgārjuna's understanding of emptiness, "Vasubandhu...reinterprets the emptiness of the object as being its lack of *external* reality, and its purely mind-dependent, or ideal, status. At the same time, however, he argues that the foundational mind is nonempty since it truly exists as the substratum of the apparent reality represented in our experience. The position is hence a kind of idealism akin to, but different in

important ways from, the idealisms defended by such Western philosophers as Berkeley, Kant, and Schopenhauer."

So what does all this mean in terms of today's question? OK, I'll 'fess up: I *do* sometimes tilt toward experiencing, like Vasubandhu, the world or "nature" around me as a kind of "magic show," one that always boomerangs me (as Ralph Ellison might put it) back to the consciousness that makes these sometimes magnificent appearances possible. This is why you see me writing much non-fiction about the *way* we consciously experience (or interpret) nature and the environment and not much about the objects of nature and the environment themselves, although I greatly appreciate the work of others who have contributed significantly to this genre, like Barry Lopez (winner of a 1986 National Book Award for *Artic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*). I shall have to leave it up to the literary scholars who write about my work to determine if this idealistic tendency (and my lack of writing about nature) is a virtue or a flaw.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:35 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/charles-johnson-and-magic-of-nature.html

Sunday, November 6, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON IN THE PRESENCE OF ELLA TWEEDY

E.Ethelbert Miller asks: "How does a writer know when their best days are gone? In sports a player loses a step on the field, or discovers his arm is dead and he can't throw as hard. When might a writer decide to stop writing? Do you see yourself reaching a point where there are no more stories in your head? Are you afraid of a sudden illness preventing you from writing?"

ELLA TWEEDY

With great reluctance, I'm going to share with you a story I seldom tell people, though I do briefly mention it in my autobiographical essay that appears in *I Call Myself An Artist: Writings By and About Charles Johnson.* This story may make you laugh. It may lead you to ridicule me. Or perhaps it will just make you think, as it made me think. And it's a true story. I swear it is.

When I was an undergraduate journalism major and working as a cartoonist in 1968, I had a dormitory roommate (a really talented guitarist, who played in local bands), who came back to the room we shared one night very excited. He'd just been to a fortune-teller in southern Illinois. He raved about her and said I should visit her, too.

So I did.

I went to her house the next evening. She invited me into her parlor and we sat at a table. She said to me, "You have a mission. It involves writing. You're protected. Nothing bad can happen to you, or to anyone connected to you until this mission is over." She even predicted that I would have two kids---I wasn't even married then---predicted the death of my maternal grandmother, and said, "You'll have a lot of money, live a long time, and be well-known for what you do."

I asked her, "When does this happen?"
She smiled and said, "You have to wait awhile."
I wanted to laugh out loud.

Writing? I was a cartoonist, a journalist, for Christ's sake. That was absolutely the farthest thing from my mind when I was 20 years old. I had *no* desire to be a writer. That was not in my plans at all. She might as well have told me that one day I would be on an Apollo mission to the moon. Her words blind-sided me completely. So I said to her, with a great deal of bewilderment, "What I am supposed to write *about*?" She was an elderly, gentle, white-haired woman. Her name was Ella Tweedy. She reached behind her to a shelf of books, pulled one down, and held it out to me. "Something like this," she said, quietly. I looked at the book. It was a book published by the Theosophical Society---a group I looked down upon at the time, because (since I was taking as many philosophy courses as ones in Journalism) in my view they were sloppily mystical and less than rigorous in their borrowings from eastern philosophies and religions. So I held my nose when she gave me that example, but she only said, "like this."

And so my visit with Ella Tweedy ended. I had no idea of what to make of the things she told me. I set no store by them. I went on with my life. But two years after our meeting, an idea for a novel came to me, wouldn't leave me alone, and so I had to write it.

Do I believe in fortune-tellers? Generally, no. But I've never forgotten Ella Tweedy and the uncanny ability she had to see things yet to be. She was as close to the "real deal" as I've even seen. Are there people in our world who see what the rest of us are not empowered to see? I simply don't know. And I take no position on this question, because I don't have a shred of empirical evidence to affirm or deny the matter. All I'm doing is reporting on something that happened to me. Her grandson wrote to me a few years ago (after reading my autobiographical essay that mentions her), and kindly sent me a picture of her. I'm very grateful to have this photo of a remarkable lady whose prescience defies my understanding.

So these things you ask about, Ethelbert, are matters I've never worried about. (I do believe, though, that we live in the midst of great mysteries that outstrip our perceptions.) If I don't have a story to tell, I just don't write and do something else, like draw, or write philosophical essays, or workout with my aging kung-fu buddies, or---well, there's a world of other things to do. I'm not "attached" to being a writer, though I enjoy it, find myself spending all my time doing it and, according to Ella Tweedy, it's what I'm supposed to be doing until such time as the necessity for doing it is done.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:51 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/charles-johnson-in-presence-of-ella.html

Sunday, November 6, 2011

100 RAYS OF LIGHT

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "How important are first lines in novels?"

Well, we know the answer to that question. First sentences are crucial. And so are concluding sentences. Our friends at the *American Book Review* selected what they feel are the 100 best first lines for novels. I copied this, as you can tell, right off the internet. *Middle Passage* is Number 88 on this list.

	Quote	Author	Title	Year
1.	Call me Ishmael.	Herman Melville	*Moby-Dick*	1851
2.	It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.	Jane Austen	*Pride and Prejudice*	1813
3.	A screaming comes across the sky.	Thomas Pynchon	*Gravity's Rainbow*	1973
4.	Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.	Gabriel García Márquez (trans. Gregory Rabassa)	*One Hundred Years of Solitude*	1967
5.	Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins.	Vladimir Nabokov	*Lolita*	1955
6.	Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.	Leo Tolstoy (trans. Constance Garnett)	*Anna Karenina*	1877
7.	riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.	James Joyce	*Finnegans Wake*	1939
8.	It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.	George Orwell	*1984*	1949
9.	It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.	Charles Dickens	*A Tale of Two Cities*	1859
10.	I am an invisible man.	Ralph Ellison	*Invisible Man*	1952

11.	The Miss Lonelyhearts of the New York Post-Dispatch (Are you in trouble?—Do-you-need-advice?—Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you) sat at his desk and stared at a piece of white cardboard.	Nathanael West	*Miss Lonelyhearts*	1933
12.	You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter.	Mark Twain	*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*	1885
13.	Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested.	Franz Kafka (trans. Breon Mitchell)	*The Trial*	1925
14.	You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*.	Italo Calvino (trans. William Weaver)	*If on a winter's night a traveler*	1979
15.	The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.	Samuel Beckett	*Murphy*	1938
16.	If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.	J. D. Salinger	*The Catcher in the Rye*	1951
17.	Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo.	James Joyce	*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*	1916
18.	This is the saddest story I have ever heard.	Ford Madox Ford	*The Good Soldier*	1915
19.	I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then	Laurence Sterne	*Tristram Shandy*	1759–1767

	uppermost:—Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,—I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me.			
20.	Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.	Charles Dickens	*David Copperfield*	1850
21.	Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed.	James Joyce	*Ulysses*	1922
22.	It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the house-tops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.	Edward George Bulwer-Lytton	*Paul Clifford*	1830
23.	One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary.	Thomas Pynchon	*The Crying of Lot 49*	1966
24.	It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not.	Paul Auster	*City of Glass*	1985
25.	Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting.	William Faulkner	*The Sound and the Fury*	1929
26.	124 was spiteful.	Toni Morrison	*Beloved*	1987
27.	Somewhere in la Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember, a gentleman lived not long ago, one of those who has a lance and ancient shield on a shelf and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for racing.	Miguel de Cervantes (trans. Edith Grossman)	*Don Quixote*	1605
28.	Mother died today.	Albert Camus (trans. Stuart	*The Stranger*	1942

		Gilbert)		
29.	Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu.	Ha Jin	*Waiting*	1999
30.	The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.	William Gibson	*Neuromancer*	1984
31.	I am a sick man . . . I am a spiteful man.	Fyodor Dostoyevsky (trans. Michael R. Katz)	*Notes from Underground*	1864
32.	Where now? Who now? When now?	Samuel Beckett (trans. Patrick Bowles)	*The Unnamable*	1953
33.	Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. “Stop!” cried the groaning old man at last, “Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree.”	Gertrude Stein	*The Making of Americans*	1925
34.	In a sense, I am Jacob Horner.	John Barth	*The End of the Road*	1958
35.	It was like so, but wasn't.	Richard Powers	*Galatea 2.2*	1995
36.	—Money . . . in a voice that rustled.	William Gaddis	*J R*	1975
37.	Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.	Virginia Woolf	*Mrs. Dalloway*	1925
38.	All this happened, more or less.	Kurt Vonnegut	*Slaughterhouse-Five*	1969
39.	They shoot the white girl first.	Toni Morrison	*Paradise*	1998
40.	For a long time, I went to bed early.	Marcel Proust (trans. Lydia Davis)	*Swann's Way*	1913
41.	The moment one learns English, complications set in.	Felipe Alfau	*Chromos*	1990
42.	Dr. Weiss, at forty, knew that her life had been ruined by literature.	Anita Brookner	*The Debut*	1981
43.	I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane;	Vladimir Nabokov	*Pale Fire*	1962
44.	Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board.	Zora Neale Hurston	*Their Eyes Were Watching God*	1937
45.	I had the story, bit by bit, from various people, and, as generally happens in such cases, each time it was a different story.	Edith Wharton	*Ethan Frome*	1911
46.	Ages ago, Alex, Allen and Alva arrived at	Walter Abish	*Alphabetical*	1974

