

# HALF OF WHAT I SAY IS MEANINGLESS



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A few summers ago, my family and I packed up our household in preparation to move a mile down the road. Among my horde of haphazard papers, I found an old catalog and application from McGill University in Canada. Its envelope was postmarked Montreal, 22 Feb '72, and addressed to me at California State College, in the little Pennsylvania coal town of California, where I was then enrolled as a freshman. This faded brown package is the only extant artifact of my brush with the Vietnam War.

For boys of my generation, Vietnam had been there all along, like some lethal recessive gene inching its way into our futures. When and how I became conscious of it, I can't say. Its television images seemed to play on the backdrop of my adolescence: a dreary black-and-white junglescape; dreamlike chaos;

soldiers in camouflage being dragged by buddies; machine-gun fire; explosions; and an odd foreshadowing vocabulary: Saigon, Hue, Khe Sanh, Tet, Danang, Cam Ranh, Quang Tri, DMZ, Dak To, Ho Chi Minh. What were these things? By the time I knew, they were indelibly seared into my consciousness. My future had arrived, and, like most of my pals, I was politically vacuous. When I graduated from high school, I packed up and went to college. My parents were picking up the tab.

The United States draft lottery for boys born in 1953, such as myself, took place during the first weeks of 1972. All 365 days of the year were dropped into the proverbial hat. The boys born on the first 150 or so dates plucked from the hat were sure to be drafted. Those with high numbers, two hundred or above, were safe: no draft, no war. No military of any kind. The ones

who caught a seventy-five or lower could count on being sent to Vietnam. Student deferments had been abolished. I copped a thirty-three. I was eighteen, home in Pittsburgh for the holidays, having successfully completed my first college semester. (I had made the dean's list.) At the time, there were 140,000 American soldiers still fighting in Vietnam.

I was alone when I heard the news over the radio. My mother and father were at their jobs as seamstress and steelworker. My sister was married. I wasn't shocked. I wasn't scared. I wasn't anything. But I knew I was changed, as if God had hit me over the head with something big and irrevocable, and I would never be the same. It only vaguely occurred to me that I could die. More than anything else, this event signaled in bold letters that I was no longer a child; that the charmed existence I had enjoyed thus far — and that I had figured would last forever — was now a thing of the past. I sat around the house reading and drinking coffee (a privilege of being an adult) until it was time to hitchhike down to meet my girlfriend, who was still in high school.

I sat waiting for her on the steps of Sacred Heart gym, the place where I had learned to play basketball, where I had taken my first shower, where in eighth grade I had noticed the first black hairs blooming out of my chest. I smoked cigarettes (I kept my smoking hidden from my parents) and listened to the hoops ringing with the girls' practice free throws. It was snowing. The sky was grayish purple. All the automobiles had their lights on, though it was only three o'clock. A gloomy day, the kind of Pittsburgh day I loved: a day when any minute the sky could unload enough snow to slow things to a crawl, and then to a halt, and by nightfall there would be the feeling that time had stopped and nothing bad could ever happen.

The moment she saw me, my girlfriend started crying and threw herself into my arms. Like everyone else, she had heard the news. On the covers of her books she'd magic-marked peace signs. She wore dangly earrings, love beads, and tiny skirts. She was only sixteen and fully intended to marry me.

"We'll go to Canada," she said.

At that moment, her plan suited me. I had no intention of entering the armed forces. In fact, I had no intentions whatsoever.

That night at supper, my mother broke down and sobbed, though we never talked about my number. I realized how different, nearly tragic, I had become in the eyes of others. I had always wanted to be different — indeed, had always thought of myself as so — but not like this.

**W**hen I returned to California State in mid-January, reactions varied. Some offered sympathy and commiseration. Others told me I was a dead man. Quite a few asked me what I was going to do. I had no idea.

My girlfriend and I feverishly wrote letters back and forth. Our first plan was that I would apply for conscientious-objector status. If that didn't work, our backup was Canada. We would get married, and I would enter a Canadian university. Then, according to our plan, I would proceed to law school and become a lawyer who specialized in defending the poor and

downtrodden. Chiseled into my mind was an unyielding picture of the future: I would grow a mustache, wear three-piece suits, and work from home in a giant oak-paneled study, where my gleaming, cuddly children would feel free to play until my wife called us to meals in the sunroom. It could be done, my girlfriend and I assured each other.

Without delay, I sent off to McGill University in Canada for a catalog and application materials. Then, on a weekend home, I took a bus downtown to the Federal Building and picked up a form outlining procedures for obtaining CO status. The clerk who handed it to me said that all I had to do was write a statement.

To my mind, I embodied all of the qualities of a conscientious objector: A CO is against war for moral reasons, and I believed this war was immoral. Everyone said so, especially those with whom I had, at least rhetorically, aligned myself. Also, I was not a violent person. I did not believe in killing. And I certainly had the clothes to be a CO. That day, I was wearing a purple shirt, white-and-blue-striped bell-bottoms, work boots, and an army jacket, in the pocket of which was Sartre's *The Age of Reason*. My shoulder-length hair flowed from under a navy blue watch cap. I brimmed with confidence. Until I read the form:

To be classified as a conscientious objector you must be opposed to war in any form. Your objection must be based on moral or ethical beliefs, or beliefs which are commonly accepted as religious. Your beliefs must influence your life as the belief in God influences the life of one who is a traditionally religious conscientious objector. To qualify, your conscience must be spurred by deeply held moral, ethical, or religious beliefs which would give you no peace if you allowed yourself to become a combatant member of the armed forces.

There were also a number of questions addressing the applicant's "core of belief." It was like applying for the priesthood. To simply write, "War and killing are bad" — which in 1972 was a bit of a cliché — would not be enough. And that's all I had in my arsenal. I needed an ideology, and there in the cold hallway outside the draft board, I realized, with a touch of panic, that I thoroughly lacked one.

