



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)
Issue: Vol. 1; No. 11; November 2020 pp. 35-37
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)
Website: www.jlahnet.com
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com
Doi: 10.48150/jlah.v1no11.2020.a3

Non-Linear Waterfowl: Chaos

Skip Eisiminger

I. “When alphabetizing his kitchen wares,
Wayne put the poisons next to the pears.” —*The Wordspinner*

As an English professor, I did not have a high tolerance for chaos, but neither was I a “clean-desk man” because there was no point in putting away books and files I’d be needing later the same day, week, or month. To the point, my desk dictionary lay open for forty years. Today, it still lies open, unabridged beside my recliner. While the popularity of “tangle porn” mystifies me, I’m fine with a “lawn” of fescue, centipede, Bermuda, clover, and some noxious green weeds. If it’s mown, it’s fine. I loved building sandcastles with our children, but I hated to see the tide wash over them. I love building block castles with the grandchildren, but I do not share their glee when they knock them over.

I had colleagues that had what I called “mulch” covering their desks, but when I asked one of them about a memorandum I’d misplaced, he dived into the pile and found his copy within seconds. Then there was the mulcher who found a twelve-year-old, unopened, first-class letter when she moved from one floor to another. When I moved into a larger office after a colleague retired, I had to borrow the custodian’s broom to reach all the leaves and assorted detritus that had fallen behind the desk and bookshelves. His tolerance for chaos was clearly greater than mine.

For a nearly a decade, “Thursday, 9 PM” meant *Seinfeld* to my wife and me. Netflix and binge watching have damaged that house of cards for many, but not us, the last two Americans not subscribed to Netflix. On Sundays at 7PM, for example, that Aristo stopwatch still announces it’s time for *60 Minutes*, and Sunday at 9:30 AM, that piccolo trumpet still announces it’s *Sunday Morning*. Without the scaffolding of the evening newscasts, Saturday Night Live, and the occasional feature film at times we have agreed are appropriate, I’m afraid I’d waste even more time in front of the computer. Without the ninety minutes I spend with the television most days when my eyes are too tired to read or write, I’m sure I’d feel chaos was gaining the upper hand.

The first interview I ever gave was on WEPR, Clemson’s NPR affiliate. The day before the broadcast, the interviewer and I transcribed nearly every word of our ten-minute segment. But after we’d listened to the tape, we were appalled at how stiff and rehearsed it sounded. We then put our scripts aside and winged it. Despite dozens of “uhs” and reams of “dead air,” we agreed this was “much better” because most people don’t speak in the polished paragraphs of our initial run. Given the Second Law of Thermodynamics’ mandate that everywhirling electron must eventually exhaust itself, nature seldom manages a wrap on the first take, but there are pockets of order, thanks to the light and energy drawn from the sun, that keep hearts beating and sap rising. Given that it took *homo sapiens* four million years to leave this planet and explore the moon, given another four million, we may be able to move into one of those other universes where the Second Law has been revoked.

II. “If I cannot police the universes,
at least I can tidy my humble verses.” —*The Wordspinner*

When it comes to performing brain surgery, paying one’s income taxes, or writing a haiku, an orderly progression is essential. I’m sorry, but two lines do not make a haiku, nor do four. However, after the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, is there anyone who still believes in an overarching divine order? In case you’re unfamiliar, an estimated 50,000 people, most of whom were in church, were killed when an earthquake collapsed many of the city’s churches and homes, caused a massive fire, and then finished off the few survivors with a tsunami that raced up the Tagus estuary. Earth, it seems, re-orders and relieves the stresses it’s under with no respect for humans or their property.

Having grown accustomed to the indifference of nature, humans have often sought refuge in some artificial order. The Shakers, for example, eliminated ugly cow paths across their lawns, getting up on the wrong side of the bed, and the difficulty of sweeping around dozens of chairs after a communal meal. In their place they outlawed diagonal shortcuts, rising on the left side of the bed, and leaving chairs, when not in use, unhung from the dining-room wall pegs. But they also eliminated sex. When there were plenty of Civil War orphans to keep the Shaker industries humming, all was well, but the last census revealed there were three Shakers left.

Along these lines, a self-directed acquaintance convinced himself that, like a gem cutter with a raw diamond in hand, nature's order could be improved upon. One of his DIY projects involved buying a Christmas tree on the first of every December, taking it home, and carefully sawing off every branch. He then bored holes in the naked trunk at regular intervals and returned the branches to the places and angles where he felt nature *should* have grown them. But by Christmas, only a few brown needles were left attached to the tree.

Voltaire in the guise of Candide, after suffering hardships only a novelist could imagine, concluded that humanity's best option is to cultivate its gardens, but he didn't say the rows had to be string-drawn. But gardens don't organize themselves any more than the START treaty, NATO, and the UN did.

