

Slack Tides
August 29, 2010

Personally, it's been a pretty good summer. Certainly a better summer than it was for Mel Gibson, Tony Hayward, and Lance Armstrong. I don't think Barrack Obama particularly enjoyed his summer very much either. But my summer was probably not as exciting as it was for LeBron James, Chelsea Clinton, and Betty White, who at age 88 signed not one but two book contracts this summer. The Spanish soccer team had a pretty wonderful summer as well.

It's been an interesting summer all around: A new folk hero emerged, Steven Slater, the Jet Blue flight attendant who turned venting one's frustrations into an art form. Mr. Slater offered vicarious satisfaction for all of us regardless of political or religious persuasions. We all repress our human desire to act more impulsively especially in an unsatisfactory job situation. We're just not that...liberated. And grabbing a couple of beers before his dramatic exit down the plane's emergency chute, added a certain panache that would make even James Bond envious. Fans have set up a Steven Slater Face Book and at least three Slater ballads are making the rounds on YouTube. In a rather bleak summer, Steven Slater gave us all a psychological lift and a good jolt of fresh energy.

The summer had a bizarre twist with the BP oil spill in the Gulf Coast. After bracing ourselves for the worst environmental disaster in American history, it turns out that the oil just disappeared...or in BP terms, it dissipated. There's not much to worry about after all. It made me think that the letters BP maybe stand for Blessed Petroleum for certainly Divine Intervention must have had a hand in the matter.

It's been a schizophrenic summer in terms of same sex marriage. Proposition 8 stood, fell, stood, fell, all summer long until finally Judge Vaughn Walker wrote a 136 page ruling citing lack of scientific evidence that same sex couples would harm the institution of marriage, children, or any one or any thing on the planet. But we still don't know whither Prop 8, although it was an interesting ruling from a judge who was a Reagan appointee to the federal bench, and strongly recommended by then - Attorney General Edwin Meese who, I believe, was never a fan of gay marriage. It seems to me that when a Reagan appointee tells our nation that one either addresses civil rights for everyone fairly or one kisses our democracy good-bye, it is, despite everything else, a great day in America. And the P.S. is that the Bill of Rights is not something we vote on.

The Tea party this summer filled us with anguish and laughter. Their claim that the Civil Rights act was just another overreach by Big Government did not have legs, nor did their lament that bicycle lanes and farmers markets are gateways to communism. We can always count on Michelle Bachmann to provide us with a smile. She sternly reported while addressing climate change research that not one study shows that carbon dioxide is a harmful gas.

And Sharron Angle must have realized she was on shaky ground when she told Harry Reid this summer in her senate campaign to unseat him: "If you quote me I'll sue you."

Our Utah legislature is on board with threatening law suits of their own, namely at the federal Government IF THEYMAKE US TAKE THE MONEY to improve our Utah schools. I will gladly go on record that I believe this kind of reasoning is somehow flawed.

But then again I've been thinking a lot about flaws this summer, or more specifically – imperfection. Quite by chance I fell into a string of books on the topic; first there was a brilliant novel, a first publication by a young writer, Tom Rachman called, appropriately enough, *The Imperfectionists*. I was jealous of this young writer's remarkable skill in exposing our human foibles, and my jealousy revealed of course my own imperfections. Later in the summer I grabbed hold of Ann Lamott's latest book, *Imperfect Birds*. She is no newcomer to the literary world and I have long admired her works. Ann Lamott lives in Mill Valley, a town very close to Bolinas. And she knows Bolinas well, referring in that book to "the ebb and flow of the Bolinas Lagoon, and the strangeness of its inhabitants."

Each year on my first Sunday back after the summer I share news and observations about the strangeness of Bolinas inhabitants. For those who are unfamiliar with Bolinas, the self-appointed Bolinas Border Patrol for decades now, has torn down all highway signs leading to Bolinas because we want to preserve its rarified air. I say "we" because just this summer Mary noticed how uncharacteristically friendly the towns people were towards us and I said: "They recognize and we have become on of the strange inhabitants." In a Bolinas used bookstore this summer a 20-something young man from out of town took his selection to the owner/clerk. "Do you think this is a good book?" asked the clerk. "I'm sure it is" responded the young man. "Well," said the clerk, "we're running a half-price sale on good books today." The young man looked confused but gladly accepted the discount. Bolinas is quite unique.