	Antibes, and Alva allowing all, allowing anyone, against Alex's admonition, against Allen's angry assertion: another African amusement . . . anyhow, as all argued, an awesome African army assembled and arduously advanced against an African anthill, assiduously annihilating ant after ant, and afterward, Alex astonishingly accuses Albert as also accepting Africa's antipodal ant annexation.		*Africa*	
47.	There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.	C. S. Lewis	*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*	1952
48.	He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish.	Ernest Hemingway	*The Old Man and the Sea*	1952
49.	It was the day my grandmother exploded.	Iain M. Banks	*The Crow Road*	1992
50.	I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974.	Jeffrey Eugenides	*Middlesex*	2002
51.	Elmer Gantry was drunk.	Sinclair Lewis	*Elmer Gantry*	1927
52.	We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall.	Louise Erdrich	*Tracks*	1988
53.	It was a pleasure to burn.	Ray Bradbury	*Fahrenheit 451*	1953
54.	A story has no beginning or end; arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.	Graham Greene	*The End of the Affair*	1951
55.	Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression.	Flann O'Brien	*At Swim-Two-Birds*	1939
56.	I was born in the Year 1632, in the City of York, of a good Family, tho' not of that Country, my Father being a Foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at *Hull*; He got a good Estate by Merchandise, and leaving off his Trade, lived afterward at *York*, from whence he had married my Mother, whose Relations were named Robinson, a very good	Daniel Defoe	*Robinson Crusoe*	1719

	Family in that Country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer; but by the usual Corruption of Words in England, we are now called, nay we call our selves, and write our Name Crusoe, and so my Companions always call'd me.			
57.	In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street.	David Markson	*Wittgenstein's Mistress*	1988
58.	Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress.	George Eliot	*Middlemarch*	1872
59.	It was love at first sight.	Joseph Heller	*Catch-22*	1961
60.	What if this young woman, who writes such bad poems, in competition with her husband, whose poems are equally bad, should stretch her remarkably long and well-made legs out before you, so that her skirt slips up to the tops of her stockings?	Gilbert Sorrentino	*Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things*	1971
61.	I have never begun a novel with more misgiving.	W. Somerset Maugham	*The Razor's Edge*	1944
62.	Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.	Anne Tyler	*Back When We Were Grownups*	2001
63.	The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning, and will probably do it till the end, which is a nuisance for the few people who grow up.	G. K. Chesterton	*The Napoleon of Notting Hill*	1904
64.	In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.	F. Scott Fitzgerald	*The Great Gatsby*	1925
65.	You better not never tell nobody but God.	Alice Walker	*The Color Purple*	1982
66.	“To be born again,” sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, “first you have to die.”	Salman Rushdie	*The Satanic Verses*	1988
67.	It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York.	Sylvia Plath	*The Bell Jar*	1963
68.	Most really pretty girls have pretty ugly feet, and so does Mindy Metalman, Lenore notices, all of a sudden.	David Foster Wallace	*The Broom of the System*	1987
69.	If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog.	Saul Bellow	*Herzog*	1964

70.	Francis Marion Tarwater's uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get a jug filled, had to finish it and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Saviour at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up.	Flannery O'Connor	*The Violent Bear it Away*	1960
71.	Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital; my keeper is watching me, he never lets me out of his sight; there's a peephole in the door, and my keeper's eye is the shade of brown that can never see through a blue-eyed type like me.	Gunter Grass (trans. Ralph Manheim)	*The Tin Drum*	1959
72.	When Dick Gibson was a little boy he was not Dick Gibson.	Stanley Elkin	*The Dick Gibson Show*	1971
73.	Hiram Clegg, together with his wife Emma and four friends of the faith from Randolph Junction, were summoned by the Spirit and Mrs. Clara Collins, widow of the beloved Nazarene preacher Ely Collins, to West Condon on the weekend of the eighteenth and nineteenth of April, there to await the End of the World.	Robert Coover	*The Origin of the Brunists*	1966
74.	She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in, but he kept her unconscionably, and there were moments at which she showed herself, in the glass over the mantel, a face positively pale with the irritation that had brought her to the point of going away without sight of him.	Henry James	*The Wings of the Dove*	1902
75.	In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains.	Ernest Hemingway	*A Farewell to Arms*	1929
76.	“Take my camel, dear,” said my Aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass.	Rose Macaulay	*The Towers of Trebizon*	1956
77.	He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull.	Joseph Conrad	*Lord Jim*	1900

78.	The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.	L. P. Hartley	*The Go-Between*	1953
79.	On my naming day when I come 12 I gone front spear and kilt a wyld boar he parbly ben the las wyld pig on the Bundel Downs any how there hadnt ben none for a long time befor him nor I aint looking to see none agen.	Russell Hoban	*Riddley Walker*	1980
80.	Justice?—You get justice in the next world, in this world you have the law.	William Gaddis	*A Frolic of His Own*	1994
81.	Vaughan died yesterday in his last car-crash.	J. G. Ballard	*Crash*	1973
82.	I write this sitting in the kitchen sink.	Dodie Smith	*I Capture the Castle*	1948
83.	"When your mama was the geek, my dreamlets," Papa would say, "she made the nipping off of noggins such a crystal mystery that the hens themselves yearned toward her, waltzing around her, hypnotized with longing."	Katherine Dunn	*Geek Love*	1983
84.	In the last years of the Seventeenth Century there was to be found among the fops and fools of the London coffee-houses one rangy, gangling flitch called Ebenezer Cooke, more ambitious than talented, and yet more talented than prudent, who, like his friends-in-folly, all of whom were supposed to be educating at Oxford or Cambridge, had found the sound of Mother English more fun to game with than her sense to labor over, and so rather than applying himself to the pains of scholarship, had learned the knack of versifying, and ground out quires of couplets after the fashion of the day, afroth with Joves and Jupiters, aclang with jarring rhymes, and string-taut with similes stretched to the snapping-point.	John Barth	*The Sot-Weed Factor*	1960
85.	When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonoma, California, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon.	James Crumley	*The Last Good Kiss*	1978
86.	It was just noon that Sunday morning when the sheriff reached the jail with Lucas Beauchamp though the whole town (the whole county too	William Faulkner	*Intruder in the Dust*	1948

	for that matter) had known since the night before that Lucas had killed a white man.			
87.	I, Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus This-that-and-the-other (for I shall not trouble you yet with all my titles) who was once, and not so long ago either, known to my friends and relatives and associates as “Claudius the Idiot,” or “That Claudius,” or “Claudius the Stammerer,” or “Clau-Clau-Claudius” or at best as “Poor Uncle Claudius,” am now about to write this strange history of my life; starting from my earliest childhood and continuing year by year until I reach the fateful point of change where, some eight years ago, at the age of fifty-one, I suddenly found myself caught in what I may call the “golden predicament” from which I have never since become disentangled.	Robert Graves	*I, Claudius*	1934
88.	Of all the things that drive men to sea, the most common disaster, I've come to learn, is women.	Charles Johnson	*Middle Passage*	1990
89.	I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent.	Saul Bellow	*The Adventures of Augie March*	1953
90.	The towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods.	Sinclair Lewis	*Babbitt*	1922
91.	I will tell you in a few words who I am: lover of the hummingbird that darts to the flower beyond the rotted sill where my feet are propped; lover of bright needlepoint and the bright stitching fingers of humorless old ladies bent to their sweet and infamous designs; lover of parasols made from the same puffy stuff as a young girl's underdrawers; still lover of that small naval boat which somehow survived the distressing years of my life between her decks or in her pilothouse; and also lover of poor dear black Sonny, my mess boy, fellow victim and confidant, and of my wife and child. But	John Hawkes	*Second Skin*	1964

	most of all, lover of my harmless and sanguine self.			
92.	He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad.	Raphael Sabatini	*Scaramouche*	1921
93.	Psychics can see the color of time it's blue.	Ronald Sukenick	*Blown Away*	1986
94.	In the town, there were two mutes and they were always together.	Carson McCullers	*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*	1940
95.	Once upon a time two or three weeks ago, a rather stubborn and determined middle-aged man decided to record for posterity, exactly as it happened, word by word and step by step, the story of another man for indeed what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal, a somewhat paranoiac fellow unmarried, unattached, and quite irresponsible, who had decided to lock himself in a room a furnished room with a private bath, cooking facilities, a bed, a table, and at least one chair, in New York City, for a year 365 days to be precise, to write the story of another person—a shy young man about of 19 years old—who, after the war the Second World War, had come to America the land of opportunities from France under the sponsorship of his uncle—a journalist, fluent in five languages—who himself had come to America from Europe Poland it seems, though this was not clearly established sometime during the war after a series of rather gruesome adventures, and who, at the end of the war, wrote to the father his cousin by marriage of the young man whom he considered as a nephew, curious to know if he the father and his family had survived the German occupation, and indeed was deeply saddened to learn, in a letter from the young man—a long and touching letter written in English, not by the young man, however, who did not know a damn word of English, but by a good friend of his who had studied English in school—that his parents both his father and mother and his two sisters one older and the other younger than he had been deported they were Jewish to a German concentration camp Auschwitz probably and never returned, no	Raymond Federman	*Double or Nothing*	1971

	doubt having been exterminated deliberately X * X * X * X, and that, therefore, the young man who was now an orphan, a displaced person, who, during the war, had managed to escape deportation by working very hard on a farm in Southern France, would be happy and grateful to be given the opportunity to come to America that great country he had heard so much about and yet knew so little about to start a new life, possibly go to school, learn a trade, and become a good, loyal citizen.			
96.	Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space.	Margaret Atwood	*Cat's Eye*	1988
97.	He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters.	Virginia Woolf	*Orlando*	1928
98.	High, high above the North Pole, on the first day of 1969, two professors of English Literature approached each other at a combined velocity of 1200 miles per hour.	David Lodge	*Changing Places*	1975
99.	They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did.	Jean Rhys	*Wide Sargasso Sea*	1966
100.	The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting.	Stephen Crane	*The Red Badge of Courage*	1895

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:08 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/100-rays-of-light.html

Monday, November 7, 2011

OUR FATHERS, OURSELVES.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What mistakes should fathers avoid making when raising their children?"

