

# **Essays: Lessons Learned on Life's Rocky Trail**

**By Dan Campbell, July 2025**



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## Introduction

There are two ways to walk through the world: eyes forward, brisk and goal-bound—or slowly, with your senses cracked wide open, as if every leaf, every shadow, every oddly shaped stone were whispering a story.

This book is an invitation to walk the second way.

***Essays: Lessons Learned on Life's Rocky Trail*** is not a guidebook, though it has its share of signposts. It's not a memoir, though personal truths are braided through its pages like roots beneath a weathered path. What you're holding is a collection of glimpses—into light, loss, wonder, and the wild terrain of being alive.

Because noticing is the point. And the practice.

An artist doesn't merely look. They linger. Where the world sees puddles, they see mirrors with memories. Where others pass cracked sidewalks, they see cathedrals etched by weather and time.

Monet painted haystacks like symphonies of light. O'Keeffe found canyons in the curve of a petal. Van Gogh didn't just paint stars—he screamed them into being. Each of them saw not just what was there, but what shimmered beneath.

The essays you'll find here are reflections disguised as trail markers—each one shaped by the belief that art and emotion, memory and metaphor, are not luxuries but lanterns.

Hopefully, some of them may guide us through darkness and give lessons on how to see the choreography in clutter, meaning in the mundane.

And yes, sometimes the path is rocky, riddled with rattlesnakes, and uncertain in its direction. But even there—especially there—lessons live. Some sting. Some shimmer.

So take a breath. Loosen your grip on certainty. And step with me into the wilderness.

## Reflections on Listening as an Art Form

Listening—truly listening—is one of those underrated human abilities that we tend to gloss over. It's often lumped in with hearing, but the two couldn't be more different. Hearing just happens.

It's automatic. But listening? That takes effort, focus, and a certain kind of emotional investment. In a world saturated with noise—be it digital chatter, political debates, or emotional static—the act of genuinely tuning in to someone else is becoming something of a lost art.

When done well, listening is an act of generosity. It's not just about keeping quiet while someone talks; it's about pressing pause on our internal commentary, suspending judgment, and offering space for another's voice to take center stage.

So many of us are wired to react—to jump in with advice, counterpoints, or anecdotes—before the other person even finishes speaking.

But true listening? It calls for patience. It asks us to hold back, to become—if only momentarily—a container for someone else's reality.

But don't mistake listening for something soft or sentimental. In a fractured world, where so many voices are dismissed or drowned out, choosing to listen can be a form of resistance. It's how we begin to repair what's been broken.

Listening to stories we haven't lived, to perspectives we may not understand, helps stitch empathy into the seams of a divided society. It's not just about understanding others—it's about being willing to ask, "What don't I know yet?" or "What truth am I missing here?"

Deep listening goes beyond sound. It's about catching what's unsaid—the emotion between sentences, the long pause that hangs heavy with feeling. It's being okay with not having the answers, with sitting in the uncomfortable spaces that real conversations sometimes uncover. Listening this way asks something of us—not just our ears, but our whole selves.

Of course, all of this becomes trickier in an age of constant buzz. We're trained to scroll, to skim, to split our focus a dozen ways. Social media nudges us to broadcast rather than absorb. In that kind of climate, choosing to slow down and really listen feels almost rebellious.

It might help to see listening not just as a passive act but a creative one. Like a painter watching how light shifts across a room, or a writer who notices the way someone hesitates before speaking, a good listener picks up on the subtleties. They gather, interpret, and respond in ways that can turn a conversation into something meaningful—something real.

At its core, listening is about being there. Fully. Not just with your ears, but with your heart, your attention, your presence. And in offering that kind of presence to another human being, something remarkable happens.

## **The Quiet Power of Haiku: A Gentle Path to Mindfulness**

Mindfulness isn't just a wellness trend or a meditation app feature—it's a way of tuning into the moment you're living right now. It's about paying attention, kindly and curiously, to your thoughts, your surroundings, and the rhythm of life unfolding around you.

And in a beautifully understated way, the ancient Japanese form of haiku offers the same invitation.

### **What Is a Haiku?**

A Tiny Poem with Deep Roots

A haiku is just three lines long, but don't let its size fool you. These poems are rooted in centuries-old Japanese tradition and often capture a passing moment in nature—something brief yet profound.

### **Why Less Is More**

A haiku doesn't explain. It suggests. With only a handful of words, it opens a doorway into mood, image, and feeling. It leaves space—for stillness, for wondering, for you.

### **Where Mindfulness Meets Haiku**

Be Here Now

To write a haiku, you first have to stop. Look. Listen. Notice. That simple act of paying close attention—to a raindrop, a crow's call, a shaft of morning light—is already a mindfulness practice.

### **No Judgment, Just Presence**

A haiku isn't trying to impress. It doesn't argue or explain. It simply reflects what is. That same spirit lies at the heart of mindfulness: observing without fixing, labeling, or chasing.

### **Nature as Teacher**

Most haiku draw their power from the natural world: a falling leaf, the sound of wind, the feel of snow underfoot. Nature grounds us in the present. Mindfulness does, too.

## Haiku in Action: Poetry as Mini-Meditation

*Silver pond at dawn  
Dragonfly's silent shadow  
Ripples of sunrise*

A moment unfolds gently—stillness, motion, light. Each image invites quiet reflection. Reading—or writing—haiku like these slows your thoughts. You start noticing again. Feeling. Being.

### Try It: A Haiku Practice for You

Here's a little exercise—no pressure, no perfection needed:

Pause. For just 2–3 minutes, observe something small. A breeze, a rustle, a glimmer of light.

Write. Turn that moment into a haiku.

Reflect. How did it feel to slow down and notice? What did the moment reveal?

