



# A Thousand Elephants

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This is *The Sun's* thirty-third-anniversary issue. How grateful I am that this improbable dream continues; that my ardor for the work is undiminished. I'm married to *The Sun*, I expect, till death do us part.

Thirty-three has never been just another number to me. Jesus was said to have been thirty-three years old when he was crucified, and I'm a Jew who sometimes prays to Jesus. For numerologists thirty-three symbolizes a high level of spiritual development, and the number also makes an appearance in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and numerous other religions. There are even — you guessed it — thirty-three principal religions in the world today, according to Mircea Eliade's *The Concise Guide to World Religions*. As a kid, I listened to music on vinyl LPs that played at 33½ revolutions per minute, and sometimes I'd become mesmerized by a record spinning round and round — the closest I got, in those days, to an altered state of consciousness.

I learned recently that thirty-three is also the number of innings played in the longest baseball game in history, a 1981

minor-league game between the Pawtucket Red Sox and the Rochester Red Wings. The game went on for more than eight hours, and there were only seventeen fans left in the stands when, shortly after 4 A.M., someone finally had the good sense to say, *Enough*.

When I started *The Sun* in 1974, the longest war in U.S. history — in which fifty-eight thousand Americans and more than 3 million Vietnamese were killed — had just ended. President Richard M. Nixon, facing impeachment because of the Watergate scandal, resigned in disgrace that year. (Hint, hint, George W.). Feminists picketed the *New York Times* to protest the paper's refusal to use the designation "Ms." *All in the Family* was the highest-rated show on television. Drivers waited on long lines to buy gasoline because of an oil embargo. It was a lot less expensive to buy a cup of coffee or a baseball team or the White House. For a million dollars, according to conventional wisdom, you could start a magazine.

I was about a million dollars short, but what I lacked in money, I made up for in determination. It was both an act of faith and an example of hopeless naiveté to start a magazine with no office, no staff, no money, and no business plan. But I believed that if my intention was pure enough, and if I worked hard enough, the universe would take care of the rest.

Becoming a successful publisher wasn't my goal back then. In fact, I was suspicious of success and scornful of people to whom money seemed to matter more than, say, falling in love, or reading a great book. To be obsessed, during one's brief and

mysterious existence on this earth, with accumulating wealth made as little sense to me as building a dream house at the beach with no windows facing the sea.

Eventually, I met some successful men and women who'd read just as many great books as I had and whose love affairs were no less passionate (or loving). Also, after more than a decade of tottering on the brink of bankruptcy, *The Sun* began to grow — from fewer than a thousand subscribers to nearly seventy thousand today. Since I was still the same person — my values intact, my ardor for social justice unchanged — I realized that my opinions about success needed to be tempered. What could I really know about another person from the size of his or her bank account? Other people's success wasn't the problem; my self-righteous judgments about success were the problem.

In 1974 I wrote on a manual typewriter; today I write on a computer. Getting the words right is still difficult. In 1974 I didn't know what I was doing; today I still sometimes don't, but I'm more practiced at not-knowing: an expert, you might say. So I raise a glass to faith, and I raise a glass to hopeless naiveté, and I raise a glass to the artist Henri Matisse, who said, "You study, you learn, but you guard the original naiveté. It has to be within you, as desire for drink is within the drunkard or love within the lover."

I'm grateful for *The Sun's* modest success. But I felt grateful, too, when I typed up the first issue in the middle of winter in a friend's unheated garage. I felt grateful when I stood on the street selling *The Sun*, hoping to make enough to cover the check I'd just written to the printer. I felt grateful when I had to live in the back of the office because I couldn't afford a place of my own. I felt grateful that, no matter how many bills went unpaid, we never ran out of coffee.

I was interviewed recently by someone who asked why so many of *The Sun's* readers feel such a strong connection with the magazine. I said it's partly because of the deeply personal nature of much of what we publish. It's also because we try to relate to our readers without cleverness or guile. We're not selling a solution to life's problems or presenting ourselves as any wiser than we actually are. I think of the magazine as a conversation between a writer and a reader. A conversation is interesting to me when people are being genuine, when they're more concerned with sharing difficult truths than with showing off. What's the use of striking a pose? We're all in the same boat — mysterious flesh-and-blood creatures, radiant and broken — and of course the boat is sinking, but there's still time to share a story or two as the night comes on.

The interviewer asked what will happen to *The Sun* after I retire. I don't intend to retire, I said. I can't imagine anything else I'd rather do. But I know a morning will arrive when I'll no longer climb the creaky wooden stairs to my second-floor office and turn on my desk lamp and get to work on the next issue, because I face the same mandatory-retirement rule we

all do, the one from which there's no reprieve no matter how many hours I spend at the gym and how many vitamins I gobble. (I used to take mine in strict alphabetical order; now I throw caution to the wind and gulp a handful at a time.)

For better and for worse, my temperament, intellect, and sense of moral urgency have shaped *The Sun*, and it's hard for me to contemplate a future in which someone else is sitting at my desk. It's about as appealing as imagining the kind of man my wife might marry after I'm gone. Of course, I know it won't make a bit of difference what kind of man he is, as long as he loves her, and she loves him.

It's true, I told the interviewer, that I gave birth to the magazine and have nurtured it all these years. It's equally true that the unmanifest spirit of *The Sun* — its energetic essence, its animating force, its primordial will-to-be — needed someone in the human realm to give birth to it, and, for whatever reason, it chose me. Though I sometimes call it "my" magazine, I know it's not mine and never was. A Hindu saint once said that Abraham Lincoln was a great president because he knew he was only acting president. I'm no Lincoln, but I've tried to remember I'm only acting editor. If my successor remembers this, too, if my successor loves *The Sun* and is well loved by *The Sun*, what difference does it make whether he or she selects exactly the same authors to publish that I would have selected, or insists as emphatically on serial commas, or keeps the office just as neat?

After my stubborn heart calls it a day, *The Sun's* board of directors will choose a new editor, and the luminous heart of the magazine will keep on shining. And who knows? Under a different editor's guidance, *The Sun* may blaze more brightly than I can imagine. And what if it doesn't? What if the next editor turns out to be completely wrong for the job, an arrogant fool who confuses his or her name up in lights with the light of truth, and tries to take the magazine in precisely the wrong direction? Then may all our devoted readers — those who read every issue and faithfully renew their subscriptions and write impassioned letters about what the magazine means to them — rise up and stone the son of a bitch.

The other day, I was wondering just how much influence *The Sun* can have in a country of 300 million people. Circulation numbers seemed like too crude a yardstick; I might as well gauge the magazine's influence by calculating its readers' aggregate weight. Well, I thought, *why not?* So I looked up the weight of average adult Americans, did the math, and came up with 11 million pounds, or more than five thousand tons, of *Sun* readers. Now, five tons is what an average elephant weighs. How tempting, then, to imagine a thousand elephants — a thousand elephants! — crashing through the jungle after learning that the new issue of *The Sun* has arrived in port. Why are they so drawn to this magazine? After all, there are no columnists advising them on how to become richer or better-looking elephants. No ads for weekend workshops that promise to enlighten them about their true elephant nature. No peanuts. Yet here they come, trunks raised high. A thousand elephants! ■