

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

THIS IS *THE SUN*'S THIRTY-FIRST ANNIVERSARY issue. But for me there's only one issue: the one I'm working on right now. Since this is my path, I keep walking the path, and sweeping the path, too. I keep an eye out for dragons. Yes, there are dragons. The dragon of playing it safe. The dragon of taking my good fortune for granted. I remind myself what it was like when I started: no money, no acclaim, just me and the work. And all that mattered was giving myself to the work as passionately as I'd ever given myself to any woman. And the work returned my passion. And nothing has changed.

I NEVER SAW MONEY AS A SYMBOL OF PERSONAL power. Yet, now that I have a few extra dollars in my pocket, I like the expansive feeling that comes from spending a little more on a bottle of wine or picking up the tab when I have lunch with a friend. Surely it's not necessary to renounce the material world in order to grow spiritually. Then I remember Gandhi's injunction: "Think of the poorest person you have ever seen, and ask yourself if your next act will be of any use to him."

MY FRIEND M. SAYS THAT MY ESSAY ABOUT RALPH Nader in the November *Sun* was too judgmental. "Nader never asked to be your hero," he points out. "He's just being who he is. You don't really know the man. If you've idealized him, whose fault is that?" Maybe he has a point. After all, some readers may idealize me, and whose fault is that? They don't really know me, after all. Not the way the refrigerator at midnight knows me. Not the way children dying of hunger know me. Their bloated bellies and the flies crawling over their faces know me. The comfortable leather armchair I'm sitting in knows me.

TOO BUSY TO SPEND A FEW MINUTES MEDITA-ting or praying this morning. Too busy to wave when I drove past God's little cabin at the edge of town. Traffic was already building on the interstate.

I STAYED UP LATE AGAIN, AS IF THE NIGHT WERE mine to do with as I pleased, as if the goddess of dreams didn't mind being snubbed. But this morning, rather than lamenting how little sleep I got, why not be thankful for the bed I rise from, for the floor I stand on? Reaching for my toothbrush, I can be thankful for such a handy little tool: inexpensive, intelligently designed, maintenance-free. I can be thankful for my computer (made in Taiwan), even though I understand as little about how it works as I do about my car (made in Sweden) or my own body (made in the U.S.A.). Yes, I can be grateful for my tattered bathrobe and the six feet of meat wrapped inside it, which has been performing reasonably well all these years. Even now, I don't have any trouble starting in the morning. I can be thankful for the birds who

have just begun to sing; that's not my language they're singing, but I listen just the same.

I NEVER MET CARLOS CASTANEDA, BUT I'VE BEEN inspired by his books about what it means to be a fearless and compassionate spiritual warrior. The night after *The Sun*'s thirtieth-anniversary celebration last year, I dreamt that Castaneda was a guest in my home. What a powerful, enigmatic, mischievous presence he was. He wanted to congratulate me, he said, and to remind me of a few things. For one, he said, a spiritual warrior doesn't list "warrior" as his occupation. Nor, when he eats out, does he order the "Warrior's Special." I laughed. I said I'd already figured that out. He cocked his head and smiled. "Then maybe you've also figured out," he said, "that a spiritual warrior regards all men and women equally, no matter who they think they are and what they think they deserve and how loudly they insist upon it." He looked me in the eye. "That's because a spiritual warrior knows that there are two advantages to getting what you want in life," he continued. "The first is getting what you want; the second is realizing it's not what you really want." He paused. "Understand?" His gaze bored into me. "One more thing," he said, putting his arm around my shoulder and drawing me closer. "A spiritual warrior knows that it's foolish to worry so much. The only real life-or-death situation he faces is that he's going to die one day, and there's nothing he can do about it." He smiled and gave my shoulder a little squeeze. "Got that?"

AMAZING BUT TRUE: MILLIONS OF AMERICANS, none of us convinced that George W. Bush won the election fairly, went to bed one night last November and had the same dream. We dreamt the streets were filled with angry citizens protesting that an election had been stolen. But these weren't American citizens demonstrating on American streets. These were Ukrainians, we realized. *Ukrainians*? How strange, we thought, tossing fitfully in our sleep.

AMERICA, THEY'RE GOING TO DRESS YOU FOR THE inauguration in something tight and sexy. Who says a 228-year-old country can't turn heads? The president will whisper that he has a surprise for you tonight. They all say that, don't they? You'll smile as if no one has ever kissed you this way before. You'll tell him his touch makes you feel young again. Please, America, don't tell me it was never about love. Don't say it was always about the money. I spied you once when you thought you were alone, when all the money-boys and patriots were off somewhere making jokes at your expense. I saw you rise from the bed and stand by the window. You were naked. You were beautiful. O America, I couldn't turn away. You closed your eyes and shook your head as if to keep from weeping. And then, America, you started singing.