#### Why It Matters

Haiku offers more than art—it offers awareness. It reminds us that the quiet, ordinary moments are not empty—they're full. They just ask us to look, to listen, to feel.

So give it a try. In these tiny poems, you might find spaciousness, stillness, even joy.

## If My Emotions Were a Weather Report

If my emotions were a weather report,  
I'd tell you—don't bother bringing a forecast.  
The skies? They change.  
No warning. No pattern.  
Just gut-level guessing and a lot of cloud cover.

Some mornings,  
it's fog.  
That soft kind—hugs the ground,  
blurs the edges of thought.  
I move slow.  
Like the world's still waking up, and I don't want to be the one to jolt it.

Then—bam.  
Outta nowhere,  
anxiety rolls in.  
Not a drizzle. Not a breeze.  
It's sideways rain.  
Wind screaming in the wires.  
Thoughts scatter like receipts in a parking lot.

Anger?  
It doesn't crash down.  
It builds.  
Thick heat—mid-July with no air conditioning.  
It's not a tantrum, it's a pressure system.  
You don't see it,  
but I feel it pressing behind my ribs.  
People hear my silence and call it peace.  
But it's not peace.  
It's the hush before the sky breaks open.

Grief—  
that's a season.  
A long long winter.



Gray-on-gray.  
No dramatic storms.  
Just cold that hangs on too long.  
Snow falling so soft  
you don't notice how heavy it's gotten.  
Until you're buried in it.

But joy?  
Joy is weather that doesn't ask permission.  
It breaks through.  
Like light after five straight days of rain.  
Like that one perfect breeze that finds you  
in traffic,  
in chaos,  
and just for a second—you remember how to breathe.  
Don't chase it.  
Just let it land.

Truth is—  
there's no steady climate here.  
No predictable highs.  
No reliable lows.  
One hour,  
I'm all blue skies.  
Next?  
Clouds so thick you can't see what's two steps ahead.

I used to want control.  
Clear skies on command.  
Neatly labeled feelings with timestamps.  
But now?  
I'm learning to watch the sky without trying to change it.  
Let the storm roll.  
Let the drizzle come.  
Let the sun catch me off guard.

If my emotions are a weather report—

then let the report be real.

Messy.

Moving.

Unpredictable.

Like me.



## Handwriting Is an Endangered Species

I've been thinking lately about something that feels small on the surface but holds more meaning the longer I sit with it—handwriting. Not just the act of jotting something down, but the whole ritual of it. The weight of the pen, the slow curl of a letter forming on the page, the unmistakable presence of the person behind the words.

These days, it feels like handwriting is quietly vanishing, like an old friend we meant to call but somehow forgot. I imagine it living now in a kind of Script Sanctuary, sharing stories with faded fountain pens and half-filled notebooks.

Cursive is there—once elegant and bold, now a little frail but still proud. Block print sits beside it, stoic and practical, watching a world that no longer seems to need them as much.

But I remember when handwriting was everything. I especially remember the joy I found in calligraphy—not just writing, but truly crafting each letter.

There was something deeply meditative in the process: the rhythm of the strokes, the careful pressure of the nib, the way ink would sometimes surprise me with a flourish I hadn't intended but chose to keep.

It wasn't about speed or efficiency—it was about presence. Attention. Beauty. In those quiet moments, pen in hand, I felt connected to centuries of scribes and poets who had once done the same.

Calligraphy was my way of honoring language—not just what words said, but how they appeared. Even now, I can picture some of the pieces I created, slowly drawing each loop and serif like they mattered—because they did.

Writing that way, with intention and grace, taught me to slow down, to listen to the silence between words, to value detail in a way that typing never could.

Of course, I still type—don't we all? Our devices are always within reach, and their convenience is hard to deny. But part of me misses what gets lost in translation.

A typed sentence doesn't reveal the mood of the moment. It doesn't show the tremble in your hand or the extra pause you took before writing "I miss you."

Still, handwriting hasn't disappeared entirely. I see it in the occasional birthday card, in a note left on the kitchen counter, in the messy grocery list scratched in haste.

I smile when I see calligraphy resurface in wedding invitations or handmade signs—as if these words are reminding us they still belong.

So maybe this letter is my way of encouraging us to keep handwriting alive in our own small ways. To write more. Not perfectly, but personally.

Maybe even to pick up the calligraphy pen again—not because we have to, but because it reminds us of something beautiful, something tactile and true.

Let's keep leaving traces of ourselves behind, not just in data, but in ink. Who knows—maybe those little gestures, those hand-formed words, will someday mean even more because they've become rare.

## **Memories of Roosters**

Roosters have added surprising memories to my life. Not by design. I never sought them out. But in three very different countries—El Salvador, Kenya, and Thailand—I found myself living within earshot of a rooster who seemed to take a particular interest in me.

Some travelers collect stamps. I collect stories about birds that scream at the sky.

### **El Salvador – The Rooster That Ran the Town**

It started in a city, not a barnyard, in El Salvador, where mornings arrived early and unapologetically. The rooster—el gallo viejo, as my neighbors called him—was a local personality. He lived on the rooftop across from my tiny house in Colonia Montserrat where he crowed like his life depended on it.

His crow wasn't charming. It was raspy, aggressive, and astonishingly punctual—usually around 4:37 a.m. He didn't so much wake you up as challenge you to face the day.

I served in El Salvador for 3 years with the Peace Corps and I don't think the rooster ever missed a single day. I didn't always appreciate him in the moment, but I came to admire his presence.

He reminded me that in a place where life could be tough and resources thin, people still laughed, worked, celebrated—and woke up to the same determined crow.

### **Kenya – The Rooster Who Knew Things**

In Kenya, the rooster felt less like a neighbor and more like an oracle. I was in Kenya to work with malaria researchers and stayed in a small village near Nakuru, where the red earth warmed your feet and the sky stretched wide enough to hold all your thoughts.

