

...but it's a surprise

*Stories And More From A New American
Philosophy*

John Henry

This is a work of fiction, non-fiction, AND sometimes questionable memory. I have done my best to only use real names if and when necessary to the passage at hand, and only of people who would be publicly known. Beyond then, when necessary to identify anyone by name for narrative purposes I have changed their name to avoid being identified in real life. Please review the section “Prefatory Matters” for further commentary which may constitute an extension of this legal disclaimer.

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DEDICATION

For everyone who made it this far, and those who didn't.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would be impossible to explore even half of the people to whom I owe gratitude from my journeys over the years. To really even start naming names would be to hurt other folks' feelings, so I'm going to mostly avoid that by saying I don't forget a debt I owe, of gratitude or anything else, and whether I have or ever will repay it directly in kind, every one of you help keep me both inspired to, and literally capable of, living in a way that lets me repay it forward in the ways that are available to me. Thank you, literally, for my life.

Thank you to my daughter for always, always being my reason to live, and genuinely my pride and joy.

Thank you, the reader, for reading.

If you've purchased, thank you for that as well.

Prefatory Matters

The sharp-eyed reader will immediately catch the title of this prologue as being the same as the first chapter of Stephen King's *The Shining*.

This is not accidental in any way, although I'm by no means an "officious little prick." Rather it's a sort of shout-out to that book and that author because *The Shining* is the first "adult" sort of book I read, when I was 9 or had just turned ten. I know it was around that time because it was the original tie-in version for the movie, with the bright yellow cover, and my folks bought it new – they were both voracious readers, as am I to this moment. A bit of quick research says the movie was released in June of '80, I was born in August of '70, QED.

By that point I had already been reading things like "The Book of Lists" and some advanced young adult stuff, so I was ready for it. And I was a little bookworm so I loved looking up the words I didn't know. But that's getting off-track. You'll find these little subreferences scattered everywhere throughout my work.

Housekeeping

Before I get further into the book than someone can see while previewing it, I want to tell you what this book is, and do some legal housekeeping in the process.

In this book – which isn't even complete as of this writing – I will reference certain events in my life that involved other people. In every case I've changed names – n.b. just because I used an initial doesn't mean I didn't also change that – and done my best to fully obfuscate the identity of private citizens. Even if it's nothing particularly heinous, I just don't have the right to drag people in like that.

I've had a pretty unlikely life, which I'll go into later, but it includes meeting and hanging out with some "famous people." I'm just not a name-dropper; if there's not a very specific reason to mention someone by name, I won't. "A drummer for a popular pop-metal band from the 70's and 80's" should be enough, for instance, or "one of the wrestlers."

Nothing in this book is intended to be hurtful, unless it's frankly obvious. There are some people I do not like who are public figures, like our current "president" Mr. Trump, and I'm not going to spare them my ire. But stuff like personal grudges or insider "dirt" isn't a thing I do, and I've gone to great lengths to avoid it.

Finally, I often make references to the artifacts of the cultures that have influenced me, including song lyrics, passages from books, and so forth. I assume these to be well-known enough by reference without extensive bibliography, and I believe my use of them falls inside the legally acceptable definitions of "influence" rather than "plagiarism" or "infringement."

I certainly mean no disrespect toward the originators or popularizers of these phrases, I believe my use in no way violates the letter or spirit of intellectual copyright law, and the use of anyone's real name, identifiable brand, legally trademarked word or phrase, etc. is not intended in any way to constitute an endorsement by the person or owner of the brand or phrase.

If you disagree, it's probably much more productive to reach out to me like a human being and we'll resolve it, rather than trying to throw a battalion of suits at me because I forgot to say something in this section, or you believe I shouldn't be allowed to use it at all. Find me through the website or social media and we'll chat about it.

Hopefully that'll satisfy the lawyers.

What Is It?

So what *is* this book? It's a bunch of things I've written, from examinations of social and political issues to talking about my favorite artists and writers, you might even find a little poetry or some song lyrics before I'm done.

It's not a fiction book, at least not on purpose, although I'll confess early on to having a poor memory and making minor adjustments to real stories for the sake of fudging identities or making time pass faster, but I'm not changing important facts or information that would change any realities, and in matters of fact that can be checked, I've done my best to check them with reliable sources.