So after having read *The Imperfectionists* and then *Imperfect Birds*, quite I happened upon a Zen book called: *The Blessings of an Imperfect life*. Was somebody trying to tell me something? Or is imperfection simply in the air?

Charles Isherwood, theatre critic for the New York Times, wrote a piece a month ago about the unusual trend this year in summer stock theater. He wrote that rather than the usual breezy fare one associates with stock, this year the theme seemed to revolve quite clearly around "angst." This dove-tailed nicely with my bombardment of imperfection...and angst would certainly describe my existential state of being. But fortunately it is not limited to me. The theater arts seemed ready to confront the situation of our imperfect society and the angst that flows from our present state of affairs.

I had the opportunity to see first hand what Isherwood was talking about. We took a circuitous route to Bolinas this year by way of Ashland. And when we weren't seeing Shakespearean plays, we were engaged in what could only be described as Protest Art - - Plays defiant in their treatment of an increasingly imperfect society.

In the play, *American Night*, we saw a Mexican immigrant, Juan Jose, madly studying the Citizens Almanac of American History for his citizenship test the next morning. He falls off into a fitful sleep, experiencing American history in his dreams as told by our many oppressed minorities. History offers a different slant depending on who is telling the story: master or slave; migrant worker or land owner; Indian or white man. Juan Jose was exposed to historical data not contained in the Citizens Almanac of American History, and as he awakens the next morning with a whole new perspective on American life and patterns and bigotry, he asks himself: Do I really want to be a citizen of this country? (I hope the show plays in Arizona and Utah).

We saw a production called *Ruined*. It was angst mired in tragedy. My own ignorance of the subject material haunts me still. The play takes place in the Congo where ethnic rivalries prevail, the fallout from its colonial past still lingers, and the global greed for mining the minerals there has caused wars with many millions of people dying there during the past ten years. Thousands still die there every month.

The Congo is an impoverished country with vast mineral wealth: gold, tin, diamonds, copper, and what was the play's major focus: coltan. Coltan powers our modern life here in the west. It is used in cell phones, pagers, DVD players, video and digital cameras, computers, hearing aids, pacemakers, airbags, GPS systems anti-lock braking and nuclear reactors. Rape is regarded as a tactic of war. Coltan is an invaluable mineral and wars and exploitation and other horrendous conditions surround the acquisition of wealth by obtaining it. Deliberate and often public, rape is committed to instill terror and break down communities. Women who are raped, approximately 200,000 in the last decade, are shunned and considered "ruined."

The playwright, Lynn Nottage, who received a Pulitzer for the play, never gives us moral instruction or even hints that tossing out our computers might be the right thing to do. We are, after all beyond the point of no return. But it was like she was telling us: I thought you ought to know about this... "imperfection" in our non-thinking daily habitual use of modern technology. I don't know if we are just unconscious of the consequences of our lifestyle, or if our lifestyles are simply unconscionable.

There are no real "solutions" to the dilemma of people dying and suffering while we mindlessly add apps to our I-phones and I-Pads. It just makes for an uncomfortable reality. An "imperfection" in how things are.

I was eager to get to Bolinas where the vibe is a little more laid back and everyone is driving their VW vans and we just drop money into a produce stand that's open

24/7, and I'm one of the few men without a ponytail. Yet. But while there I was struck by the comedy of our concerns and the silliness of our language. One night a friend brought a bottle of wine from the Napa Valley that boasted proudly on its label that it was Bioholistically produced. I have absolutely no idea what that means. When I asked our friend she said she didn't know either but apparently it was good for us. But I drank the wine cautiously.