The locals called him Jogoo wa Jua—Rooster of the Sun—and that's exactly what he was. He didn't just announce the day; he summoned it. His crow had depth, like it came from somewhere ancient.

And he walked the village like a priest, slow and observant, pausing near gardens and wells, often standing still long enough to make you wonder if he was meditating.

By the end of my stay, I found myself waiting for his morning crow—not just as a signal to wake, but as a kind of assurance that the world still spun and the rituals still mattered.

### **Thailand – The Rooster with a God Complex**

I met another feathered friend in northern Thailand, on the edge of Chiang Mai, where the rice paddies shimmered green and a monk sat outside a temple smoking cigarettes.

This rooster didn't just crow. He performed. He was white with streaks of gold, his tail fanned like a parade float, and his strut was pure theater.

He crowed constantly—at dawn, at dusk, at laundry, at the moon. He had his rituals. He'd stop at the spirit house every morning and he never missed a festival, a family meal, or a photo op.

### **Reflections from the Roost**

Each rooster embodied something unique: the scrappy resilience of El Salvador, the soulful wisdom of Kenya, the playful dignity of Thailand.

They weren't just background noise. They were part of the story—woven into markets and mornings, rituals and routines. Through them, I saw how closely tied humans are to rhythm: of seasons, of stories, of waking and working and beginning again.

I came to see these roosters not just as characters in my travels, but as teachers. Unlikely, loud, opinionated teachers who never let me forget where I was—and why I was there.

And now, even back home, whenever I hear a distant crow, usually on TV, I smile. Somewhere, a day is beginning. And someone—probably against their will—is being reminded to get up and live it.

## Wishing Wells

There's a hush about a wishing well that feels almost holy.

They linger on the margins of places—moss-covered stone rings hiding in gardens, or coins glinting quietly in the chaos of city squares. Most days, we pass them by. But now and then, something tugs. We pause. We lean. We close our eyes. And we ask the water for a secret favor.

It's a tender kind of ritual, isn't it?

Wishing wells belong to a time before time—when stories were truth and water held magic. The Celts saw spirits in the springs. The Greeks, the Romans, offered coins and hopes to gods who might be listening. The Norse spoke of Mímir's well, deep beneath the world tree—its waters whispering wisdom. Across cultures, water was never just water. It was a mirror, a messenger, a mouthpiece for longing.

And somehow, it still is.

There's something about still water that feels like it's waiting. It asks nothing. It answers nothing. But it stays. It receives. Patient as dusk. Gentle as breath. Maybe that's why we lean over it—again and again—even when we know better. Even when we don't expect anything to happen.

Wishing wells haven't lasted because they work. They've lasted because we do. Because something in us still needs a moment to be soft. To be honest. To speak a hope we haven't dared say aloud. Even if no one hears. Even if it's only between us and a shimmer in the dark.

So no, they're not foolish. They are sacred pauses in a world that forgets to stop.

And even if our wishes sink without a trace... the wishing means we're still reaching.

Still believing.

## **The Language Beyond Words**

For every word that lands cleanly, a thousand others slip through the cracks—missed, misnamed, or simply beyond the reach of articulation.

How do you capture the hush right before snowfall?

The ache folded into a mother's sigh?

Or that flicker—almost a gasp—in your eyes when the world suddenly feels new?

This essay lingers in that quiet threshold—not silence as void, but as something alive beneath the noise. A pause that pulses. Not a thesis, but an invitation: to wander through what resists language, where truth arrives unadorned—raw, blurred, and breathing.

### **When Silence Isn't Empty**

The best writing doesn't just speak—it listens. It stretches into stillness.

Sometimes it disappears altogether, letting something else do the speaking.

Take Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. On the surface, it's two men waiting for nothing. Long pauses. Awkward silences. But those silences throb with meaning. They don't explain—they demand attention. Meaning hides in the circling, in the refusal to resolve.

These aren't gaps. They're thresholds.

Places where language steps aside and lets the soul speak—if only in a whisper.

### **When Words Can't Go There**

Emily Dickinson wrote, "Saying nothing... sometimes says the most."

Not silence as absence, but as presence. Not a lack of expression—but a deeper kind.

Think of grief. Or awe.

You don't describe them. You stand in them.

You hold your breath and let them pass through you.

Like that first quiet after loss, when even breathing feels too loud.

Or the hush beneath a star-filled sky—so vast it stills your every thought.



Language tries. It reaches. But some experiences won't be reduced.  
They resist translation. They ask not to be named, but felt.  
Words may gesture toward the truth—but they are not the truth.  
At best, they are signposts. Glimpses.

### **Stillness as Sacred**

Across time and culture, silence has never meant absence.  
It has meant presence.

The Quakers gather in stillness not because they have nothing to say, but  
because they long to hear what can't be said aloud.

In Zen practice, silence isn't passive—it's alert. Focused.  
Even Christian mystics speak of the desert or wilderness  
as the place where God whispers—not in thunder, but in the hush that follows.

These silences are not empty.  
They are full—of waiting, of presence, of awareness.

Here, silence is not lack. It is intimacy.  
A kind of prayer that doesn't need words to be heard.

### **Conclusion: In the Pause, Something Begins**

In a world addicted to noise, silence is a radical act.

To choose it isn't to retreat—but to listen differently. To attend. To care.  
To sit in stillness—not just with others, but with yourself—is a form of courage.

Across the traditions—literary, spiritual, philosophical—one truth repeats:  
Silence is not the end of meaning. Sometimes, it's where meaning begins.

It's the space between notes that gives music its soul.  
The blank canvas before the first brushstroke.  
The final page that answers nothing—and somehow, says everything.

## The Grace of Humility

Humility is strange.

On the page, it reads like a virtue carved in stone—quiet, noble, golden.

Think less of yourself. Step back. Don't take up too much space.