I deliberately spoiled my son and daughter, because my parents spoiled me. I felt toward them as I did toward my wife when we were dating: namely, I wanted them to have not only everything they needed, but everything they desired in this life. These were two black children, you understand? The history of their ancestors in this country was one of systematic denial of their personhood and material deprivation. Therefore, I insisted that both my children have the best of everything, and it was my duty, as their father, to provide that for them. My operating baseline was how my father raised me. As I saw it, I had to at *least* give my children everything my Dad gave me and, since his personal sacrifices made it possible for me to have a better life in general than he had, I therefore had to do *more* for my own children.

I was never quite as demanding with my children as my Dad had been with me. He was never harsh because that was not part of his nature. He could be generous (he bought me my first car, paid for my correspondence course with cartoonist Lawrence Lariar, and paid for two years of my college education), but he was also demanding. In his view, a man had to know how to work, and it didn't matter one whit *what* the work was (all work done well had dignity, in his opinion, and was a reflection on the worker), so my first year home from college he got me a summer job as a garbage man for the City of Evanston, a job I did for two summers. He insisted that a young black male had to know how to make sacrifices, particularly for his loved ones. But also how to enjoy life, too. He loved to play pool. We had a table set up in our garage, and he and I spent countless hours when I was in high school on that pool table. Nevertheless, I'll never forget something he dropped on me when I was a teenager. He said, "I want you to have your own job and your own money. And your own car. And I want you *not* to be a burden on me." He told me that if I was ever arrested, he wouldn't come to help me. But that, of course, wasn't true, as my mother reminded me. He would have been right there with the bail money if for some reason I screwed up and landed in the slammer.

He was a mixture of gentle and tough, water and steel. He had a sense of humor that sparked to life easily. During all the years I knew him (he died at age 81 seven years ago), I never heard him cuss. Not once. The strongest oath he ever used when irritated was, "Shoot!" He was on his knees in prayer every night. At church every Sunday. And everyone in Evanston, Illinois who knew him respected my father---his employers, our neighbors, and my young friends. He was our family's patriarch. He loaned money to his many brothers and sisters from South Carolina (he was from a family of 6 boys and 6 girls). He rented out his second home to them. (Earlier in life, whenever we lived in a house or an apartment, he always found a place that had an extra bedroom he could rent to a "roomer." I grew up with roomers somewhere in the house---respectable black men and women (some with kids) who needed a place to stay, and my Dad provided that for them.) He was frugal, working two and three jobs sometimes---using the check from one job to pay the monthly bills, and putting the other one or two checks away in his savings account. Black men who didn't carry their own weight, who didn't keep a job and support

their families, he dismissed as being "sorry." When he died, he left me his large South Carolina home and the huge plot of land it was on to sell (I divided the money between my children and set up safe investment accounts for them), and his savings account was just a few grand shy of six figures, which paid, first for his six months of home care when he came down with congenital heart failure, then for his own funeral in 2004. He was always prepared and carried his own weight and that of others. For life he was prepared. For his own death, too. And he was prepared to leave me and *my* children something to enhance our survival and prosperity.

He was born in 1922, grew up in the '30s, and there was no nonsense about him. (Even as a young man, he had ideas for how his own father---my grandfather---could improve his work as a farmer and blacksmith in rural South Carolina.) He'd laugh and joke, but when time came to take of business, he was the one in my large family of relatives that everyone turned to, including me when I was a kid. If there was something he was determined to do, he was relentless, like a force of nature, never resting until it got done. His doggedness in this regard could sometimes be funny. In *his* home, one of my jobs was cleaning up the kitchen after dinner. Washing the dishes so they would be ready for everyone's use the next day. We never went to bed until the day's business was wrapped up and things were prepared for tomorrow. And we were always in bed by 11 PM, and up by 7 AM. My wife and I have noticed an uncanny resemblance between my southern-born-and-bred father and the character played by Morgan Freeman in the film "Driving Miss Daisy." (Speaking of driving, he always kept a Cadillac for his own pleasure, but one always purchased used.) Both that character and my Dad were minted from the template of a certain kind of southern Negro who grew up resourceful and proud during the worst years of Jim Crow, and who developed reliable algorithms for survival in a hostile world.

But even my Dad was not the best black father I've ever seen. That distinction goes to my best friend, a black screenwriter in California, who'd probably prefer that I not mention his name, because he's a very private man. He, my friend, was an athlete. He was captain of both his high school and college football teams. But what he did for his son, now on his way to med school, nearly left me speechless. At great expense to himself, he kept his boy in one of the best California private schools from kindergarten through high school, then paid for his way through Swarthmore. His son's schedule was like that of an adult from the time he was very young: classical music lessons at a conservatory (his son is a talented composer now and writes the music for his father's short films); kung-fu lessons (his son had his first children's black belt around the age of eight; I advised my friend on the best martial art systems for him to study); and sports (my buddy assembled and coached a baseball team consisting of poor, young black and Hispanic men in the Bay area to play along with his son because he had problems with what he said was the bigoted, white coach at the private school his son was attending, and the young men on this team he also served as a mentor for). His son (my godson who calls me "Uncle Chuck"), now in his early '20s, is one of the most well-rounded young men I've ever seen. When his son was a kid, something my friend did was sit himself down and record his son's daily high school lessons on a tape recorder, which they played (to save his son study time) as they drove from one after-school, extra-curricular activity to another. (Among Asians, he was the equivalent of a "Study Mom" studying her son's textbooks right along with him.) When asked who his hero is, my friend's son always says, "My Dad." (I can think of nothing sweeter in this world, no greater reward than hearing that.)

In this post I've focused more on what I think a father (or any parent) should do rather than what they shouldn't do. (Obviously, not trying to do these thing is what I see as being a mistake.) My parents talked *all* the time about what they felt was best to prepare me for the world, then they worked to realize those plans. What is parenting? A daily "performance art" is how I would describe it, and I see it as being the most important job in the world. So I think it's OK to spoil black children a little when they're very young, but they should never have the feeling of entitlement, or that the world owes them something. On my grandfather's South Carolina farm in the 1930s, according to my Dad, even the youngest children learned to work early---for example, bringing water (or tools) to thirsty adults in the field.

A YOUNG CHARLES JOHNSON WITH DAUGHTER

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 1:33 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/our-fathers-ourselves.html

Monday, November 7, 2011

TAKING REFUGE IN THE DHARMA

"Do not expect to reestablish good taste. We are in every way in a time of horrible decadence." Voltaire in 1770.

"Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Seek salvation alone in the truth. Look not for assistance to any one besides yourselves." Buddha's last words to his disciples.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What does taking refuge in the Dharma mean to you? How do you practice this on a daily basis?"

Why do we need to take refuge?

Just look outside your window at the world. Read the stories in today's newspaper. Is it possible *not* to see a world awash in suffering? I think not. But what does it mean to take refuge within this world? It means following a daily practice that becomes our path. That practice consists of constant alertness, vigilance, and mindfulness. Everything we do---large and small, public and private---is the occasion and a precious opportunity for practice. True Buddhist practice begins when we get off our cushion (or zafu) and engage with this world. For as Zen master Hakuin said, "Meditation in the midst of activity is a thousand times superior to meditation in stillness."

Our era looks eerily (to me) like the time of Petronius, author of the *Satyricon*, at the end of the Roman empire. A time of late cultural decadence, confusion, and incoherence. So many people are scarred and scared, stressed and depressed, angry and willful. Given that fact, we need a place for spiritual renewal and healing. That place is within ourselves. It is always available to us. We need not look outside ourselves in order to achieve happiness and freedom from suffering. As it says in the *Digha Nikaya:*

"You should be an island to yourself, a refuge to yourself, not dependent on any other but taking refuge in the truth and none other than the truth. And how do you become an island and a refuge to yourself? In this way. You see and contemplate your body as composed of all the forces of the universe. Ardently and mindfully, you steer your body-self by restraining your discontent with the world about you. In the same way, observe and contemplate your feelings and use that same ardent restraint and self-possession against enslavement by greed or desire. By seeing attachment to your body and feelings as blocking the truth, you dwell in self-possession and ardent liberation from those ties. This is how you live as an island to yourself and a refuge to yourself. Whoever dwells in this contemplation, islanded by the truth and taking refuge in the truth---that one will come out of the darkness and into the light."

