

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

MY WATCH STOPPED WORKING. JUST LIKE THAT.

No warning. No letter advising me that time was about to stand still. I took it as a sign, or what Carlos Castaneda called a “gesture.” The universe gestures to us all the time, he said, and if we learn how to read those gestures, we become, in a way, more literate, more able to follow the signs that really matter. Since it was an inexpensive watch and not worth fixing, I’ve hung it on the wall next to my calendar: a reminder that it’s unwise to take refuge in all those tidy little squares, lined up like soldiers ready to do my bidding; that, for each of us, “next week” is merely a hypothesis.

IF PRESIDENT BUSH PAID ATTENTION TO CERTAIN

signs, perhaps there wouldn’t be nearly five hundred U.S. soldiers dead in Iraq, and thousands of others injured, and who knows how many tens of thousands of Iraqi lives destroyed. Last February, when the Columbia space shuttle disintegrated while trying to land, killing all seven crew members aboard, the moment rippled with symbolic significance. Camille Paglia wrote: “So many times, in antiquity, emperors went to the oracles to ask for advice about going to war. Roman generals summoned soothsayers to read the entrails before battle. . . . Kings throughout history have been shaken by signals like this from beyond. . . . If there was ever a sign for the president and his administration to rethink what they’re doing, this was it.” Still, two days after the tragedy, the president announced that it wouldn’t deter him from going to war with Iraq — even though the shuttle fell over the president’s home state of Texas, strewn its parts over a town named Palestine; even though one of the astronauts on board was an Israeli who had bombed Iraq twenty years earlier; even though Columbia is what many colonists wanted to name this country (after Christopher Columbus). It’s no surprise, I suppose, that a president who admits he doesn’t read newspapers — preferring to get his news from the people who work for him — couldn’t be bothered by the writing on the wall.

FOR THE NEXT WAR, INSTEAD OF AN ARMY COM-

posed of those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, let’s start at the top. We can begin with the men and women who serve in Congress, or sit on the boards of Fortune 500 companies, or drive Humvees to the mall. If a draftee turns out to be too old or feeble to stand on his own two feet, we’ll find someone to assist him, just as we’d assist a wounded soldier — say, a healthy, strapping nineteen-year-old from New Jersey who’s just had his leg blown off. Wouldn’t the president bring a kid like that a chair? Wouldn’t the president offer him an artificial leg and tell him not to worry: the government will cover 50 percent of the cost of the prosthesis. “And we’ll see to it,” the president assures him, “that painkillers won’t cost an arm and a leg. . . . Come on, son. That was a joke. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

IT’S MISGUIDED TO BLAME GEORGE W. BUSH FOR

everything that’s wrong today, as if humans haven’t been slaughtering each other since Cain slew Abel. As a species, have we ever taken more than a step away from our animal origins? “The drive to dominate one’s fellows,” anthropologist Robert Ardrey wrote, “is an instinct three or four hundred million years old.” So too, Ardrey says, is our preoccupation with weapons. “The development and contest of superior weapons is Homo sapiens’ single, universal cultural preoccupation.”

I DREAMED I WAS LOOKING AT A PHOTO EXHIBIT

that celebrated the courage of American soldiers in World War II. They really were brave, I thought. I called Norma to tell her about the exhibit, then asked what she was doing. Writing a letter to an ex-boyfriend, she said; so far, she’d written 150 pages. I woke up, fuming with jealousy. But my intention was to start the day with gratitude, so what can I be thankful for? For the amazing heroism some of us display under harrowing circumstances; that’s one reason war is glorified, no doubt. For a dream that reminds me I’m only human (not that I’d exactly forgotten). For a wife who is generous with loving words in an age when letter-writing is a dying art.

AS CHRISTMAS APPROACHES, I’M REMINDED OF

the ice storm that knocked out electricity to hundreds of thousands of homes in North Carolina last year. During the week we went without power, Norma and I slept in front of our fireplace every night, huddled together for warmth. Before the week ended, I happened to drive through a neighborhood that was one of the first to get power back. When I saw a brightly lit Santa on someone’s lawn, I had a momentary urge to do something unneighborly. How envious I felt: they had power and we didn’t. Then I wondered: in a world where 800 million people don’t have enough to eat, what’s it like to feel this way every day of your life?

TALKING WITH FRIENDS ABOUT WHAT’S HAPPEN-

ing in the world today can be profoundly dispiriting, but so is taking refuge in small talk. It’s hard to find the balance. Yesterday, when I ran into a friend outside a local cafe, our conversation turned to world events; before long, we sounded like two mourners at a funeral. His two-year-old daughter tugged at his sleeve. “Look,” she said, pointing at a squirrel. We looked for a moment, then went back to our lament. A couple of minutes later, she interrupted us again. “Look at the cute squirrel,” she said. I glanced at the squirrel, the massive oak tree the squirrel was climbing, the rags of clouds in the overcast sky. Then I told my friend I needed to go. I was a block away before I realized I hadn’t said goodbye to his daughter. I had forgotten she was standing there, still entranced by the world around her. She was just a child. She was so small.