But in practice? It feels uncomfortable.

Because let's be honest—most of us aren't in love with the idea of being small.

We claim to honor humility, but we throw our spotlight on the bold, the loud, the self-assured.

We say, **Don't brag**, but reward those who do.

We say, **Be humble**, but whisper, Don't you dare go unnoticed.

It's a tightrope: keep your head down, but make sure everyone sees your success.

Quiet confidence—but louder than the next guy's.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, *"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less."*

A beautiful line. Almost musical.

But try living it. Try slipping out of your own orbit.

Even as we do something generous—helping a friend move, staying late to listen, giving someone the better seat—we often carry the awareness of our sacrifice like a subtle badge.

A whisper in the back of our minds: Look at how good I'm being.

Even our selflessness wears a mirror.

For an example of humility, just consider the humble and kind Fred Rogers.

The soft voice. The cardigan. The deep well of kindness.

He didn't just speak of gentleness; he embodied it.

He wrote back to children, remembered their names, carried their sorrows.

No camera needed. No applause required.

Most of us, meanwhile, lose our patience at red lights or slow walkers or someone chewing too loud.

We're not saints. We're just trying.

Maybe that's where humility begins.

Not in perfection or performance, but in the quiet confession: I'm not the center of everything.

It's not about vanishing. It's about making space.

For others. For the possibility that someone else's story matters just as much as your own.

And that's hard. But maybe the struggle is the point.

Humility isn't a destination.

It's a posture. A practice. A poem we try to live, one line at a time.

## A Tribute to Birds

Each morning, before coffee, before email, before the day begins its noisy clamor—I open our bedroom window.

It's a small act, really. A simple habit. The cool air carries in the songs of the birds—trills, whistles, chirps like little bells. Sometimes a solo; often a choir. It is the sound of the world waking up.

There's a kind of stillness in birdsong—not silence, but a full, breathing quiet. A joy that isn't loud, but expansive. It reminds me that even before the to-do lists and the headlines, the earth is already singing. And we're invited to listen.

That window ritual didn't start out as something meaningful. It just became meaningful—over time, over mornings. Much like my fascination with birds.

It truly took root years ago, when I served in the Peace Corps in El Salvador. I was helping to plan El Salvador's first national park, which is now Parque Nacional de Cerro Verde and the hummingbirds were everywhere – flashes of emerald and ruby darting between flowers.

I couldn't stop watching them. I'd sit for hours, notebook in hand, sketching their shapes, jotting notes. Eventually, that notebook became a small book—a field guide and story collection about hummingbirds that I wrote for the Department of Natural Resources and which I used to give talks on hummingbirds to schools and environmental groups.

Did you know a hummingbird's heart beats over 1,200 times per minute? Imagine the energy it takes just to be a hummingbird—hovering midair, wings blurring faster than the eye can follow, traveling great distances to find food. They're little miracles of motion.

But they're not alone in their wonder.

Take the **Arctic Tern**. This slender seabird migrates from the Arctic to the Antarctic and back again each year—nearly 44,000 miles. That's like flying around the entire planet... twice.

Or consider **parrots**, especially the **African Grey**, which can mimic human speech with eerie precision. Some researchers believe they not only repeat but understand. They can name colors, count, even show signs of empathy.

And then there's the extravagant courtship dances of the **birds-of-paradise** in New Guinea—feathers fanned like crowns, strange staccato steps, elaborate displays. If you've never seen one, promise me you'll look them up later. They're like living performance art.

And perhaps most beautifully, birds can see more colors than we do. They perceive ultraviolet light—hidden hues in petals, feathers, and skies. What looks plain to us may blaze with color to a bird. It makes you wonder: how much beauty are we missing?

Birds, to me are teachers. They show us resilience—think of the tiny chickadee surviving harsh winters on seeds and song. They model grace—in flight, in movement, even in stillness. And above all, they invite attentiveness. You can't rush a birdsong. You have to pause... be present... and listen.

So much of life urges us to move fast, to chase, to scroll past. But birds? Birds remind us to slow down. To notice. To wonder.

And maybe, if we're lucky, they remind us that we, too, are part of the song.



## Small Talk

You know that quiet moment—the one that slips in at parties, in elevators, or behind the hum of the grocery store checkout line—when you're suddenly wading knee-deep in conversation that barely ripples the surface?

That's small talk. It doesn't pierce or sting in any dramatic way. It's more like a soft erosion of the spirit. A paper cut of the soul—thin, polite, and endlessly persistent.

Small talk isn't meant to mean much. It's a placeholder, a breath between real things. A kind of social choreography we all know too well—how's it going, fine thanks, good to see you, take care.

It asks nothing of us but compliance. A few borrowed phrases to fill the air and hold discomfort at bay.

And sure, it has its purpose. Like a nod when someone holds the door. A script we recite to remind ourselves we're still playing the part. Still in step. But beneath that shallow patter is a quiet ache—a knowing—that something deeper is always left unsaid.

What if, instead of "Nice weather today," we could say, "Do you ever feel like you're living underwater?" Or, "Do your dreams still visit you, or have they gone quiet too?" What if, instead of weekend plans, we asked, "When was the last time you felt truly alive?"

But we don't. We smile. We skim. We stay near the shore.

And maybe that's the loneliest truth of all—that we're surrounded by entire universes dressed as strangers, and all we ever say to each other is, "Looks like rain."

## **The Artist's Way of Seeing**

(Or: How Cracked Sidewalks Become Cathedrals)

Most people glance at the world and catch the outline.  
Artists stare—and find the soul.  
They see with a kind of double vision,  
where reality overlaps with revelation.

To you, a puddle might be just a puddle.  
To them, it's a mirror with a memory.  
A lamppost becomes a sentinel.  
A crooked nail, a note in an unfinished song.