Mostly, it's essays and stories and analyses and thoughts about a lot of "big" things, from ongoing political and social events to personal

memories of things I've done and people I've talked with and the conversations we've had or the events surrounding them, ruminations on various and sundry topics. I'll often touch on topics that have been relevant in my life like poverty, mental illness, politics, economics, but also music, comedy, acting, directing. My folks and my family for better or worse.

All in the context of doing my best to communicate my understanding of "this world of ours," its current condition, and the best ways I can see to improve it on every level, whether that's individuals and their individual behavior and thinking, or large groups of nations or every single one of us.

I want to describe the world to you as I see it, and hope that in doing so I can add something positive to the world as you experience it, or help to subtract something negative from it. That's really what it's about. If you're someone browsing unknown authors, I hope this information gives you reason to want to read more. If you want to know more about who I am, or think I am, to be writing anything, let alone presuming anyone should by a copy of it, I'm going to devote the first couple of chapters to that, since this is my first book. For the condensed version...

Who Am I?

I'll get into more of the biographical storytelling in the book, in fact the first couple of chapters will be straight up biography, but I feel like it's super-important to say that this book isn't intended to be a biography or "about me." It's about everything, and I'm writing it and my experiences inform my perspective, and I may share those experiences with you by way of explaining or describing my perspective (or illustrating some manifest point of fact or reality that just plain isn't about perspective).

Over the course of things, I'm going to talk about my feelings and thoughts about various issues and events and subjects, as well as things that are objectively verifiable as facts and reality. It's a walk through the mindgarden of a fifty year old multi-ethnic guy who passes for white in the year 2020 in the United States of America. This isn't intended to be dry and academic; I want you to laugh and think and maybe even cry a little.

I'm going to generally trust you, the reader, to be able to tell the

difference between a dry fact about say, the population of Ohio in 1983, and my subjective thoughts about how Ringo Starr plays drums. If you've got specific questions, you're always welcome to contact me via my website at johnhenry.us, my Facebook address is [fb.me/JohnHenryUS](https://www.facebook.com/JohnHenryUS), and my Twitter is [@JohnHenry_US](https://twitter.com/JohnHenry_US).

The single-para bio: Born 1970 in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Musician – primarily drums but I play guitar and sing a little as well, and can poke around a bit on a few other things. Actor. Performer in general. Also director, producer, editor, and writer of multimedia in text, audio, and video since well before it became the big business it is now, machinist, taxi driver, database developer, web developer, web designer, I can do sales *when I genuinely believe in the product*, which means not often enough to make a living at it in most cases. Writer/proto-blogger/low-tier (but rising) internet “brand,” political activist, single dad of a daughter in her thirties at the time of this writing. Went to college at age forty about ten years ago and completed major and minor coursework for a BA in Communication with a political science minor, but I still have about a year's worth of electives before I can finish after having had to drop out for financial reasons.

I was born and raised a mixed-race-but-mostly-white kid in the 70's. I didn't find out until I was in my mid-thirties that one of those races was African-American, so I grew up believing I was basically half Dutch, one quarter Cherokee, and one quarter Choctaw. Over time, we've come to understand that the truth is more complex. The serious “run the numbers” truth is impossible to calculate, really, but this isn't the time to go into it.

That's my “ethnic background,” so you may now make some assumptions which will probably end up being broken later in the book, and maybe some that won't.

I was what they called at the time a “gifted child,” and it has shaped my life in many ways, some good and some bad. The details aren't that important here; let's just say I was born with about a brain and a half, as those things are measured and to the extent they truly can be, by any objective standard, and move on.

I try to keep my facts straight, and to be honest with myself and with you when I lack information or may not know all I should to fully validate my opinion about something. I try to be as open and

straightforward as I can in every instance where I'm short on objectively verifiable facts, or those sufficiently reported by reliable sources to be trusted as such by a reasonably proficient critical thinker.

Generally my humor tends to be pretty dry, but I'm nowhere near above a basic dick joke in the right time and place either. I use "adult language" or "four letter words" or however you choose to think of it in my writing and speaking and so forth. I think and talk and write about things that aren't always easy to read about, or that may provoke strong opinion. If you're the type who turns your nose up at that because you prefer more highbrow stuff like Shakespeare, I'll remind you that Shakespeare is about 60% dick jokes and we'll just move on again...

Final Forethoughts

This is getting to be the book instead of the preface, so I'm going to move on now and let you explore the rest of the thing. Thanks for reading, and thanks for supporting my work by buying the book or being a contributing member at my website through johnhenry.us, or a Patreon patron.