Nor did I really understand that the water I drank, from in an environmentally friendly bottle, offered, and I quote directly from its label, "hand-crafted water." I don't think I've ever tasted hand-crafted water before and cannot imagine water being hand-crafted by anyone other than Mother Nature. Has water become now a cottage industry? Should hand-crafted water be our priority given the imperfect world in which we live?

Whenever in Bolinas I return to a bench I somehow adopted as my own. It sits about 20 feet up on a pile of rocks, with its great vantage point of being situated just where the ocean narrows into an inlet as it makes its way to the lagoon. So I am able to observe the continuous action of waves a little to my right, and the tranquility of calm waters a little to my left, and straight ahead is a spit of land from Stinson Beach that together with Bolinas forms this channel. The currents are quite strong as the tide ebbs and flows through the channel.

I watch the seals frolic in the channel. They playfully tease the dogs on the shore who watch them with rapt attention and then decide to jump in and catch a seal. The seals seems to egg the dogs on only to disappear underwater just when the dogs think they've got them. The seals then resurface maybe twenty feet away and you can almost hear them laughing. And the dogs look embarrassed when they return to their masters waiting on the beach.

When the tide comes in, bringing the fish with it, the seal take their position in this little channel and just open their mouths waiting for their dinners to be served. And by the time the tide is out, the seals have made their way to a pretty dry lagoon, and they lie on their backs so the sun can caress their tummies. Hundreds of them just lying there, probably telling dog stories between their naps. In my next life I would like to return as a seal in Bolinas.

Tides are magnificent when you think about them. They connect us so tangibly with the forces of the universe. Two high tides and two low tides every day because the sea is impacted by the gravitational forces exerted by the moon and the sun combined with the rotation of the earth. It's simply amazing how it all hangs together...I think the word is "interconnected."

There is a moment, for me a sacred moment, when the tide stops flowing in or out as it readies itself to reverse direction. In that brief interlude before the water changes direction, the water becomes perfectly still. Nothing moves on the channel. It's

called slack tide. The ongoing continuous movement of the sea just --- stops. A pause in the action as though to “reconsider” its direction.

The world, it feels, is at rest. The momentary stillness delivers a welcomed metaphor for what WE ALL so desperately need throughout the world: A break in the whirlwind of constant motion and action – a metaphor for all habits of distraction stopping for a nano-second: no cell phones, text messages and twitters, no emails and blackberries, nothing digitized, no obligations, and all conventional routines stopped. An invitation to pay attention and examine the essence of what it all might mean.

How different life might be if we could only imitate this act of nature and for a brief moment not be swept along life’s currents; a time-out, a breather, a kind of surrender from moving mindlessly on automatic pilot. It is truly a spot of holiness to observe nature stopping – the sea in perpetual motion just stopping as it contemplates a new direction.

Slack tide. The world at rest. And in this non-movement, however brief, might there be opportunity to hear the pain of African women, to feel the oppression of minorities and the sting of our inhospitable treatment towards the stranger? In that moment called slack tide, could the fighting in Afghanistan stop long enough for a shift in perspectives. Can the lunatic rhetoric from both the left and right stop for a moment to turn off the spigot of hate so we can have a quiet moment of sanity and reconsider our direction?

Are not our lives swept up in the current, moving along with little reflection because the tide just carries us forth. There is a power inherent in the notion of “non-doing.” That’s my human equivalent for slack tide: non-doing or meditation or just silence or anything really, that forces us to stop routines and get at the essence of what we really should be doing. And even nature has to stop before it reverses direction and – good heavens – do we ever need to reverse direction.

The imperfections of our world...from how we fail to heed the needs of one another to how we disregard the needs of an earth grown toxic, these imperfections mired in angst, cry out for a reversal of direction. But before that happens we need to –stop – slack tide, not moving with our inane actions and biases and uncaring hearts long enough to actually reflect on a new perspective and reverse directions.

Slack tide – a time to examine, a time to pay attention, a time to stop in order to notice...it’s what nature does. It is what we must learn to do for the sake of life itself. Amen.