That, in part, is what taking refuge means to me.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 9:19 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/taking-refuge-in-dharma.html

Thursday, November 10, 2011

TELL ME SOMETHING ABOUT BLACKNESS AND I'LL TELL YOU SOMETHING ABOUT BUDDHISM

"My understanding of the Dharma comes in living color, so to speak. As a black woman I can see and experience things others may not, which in turn gives me a 24/7 practice of compassion." Zenju Earthlyn Manuel.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What are some of the 'problems' Black Buddhists confront within the Buddhist community? It seems as if our attempts to be people of the spirit keeps being held back by the chains of the skin. Is there no escaping racism? Are we ever enlightened? Are we trapped by the monkey mind of race?"

This is a very important and timely question. And fortunately this month Buddhists of color are addressing it in articles that are powerful, beautiful, and enlightening in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* and *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly.*

Buddhist nun Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, the author of *Tell Me Something about Buddhism: Questions and Answers for the Curious Beginner*, is interviewed in *Tricycle.* There she says:

"When I walk out my door, it is guaranteed that someone or something will let me know that my dark skin is not good enough or let me know that I am not welcome. All I have to do is look at a billboard, be followed around in the store, or have the clerk smile to everyone but me. So, every moment the depth of my practice as a black woman in the Dharma is one that requires deep-sea diving and unbroken awareness. My understanding of the Dharma comes in living color, so to speak. As a black woman I can see and experience things others may not, which in turn gives me a 24/7 practice of compassion. I have no time to waste, protest, yell back, or play games. And it is exhausting to act out when I feel wronged. So, with Buddha's teachings I understood that I could change my response to the human condition. I ask each day, how do I walk as vulnerable and as soft as I feel without looking over my shoulder? I walk with what I know to be true if I am awakened to the true nature of my own life. This is my face. I walk with it. That is how I understand the teachings from the body in which I was born."

Zenju's inspiring interview can be read in its entirety if you click on this link: http://www.tricycle.com/blog/difference-and-harmony-interview-zenju-earthlyn-manuel?page=0,0

The new, winter 2011 issue of *Buddhadharma* also directly takes on today's question with a powerful and important forum entitled, "Why is American Buddhism So White?" The panelists discussing this issue are Larry Yang, a leader of the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland; Amanda Rivera, a member of Soka Gakkai International; Angel Kyodo Williams, founder of the Center for Transformative Change in Berkeley, California; and Bob Agoglia, executive director of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. The photographs of Buddhists of color that illustrate this forum are just stunning. It was my privilege and pleasure to write the

introduction for this panel discussion. I include that introduction below for your reading pleasure, and urge you to pick up the new issue of *Buddhadharma*:

I would wager that every Buddhist enjoys the story about Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch of Zen, who presented himself as a poor "commoner from Hsin-chou of Kwangtung" to the abbot of Tung-shan monastery in the Huang-mei district of Ch'i-chou in hopes of study, and was rebuked by the abbot with these words: "You are a native of Kwangtung, a barbarian? How can you expect to be a Buddha?" Hui-neng replied, "Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their Buddha-nature. A barbarian is different from Your Holiness physically, but there is no difference in our Buddha-nature."

For more than two millennia one of the appeals of Buddhism is that happiness and freedom from suffering can be achieved by anyone, regardless of race, class, or gender. But we must remember that all convert practitioners are embodied beings who come to dharma study from s*ome*where. They are firmly situated in a particular moment of history. If they are American practitioners of color, who from childhood learn to be bi-cultural, some portion of the real, daily suffering they experience in America will arise from racism and social injustice. And in the post-civil rights era this social suffering assumes forms that are so subtle, so deeply interwoven with our individual being-in-the-world, they are nearly invisible to white practitioners.

These unexamined, ingrained patterns of conditioning, are, when viewed from a Buddhist perspective, perfect examples of what we mean by illusion if the racial or cultural self is taken to be an unchanging, enduring entity or substance. They are assumptions about identity that are as close to us as our breathing, so familiar that when these presuppositions are unveiled "awakening" to them can be experienced as deeply unsettling by practitioners who cling to a sense of "whiteness." James Baldwin explained this well when he said, "It's not the Negro problem, it's the white problem. I'm only black because you *think* you're white."

In the societies where Buddhism has taken root, it has adapted to the everydayness of the lives of the laity. But problems arise in a multi-cultural society if one racial group of practitioners, with its preferences and prejudices, has historically been privileged and dominant over others.

The overwhelming whiteness of American Buddhist centers is not a problem just for teachers who want to transmit the dharma to everyone. The United States is presently undergoing a dramatic sea change. Demographers predict that by 2042 minorities will outnumber whites. This "browning" of America is arguably one of the greatest cultural issues in the 21st century, a change that is already affecting everything from employment to popular culture, and especially our system of public education.

A recent article by Jen Graves in Seattle's *The Stranger*, entitled "Deeply Embarrassed White People Talk Awkwardly About Race," reports on how progressive whites are addressing this issue through organizations such as the Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites. "Whiteness is the center that goes unnamed and unstudied, which is one way that keeps us as white folks centered, normal, that which everything else is compared to," CARW cofounder Scott Winn says in the article. "I think many white people are integrationists in that 'beloved community' way, but integration usually means assimilation...As in, you've gotta act like us for this to work."

And Peggy McIntosh, the anti-racism activist and Wellesley Centers for Women scholar, sums all this up well when she observes that, “I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”

In order to solve this problem, whites must listen deeply to Buddhists of color who are particularly well-suited (and perhaps even karmically directed) to take the lead in healing these wounds, not only in the American sangha, but in the larger society as well.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:22 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/tell-me-something-about-blackness-and.html

Saturday, November 12, 2011

TALKING ABOUT THE BANKS OF FRIENDSHIP

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Could you talk about your relationship with the writer Russell Banks? His name appears in the acknowledgements of MIDDLE PASSAGE."

I've known and admired Russell Banks since the 1970s. He's one of our grand men of American letters: prolific as a storyteller, influential as a creative writing teacher (as his daughter once said, he has produced many "Russell sprouts" who imitate his realistic stories about working-class Americans), and an author who has unselfishly supported the work of other literary writers.

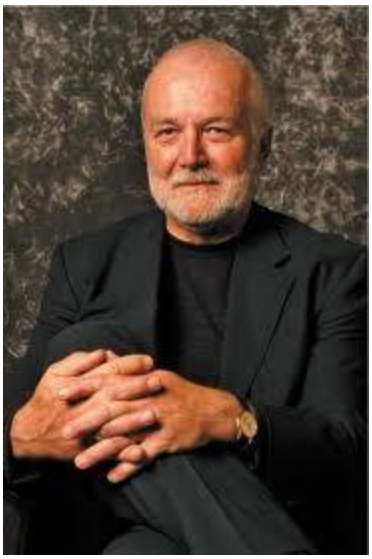
We probably first came into contact in the late '70s when he was one of the writers publishing with the original (or first incarnation of) The Fiction Collective and I (with the help of a couple of my graduate students) handled the manuscripts submitted to that organization from my office at the University of Washington. We had a nice dinner conversation when his novel *Continental Drift* was selected as a city-wide read in Seattle. We were on the same panel together in 1995 discussing "History and Fiction" at the 92nd St. Y (with Marilyn Robinson and Allan Garganus). And in 1998 when he published *Cloudsplitter* and I published *Dreamer*, we read together at Harvard during our book tours, courtesy of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Banks has been very successful, I think, with seeing his fiction adapted as films. Notable among these adaptations is *Affliction*, a 1997 film based on Banks's 1989 novel; actor James Coburn received the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for his role in that film.

And speaking of Academies, Russell Banks is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. I have little doubt that he was the prime mover behind my receiving in 2002 an Academy Award in Literature from that organization. You can hear Banks's voice in the citation I received on May 15 of that year:

"Charles Johnson is a storyteller with a philosopher's intellect and a historian's belief in the power of the past to shape the present. But he is before all else a true storyteller. Johnson's literary intelligence and devotion to his craft have allowed him to explore at a consistently high level of artistry a myriad of narrative forms and modes drawn equally from Asian, European, and African traditions. In his novels, especially *Middle Passage* and *Faith and the Good Thing*, and his many short stories, he has ingeniously braided history, philosophy, and imagination in making post-modern fiction of the highest order."

So it has been my great, good pleasure to be able to count as one of my friends in this lifetime a writer as distinguished, talented, big-hearted, and generous as Russell Banks.



RUSSELL BANKS

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:08 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/talking-about-banks-of-friendship.html

Sunday, November 13, 2011

THE POVERTY OF WEALTH

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "What can a Buddhist teach a politician about poverty? How do we define wealth? Are our problems rooted in money or simply the "idea" of having and needing money?"

In the *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutra* (The Lion's Roar on the Turning of the Wheel) we are told the story of how a society failed. A king "did not give property to the needy, and as a result poverty became rife. With the spread of poverty, a man took what was not given, thus committing what was called theft." As more and more people engaged in theft "the use of weapons increased, from the use of weapons, the taking of life increased...lying increased...the speaking evil of others increased" along with sexual misconduct, harsh speech and idle chatter, covetousness and hatred, false opinions, incest, excessive greed and deviant practices, lack of respect for mother and father, for ascetics and Brahmins and the head of the clan.

Commenting on this sutra, H. Saddhatissa says in *Buddhist Ethics* that, "If rulers do not prevent the spread of poverty in their domains they not only induce disorder therein but create disrespect for all recognized forms of authority, so contributing to the deterioration of the human race." Put another way, this very old story states that widespread poverty causes the collapse of all the gossamer-thin structures of civilized life, and plunges men and women into a degenerate state of living like "goats, sheep and such animals."