Where we see clutter, they see choreography.  
Where we walk past, they linger—  
like someone who just heard a voice in the static.

When Light Becomes a Language  
(Or: Monet, the Haystack Whisperer)

Light, to most of us, is background noise.  
To Monet, it was an instrument.  
He played it across the surface of the same haystack  
as if tuning a violin under a different sky each time.

Dawn didn't just arrive—it seeped in,  
like gold ink bleeding across silk.  
Fog wrapped the fields like a memory you couldn't quite place.  
Sunset didn't fall—it folded, tucking shadows into corners.

His paintings weren't static scenes,  
but time-lapse whispers of a world constantly exhaling.  
He wasn't painting hay—he was painting impermanence.

The Romance of Ruin  
(Or: Loving the Beautifully Broken)

Beauty doesn't have to shout.  
Sometimes, it just rusts slowly.

To the artist's eye, a cracked window  
isn't damage—it's stained glass drawn by time.  
A rusted pipe is an artery of a forgotten machine.  
Peeling paint becomes a topographic map of neglect and nostalgia.

Georgia O'Keeffe didn't just paint flowers.  
She turned petals into landscapes—  
canyons of velvet, ridges of blush,  
vast and echoing like the surface of a distant moon.

She taught us that the small, when seen deeply,  
can be as vast as the stars.

### **When Emotion Colors the Sky**

(Or: Van Gogh Didn't Just Paint the Stars—He Felt Them)

Some skies whisper. Van Gogh's skies roared.  
He painted the night like a storm trapped in glass.  
Stars weren't dots—they were flames caught mid-flicker.  
The moon didn't hang—it hurled itself across the canvas.

His brush didn't glide; it surged.  
Each stroke was a lightning bolt shaped by longing.  
The cypress trees reached like hands in prayer or protest—maybe both.

He didn't paint what was there.  
He painted the inner weather of being alive.

Learning to See Again  
(Or: The Art of Noticing)

You don't need a canvas to see like an artist.  
You just need to notice the choreography in the chaos.



Look at the way rain maps itself in dark, misshapen ovals on the sidewalk.  
How neon signs reflect off wet asphalt like city constellations.  
How a pile of laundry by the window catches light like a Vermeer.

Not everything is profound.  
But everything has a shape. A story. A texture worth tasting.

Maybe those cracks in the sidewalk  
aren't flaws after all—  
maybe they're lightning scars on the skin of the earth,  
proof that even the ground beneath us  
is in the middle of becoming something else.



## Some Random Thoughts About Life

I'm 73 now,  
though most mornings I forget that.  
There's still a boy inside me,  
the kind who pockets smooth stones  
just to feel their weight,  
who stops mid-step  
to wonder about the bend in a trail  
or a sentence left half-finished.

Books are paths I wander,  
each one opening like a gate in an old fence.  
Ideas flicker up—  
like lightning bugs in June—  
brief sparks that make the dark  
less lonely.

Art is the language I never meant to learn  
but somehow did.  
I don't remember when words  
began turning into light and shadow,  
but now, my hands move over a digital canvas,  
and something stirs—  
a face, a field, a dream taking shape  
pixel by pixel.  
Quiet magic.

Writing poems is a kind of digging.  
I go in with soft brushes,  
like an archaeologist who isn't in a hurry.  
I find things—  
old fears,  
forgotten laughter,  
a single note from a song I haven't heard in years.  
Some pieces are fragile.  
Others come up glowing.

I lay them out in lines  
like artifacts.

Travel has been my best teacher.  
I've spent the night in volcanos,  
shared stories with people whose names I never learned.  
I've walked through cities  
where no one knew me,  
and still felt at home.  
The world is huge—yes—  
but stitched together  
with invisible thread.

To create something—  
a poem, a picture, a quiet thought—  
feels like lighting a candle  
in a room you're leaving.  
You don't stay to see it flicker.  
You just trust someone might.

Each morning now feels like a gift—  
unexpected,  
unwrapped slowly.  
At 73, I'm still learning.  
Still stretching toward light.  
There are poems left in me,  
places not yet touched by my footsteps,  
questions that still hum  
beneath the silence.

And maybe  
That is the secret—  
to keep discovering,  
one day at a time.

## **Ways to Impress My Classmates at Our Class Reunion**

I recently received notice that our 1969 high school graduation class would be having a class reunion. This made me stop to think of the wonderful teachers and good friends that I had during my high school years. Go Statesville High School!

It would be fun to attend and try to impress my former classmates in some of the following ways:

**Show Up in a Limo** - Arrive in style! Rent a limo and pretend I am a celebrity for the night, complete with oversized sunglasses and an entourage.

**Bring a “Professional” Photographer** - Hire a friend to act as a paparazzi, snapping photos of me and my “fans.”

**Wear a Customized T-Shirt** - Wear a T-shirt that reads, “Class of ’69: Still Kicking, Just Not as High.”

**Hand Out “Autographed” Photos** - Bring along a stack of old photos from high school when I had a head full of hair and sign them like I’m a movie star.

**Share an Outrageous “Life Story”** - Make up a tall tale about what I’ve been up to since graduation. Tell about my career as a secret agent who saved the world 5 times and that I am now retired and working as a juggler for Cirque du Soleil.

**Perform a Comedy Routine** - I would tell jokes about how my dear mother would always put a gingerbread man in with my lunch. Another joke would be about when I reached over and took a friend’s pencil during a history exam and threw it out the window. High school memories are a great source for jokes!