I maintain the Patreon because I know there are people who prefer that extra layer of known public broadly identifiable corporations when their money's involved, or because they support a lot of different things and Patreon is a great tool for that kind of many-tentacled philanthropy. If you choose instead to become a direct contributor, the prices are a little lower that way, as comp for the loss of the cost of the Patroen processing.

If you're reading this for free somehow, maybe you got it as a gift, thanks for taking the time to do that, and for everyone involved I truly hope that, at the last page, you feel like it was worth it. I create a LOT of other stuff on many platforms including YouTube, social media live-streaming, and more – even a song or two – and I hope you enjoy exploring it, and I appreciate you for knowing that what I do is work worth supporting.

Best,
John Henry
Kalamazoo, MI
October, 2020

Pleased To Meet You, Hope You Guess My Name...

I realize that with a name like John Henry, nearly anyone is going to go “that can’t be his real name.”

It is. My “real” last name is DeJong, but when I moved to North Carolina in 1993 and went to work in my dad’s machine shop, the guys in the shop started calling me “John Henry” to distinguish me from him, as his name was also John but with no middle name at all. Henry is my middle name, and I come by it honestly as well, as I’ll describe in more detail further on. So it was legit, and it rolled off the tongue, and I loved how well the association of the American (Semi-) Legend John Henry fit my personality naturally, and I was really getting bored with explaining to people either how to spell or pronounce my last name, properly. (You can see it above; it’s pronounced “Dee Young.”)

As I’m hoping this book reaches more people than my social media and website recently have been – a few thousand per week – and many of you folks who already know me from those or other media have never really heard my story all at once, front to back, I thought I’d open

my first book with some background and biography.

I'm not going to get super in-depth here per se, as I said in the prologue (you *did* read the prologue, didn't you?). Too much of that will take flavor and fun out of some of the other stuff later. But I do want to take a couple of chapters to properly introduce myself and give you some idea of why I think I should write books and why I think you not only should but will read and enjoy and appreciate them.

That said, let's go ahead and give you the biography to the extent we're going to, and get this show on the road.

At the time of this writing – October of 2020 - I'm a single fifty year old multi-ethnic cisgendered heterosexual man who was born and raised in an industrial midwestern suburb (Portage, Michigan) of a very small industrial city – just big enough to not quite feel right with “town” either – called Kalamazoo in the 70's and 80's. I'm a musician, or at least that's how I think of myself. Primarily I play drums, which I started in 1978 at age 8, but I also play guitar and sing a little, and noodle around on a few other things when I get the chance. I'm also a good but not great “producer,” because I don't feel like I'm good enough to dare call myself an engineer. But I can make a listenable demo tape and I've got a couple of little covers up on YouTube, and over the years – mostly in the pre- and early internet days – I've had some minor successes in little local and getting-to-regional bands, but never enough to be a self-sustaining generator of income on a reliable basis.

I also am a political activist, writer, and analyst. My first real activism was when I was still a kid – around that same time, late 1970's or 1980 because I was definitely nine – I helped plant seagrass and do other non-industrial things to help set up the very first “version” of the Lake Michigan Maritime Museum in South Haven, Michigan. Even got my picture on the front of the Tribune; unfortunately I don't have the resources at present to drive out there and look through their morgue. Hopefully it won't be too many more books down the road before I can do more of that sort of thing for you.

In this vein, I've remained an activist, to varying degrees, all my life. I've participated in marches and shows and various activities for cannabis legalization, universal health care, black lives matter, local anti-discrimination ordinances, women's rights, and other socially aware activities over the years, and am just generally kind of subversive.

On the political compass, I usually fall way down in the left libertarian corner, slightly more “left” than “libertarian” usually, but always with both no more than a line or two on the grid in either direction from that lower left corner. That said, I am in some ways a small-r republican and a small-c conservative, which is why I’m not off the grid entirely as a leftist or a libertarian.

I should note early on that I consider there to be a number of critical and distinct differences between all the small-first-letter ideological labels, and their capital letter counterparts in any particular part of the world. A libertarian and a “Libertarian™” are two different – very different – things. “Republican” or “conservative” perspectives and ideology are often nearly unrecognizable in their “brands” here in the us. People think of Donald Trump as “conservative,” for instance, but he’s nothing of the sort; no conservative would have even considered the radical changes Trump has implemented across the board. The idea of “republican” isn’t Ronald Reagan or some guy in a sheet burning crosses in people’s yards; a republican simply does not place their full democratic faith in the wisdom of the masses, and believes that indirect democracy executed by individuals selected through direct democratic processes, and the appointees of those individuals, is a preferable model.