From a Buddhist perspective, then, some degree of material prosperity is required for all who have not renounced the world and donned the robes of monks and nuns. If you traveled through Japan in the 1990s, as I did on a five-city lecture tour, you probably discovered in your hotel room a Buddhist version of the Gideon Bible in the drawer of a desk. The title of that work is *The Teaching of the Buddha,* a text with English on the left side page and Japanese on the right, published in 1966 by Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (Buddhist Promoting Foundation).

In Chapter Two of that book, entitled "Practical Guide to True Way of Living," we are informed that householders, especially those engaged in business, have a moral duty to succeed and create wealth for the sake of others. In the family of a householder, "Every member must work hard like the diligent ants and the busy bees. No one must rely upon the industry of others, or expect their charity. On the other hand, a man must not consider what he has earned as totally his own. Some of it must be shared with others, some of it must be saved for an emergency, some of it must be set aside for the needs of the community and the nation, and some of it must be devoted to the needs of the religious teachers." Far from being motivated by greed, the householder inspired by Buddhist ideals labors to create wealth as a form of service or *seva.* He is not attached to wealth, nor does he cling to it. This passage continues by saying:

"One should always remember that nothing in the world can strictly be called 'mine.' What comes to a person comes to him because of a combination of causes and conditions; it can be kept by him only temporarily and, therefore, he must not use it selfishly or for unworthy purposes."

So wealth is more than just an idea. It is one of life's necessities, required to reduce physical suffering for oneself and others, despite its impermanence. But what is true wealth or riches for a follower of the Dharma? H. Saddhatissa gives us an answer when he writes:

"To Ugga, the King's minister, the Buddha gave seven states that are not subject to fire, theft and other damage:

The riches of confidence, riches of morals, of shame and fear
of wrong-doing.
The riches of listening, of charity, wisdom are seven.
Of whom is possessed these riches, or woman or man,
That one is invincible either to devas or men.
Because confidence, morals, are brightness, the vision of
Truth,
Give yourselves up, wise one, to remembering
That which the Buddha has taught."

True wealth, then, is found in one's spiritual practice.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:46 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/poverty-of-wealth.html

Monday, November 14, 2011

A TRIBUTE TO GARY STORHOFF

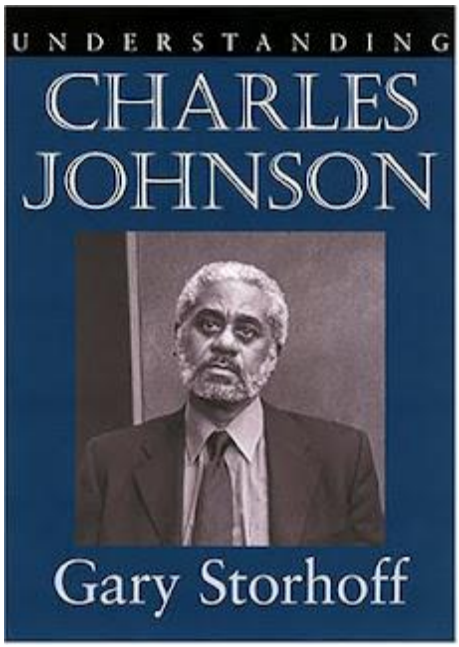
"I've had a good run." Dr. Gary Storhoff (1947-2011)

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Recently Gary Storhoff died. He was the author of UNDERSTANDING CHARLES JOHNSON published by The University of South Carolina Press in 2004. Storhoff was a Buddhist fellow traveler. Did this provide him with a deeper or different insight into your work? How will you remember Gary?"

I'm going to remember Dr. Gary Storhoff as an outstanding scholar to whom I am forever indebted, a gentleman, a dedicated teacher, devoted father and family man, and my brother in the *Buddhadharma.* I only learned about his passing away yesterday from his wife. He died at age 63, exactly a week ago on November 7, peacefully at home with his family after a year-long bout with cancer. Never did he complain about his illness or the fact that, as he put it, he was leaving this "beautiful world."

We were introduced in the best of possible ways---by his work. I read one of his scholarly articles on my work, and I was so impressed by his insight, the depth of his knowledge of literature and philosophy (Western and Eastern), that I called his English department at the University of Connecticut (Stamford) and left a message, thanking him for this gift of the mind and spirit. (He describes our initial contact in his tribute for me in the book published this fall in India, *Charles Johnson: Embracing the World*.) It was Dr. Storhoff who first made clear the presence of Buddhist epistemology in my story "Moving Pictures."

Later, at one of the sessions for the Charles Johnson Society at the American Literature Association, I heard him present a brilliant analysis of another of my stories, "Executive Decision," and afterwards I told him that he'd inspired me to take another pass at Buddhist epistemology in a work of fiction, one that perhaps would be less elusive than in "Moving Pictures." That story, "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra," is forthcoming in *Shambhala Sun*. (I owe the existence of that story to him.) I should also mention that after Storhoff read his paper that day, I saw another participant who read a paper before him lean toward Gary and enthusiastically whisper, "You win! You win!" I believe that is the feeling everyone will have when they encounter Dr. Storhoff's scholarship. It is original, top-tier, rigorous, and deeply learned.



He was one of the founding members of the CJ Society, one highly respected by the other officers for his personal and professional integrity. He authored one of the best books on my work, *Understanding Charles Johnson*, for which I am deeply grateful. And for the last few years, he co-edited with John Whalen-Bridge for SUNY Press the ambitious, interdisciplinary, and ground-breaking three-volume series on Buddhism and American Culture: *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (2009); *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* (2010) ; and *Writing as Enlightenment* (2011). In addition to his books, he authored 65 articles and chapters in American, African-American, and ethnic literature journals. He received two teaching awards, and served for two years as assistant to the director at the Stamford campus. He is survived by his mother, his wife of 39 years, a son (a film animator), a daughter, and two brothers. His ashes will be scattered at his home in Danbury and his childhood home in North Dakota.

Like a stone tossed into a pond, his absence among us will ripple outward and be felt by many for a very long time: by family, friends, his students, colleagues, those who care about American Buddhism and literary/academic culture. I remember him as a quiet man---quiet in that solid, steady, reliable American heartland way that someone would be who was born in Duluth, Minnesota and grew up in North Dakota. He never promoted himself, but instead let his works and deeds speak for him. I am convinced that a man like Gary Storhoff is an achievement of culture and civilization. That he was the very embodiment of culture and civilization. And that, of course, explains his humility. Do not underestimate all the decades of disciplined living, devotion to learning and the highest ideals of teaching, love and sacrifice for others required to produce a true man of character, credentialed and accomplished, like Gary Storhoff. We academics (and artists) sometimes tilt toward cynicism; we often silently watch the everyday, selfless work of our colleagues but fail to properly honor them until their sudden absence leaves a hole in our lives. What I'm saying is that men and women such as him are a crucial bridge between generations, transmitting day in, day out "the best that has been known and said in the world" (to borrow a phrase from Matthew Arnold), in the West and the East, from those who came before us to those who will follow us and embrace 24/7---as Storhoff did---the daily,

demanding work of keeping the goodness, truth, and beauty to be found in culture and civilization alive and vividly present from one era to the next. What I wrote about M.L. King Jr. in *Dreame*r (words adapted from the *Tao Te Ching*), I would say about Storhoff: "Not putting on a show, he commanded respect; not justifying himself, he was distinguished; not boasting, he was instantly acknowledged."

I will sorely miss Dr. Storhoff. But, even as I grieve, I find great joy in the brilliant gifts that he so generously gave to us. Those gifts of the mind and spirit (and his personal example) will never---ever---be tarnished by time. Thank you, Gary.

GARY STORHOFF

La guerra e terminata
de la virtu battaglia
de la mente travaglia
cosa numma contende

The war is over.
In the battle of virtue,
the struggle of spirit,
all is peace.

(Jacopone da Todi)

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:43 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/tribute-to-gary-storhoff.html

Tuesday, November 15, 2011

ARE YOU TALKING TO ME?

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "How does a fiction writer learn to write good dialogue?"

This could have been an easy question for me to stumble on. I started thinking about individual lines of dialogue---or speech between characters--as an isolated phenomenon, and what I liked about them. One can extract dialogue from a story and discuss in a general way its virtues. But we should remember that dialogue occurs in a context, in other words, within a specific scene. And every dramatic scene has a structure. If we have two characters, say, each enters a scene motivated by a desire or need (or a conflict) that has brought him or her there. So they have (1) An *Entrance.* They seldom jump right into talking about their individual motivation for being there; instead they may engage in very natural and easy small talk or banter, as we find Richard Wright's characters doing at the opening of a scene in his novel *Lawd Today*:

> "What you know, Skinner?"
> "Don't know. What you know?"
> "Don't know. How's (another character) doing?"

Or in another exchange from the same novel:

> "What you saying, Jake?"
> "Ain't saying."

So for a few moments (or beats) in the scene we have what is called (2) *Rhythm*, the natural flow of speech between two people. At some point this will lead to (3) *The Hit*, or that heightened moment in their exchange where the issue (or conflict)that has brought them together is finally revealed. (This can be a true revelation, as in the pivotal "slapping" scene in the film "Chinatown" where the character Evelyn Mulwray reveals to detective "Jake" Gittes that she had an incestuous relationship with her father when she was 15-years-old.) Finally, after the Hit, the characters will (4) *Exit* the scene. A couple of things should be noted now. First, the emotional encounter experienced by the characters in a single dramatic scene will cause them to register

some degree of change, psychologically, *i.e.*, they will not exit that scene as clean as they went into it. Ideally, the scene (with its dialogue), will advance the story, moving its plot forward. So, to repeat: the structure of a dramatic scene (and usually comic ones, too) in which dialogue appears, and which determines what dialogue will be there, involves an *entrance, rhythm,* the *hit*, and an *exit* (from the stage or the scene).