## Words I Recently Invented

Shakespeare inspired me to try and invent new words in English which is fun but not easy. Here are 5 words and their definitions that I came up with:

**Snurdle** – (verb) To shuffle slowly and awkwardly while carrying something large or unwieldy

**Sproggles** – (verb) To leap unexpectedly from a sitting or resting position due to sudden excitement.

**Skattywig** – (noun) A person who is perpetually lost or confused in unfamiliar surroundings.

**Grivvle** – (verb) To laugh at an inappropriate or awkward time.

**Wibblelark** – (noun) A whimsical or unexpected remark that derails a serious conversation.

## Weeping Willow Trees

Every day, one of my favorite sights is the line of weeping willows that drape elegantly along the Potomac River. They stand like living curtains at the water's edge, their branches swaying gently in the breeze—as if inviting you to pause, breathe, and reflect.

There's something timeless about the willow's delicate form—the way its slender limbs arc toward the ground, the whispering rustle of its leaves. It's no wonder artists and writers have drawn inspiration from these trees for centuries.

The weeping willow has long been a powerful symbol in the arts, speaking to emotions that words alone can't quite capture.

While writing this piece, I felt compelled to create a digital art image inspired by the willow. In visual art, its flowing lines and quiet elegance often serve as metaphors for emotion, memory, and grace.

Claude Monet, for instance, frequently painted weeping willows in his water lily series. Their blurred reflections in the water added a dreamy, almost meditative layer to his work—echoing the fluid, introspective nature of the trees themselves.



What moves me most is how the willow seems to embody both strength and vulnerability. It's a visual reminder of resilience—the way it bends without breaking, how it holds space for sorrow and serenity at once.

In its soft, swaying dance, I see a reflection of life's quiet lessons: to stay rooted, to flow with change, to endure with grace.

For me, the weeping willow isn't just a tree—it's a gentle companion on the path of contemplation, a symbol of calm in a chaotic world, and a quiet source of inspiration I return to again and again.



## The Rewards of Learning to Draw

Drawing isn't just about making marks on a page. It's a quiet, personal kind of magic—a way of seeing the world and yourself with new eyes. And sometimes, without even realizing it, it changes us.

Let's take a closer look at how putting pencil or pen to paper can sharpen your mind, soothe your heart, and bring you a little closer to others. Because drawing is more than a creative outlet—it's a way of growing.

### Sharpening Focus and Memory

Ever notice how time seems to disappear when you're drawing? That's your brain fully engaged—watching, translating, moving. You're not just doodling; you're observing the tiniest details, coordinating your hand and eye, and turning perception into shape.

This process gives your brain a workout. It builds focus. It strengthens memory. And maybe best of all, it trains you to notice the little things—not just on paper, but in life. That kind of awareness can quietly shift the way you solve problems, make choices, even interact with the world around you.





## **A Quiet Therapy for the Soul**

Sometimes, words fall short. That's where drawing steps in. When emotions feel too big—or too blurry—to name, drawing gives them shape. It becomes a gentle way to process what's stirring inside.

That's why art therapy is so powerful. It's not about making "good" art—it's about making honest art. But you don't need a therapist's office to feel the effects. Just a quiet space, a blank page, and the willingness to slow down. In that stillness, healing often begins.

## **Fueling Creativity and Resilience**

Drawing lets your imagination stretch its legs. There are no rules, no grades, no single right way to do it. You can try something bold, mess it up completely, and try again. And that's the point.

Every "mistake" on the page is really just a step in learning—not just about drawing, but about trying, failing, and getting back up. That's how creativity works. That's how resilience is built. One line at a time.

## **Confidence Through Creation**

Finishing a drawing—especially one that challenged you—feels like a quiet victory. That feeling, small as it may seem, is confidence taking root.

As your sketches evolve from simple shapes to something more expressive, your belief in yourself begins to grow. And you carry that belief into other parts of your life. Drawing teaches you to trust your instincts, your effort, and your unique perspective.

## **Why Drawing Matters**

At the end of the day, drawing isn't just about making art. It's about making space—for focus, for healing, for discovery. It's a tool for thinking, feeling, growing.

Whether you're sketching a memory, scribbling through a hard day, or chasing a creative spark, drawing invites you to be present. To pay attention. To let go.

So go ahead—pick up that pen or pencil. You never know where that first line might lead.

## Learning a New Language

Languages are fascinating and over the years I have tried to learn Mayan, Arabic and others. It was truly exciting to learn even just a few words in Mayan and to decipher the Arabic alphabet.

When I served in the Peace Corps in El Salvador it was a slow journey to speak and understand Spanish. I still remember riding on a bus in San Salvador and the bus driver spoke so slowly and clearly that I understood every word he said and I was so overjoyed to understand his conversation.

Language truly is the gateway to cultural understanding. By learning a new language, we gain insights into the customs, traditions, and values of different cultures, fostering empathy and global awareness.

While learning another language is beneficial, the importance of preserving endangered languages is super important.

Language preservation helps maintain cultural heritage, supports linguistic diversity, and strengthens community identity.

Many indigenous languages are at risk of disappearing, and with them, their unique worldviews and knowledge systems.

The benefits of learning a new language extend far beyond communication. From cognitive enhancement to career advancement and cultural understanding, the advantages are many.

Additionally, the preservation of endangered languages is crucial for maintaining cultural heritage, supporting linguistic diversity, and strengthening community identity.

Whether motivated by personal growth, professional development, or a desire to connect with others, learning a new language is a journey that promises to enrich and transform lives.

## Clouds and Cloud Watching

This essay is dedicated to my dear sister, the artist, who taught me to stop, look up and observe the clouds. Taking time to watch and study clouds has made me appreciate the wonder and beauty in everyday life.

Clouds have fascinated humans for centuries, inspiring myths, scientific inquiry, and artistic expression. Their ephemeral nature and infinite variety create a moving canvas in the sky.

The science of clouds begins with water vapor, rising and cooling in the Earth's atmosphere. This vapor condenses into tiny droplets or ice crystals, forming the clouds we see. Cirrus clouds, for example, are thin and wispy, often indicating good weather but also the edge of a distant storm.

