

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

WE ATE TOO MUCH. OF COURSE WE DID. IT WAS a Thanksgiving feast, here in the land of plenty. Go ahead, America, take another bite. The most powerful nation in the world doesn't have to apologize for being a little hungry.

BY EXERCISING MORE AND EATING LESS, I'VE LOST the fifteen pounds I gained last winter. It's tempting to imagine I've become more virtuous. In fact, I've merely become more disciplined. Why assume that discipline is necessarily a virtue? Anorexics are disciplined. So is the miser who won't give a dollar to charity. So is George W. Bush, in bed every night by ten. Besides, if I equate discipline with virtue, I'm more likely to judge others for their seeming *lack* of discipline. Surely there's no virtue in that. Yesterday, I visited with an old friend who'd gained quite a bit of weight since I'd last seen her. Making a judgment about her appearance was as tempting as reaching for a sweet. But I didn't need those calories.

I WAS SADDENED TO HEAR OF THE DEATH OF FRED Rogers. He treated children as human beings, not cartoons that someone hadn't finished drawing yet. How many millions of men and women are more decent people today because, when they were growing up, Mister Rogers was a star in their sky: the real thing, a light they could steer by? After his death, I learned that he swam every morning, was a vegetarian, and never drank or smoked — yet died at seventy-four of stomach cancer. Oh man, I know I'm in the neighborhood of make-believe when seventy-four seems young to me.

REMEMBERING THAT I'M NOT GOING TO BE HERE forever can be terrifying. It can also help me to feel more alive. I've set my watch to chime every hour — like a meditation bell, like a fire alarm — to remind me of this undeniable fact.

SOGYAL RIMPOCHE: "IT IS SAID THAT THE ORDINARY practitioner meets death without apprehension; the mediocre practitioner meets death without regret; and the supreme practitioner meets death with joy."

THE YEAR HAS GONE BY SO QUICKLY. OR MAYBE it's me who's moving too fast. How often, as I bounce from task to task like a gymnast doing his floor routine, do I stop, take a deep breath, and open my eyes and my heart? Yet when I remember to pause, as I did yesterday, to contemplate my two gray cats lying beside each other on the bed — as beautiful a sight as I'd seen all day — how long did it take for my inner coach to grab me by the collar and point me back to the mat?

I DON'T NEED TO TAKE PERSONALLY THE FACT that creating something truthful and beautiful is a challenge.

It isn't a challenge because I'm not smart enough. It's a challenge because it's a challenge.

RUMI: "YOU SAY YOU CAN'T CREATE SOMETHING original? Don't worry about it. Make a cup of clay so your brother can drink."

I ASKED GOD TO WAIT WHILE I STRAIGHTENED MY desk. *Take as long as you need*, God said. Being a fool, I took God at his word, which he, being God, has kept.

I DON'T NEED TO WORRY THAT I'VE SHUT THE door on God. God knows where to find me.

ANOTHER DEADLINE LOOMS — WHICH MEANS another cup of coffee, and another, and another. I've had so much coffee today that, in Costa Rica, the *campesinos* have put my picture on an altar next to a small plaster statue of the Virgin. I'm honored, but I'm sleepy.

I THANK THE SUN FOR THIS WARMTH. I THANK the turning planet and its molten core. I thank this moving hand, and the teachers who taught me the alphabet, and the writers who taught me the power of words. I thank the living language for not giving up on me even when I gave up on myself.

WHEN PABLO CASSALS, THE WORLD'S FOREMOST cello virtuoso, was in his nineties, he was asked why he still practiced three hours a day. He replied, "Because I think I'm improving."

I DREAMT THAT I TRAVELED BACK IN TIME TO offer encouragement to a younger me. I hovered beside him as he sat at his desk with his head in his hands, wondering if all his effort had been worth it. When he lay down to take a nap, I lay down beside him, and held him, and kissed him. How strange! Was this the ultimate narcissism, a homoerotic dream about myself? Or was I, as my friends keep advising, finally loving myself?

I DIDN'T START THE SUN WITH A RECIPE. I MADE it up as I went along. I'm still making it up, even though the kitchen is so much bigger and more elegant now, with decent knives and sturdy pots and pans. But water still boils at the same temperature, and hunger is still hunger. I mean the hunger to break bread, and the other hunger: to break bread *together*.

TIME THROWS HIS ARM AROUND MY SHOULDER, congratulates me for thirty years of hard work, and hands me a cigar: the exploding kind, I see. I thank him and slip it into my pocket. *For later*, I say. *When my work is done*.