Focusing more closely now on individual speeches, there are a few obvious points to make. Characters usually speak naturally or colloquially in short, crisp sentences. (But long speeches are, of course, sometimes required. If you want to learn how to make a character give a long speech or monologue without it being boring, do Exercise 7 in John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction* for practice; and also try your hand at Exercise 8, where you're asked to "Write a dialogue in which each of the two characters has a secret. Do not reveal the secret but make the reader intuit it. For example, the dialogue might be between a husband, who has just lost his job and hasn't worked up the courage to tell his wife, and his wife, who has a lover in the bedroom.") Ideally, those sentences should reveal character through the words the speaker uses and the specific cadence of his or her use of language. Each character's speech should be so specific to him or her that we can dispense with the label "he said." But if you must attribute a line of speech to a character, then the standard and simple "he said" will get you in less trouble than a risible choice like, "he ejaculated." (Please, don't ever write that one.) Now, take a look at this exchange from Wright's *American Hunger:*

> "Can't you read really?" I asked.
> "Naw," she giggled. "you know I can't read."
> "You can read *some*," I said." (Italics mine)

For me, the "some" in that sentence delivers a bit of the texture of black speech, and is more effective than, say, if the character had said "a little." Good dialogue is the product of a writer having a good ear, of listening carefully to how others speak, the words they choose, the stresses they place on certain syllables in those words. For example, in *Dreamer* I attempted to provide scansion for a line from Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermon "A Knock at Midnight" in a scene where Chaym Smith, King's double, is trying to learn how imitate the good doctor's individual speech patterns and where he places stress on words (see page 107).

But an even more vivid and wonderfully funny example of the music of rich, ethnic speech than the three lines from Wright above can be found in the recently published novel, *Ed King* by David Guterson. In this very well-crafted work of fiction, the protagonist Ed King is the adopted son of Daniel and Alice King, a Jewish couple, who raise him with their biological son, Simon. During one of Daniel's phone conversations (the subject is whether to let Ed know he's adopted), we have a textbook-perfect example of textured speech so convincing we almost feel we are hearing it close range right at our ear and not reading it on the page:

> "Maybe one day they ask," said Pop. " 'How come he's tall, I'm not tall, he's got his nose, I got my nose, his hair, the other hair'---what you gonna say to your boychiks then? Huh, Dr. Dan? I'm waiting for you! This one, he's hitting home runs from the left side of the plate; the other, he's making Einstein in science class; one allergic maybe to nothing, one don't leave home

without having asthma; one is this, one that, one up, one down, one yes, one no---so what do you say, Mr. Know-It-All?"

"We stick with the mystery of genetics," answered Dan. "It couldn't be simpler, Pop."

"Simple?" Pop said. "How is it simple? One day, he's gonna find out."

"We stick with the mystery of genetics," Dan repeated. "If no one slips up or spills the beans, he isn't adopted. Let's all remember that."

Pop sneezed into the phone. "Excuse me," he said. "It's lying, this business. The tooth fairy's lying, the *golem* is lying, Santa Claus lying, all of it lying, but this, Mr. Eddie, not adopted, that's *lying*, that's Number Nine of the Ten Commandments lying. Listen, Daniel, I'm telling you from my heart, you want more *tsuris* than you already got? Go ahead---tell this lie!"

Because we're talking about *dia*logue and not *mono*logue, I find my writer's notebooks of the last 40 years filled with numerous examples of witty and crisp exchanges or repartee between two characters. Perhaps this is just my personal taste, but I suspect audiences for any story (in a novel, short story, in film or on stage) enjoy funny dialogue between characters, as in this back-and-forth between two characters in philosopher George Santayana's novel *The Last Puritan:*

"Are you a Catholic?"
"No---I've lost my faith."
"Then, a Protestant?"
"Sir---I've lost my faith, not my reason."

And Charles Dickens is nothing if not a master of humorous dialogue. Here's an exchange from *Great Expectations*:

"What's the name of them things with humps?"
"Camels?"
Joe nodded. "Mrs. Camels, it was."
I supposed he meant Mrs. Camilla.

Being Buddhist, I must confess to having a great affection for those dialogue exchanges that not only make us smile but also slap us upside our heads with a spiritual lesson. Consider this famous Q&A reprinted in John C.H. Wu's *The Golden Age of Zen: Zen Masters of the T'ang Dynasty:*

"Do you perceive the fragrance of the cinnamon?
"Yes, I do," replied Shan-ku.
Huang-lu said, "You see, I have hid nothing from you."

And from that same volume:

A monk asked, "Who is the Buddha?"
Pai-chang replied, "Who are you?"

And with that example I'll end today's mini-lecture on some of the possibilities for dialogue.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:55 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/are-you-talking-to-me.html

Wednesday, November 16, 2011

FLIGHT DON'T FAIL ME NOW...

"I would stare out to sea, envying the sailors riding out on merchantmen on the gift of good weather, wondering if there was some far-flung port, a foreign country or island far away at the earth's rim where a freeman could escape the vanities cityfolk called self-interest, the mediocrity they called achievement, the blatant selfishness they called individual freedom---all the bilge that made each day landside a kind of living death." From *Middle Passage*.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "From the first sentence of MIDDLE PASSAGE, your novel seems to embrace the theme of Flight. This theme appears quite often in African American literature. How is your novel different from others that have explored this topic? In 2011, where can a black man run to? What might he be escaping from?"

Yes, and yes again: the slave narrative, one of America's most indigenous literary forms, is all about flight. The flight or escape from slavery: Frederick Douglass's daring tale of escape, or that of Henry "Box" Brown who mailed himself to freedom. I think if we poke at this idea a little bit, slavery can be seen as a metaphor for anything that constricts or confines human imagination and the universal desire to be free.

The cage one might wish to escape from could be an arranged marriage (for a man or a woman), as is the case with Rutherford Calhoun in *Middle Passage*. Or it could be escape from an abusive marriage. Or a suffocating family life. Or a spirit-depleting job. Or an affluent social class to which one feels he or she doesn't belong. Think of all those science fiction stories in which characters try to escape from future dystopias. Or the flights of Huck and Jim. Or all those supposedly broken-hearted soldiers who joined the French Foreign Legion after a love affair went sour. Or nearly every Sinbad story starting with that character feeling bored at home and deciding to sail off on a ship (in most stories he's soon shipwrecked.) We find this theme of flight throughout world literature, and the reason is because the experience is both primal and paradigmatic. (It also forms the basis for the adventure story, which is one of my favorite forms of fiction.) In my notebooks, I long ago jotted down a short list of experiences that serve much the same archetypal storytelling function as flight---primal "ground situations" (to use John

Barth's phrase) from which one can conjure entire fictional worlds (but don't ask me where I first read about this list because I've forgotten its source):

1. Birth.
2. Death.
3. Marriage.
4. Attaining adulthood.
5. Serious illness and recovery.
6. War and concluding peace.
7. Choosing a vocation and launching a career.
8. Setting out upon a long journey.

The theme of flight is, I think, a variation on #8, "setting out upon a long journey." In *Middle Passage*, the flight that Rutherford Calhoun takes by going to sea to avoid marriage hurls him from the frying pan into the fire. An immature young man at the novel's opening, he is forced to achieve adulthood by all the challenges and crises he experiences at sea. He lives through the death of many, through a serious illness, through war (the slave revolt on the *Republic*), and finds a new vocation when by the novel's end he has indeed become a sailor. So the novel hits every theme in the above list except for birth as it cycles through the three basic conflicts in storytelling: Man vs. nature. Man vs. man. And Man vs. himself.

But Ethelbert asks, "In 2011, where can a black man run to?"

This question makes me wonder if there is a need for flight for black men in general. What is it they need to flee from? (If one has broken the law and the police are at one's heels, well, yeah, I guess there *is* a need for flight, which is the title, of course, for the second section of Richard Wright's *Native Son*.) But I can't racialize this question in a general way. What it does is make me recall one of my favorite Zen stories, which is (once again) a variation on #8 on the above list:

Two monks, one old and one young, traveled on foot for several days from their home to another village. The trip was tiring. They ran out food. Their feet became blistered. Rain one evening soaked their robes. As they finally approached their destination and could see the village that had taken them so long to reach, the younger monk became excited. He began to walk faster. Then he started running toward the village. The older monk did not run. He maintained his steady pace of walking. And he called out to the younger monk, *Here also it is good.*

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:15 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/flight-dont-fail-me-now.html

Thursday, November 17, 2011

HER NAME IS BALEKA

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "How important is your character Baleka? How symbolic is this 8 year old?"

I received this question from Ethelbert on September 2nd. For two months it has sat unanswered on my computer. Symbolic? My mind kept nibbling at the question, "Is this little African girl representative of something *more* than a little African girl? Is she some abstract idea?" Then a few days ago when writing the post entitled "Our Fathers, Ourselves" (November 7), I looked at the photograph of myself and my daughter Elizabeth. (That was her name from birth, which was my mother's middle name; at age 21 she legally changed it to "Elisheba" since she no longer felt like an "Elizabeth," though her new name in Hebrew means Elizabeth. Go figure. She's a conceptual artist, owner and curator of Seattle's Faire Gallery Cafe on Capitol Hill so she decided to get as creative with her name as her canvasses.) And as I looked at that photo of she and I holding hands as we walked on a very icy street with snow all around us, my memory was jogged and I realized, *This* is Baleka.