Cumulus clouds are the quintessential "fair weather" clouds, their puffy, cotton-like shapes evoking images of fluffy sheep or mountains of whipped cream. Stratus clouds, which blanket the sky in a uniform gray, can bring a sense of calm or melancholy, depending on their density and the light they filter.

Throughout history, clouds have inspired countless artists, poets, and thinkers. The poet William Wordsworth wrote about clouds as "lonely as a cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills," capturing their solitary yet omnipresent nature.

Even today, photographers and filmmakers use clouds to add depth and emotion to their work and writing about clouds inspired me to create the digital art below of a cloud.

Clouds also influence our moods and thoughts in profound ways. A bright, blue sky dotted with fluffy cumulus clouds can lift our spirits and fill us with a sense of joy and possibility.

Conversely, a sky heavy with dark, brooding clouds can evoke feelings of introspection or foreboding. This emotional response to clouds speaks to their role as a mirror of our inner landscapes, reflecting and amplifying our feelings.

Whether observing the delicate brushstrokes of cirrus clouds at sunset or marveling at the majesty of a cumulonimbus cloud towering into the stratosphere, clouds invite us to look up, to dream, and to reflect. They are a reminder that, in the ever-changing sky above, there is a story unfolding—a story of nature's wonder.



## Selling Bibles Door to Door

As a student at N.C. State University many years ago, I embarked on a summer adventure that whisked me away to the picturesque and historic town of New Bern, North Carolina.

My mission was to sell Bibles door-to-door. Little did I know, this venture would lead me down a path of unexpected lessons and memorable encounters, rather than commercial triumph.

From the very first knock, it became clear that my skills as a salesman left much to be desired. Day after day, my dreams of successful sales evaporated under the sweltering sun. My dear mother had to send me money to cover the \$10 a week rent for my room.

Despite my abysmal sales record, I found joy in the charm and history that enveloped New Bern. Though I failed to sell many Bibles, I succeeded in making genuine connections with the people behind those doors. Some residents, intrigued by my earnest pitch, would invite me in for a chat.

On more than one occasion, I found myself at their dinner tables, savoring hearty meals and warm hospitality. These moments of kindness were the true rewards of my endeavor, offering me a deeper understanding of community and generosity.

My summer of sales folly wasn't in vain, for it imparted several invaluable lessons:

**Persistence Doesn't Always Guarantee Success:** No matter how hard you try, sometimes the outcome isn't what you hoped for. Persistence is important, but it's not the only factor in success.

**Rejection is Not Personal:** Being turned down repeatedly can feel personal, but it's often more about the circumstances or the product than about you as an individual.

**Learning from Each Experience:** Every failure is an opportunity to learn.

**Building Resilience:** Facing repeated failure builds resilience. It teaches you how to recover quickly and keep moving forward despite setbacks.

**Success is Multifaceted:** Selling a product isn't the only measure of success. Building relationships, gaining experience, and developing communication skills are also valuable outcomes.

## Things Not to Do in an Elevator

For some reason, I once started singing “***Ave Maria***” on a crowded elevator and it was interesting to see the reactions. A few smiled but most wanted to exit the elevator as soon as possible. I have also wanted to carry a whoopee cushion onto an elevator and make fart sounds but have never had the nerve to do it. This made me think of other things not to do on an elevator and they include:

**Don’t Press All the Buttons** - Yes, it’s tempting to see what happens when you light up all the buttons, but the result is a series of unnecessary stops that will make you very unpopular with your fellow passengers.

**Don’t Face the Wrong Way** - Facing the back of the elevator, or staring directly at someone, is a surefire way to make everyone uncomfortable. Save the dramatic flair for your theater class.

**Don’t Have Loud Phone Conversations** - No one wants to know about your doctor’s appointment results or hear you argue with your cable provider.

**Don’t Use It as a Gym** - Sure, you might be in a hurry to fit in a quick workout, but an elevator isn’t the place for your morning stretches, yoga poses, or that CrossFit routine.

**Don’t Ignore Personal Space** - Elevators are small, and personal space is a luxury. However, this doesn’t mean you should treat it like a game of human Tetris. Avoid crowding people or leaning on them, even if it means standing in an uncomfortable position.

**Don’t Make Unnecessary Small Talk** - While some light conversation is acceptable, especially if you know the other person, there’s no need to dive into deep, philosophical discussions or ask overly personal questions. Keep it simple: a nod, a smile, and perhaps a comment about the weather will suffice.

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In conclusion, elevators are a shared space where a little consideration goes a long way. By avoiding these common pitfalls, you can ensure your elevator rides are smooth, pleasant, and free from awkward encounters.



## Earthrise: Seeing Home for the First Time

On Christmas Eve, 1968, something quietly miraculous happened—not just in the vast silence of space, but deep within the hearts of millions on Earth.

As Apollo 8 looped around the Moon—the first time humans had ever done so—astronaut William Anders looked out the window, raised his camera, and captured a moment that would change how we see ourselves forever.

That image became known as *Earthrise*.

There it was—our planet—rising above the Moon’s desolate gray horizon. A delicate swirl of blues, greens, and whites, floating alone in a sea of black.

Against the lifeless lunar surface, Earth looked startlingly alive. Tiny, yes—but stunning. And, suddenly, unmistakably fragile.

Before that photograph, space was mostly the stuff of science fiction—fascinating, but abstract. Earthrise made it personal. The universe wasn’t just out there anymore; it was a frame for us.

That image didn’t just show us Earth—it showed us where we fit in the vastness, and how rare and aching beautiful our little world really is.

William Anders later reflected, “*We came all this way to explore the Moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth.*” That sentiment gets right to the heart of it.

From a quarter-million miles away, Earth sheds its borders, its politics, even its noise. What remains is something simpler: one world, shared by everyone.