As it happens I agree with that model, upon which the US government is based. Direct democracy gets you mob rule, what Jefferson warned of as the “tyranny of the majority,” which we saw manifest in the many state constitutional amendments attempting to ban gay marriage in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Accountability in a direct democracy also becomes difficult, and efficiency dies. That’s not to say that people shouldn’t have a direct voice in their government; that’s unacceptable from a standpoint of human rights.

So from a mechanical standpoint I haven’t been able to come up with a more effective system than that constructed by the “founding fathers” of the United States, which is a democratic republic. However, that system also has major flaws and breaks, some of which we’ll address later in the book.

From an ideological standpoint, I believe government is not a separate entity from but a functioning expression of the will of the governed, in a democratic system that’s functioning properly. The role of that government, properly, is to resolve disputes through both litigation

and legislation. In a capitalist society, part of that function includes acting as the “conscience” of business, because business has only one ethic and that is profit. A critical function of government is to stand as the people’s representative to say no, you can’t permanently poison this wetland or cause new seismic activity or shovel so much junk in the air that we, the people, can no longer breathe. Without the mitigation that comes from that function of government, short-term interests of individuals take precedence over the best interests of both the long term and of the community at large, and sustainability is reduced or impossible as a result.

I also believe it’s absolutely critical to think of government not as a separate entity from but a tool of the people. The hammer in your hand can hurt you, but not with *intent*. Government is a tool, not an entity, and it absolutely can hurt you...but whether it does so purposefully is a function of those controlling it, not of “government” itself. But that’s my political “affiliation” in a nutshell – a small-r republican small-l libertarian leftist. Which makes me simultaneous a very strange bird in US political discourse, and a member of the largest US ideological group.

I’m a single dad, my daughter is currently in her early thirties. She was born when I was 18. Her story is her own to tell, and she’s always, always the last light in my life. We were super close when she was younger, at various point, and as one tends to do we’ve drifted apart as she’s become an adult but we still love each other and she’s still the first and last reason I get out of bed every day.

She’ll cross paths with us here and there over the course of storytelling, but I’m really super-sensitive to not speaking for her, especially when she’s not around. Our relationship has been up and down over the years, as any between a dad and his only child will, but we love each other and don’t hate each other and she’s a damned fine human being and I’m proud of her. Like I’ve mentioned previously I’ve always had something of a social conscience, but she’s the reason I’ve held on to it and kept going, sometimes in the face of impossible odds.

I want to talk about my ethnic background a minute and then we’ll do a chapter of the *story* of my life and world, before we get into the meat of the thing. My dad was born to Dutch parents who had Dutch parents,

in The Hague, Netherlands, in 1943. He moved here in late 1947 with his family, so on that side of the family I'm white, and first-generation American born.

My mom's side is where it gets complicated. Her mom, we don't have a great deal of reliable information about, but we have it to understand she was half Cherokee, and half Choctaw (long, long before that country song came out!), but not tribally registered.

My mom's dad is where things get interesting because I found out when I was in my mid-thirties that rather than the similar Cherokee-Choctaw background he claimed, he was mostly Caddoh and African-American. He was listed as "black" on his birth certificates and early census records, but we thought it was a mistake. Turns out a gentleman by the name of Billy D. Higgins, who works at the University of Arkansas, did a bunch of research on that part of the family and published it in a book titled "A Stranger And A Sojourner," which wouldn't be a bad description of me either.

That book details the life of Peter Caulder, who was black, and his family, a subset of which ends at Henry Elbert Caulder, and that's where the "Henry" in "John Henry" comes from. Born and raised in South Carolina, Peter eventually joined the US Army and served for fourteen years, helping to construct the original Fort Smith, Arkansas, before deserting for romance on the frontier.

Ultimately this led to Peter and his friend, David Hall, and their families establishing a freehold in north-central Arkansas in the early-to-mid 19th century, and eventually there was a small black community there of a few score, a few thousand acres of land, and so forth. Ultimately the state of Arkansas declared unilaterally that any black person in that state was either property or a criminal, so Peter and his – my! – family picked up and moved to eastern Missouri, where my great, great grandfather David married Matilda Cato, a Caddo woman who may have also been part black. Their son, William Henry, was my grandfather's dad, and was dead long before I was born.