Looking for reassurance, I caught a bus to the Friends Peace Center in Oakland. I explained to a long-haired, bearded counselor, whose job it was to coach people like me in such matters, that I had a bad draft number and wanted to shoot for a CO.

He gave me a withering look and asked what I would do if I walked in the door of my home and found someone raping my mother.

I knew what the correct answer was. The true pacifist would somehow persuade the offender, in a completely nonviolent manner, to stop his assault. As I visualized the scenario, however, I saw myself reaching for the big knife my mother used to slice eggplant and stabbing the culprit as many times as I had to — maybe even a few extra times for good measure.

I replied vaguely that I'd do whatever it took to protect my mother.

"You are probably not a CO," he said. I was still welcome, of course, to submit a statement to my draft board, but first I needed to spend some time reflecting on my commitment to peace and nonviolence.

I thanked him and walked out into the winter air. It was a dark, bitter day: snow, wind, slush. I stuck out my thumb. No one would stop. I started walking. How disrespectful, how egotistical, to think that I could be a CO just by writing a statement. Really, I wasn't "opposed to war in any form." I thought U.S. involvement in World War II had been as moral as it gets. I was born in 1953, into the Republican presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, eight years after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. The Korean War Armistice was signed when I was just seven days old. Joseph McCarthy had everyone suspecting the neighbors of being Communists. All the adults I knew had talked about World War II as if it had happened the day before. And I was, after all, a boy — with a beloved arsenal of toy guns — who, like other little boys, adored any film with sword- or gunplay. It was good clean fun. If anyone had asked me just a few years before I started college who my favorite actor was, I probably would have volunteered John Wayne. I had loved *The Green Berets*, propagandist pap through and through.

In truth, I had always thought of myself, in some pit of my subconscious, as a soldier. Before I had ever heard of the war in Vietnam, I had lived through the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. I'd grown up during the height of the Cold War. Khrushchev, Castro — their names were dirty words. My entire existence was paramilitary, my psyche pocked with trenches and foxholes. Damn it, I was a boy, and there was nothing better and braver and truer and more blessed in the eyes of God and country than a soldier. Girls had babies. Boys went to war. Period. What was it our football coach told us? *Make them piss blood.*

Apparently, I was not against killing and violence. I would have loved being a war hero. The reason I didn't want to go to war was quite simple: I was afraid. As for my "belief in God," well, I hadn't consulted him. At the sobering announcement that my number was thirty-three, I had prayed for miraculous deliverance, but it had been an eternity since I had gone to Mass or received the sacraments. I had no "deeply held moral, ethical, or religious beliefs." I wasn't even sure what I believed anymore.

So I went back to California State and waited to hear from McGill. Lurking in my mail was a summons from the draft board. I was classified 1-A and was to report to the Federal Building for my preinduction physical.

I did not tell my parents about the letter. I might even have thrown it away; I'm not sure. What I am sure about is that I did not report for that physical.

**W**hen the materials for McGill arrived in late February of 1972, I was a month into my second semester and doing well. In addition to my classes, I was on the dorm council and

the varsity track team, and I had even published, anonymously, a poem called "This Disgruntled Noise" (my first-ever publication) in the campus literary magazine.

Living in the welter of new theories and ideas that college offered, I began to sense what a mechanized, futile place the world was, how technology subverts humanity at every turn, how instead of souls people now had appliances. In my beloved, imagined poverty, I fueled all-nighters with instant coffee whitened with Pream. I even started smoking a corncob pipe stuffed with synthetically flavored tobacco. I'd sit at my desk, puffing away by candlelight, a stick of incense embedded in the candle wax, and write poems that, I was sure, would one day bring me fame. My dorm buddies, mostly tough kids from one-horse steel towns in the Monongahela Valley, eyed me with respect. To them I was cool and intense: an egghead, a real silver-plated bookworm who would still chip in, even on school nights, for a couple of quarts of Iron City beer.

My favorite teacher was Connie Mack Rea, a former pro-baseball player and direct descendant of legendary baseball pioneer Connie Mack. A tall, enigmatic, ruggedly handsome man with a clipped mustache, Professor Rea called us "Mr." or "Miss." He wore elaborately knitted sweaters, expensive sports jackets, and pointy, tooled-leather cowboy boots. His air was aristocratic, vain, wry, condescending, perhaps even tragic, as if he were nursing some secret wound about which he'd remain eternally silent.

There was a word Mr. Rea used frequently, though far from casually; a word I had heard kicked around in high school and that had come to have, among my friends and me, a superficial chic: *existentialism*. I never really knew what it meant, but I would mouth it occasionally as if it were a kind of password. Even now I have to consult Webster's to get my bearings. Pinning that philosophical concept down is like trying to scoop mercury. Mr. Rea described it as the primal core of individuality, the insideness of you and you alone that no one — not physicians, priests, parents, or lovers — could get to, because your unique experience placed you in a category of one.

No wonder I had been feeling so misunderstood all my life. By God, I had been born an existentialist! And never had I felt more misunderstood than at the moment my birth date had betrayed me. How could anyone know how I felt? What it was like to look into my own personal abyss? Heck, even I didn't know what it was like, and it was *my* abyss.

Mr. Rea had us read Albert Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus," an essay of just over a thousand words that seemed to sum it all up: Step out of line and, like Sisyphus, you are given a rock that, every time you finally roll it up the mountain, rolls back down. The gods, Camus writes, "had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor."

Existentialism seemed the perfect philosophy for a fellow in my spot. The notion that life is meaningless, at best a cruel joke, made perfect sense. I was ready to sign on, though I was far from a nihilist. In fact, I was hopelessly ambitious.

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