Middle Passage was written between 1983 and 1989. When I completed the novel my daughter was eight-years-old. (I remember her telling me in 1990 that even though she didn't know what a National Book Award was, she prayed on the night of the ceremony---which was exactly 21-years ago yesterday---that I would win in the fiction category.) So for the six years during its composition, I had a little girl of African descent in my life, day and night, dominating my thoughts, because a father's relationship to a daughter is---well, special. As my former student, writer David Guterson put it so well, "Having a daughter is like falling in love for a second time." Daughters powerfully bring out in fathers their most primal protective instincts. They see their daughters as perfect, beautiful, angelic, and incapable of doing wrong. A father's love for his daughter may well be the perfect example of Platonic love.

And all that is what Rutherford Calhoun feels for Baleka when her mother is swept out to sea during a storm and he becomes her guardian on the slave ship, *The Republic.* I've often said, "When you have a child, you have to stop being a child yourself." For most men, fatherhood brings about the abrupt "letting go" of childish things because suddenly another life---vulnerable, helpless in a hostile world---requires your moment by moment nurturing and attention to survive. You cannot eat until your child has eaten first. If she is sick, you feel sick. And in a world of predators and corrupting influences, you screen ruthlessly everyone and everything that draws near to her, determined that you will not allow anything to cause her harm. That is the change brought about by Baleka's presence in Rutherford's life.

And here's a bit of esoterica for you. The Sanskrit word bālikā (बालिका) means "girl" or "young girl." But I didn't know that, of course, until after 1998 when I began to study that beautiful language.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:13 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/her-name-is-baleka.html

Friday, November 18, 2011

WRITING IS THINKING

"Great things are not done by impulse, but by a series of small things brought together." Vincent Van Gogh.

"Trifles make perfection, but perfection is no trifle." Michaelangelo.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "In your essay "A Boot Camp for Creative Writing" you mention that writing well is the same as thinking well. What does thinking well mean? How do you teach this? Are their certain steps a person must take in order to think well?"

The statement I often repeat that, "Writing well is the same thing as thinking well," can be linked to that old chestnut, "Ninety percent of good writing is rewriting." This is not to say that "first thought" on a subject is not useful (or "First thought is best thought," as Allan Ginsberg put it"). My writer's notebooks are filled with "first thought" lines that came to me unbidden at various times during the day, which I jotted down because they were perfect or nearly perfect in the form they originally took.

But the best writing on the level of the sentence (as well as larger structures such as plot and character detail) is usually twentieth or one-hundredth thought. Personally, I don't feel we should burden people by showing them our first drafts; rather, what we share should be at least a third draft. With first draft, every page is like a prayer---in that draft we put something on paper just to determine whether or not it is worth our continuing to work on it (or at least continue in that particular way). As Sartre one said, "Every sentence is a risk." Why? Because the Devil is always in the details. People are generally vague and avoid being specific or precise because they hope to escape scrutiny. They think that if they are vague in details, like Herman Cain, no one will be able to pin them down. Art is just the opposite of that: it hungers for and seeks specificity and *haecceity* (the "thisness" of things"). One must develop both the meaning and the music of each and every line.

Obviously, this meticulous attention, this meditation on detail, requires time. And great patience. (And, yes, these E-Channel posts, written so quickly, accelerate and truncate this process I'm describing of taking the time to think well and thoroughly. In my best work, I strive for intellectual and imagistic density.) The creative process requires time to consider dozens of alternatives for a single word. Time to experiment with the form of a sentence, shaping it as one might a thing of plastic or clay, molding it until the music between it and the sentences that come before and after it are as perfect as possible in cadence. (Ideally, you should revise a sentence until it surprises you, and is no longer recognizable as your first draft version of it, for in later drafts it will be clearer, sharper, richer.) If memory serves me, Hemingway revised the last page of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* 39 times (and for reasons know best only by himself, he wrote standing up). We come to understand that, unlike automatic writing or certain kinds of Zen art produced in a single stroke without one's brush or pen leaving paper, creating a work of art is generally a process of thinking and rethinking everything that appears in one's first draft.

One of my former editors at the *New York Times Book Review* put it this way: a masterpiece is a story that does *not* need to be rewritten. When we consider such a work, we find it difficulty to think of it being otherwise than it is, in all its parts and pieces, because they reinforce each other so well, creating a work that feels organic, whole. (To pull out a single passage would be like ripping an arm off a human body.)The reason for that is because the writer (or artist) is way ahead of the reader insofar as he or she has imaginatively and intellectually considered every possible variation on character and event, every possible word choice, and why the words finally selected are logically and necessarily the best words at this moment in the story.

In one of my writer's notebooks, I reminded myself that, "The beauty and basic soundness of craftsmanship (*techne*) is a form of truth. Its very well-made quality is truth. Shoddiness, slipshod work of inferior quality---reflecting errors, haste, and indifference---is the absence of truth, the denial of truth."

"Thinking well" when writing also means that the writer considers the impact, consequence or possible reaction readers might have for each and every word in his (or her) work, for every speech and action in a story. You must relentlessly ask questions about every decision you make and how it will be received or experienced. Is a statement accurate? Have you checked and double-checked every fact? Is a sentence, image or word in poor taste? None of this means that you censor yourself. (There is no way that a writer can be all things to all people or satisfy everyone. As Milan Kundera once said, only kitsch is art that has a "desire to please at any cost.") But it does mean that you take into account the possibility that you might unintentionally offend or hurt a reader by one of your decisions---and, if one is a moral writer, you choose *not* to do that. And it also means that after thinking about a decision hundreds of times, you decide to stick by it (if you love what's on the paper and feel it is right and proper) even if it ruffles a few feathers.

In every sense, then, writing *is* thinking. Thinking with certain tools specific to the storytelling process, but thinking nevertheless. And the rules of rigorous thinking (like logic) apply to storytelling as much as they do to expository writing or any form of speech or expression.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:51 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/writing-is-thinking.html

Friday, November 18, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON ON THE POLITICAL CARTOON OR IS IT ONLY FUNNY WHEN EVERYONE LAUGHS?

"Humor is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humor; for a subject which will not bear raillery is suspicious, and a jest which will not bear serious examination is false wit." Aristotle

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Why does a political cartoon ignite violence in many parts of the world? Is it the power of image over text or a combination of image and text? How does a good cartoon work (on the mind)? Are there issues of class at work when people become offended by a cartoon? Are political cartoons only for the educated?"

Think about this cartoon that I saw many years ago:

We see a young, black mother enter her son's bedroom. She's surprised because he's wet his bed sheets. The mother is Alberta King. The boy is little Martin Luther King Jr. By way of sheepishly explaining himself, he says, "I had a dream."

Did that cartoon idea offend you? If so, you should ask yourself why. Do you perhaps feel that there is something so "sacred" about King that a drawing about him bed-wetting as a little boy is offensive and in poor taste? Do you believe he never wet his bed sheets as a child? Personally, when I saw that cartoon, I laughed out loud and admired the cartoonist for his imagination. He took me by surprise with it. And I didn't feel in any way that the grandeur of Dr. King was diminished.

I would answer Ethelbert's question by saying that biting political cartoons are not so much for the educated as they are for people who are open-minded. People who are not afraid when their sacred cows are presented in a way that provokes laughter (which, by the way, is a healing experience, a liberating one). And we *all* have a sacred cow or two, don't we? Some idea we are fiercely attached to? One with which our sense of identity and self-worth is tied up to?

Early in my career as a cartoonist, I was criticized by some people for drawings about black people that were as free-wheeling and innocent as the one I described above, for in my late teens and early twenties I was irreverent, like most college students. (When I became a college professor, I had to wait until I left campus for that side of myself to show, but it still revealed itself in my fiction.) One drawing in *Black Humor* showed Africans crammed together in the hold of a slave ship, looking predictably miserable; then one daffy-looking captive suddenly says, "Say, let's have a sing-a-long." That drawing still ruffles the feathers of the sanctimonious, the tight-sphinctered, the political prudes, the people who feel there is only one way---one profile or meaning---for emotionally reacting to something.

Those people, in my view, were usually socially timid, even cowardly, and mired in what we later came to call political correctness (which is a twin for being religiously pious and "correct"), so this is not a question about "class." (And they certainly didn't mind when the ox was being gored for a political belief held by those they disagreed with.) They were also rather hypocritical,

because in private they would laugh at and enjoy such work (as we did the comedy records of Redd Foxx in the '60s, or those of Richard Pryor in the '70s), but disavow in public that they approved of or enjoyed it. In other words, their reaction to the drawing was, sadly, all about themselves. Their self-righteous selves. Their image of themselves.

Humor, then, is one of the antidotes for self-righteousness and pomposity. For taking oneself too seriously. But that, of course, makes people nervous. To have one's ideas or beliefs laughed at stings most people deeply. But that only means they are fundamentally insecure in their beliefs and ideas, their ideologies and cherished views of the world. Once a cartoonist or humorist recognizes that (think of Mark Twain or Will Rogers or George Carlin or Moms Mabley or Lenny Bruce), the temptation to burst their bubble of rigid belief in a drawing is just too tempting.

