

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

WHEN MY DAUGHTER MARA CALLS ME A WORK-aholic, I tell her there's a world of difference between being addicted to work and being dedicated to a labor of love. But I have to admit that my sixty-hour weeks are indistinguishable from anyone else's, and that even a labor of love exacts a price. It's family lore that, when Mara and her sister Sara were younger, I took them to an art museum after I'd been up most of the night finishing an issue of *The Sun*. While they looked at paintings, I leaned against a wall and fell asleep, standing up.

NO MATTER HOW MANY HOURS I PUT IN, I NEVER get caught up, never take a step into the promised land rumored to lie beyond these stacks of unread manuscripts and unanswered mail. I promise myself I'll work harder, but in the last five years, *The Sun's* readership has doubled, the staff has grown, and I'm busier than ever. Unless I'm willing to further neglect my wife, or my writing, or my physical well-being, I have to accept my limitations, which isn't easy for a perfectionist like me. To stay faithful to why I'm publishing *The Sun*, I need to remember the difference between what's genuinely important and what merely clamors for my attention. As the journalist Murray Kempton once wrote: "The devil never comes offering you something evil. The devil comes offering you a larger audience."

IS BUSYNESS AND FERMENT NECESSARILY A BAD thing? In the movie *The Third Man*, a character observes that thirty years of turmoil in Italy under the Borgias produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance, while five hundred years of peace in Switzerland produced the cuckoo clock.

I DON'T LIKE DEMONSTRATIONS, BUT I WENT TO the antiwar protest in Washington, DC, on October 26 because I needed to say, *Enough*. Enough cluster bombs and daisy-cutter bombs and cookie-cutter bombs. Enough people in high places who aren't high enough.

On the crowded Metro Saturday morning, it was obvious where most of us were heading. At one station, a long-haired young man got on with an American flag, and a cheer went up. How grateful I was to be reminded that the flag can represent something other than knee-jerk patriotism.

As I anticipated, a few speakers at the rally insisted that the United States was the worst imperialist power the world has ever known, an oddly chauvinistic view, as if the United States always needed to be either the best or the worst. What if we're neither? What if we're just the latest example of power run amok? Most of the crowd didn't hate America, just the notion of another war with Iraq, especially one led by a president who was elected by 24 percent of the people and five justices on the Supreme Court.

The rally was held near the Vietnam War Memorial, a fitting backdrop. The *New York Times* downplayed the story, saying the attendance was "in the thousands." In fact, the figure was closer to one hundred thousand, which made it the largest antiwar demonstration in Washington since the Vietnam era. And the war hasn't even begun.

I HAVEN'T MEMORIZED MANY POEMS, BUT I'VE never forgotten Richard Brautigan's "Star-Spangled Nails": "You've got / some Star-Spangled / nails / in your coffin, kid. / That's what / they've done for you, / son." It was published in 1968, when the death toll of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam had climbed to thirty thousand.

WHAT IF EVERY POLITICIAN STARTED SPEAKING nothing but the truth? What if every one of us did? My friend Jim writes, "Isn't it odd that the hardest thing in the world is just to tell the simple truth? Without exaggeration. Without inflation."

NOT LONG AGO, I HEARD POET AND MEN'S-movement leader Robert Bly tell of trying to get back home when his father lay dying. But in Seattle he missed a connecting flight. "Now," Bly said, his voice tremulous, "every time I'm in that airport. . . ." He started to cry, unable to finish the sentence. Later, I told him how moved I was to see him weep in front of more than a hundred men. He said it was easier now that he was older; years ago, before he was able to acknowledge his own grief, he couldn't cry even when he was alone. But he went into therapy at the age of sixty, he said, with a therapist who had a very expressive face. "I'd tell him something about my childhood," Bly said, "and his face would get sad, and I'd say, 'Why are you looking so sad?' And he'd say, 'What you're telling me is sad.'"

I TELL A FRIEND I FELT ABANDONED AS A CHILD. "Were you abandoned?" he asks. I can't tell whether he just wants the facts or is being deliberately provocative, drawing a distinction between feeling abandoned and actually being abandoned — say, left in the middle of the night on the steps of an orphanage. Suddenly, I feel ashamed, as if I'm making excuses for myself. Maybe I am.

THIS IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF THEIR lives for the 360,000 human beings who will be born today. They've come a long way for their precious incarnations. For them, we want to put our best foot forward; they deserve the best, don't they? We're the caretakers: that is, when we're not napping or watching television or going to war. Three hundred sixty thousand beings will cry today, the first day of the rest of their crying. So many infants in so many mangers. So many Buddhas opening and closing their little hands.