As one might expect, this discovery brought new perspectives on a number of issues related to ethnicity and American history and ideas like reparations, some of which I'll discuss later in this book.

As a matter of day to day life, I'm a fifty-year-old white-ish looking long-haired musician type. If you saw me, you'd probably assume

I ride a motorcycle, and you might assume off the bat that I'm a musician. I'm about six feet tall depending on how I stand, and generally weigh around 220-250 pounds (it varies quite a bit). I'm right-handed, my eyes are hazel, my favorite color is royal blue, and that's about it for me as a human.

When you do all the math as best you can, you end up with half-Dutch, 1/8 Cherokee, 1/8 Choctaw, around 3/16 black of uncertain ultimate extraction, and around 1/16 of who knows, some German and Irish for sure, and probably a little of other stuff.

Now that you know a little about *what* I am, let's tell you the story of *who* I am...

[This is a preview of John Henry's first book, "...But It's A Surprise," available soon in print and electronic form wherever finer literature is sold, and the chapter which follows in the book is not the content that follows here.]

Hard Times

I've come to the conclusion that much of the shame and stigma around erectile dysfunction is a function of drug marketers.

(We're gonna talk about sex now. Penises, and attitudes about them, in this particular chapter. I'm writing from what we now call a "cis-het" perspective – I'm a straight man who presents himself to the world as a straight man. Consequently, my writing reflects that perspective, but there's nothing I'm going to say here that isn't just as true of male homosexual relationships, perhaps twice so. That said if you're lesbian this will probably be a pretty boring chapter.)

Being the current end result of thousands of years of mostly patriarchal cultures, we here in the US think a great deal about penises. How they work, what they look like, what size they are, and so forth. Because men write the history books – or they did until the last couple hundred years at least – we're fill up to the brim with tales of bravery and derring-do, most of which come down to euphemisms for virility – the ability to reproduce, and also the ability to convince others to attempt reproduction with you.

Since much of the knowledge and literature about sex is written from the male point of view, we've come to think about it as an event with a clear finishing point: the male orgasm. And I'm certainly not going to disparage the male orgasm. However, it seems to me that a result of this con-old programming rooted in basic reproductive realities that we didn't always have the language and science to describe until now, we've robbed ourselves of much of the pleasures of sexual intimacy.

It's also worth noting in fairness that, if one views sex as simply

a mechanism by which to create more people, and pleasure or romance simply aren't a factor, then yeah, the male orgasm is the necessary step to a "completed" coition. Fair enough.

With churches playing the "be fruitful and multiply" card at every turn (so they could expand their power), ideas like masturbation being "sinful" rose up. Then we have the lovely invention of "Onanism," that is – biblically speaking – to "spill your seed on the ground," which by making it a sin starts very quickly to sound like a creepy line from old men to coerce young women into accepting penises inside them against their immediate will.

In fact a lot of this stuff sounds that way, but what I really want to talk about here is this notion, here in the modern world, that "intimacy" must involve a male orgasm, or even an erect penis.

Non-orgasmic sexual intimacy is a thing, too, you see. Women know about this – they call it "sex," usually. Touching and exploring and feeling physical and emotional pleasure don't require men to have orgasms, and I feel like more men should be okay with that. Even if you do have an erection, for that matter even if your given day's pleasure includes penetrative sex, and you don't have an orgasm, that's not a negative reflection on you or your partner.

This is the part I want to say loudly: a failure to achieve male orgasm is not necessarily "bad sex." I don't want to write a how-to manual or devolve into graphic detail, but there's plenty of happiness and intimacy to be found in all manner of activity that does not necessarily require, or even seek to achieve, male orgasm. Older men may find that they don't produce as much semen and the physiological drive to empty things out isn't as urgent – "blue balls" are mostly the pain of a younger fellow. Exploring and learning each other, holding each other and simply enjoying the intimacy of that, and other activities both sexual and not so much are critical parts of expressing emotion with your partner.

So don't treat it like a race to some pre-defined finish line. Enjoy the getting there so much that it stops mattering whether you ever really "get there" or not. Treasure smells and tastes and textures and sounds,

enjoy and appreciate the experience not just as a physical pleasure but an act of emotional bonding and mutual worship and healing. Bathe and massage, use oils and lotions without worrying that they'll corrode a condom, wash each other's hair and dry each other off.