Why are cartoons, drawings and all visual art so powerful? The answer is simple: we *think* in terms of pictures, images. Visual art affects us on the most primal level of perceptual experience. Why do you think more people watch television and motion pictures and on-line videos than read books? Heck, even if one is illiterate, they can understand a picture.

I'm confident that no matter how calcified people become in their beliefs there will always be someone---a cartoonist, a comedian---somewhere in the room who will hold up those beliefs for a sardonic examination, saying what others are thinking but are too timid to say, and set everyone to laughing until their sides hurt and tears of mirth come streaming from their eyes. In their own small way, our cartoonists are liberators. They keep us honest. And we should thank them for doing that.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:16 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/charles-johnson-on-political-cartoon-or.html

Sunday, November 20, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON WRITES BACK TO FRANTZ FANON

FRANTZ FANON

E. Ethelbert Miller today offers us this quotation: "Come, then comrades; it would be as well to decide at once to change our ways. We must shake off the heavy darkness in which we were plunged, and leave it behind. The new day which is already at hand must find us firm, prudent, and resolute. We must leave our dreams and abandon our old beliefs and friendships from the time before life began. Let us waste no time in sterile litanies and nauseating mimicry. Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. Look at them today swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration. And yet it may be said that Europe has been successful in as much as everything that she has attempted has succeeded." Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth.*

As we draw near to the end of this E-Channel project, Ethelbert Miller has decided to add a stimulating new wrinkle to the questions he asks me. For five days, he plans to present me with a famous quote by a black intellectual and ask for my response. The first (above) is from Frantz Fanon, and I'm glad he selected this one. I haven't read *Wretched of the Earth* since the early 1970s, but I was at that time strongly influenced by this work, *Black Skin, White Masks,* and the phenomenological flavor of Fanon's investigations into the experience of black embodiment. Before I examine Fanon's quote, I'd like to start with a statement made by poet Jaswinder Bolina in his superb essay, "Writing Like a White Guy," which can be read in its entirety at this link:

Writing Like a White Guy by Jaswinder Bolina

"If the racial Other aspires to equal footing on the socioeconomic playing field," Bolina writes, "he is tasked with forcing his way out of the categorical cul-de-sac that his name and appearance otherwise squeeze him into. We call the process by which he does this 'assimilation.'

Though the Latin root here---shared with the word "similar"---implies that the process is one of becoming absorbed or incorporated, it is a process that relies first on the negation of one identity in order to adopt another. In this sense, assimilation is a destructive rather than constructive process. It isn't a come-as-you-are proposition, a simple matter of being integrated into the American milieu because there exists a standing invitation to do so. Rather, assimilation first requires refuting assumptions the culture makes about the immigrant based on race, and in this sense assimilation requires the erasure of one's preexisting cultural identity even though that identity wasn't contingent upon race in the first place."

I've written often that America is inconceivable without the contributions made by black Americans since the year 1619. We can take that issue off the table. But because America has for so long been a Eurocentric nation, and because the creation of so many of its cultural forms have been dominated by whites who ruthlessly exploited about seventy years of segregation to rig the game in their favor after the Civil War, another important question arises: How shall people of color live here? Assimilation was never an acceptable---or even intelligent---goal. I've seen research that says whites make up 17% of the people on this planet, with the remaining 83% being people of color. (Other research I've seen places the white population at 30%, but even with that larger percentage, people of color, globally, are far greater in number than whites.) Why would anyone wish to assimilate with only 17% or 30% of the world's population? Or as Malcolm X once put it, "Why do you want to integrate into a burning building?" Or, for that matter, become an "honorary white man"?

During the course of my life, I think I've shocked (and maybe even saddened) some of my white friends who simply assumed that because integration brought them together for the first time with black people in school and on jobs, that black Americans either (1) Wished to be like them, or (2) Wanted to do the various things white privilege allowed them to do. (That mistaken notion may well have been fueled by anti-segregation arguments used during the early Civil Rights Movement by some of our leaders who said blacks languished or suffered when separated from whites. In other words, they made an appeal to pity or sympathy, the logical fallacy known as *Argumentum ad Misericordiam.*) When I explained that, no, that wasn't the reason at all, their expression became sober and perhaps even a little bit hurt. The reason, to put it bluntly, was that I was there studying and working beside them only because I desired to support my family and build upon the positive and inspiring work of my black predecessors. (This is partly why in an earlier post I said that, looking back, I see the last sixty-three years of my life as being much like a tour of duty in a foreign land.) As individuals, we could be friends and colleagues, yes (that was my father's counsel to me when I was young), but that wasn't the motivation that carried me from my father's home to white schools and the workplace. No, I didn't want to culturally imitate their life-styles or join them in some of the dysteleological behaviors they seemed to enjoy. (Many were liberal or progressive, as we say today, and felt the need to be rebels because they had painful "issues" with their own parents, which I didn't have with mine, whom I simply wanted to honor, because I saw the dignified way they lived in the Jim Crow world as noble.) I didn't want to marry their sisters (even though I obviously have no problem with inter-racial marriage). Get drunk or do drugs. I didn't want to play or party. I didn't have any interest in conspicuous consumption. Or being sexually promiscuous in this culture, which is drenched every day through the media with the propaganda of sex and violence. Or the adolescent, infantilized aspects of American pop culture. Richard Wright addressed what I'm saying here in *American Hunger* when working as a dishwasher, peering up from the copy the *American*

Mercury he hides behind a newspaper, he observed white waitresses whose "lust for trash" was paralleled by similar desires for alcohol, cheap thrills and consumer goods in the black community. He wrote, "It seemed to me that for the Negro to try to save himself, he would have to forget himself and try to save a confused, materialistic nation from its own drift to self-destruction."

My only reason for living in America---staying in America---was to acquire as many useful skills as possible, contribute as a citizen to the professional fields I belonged to (and assist my colleagues and students of all backgrounds), and increase the happiness and well-being of my family. (As a friend of mine from Ghana said in the late 1960s, what he loved about America was that whatever you wanted to learn, there was someone here who could teach it to you.) In a word, my feeling was that I didn't need certain European and white American cultural formations because I had my own unique culture and history in America which, sadly, most of my white friends and associates were woefully uninformed about (that, of course, was damage or lack of knowledge caused by the era of segregation.) Something I felt I certainly didn't need to be involved with was the refuse or dross and culturally damaging ideas of European and American societies. To know Western intellectual history was necessary, yes, and even to know it better than the majority of my white kinsmen, because the West is where I live and work. But, as the old saying goes, I felt it wisest to be "*in* it but not *of* it." Early in *Middle Passage*, Rutherford Calhoun, a freeman, expresses this sense of himself when he speaks of how revolted he is by the thought of becoming a "gentleman of color," which he sees as being assimilation turning him into "the image of an Englishman, round of belly, balding, who'd been lightly brushed with brown watercolor or cinnamon." Yet, to a certain degree, when in Rome one must minimally do as Romans do. When in a foreign land (culturally) courtesy demands that one acquiesce to a degree to the customs, dress and etiquette of the host country. I would do that if living for extended periods in either the West or the East.

So what is my point? It is simply this: While black Americans are co-creators with whites of the nation we call America, and have been intimately involved (with good and bad results) with whites during the last 300 years, we---as black people---are wisest, in my humble opinion, when we recognize our situation to be very much like that of immigrants of color who come from countries that have in recent decades thrown off the yoke of colonialism, as we did slavery and segregation. Our survival strategies in the white West are quite similar to theirs. Indeed, I would say they must be identical to theirs. And the most important of these strategies, I would add, involves the principle of *Take the best and leave the rest.* And how shall we interpret "the best"? Malcolm X offered this test: Ask yourself, "Is this good for black people?"

Fanon lauds Europe when he says, "And yet it may be said that Europe has been successful in as much as everything that she has attempted has succeeded." He was right to make this remark at the time he made it. But we should define more clearly what Europe has been most successful at. After the Dark and Middle Ages, after the Enlightenment, Europeans made rapid, then exponential progress---relative to older nations and cultures---in science and technology (and the achievements of some older cultures, especially in the Middle East, made this possible), thereby giving Europeans the edge in manipulating the material world (Nature), and producing (again in terms of material life, though not always in terms of the life of the spirit) unprecedented levels of wealth and prosperity. Historically, science and technology as we know them today are products developed since the 16th century to a degree of refinement within Western cultures. But the

beauty of science and technology is that they are not inextricably bound to Western cultures and religions. India has its version of M.I.T. That nation and China now surpass America in the production of engineers; America's IT industry increasingly relies on scientists, technicians, and engineers from non-Western countries where STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and math) are emphasized. (I recently had the occasion of visiting a California school and seeing a meeting of its Honors Math Club---all the students were Asians, with about three being Caucasians in a group that filled a small auditorium.) Even as I write these words the Chinese are making progress toward developing their own space station. China, India, Pakistan (and Iran, according to recent reports) have developed nuclear technology within their own cultural matrixes. The material standards of living are rising in those nations. As we progress deeper into the 21st century, as President Obama works to link America's future to the no longer sleeping giants of Asia, we can say, I believe, that what we call modernity is no longer the monopoly of the white West. But for people of color world-wide this must be a qualified and critical modernity, one in which cultural or racial assimilation is no longer a conversation we need to have; one where we examine the cultural and scientific successes of the white Western world for the last 2,500 years, but also its errors and failures, and resolve not to repeat them. A century in which we, as people of color, *take the best and leave the rest.*

That is my response to the quotation by Fanon.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 1:37 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/11/charles-johnson-writes-back-to-frantz.html