

Last issue closed with much too compact a statement on a much too complicated set of phenomena for brief treatment. However, I am not yet ready to attempt a remedy, so instead of talking about Zen, perhaps I shd talk about chalk.

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I (I being Dave Van Arnam of 1730 Harrison Ave, Apt 353, Bronx, NY 10453) have had a thing of sorts running in my mind on the subject of chalk since about as far back as I can remember. Lest close friends hasten to search out the phone numbers of reputable alienists, I shall attempt to explain.

When I was a boy somewhere between the age of five and ten, we lived in Mansfield, Ohio, and my father was an English teacher at the senior high school there, not many blocks from where we lived. 'Somewhen,' perhaps, might be a better term; very well, somewhen between the age of five and ten I was catechizing my father on what an English teacher actually did.

One thing instantly struck me; the concept of 'essay.' I pursued the topic, and my father said that it simply meant that he might assign a topic, such as 'chalk,' and the class wd write papers on that subject.

I was mystified.

I knew about chalk, of course; not only was it used in school to make hideous sounds on blackboards, but it came from ancient deposits of tiny shellfish aeons in the past. I knew about that because I was mad for books on cavemen and dinosaurs and read dozens upon dozens of books on such topics.

And learned about such things as chalk. Mostly rather dull things.

I wanted my father to tell me how anyone cd write anything about chalk apart from telling hcw it sounded on blackboard and that it came from suchandsuch geological activity. My father tried to explain, but I wasn't, it seems, precocious enough; I was only vaguely lugged.

Over the years I contemplated the subject from time to time, and wondered if the day might come when I cd handle it. Lengthy paragraphs spun themselves out in my mind to no purpose, as I struggled to understand how someone cd write literately about something with no intrinsically interesting aspects.

Was it, perhaps, the feel of chalk held in the hand? The smoothness of it against the fingertips, the dustiness of it afterwards, unpleasantly dry (tho I'm sure I didn't think it so as a child)? But I had asked my father that, at the time he first mentioned the topic -- and he had smiled, I suppose, and said that wasn't it.

Perhaps, then, one would ponder the implicit history of the millions of tiny lifes whose shells, empty husks, were pressed together in time and under the weight of ages, to form a new subheading in the long lists of substances...but my father had shaken his head at that also.

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It was not possible to come to a conclusion on the subject; as I ran, over and over again through the years, thru the same few possibilities, a kind of quiet frustration grew. I was not in the least obsessed with the topic, but, unresolved as it was, it remained a constant, insoluble, knotted mystery at the back of my memory.

Someone out there is sure to be saying -- if anyone remains -- "Why didn't the nit ever ask his father again?"

I don't know why, except that I suppose I thot it wd be nice if I cd work the problem out eventually. I didn't know I'd still be working on it more than twenty years later...

In my college days I pondered The Topic, and devised in my mind brilliant verbal structures that, with their glittering persuasion, were intended to keep from the potential reader the truth that I did not know what I was writing about; but instinctively I barred this course of action, and never set a word down.

I suppose I've put enough effort -- casual effort to be sure -- into it by now to turn the thing into a Broadway musical.

I mean, HAIR has broken the ice; now maybe it's time for CHALK.

Well, and the end result invariably remained the same: frustration, complete and without respite. Wars came and wars went; and still in the back of my mind, instead of a lightbulb, rested the word 'chalk' and the image of a small white solid cylinder. It was almost enough to make me wonder if it were in a similar manner that great religions came to their birthing -- when the Founder in a flash of inspiration sees at last an Answer, and rushes out instanter to proclaim it to the world. Fortunately for theology, to date I have been seized with no overwhelming urge to found a religion based on chalk; the obstacles to converting others wd be formidable, it being difficult to identify with plain unmarked cylinders of chalk either emotionally or spiritually (unless, of course, there shd happen to be a substantial number of people for whom such is a valid description of their self-image...).

Instead I have let the years drift by my conundrum, accumulating other treasures of understanding as a poor substitute, solving vast congeries of intricate problems with relative ease, and yet all along being fully aware that I was fudging a Basic. And Fudging Basics is Insincere.

At length I wrote a Great American Novel and proved to myself I was a writer, and then I began doing FIRST DRAFT four years ago, and then I started selling books.

And finally my old question returned to me after years of being silted over with other, newer, gaudier, more soluble mysteries, and I said to myself that, whether or not I had in fact solved the damned thing, I was going to write about it anyway, and, having dealt with it, I then presumably cd settle back, relax, and watch the obsequies as my triumphant intellect at last symbolically crushed that mystery forever and laid it to rest...

But I don't think it will work. Historical footnote: Pay no attention to the publication # on the previous page; this is Undecided Publication #302, and I am hoping you are the sane... -- dgv