There are a million things that are sexy, loving, and gratifying that aren't orgasms, and we men should be more open to and appreciative of them. In fact, if you're in a relationship, maybe you should try intentionally avoiding your own pleasure – if there's going to be orgasms, let's have some for the ladies! After all, they can keep going afterward and have more than one without having to stop and rest, and my goodness is a female orgasm a beautiful thing to be in the presence of.

Let's stop making it always all about us, guys. Let's normalize that idea that even if *you* didn't have an orgasm, you still had a satisfying emotional and physical experience.

Of course there are women who can't or don't orgasm, and I'm not sure how to address that in a general conversation beyond saying that the same thing applies, women just don't need me to tell them that because women have been having sex without orgasms for centuries and, unlike men, would probably be well-served by more of them and by a greater generalized acknowledgement that a woman's sexual pleasure is no more dirty, forbidden, secret, shameful, or indicative of low character than a man's.

I'm not qualified or inclined to say there's something "wrong" with a woman who never has an orgasm, and each individual will have their own reasons. I *will* say that I hope that the percentage of such women in the general population is dropping dramatically over the last fifty years or so as we learn more about the female physiology (and get the men out of the way so we can even admit the female orgasm is a thing, which some people – fools, in my opinion – still seem to believe). There really isn't any excuse for a sexually functional straight man to not know how to communicate with his female partner about what satisfies her in this time and place.

With all that said, don't let marketing and social pressure from advertisers lead you to feel inadequate or like you're missing out. These folks are paid to make you feel uncomfortable about yourself so you'll spend money on their drugs. If you are trying to make babies or something and need a little help getting there, that's fine and frankly pretty normal,

and there's nothing wrong with it.

However, inducing feelings of inadequacy through advertising also helps *create* the problem through anxiety, which I think is pretty under-handed really. "Oh, hey, feel confident about your dick? Well you shouldn't, because it might not work and then you're no man at all now, are you? Here, take this pill just in case!" Meh. Every man is going to face a moment or a whole bunch of them when the spirit is willing, but the flesh weak. So instead of getting hung up on it and stuffing your body full of pills because a bunch of profit-inspired cultural programming tells you to, maybe find ways to enjoy it while it's soft (including using the opportunity to focus more on your partner's pleasure), and don't let it get to your head – either of them. Enjoy and bring enjoyment to your partner as a sexually complete and loving person, rather than a set of sex organs with a life-support system, and enjoy new and unique pathways to intimacy and loving each other that you'd have maybe otherwise ignored.

Learn how to separate your manhood from your manhood, is what I'm saying. You and your partner will both be happier, even if you're both kinky lil' rabbits going at it all the time.

On The Fly

Parents don't like to talk about sex because it reminds them of their own mortality. If your kids are old enough to have "the talk," you're getting old enough to think about your retirement. Nobody likes their own mortality, so some of us avoid those conversations (or are hostile toward the very concept) because we feel like it somehow helps us avoid getting old.

-

If we live in a free country, why do we have to be employed generating profits for someone else to be considered worthy of freedom?

-

Ego is the direct cause of 99% of the world's problems.

-

The other 1% is caused by spurious statistics.

-

By the evidence to date, human beings are the only animals to reject the benefits of cooperation in favor of individual satisfaction of non-vital prerogatives.

-

The voices in your head do not constitute reliable sources for, or objective confirmation of, anything.

-

Unexploitable deviation from the norm is a cultural crime and will be punished. Be weird and unique, but if you're going to be outside the bounds of the "okay" ways to be weird and unique, prepare to fight to keep it.

-

Survival and propagation of the species is, of necessity, the only universal ethic. Any other priority can and must be forsaken when the survival and propagation of the species is threatened. We share this ethic with all other forms of life, and with life itself. That which threatens this ethic will, in due time and course, be rejected by the species, and if the species does not reject the threat, life will reject the species, or at least try to do so until it is no longer a threat.

This may be why the coronavirus exists.

-

The problem with appealing to people's better nature is that many people don't have one.

-

People who complain about "the government" as though it's a separate entity from the governed don't understand what a government is, at least not in any functional form of democracy.

-

...BUT IT'S A SURPRISE

I love Jon Stewart but I sure am sick of living in a country that can't find its conscience until he shows up.