III. "Takes a lot of folks to fill up the freeway, and some of them you'd best give some leeway." —*The Wordspinner*

One study found that 35% of a large office's time was spent looking for misfiled files. Another found that 25% of American two-car garages have no room for the cars they were designed to house. And another influential study found that after one window was broken in an urban neighborhood, there were soon several more if the first wasn't quickly repaired. When one abandoned car turned up, more turned up if the first wasn't quickly hauled away. One New Jersey town took the "broken-window-abandoned-car theory" so seriously, it hired a person to issue fines to any homeowner whose grass height exceeded ten inches. In a similar fashion, prior to 1995 when the law was repealed, the UK mandated orderly bus lines.

Disorder often multiplies like compound interest. In 1955, my father spent a week of R&R in Japan after his service in the Korean War. Determined to find a friend living in suburban Tokyo (population sixteen million at the time), Dad bought a city map, rented a car, but was stymied in his search for his phoneless friend whose street address he had. It seems that the city assigned street numbers in the order in which the building permits were issued. Thus 101 North Street might be in one part of a town, and 102 North Street might be miles away because its permit was issued the day after 101's. With Tokyo's population now upwards of thirty-seven million, the problem is compounding. How ambulances, taxis, and fire trucks negotiate this rabbit warren is unknown, though in recent years telephones and computers have surely helped.

St. Augustine wrote that "an unregulated mind is its own punishment," to which I would add "uninformed" because as Alexander Pope observed, "a little learning is a dangerous thing." Neither Pope nor the fifth-century saint knew anything about germ theory, but had they known, they might have warned people, as public health officials do today, not to be overly sanitary or unsanitary because children raised in either environment are more vulnerable to disease. The right amount of dirt under the fingernails and behind the ears is just what a small body needs to immunize itself against the subtle microbes it must soon face.

IV. "Dad served a hitch in France in '44— sixty years later he still loves that war." —*The Wordspinner*

In one episode of *Seinfeld*, Elaine Benes, a New York publisher's assistant, tells a visiting Russian author that Tolstoy's original title for *War and Peace* was *War—What Is It Good For?* Her employer, who is riding in the car, is horrified at Elaine's effrontery, but it is an interesting question. Here's a short list of answers:

- From Socrates to Sartre, wars have given us new philosophies to make sense of the chaos wars have left us.
- Many wars have given us novelists like Hemingway and poets like Wilfred Owen to help us remember what the carnage felt like.
- The American Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 sealed our independence from England.
- Land-grab that it was, the Mexican War led ten new states, including Texas and California, to join the union.

- The American Civil War ended slavery and led directly to the creation of the American Red Cross.
- WWI gave us the League of Nations for twenty-six years.
- WWII ended the Great Depression, led to the full recognition of a woman's worth in the workplace, and curbed racism in the military.
- WWII also produced the United Nations which gave us the World Court and the World Health Organization.
- In 1942, there were four free countries in Europe. Relatively soon after WWII, most Europeans lived in liberal democracies for the first time in recorded history. Para. Timothy Garton Ash
- The Korean War freed half of that peninsula to become an economic powerhouse in a few decades.
- The Cold War gave us the START and SALT treaties.

Though many dreamed, no one knew for certain any of these results going into war, but in hindsight, it's clear that much good came out of them.

V. "Anarchy is ninety pounds of loose straw,
but twined and stacked, it makes its own law." —*The Wordspinner*

In the beginning, a chaotically expanding universe gradually organized itself into stars, planets, the human brain, atomic weapons, the United Nations, and the Marshall Plan. Remarkably, order insisted on having its way even as entropy was raising its ugly head. But just as loose sand is blown haphazardly across the Sahara rounding the grains' edges, the "dune armies" roll across the land without losing their shape. Racing up and down across the oceans, wildly contrasting air currents often form tightly organized vortices with becalmed eyes. But total order is as impossible to maintain as total disorder. Nature rebuilds and reloads just as its occupants do after a war.

The seventeenth-century English Cavalier poet Robert Herrick observed that there's some "delight in disorder," but for centuries, children have been told to dress neatly and make their beds. We now know that the heat and humidity of a recently occupied bed is precisely the environment pernicious organisms thrive in.

But to be sure, disorder and asymmetry like wars have uses of their own. As every male knows, scrotal asymmetry prevents testicular bruising, and no respectable surgeon is going to "correct" that. To pursue such a "correction" is as dangerous and senseless as the Nazi goal of turning brown-eyed Germans blue.

We reward order, but peacetime disorder like tarnished belt buckles and unshined boots, make troops less visible to the enemy. The best dressed army, as the red-coated and brass-buckled British discovered at Saratoga, usually loses.

As I considered writing this essay, I counted 231 note cards that I'd randomly filed at "Order/Chaos" over the last forty years. Having written an essay fetishizing "order" three years ago, I read through my cards and highlighted seventy-five that focused on "chaos." Reading through these, I then typed up fifty-four summaries, printed them, cut them out, and placed them on a thin piece of plywood where as I shuffled them about, I started to see connections I'd never noticed before. As this essay draws to a close, I see that I've only used twenty-seven of them. Like I said, everything is running down, but often that's where order is found. It's like panning for gold in a cold, muddy stream.