That photograph struck a nerve. It inspired art, music, poetry, and maybe most importantly, a sense of collective responsibility. It lit a fire under the environmental movement.

*Earthrise* became more than an image—it became a symbol of unity and care. A quiet reminder that this world of ours, while resilient, won’t take care of itself.

Even now, all these decades later, that image still catches in our throats. It evokes awe, wonder, and a sobering kind of humility.

It reminds us what we lose when we stop looking outward—and what we stand to protect when we remember how lucky we are to call this place home.

*Earthrise* isn't just a photograph. It's a gentle nudge from the universe, as if from the stars themselves: Don't forget what you have. Cherish it.



## **The Importance of Grandmothers**

This essay is dedicated to my dear sister who often shares her experiences and photos of her precious grandson with me.

Grandmothers occupy a unique and irreplaceable position within families, serving as pillars of emotional support, reservoirs of cultural knowledge, and sources of unwavering love.

Grandmothers are often the bedrock of family stability, bridging generational gaps with their wisdom and nurturing presence.

### **Emotional Well-being and Stability**

Grandmothers frequently act as the emotional anchors of their families, offering a safe harbor in times of distress. Their life experiences enable them to provide valuable perspectives and advice, helping family members navigate personal and collective challenges.

For instance, a grandmother's comforting presence can be particularly vital during family crises such as illness, loss, or financial hardship. Their ability to listen empathetically and provide solace often fosters a sense of security and continuity within the family.

### **Cultural Continuity and Wisdom**

One of the most profound ways grandmothers contribute to family life is through the preservation and transmission of cultural traditions and values.

Grandmothers often serve as storytellers, passing down family histories, cultural practices, and moral teachings that might otherwise be lost over generations. This role is especially crucial in maintaining cultural identity within families, particularly those living in diaspora communities.

For example, in many Indigenous cultures, grandmothers are the keepers of traditional knowledge, including language, customs, and medicinal practices. Their teachings ensure that these vital aspects of cultural heritage are not forgotten and continue to be practiced by future generations.

## **Grandmother-Grandchild Bond**

The bond between grandchildren and grandmothers is a precious one that offers mutual benefits. For grandchildren, this relationship provides a sense of continuity and security.

Grandmothers play a significant and multifaceted role in family life, contributing to emotional well-being, cultural continuity, and overall family stability. Their wisdom, support, and love span generations, creating lasting legacies within their families.

## Scarecrows

In the golden glow of dawn, a scarecrow stands sentinel over a tranquil field, its silhouette stark against the blush of the sky. The soft rustling of cornstalks dances around it, whispering secrets to the morning breeze.

Dressed in tattered clothes, a wide-brimmed hat perched precariously atop its straw-stuffed head, it exudes a quiet vigilance. This figure, humble and steadfast, is more than a mere guardian; it is a thread in the intricate weave of human culture and history.

Scarecrows have guarded fields for centuries, their origins tracing back to ancient civilizations. In ancient Egypt, farmers along the Nile used wooden frames draped with nets to protect their grain fields from flocks of quail.

Similarly, in ancient Greece, the figure of Priapus, a minor god of fertility, stood in vineyards and gardens, his grotesque form believed to scare away birds and ensure a bountiful harvest.

As the practice of agriculture spread, so too did the scarecrow, evolving to reflect the unique customs and beliefs of various cultures. In Japan, the *kakashi* stands as a straw-stuffed sentinel, often dressed in traditional farmers' attire, complete with a kasa hat.

In addition to scaring away birds, these figures were believed to possess a spirit, a *kami*, protecting the fields from pests and misfortune. Similarly, in European folklore, scarecrows were often seen as protective spirits.

The materials and methods used to craft scarecrows are as diverse as the cultures that create them. In rural America, old clothes and straw are used to configure a rural guardian.

In contrast, Indian scarecrows are often made from bright, colorful fabrics and bamboo. These figures, with their exaggerated features and lively appearance, are a testament to the creativity and resourcefulness of the people.

In Nigeria, scarecrows made from palm fronds and old clothes are strategically placed among yam fields, their purpose both to protect and to invoke the favor of the gods.

Despite the variations in appearance and construction, scarecrows around the world share a common thread: they are symbols of the profound connection between humanity and the land.

They stand as guardians, not only of crops but of cultural heritage, embodying the collective wisdom and traditions of the communities they serve.



## Empathy

By stepping into someone else's shoes, empathy bridges the gap between individuals, promoting kindness and unity in our diverse world. Some practices to help me become a more empathetic person are:

- Practice active listening: Engage fully with others, focus on their words, and show genuine interest in their perspective to understand their emotions better.
- Cultivate curiosity: Ask questions to explore others' experiences, feelings, and thoughts, fostering empathy by understanding their unique viewpoints.
- Practice perspective-taking: Put yourself in others' shoes, imagining their feelings and experiences to gain insight into their emotions and reactions.
- Read literature: Explore diverse narratives and characters in books to gain insights into different experiences and emotions, expanding your capacity for empathy.
- Volunteer: Engage in activities that involve helping others, such as volunteering at shelters or community service events, to develop compassion and understanding for those in need.
- Reflect on personal experiences: Consider your own emotions and experiences, recognizing similarities and differences with others to empathize more deeply.
- Seek diverse perspectives: Surround yourself with people from different backgrounds, cultures, and beliefs, exposing yourself to varied experiences and emotions to broaden your empathy.
- Practice mindfulness: Cultivate awareness of your own emotions and reactions, allowing you to be present and empathetic in interactions with others.
- Engage in empathy exercises: Participate in activities designed to enhance empathy, such as role-playing scenarios or empathy-building games, to strengthen your empathetic skills.

– Practice self-care: Take care of your own emotional well-being, allowing you to be more empathetic towards others by understanding the importance of managing your own emotions