-

The problem in the US is we got so used to think of ourselves as the world's savior, it stopped occurring to use that it might be us who need saving.

-

If we all stopped putting up with this crap, we wouldn't have to.

-

Willie Nelson is a long-time influence of mine personally and professionally. I'm going to follow his advice and stop smoking pot.
When I'm 93.

-

I genuinely didn't think when I was twenty that I'd be more radical at fifty than I was then.

I certainly didn't think that I'd become palpably more radical nearly by the day at this age.

And yet, here we are.

Lifeguards

When you live in Michigan, it's nearly impossible to go through life without experiencing "the beach." Where I'm from in the southwest of the state, we're fortunate enough to have scores of miles of beautiful so-called "white sand" beaches on some of the world's largest freshwater lakes nearby. From New Buffalo near the Indiana state line, all the way up to the Straits of Mackinac ("mack-in-aw") where Lake Michigan becomes Lake Huron, the Michigan shore of Lake Michigan is a long-standing and beautiful draw for tourists and travelers looking for fun and adventure.

Unfortunately, the big lakes can be dangerous, and not only to traveling ore ships like the Edmund Fitzgerald. In both 2013 and 2014, 24 people died on Lake Michigan. So far in 2020 (it's late October as I write this) there have been 53 deaths on the lake, another data point in a sharp upward trend that saw the number of drownings on Lake Michigan more than double in six years.

Several of those drownings have happened on "my" part of the lake, generally speaking from New Buffalo to Grand Haven. In many cases, the deaths have been the result of people doing things they shouldn't be doing when the Lake is rough, like going out on the piers, or swimming. Many young people have died, at least one of them young enough that his mother was recently sentenced to a six-month jail term for negligence as a result of his death.

There are signs, but not a ton of them, and there's not much in the way of safety equipment either. Nor is there much in the way of on-site or local personnel to open and close gates and other portals, update signage, and so forth. There aren't lifeguards anymore, although there

were when I'm a kid.

Recently on social media I ran into a local news article about the deaths on the lake, and why there are no lifeguards on the public beaches of Michigan. Unfortunately the article was behind a paywall, but the comments were largely victim critical, lots of remarks about how everyone knows a red flag means no swimming and so forth. "I wish people would..."

To me this illustrates the degree to which our lack of empathy has sunk in to our the daily thinking. There were dozens of these responses, as though nobody who lives here in Michigan realizes there's a giant swath of this country that is so unfamiliar with warning flags on beaches that they don't even see them. I don't mean people who don't know what the flags mean, I mean people so unfamiliar with life on or near large bodies of water that they have no have no idea what the flags are or even really that the flags are there, and from those people's perspective there's no compelling reason to wonder. They don't know because nobody tells them, and unfortunately we humans often fail to find necessary information ourselves, whether through lack of trying or even lack of awareness that there's something we need to know.

As regards the measures we take in Michigan on our public beaches and access ways to make sure that our considerable and growing tourist base doesn't endanger themselves or others, we can do better and we should. There absolutely should be lifeguards on public beaches, and they should be well-equipped and well-qualified.

The only reason there's not lifeguards is because nobody wants to pay for them, which means collectively we've decided that human lives once again are less important than money.

I think that sucks.

I spent a huge part of my childhood on the beach in South Haven. I know what those flags are because I was raised around water. Millions weren't. In fact millions were raised so far away from water it doesn't even cross their mind to wonder if there's a flag system to keep people aware of potential danger in the water. The biggest danger in lake Michigan to many of these people is a great white shark.

That doesn't mean they don't deserve to enjoy our beautiful beaches and lakes and rivers. It means those of us who live here and live around this stuff and know it from the time we're kids need to work harder

to help them do so safely.

"But," you say, "it's their responsibility to know what they're getting in to! Those parents should have been paying more attention (when the victim is a child, as is frequently the case)." Similar objections are widespread, all of them coming back down to "hey, they should have known better."

Of course people can do more to be more informed. That's always true. It doesn't mean we can't do more - since demonstrably, more needs doing - to help those who aren't.

I wouldn't be opposed to municipal lifeguards being part of local public safety including the ability to issue a citation or potentially even make an arrest under given circumstances. Roving patrols checking to make sure there's nothing funny in your Kool-Aid would be rather overboard, but ensuring there's at least one highly visible professionally qualified lifeguard on duty for a given potential number of recreants not only isn't a bad thing, it's a thing we used to do.

Maybe they aren't there anymore, I didn't notice last time I was out there maybe eight years ago, but in the 70's and 80's when I was spending a lot of time there, there were three or four life guard stands on North Beach. Eventually those reduced to two, then one. When I was younger, they were in service, but later they were mostly empty, and it may have only been a weekend thing even then - South Haven was never going to be mistaken for a metropolis.

But they were there, and they helped. They weren't obtrusive or aggressive, if you were quietly sipping something more adult than strictly allowed, they weren't going to bother you. They didn't patrol, just sat on the chairs and came down when needed.

But there were laws, with teeth, and if you decided to show up with two cases of Red White & Blue and start littering the beach with them while making an ass of yourself, they could be part of enforcing those laws too.

Seems like a perfectly reasonable arrangement to me, and with a little modern thinking could be a genuinely useful and pro-active public service year-round and not just David Hasselhoff on a giant chair.

Especially given how much more effectively you can keep an eye on the water in 2020.

You could even tap into state tourism board funds to help pay for it, right? Safe happy beaches for your safe happy family with Michigan Lifeguards. Make it part of the state National Guard, or at least similar to it - a voluntary enlistment of young men and women with eyes on careers in say public health or medicine or law enforcement or what have you, meteorology even, part of whose job will be to "own" a strip of waterfront as part of a team. Not just sitting or even just beachwalking, but like communicating with local residents during major weather events, *knowing* the area, being able to easily communicate important information to local leadership elected, appointed, and hired. Everything from entertainment to erosion abatement, including lifeguards on the beaches. I mean long term, too, at least a couple of years working and living in a given area.

How awesome, yeah? Local public citizens working hard, having fun, doing good things, getting paid for it, and everyone benefits, and the question of having a lifeguard or three on a public beach doesn't become something some people scoff at and insist is unrealistic and even ignorant. We've got the money to pay people, and the resources to equip them.

You know why we don't do all that?

Because money is more important than people in this culture, and it costs too much with nobody turning a profit from it.

Nobody wants to pay to have that, and even many of those who do, have radically different notions about what gets paid for and how much and so forth. And we get wrapped up trying to solve the money problem, and pretty soon we forget all about the people problem.

People with other interests, usually financial somehow, get involved and maybe start a "community" Facebook page opposing it, and framing everything as a question of how "their tax dollars" are being spent. Lawyers show up and make lots of money. There are hearings and the TV stations make money selling advertisements on their websites, wrapped around stories about it, always highlighting some fairly extreme position because controversy sells and media is a business. Talking about the idea becomes a cottage industry while the idea itself dies in committee.

While all that's going on, eventually we forget that what you and I, sitting here playing cat baseball about generalities, are really talking

about is whether it's worth the money to help save lives and generally make the world a better place...and when you look at it like that, it's not much work to start wondering how you could have even asked in the first place because of course it is, that's a human being.

So is the answer lifeguards, and more signage, and even public relations efforts in tandem with tourism advertising? Absolutely, all we can manage and then a little.

And then, let's maybe talk about improving public education a little, just across the board, so that it's not a mystery to those non-mitten folk that large freshwater bodies also have deadly power, just like oceans, and the water is just as heavy when it comes sweeping toward you twenty feet tall while you stand there on the pier wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

Perhaps our friends in Utah, Colorado, Montana, Idaho, and so forth would be so kind as to do similar work with mountain phenomena, so if I ever happen to be out there and in an unfamiliar context, I don't bring an avalanche down on me.

And so forth.

We just have to decide that having your life guarded is worth paying for.

Preview Notes & Thank You

Thanks for reading this preview of my upcoming book, “...But It’s A Surprise.” This is a first release preview, available at no cost, and primarily is being delivered to my social media friends and fans. This is just a preview, and there’s much more to come, covering a broad space; the official preview release will be more representative of the final product content, probably by way of adding another chapter or two to what you see here.

The entire book should be available in print and on e-readers like the Kindle as well as all the others before the end of 2020, and I plan to release both free preview and a cut-price “condensed” version, in addition to this preview.

Please do feel free to keep an eye on johnhenry.us for more details. If you’d like to help me eat and keep a roof over my head in the mean time, check out the “Become A Member” link at that site.

I’ve been told a million times that I should write a book, so now I’m writing. I’m looking forward to delivering the whole book soon.

John Henry,
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