

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

IF I WAKE UP TIRED, DOES THAT MEAN I'VE BEEN working too hard in the dream realm, too — spending all night answering dream e-mails; trying to decide whether to publish any of the dream manuscripts stacked on my dream desk? I think about the busy day that lies ahead, waiting to ambush me from all directions. *My work*, I call it, the way I call this body *mine*. Having too much work to do: Is that like being too fat? If so, I'm tipping the scales at eight hundred pounds, my pockets bulging with to-do lists and jumbo paper clips. I keep ordering different day planners, each one promising to melt away the pounds. But everything I lose I gain right back again.

AS MY PLANE TAXIS TOWARD THE RUNWAY, I think about how, until a few hundred years ago, the top speed most people traveled was that of a galloping horse. Soon, however, I'll be flying through the air at six hundred miles an hour. At that speed, a ten-mile commute to work would take one minute; a twenty-six-mile marathon, two and a half minutes. My reverie is interrupted by the pilot announcing that we'll be delayed briefly while he waits for clearance to take off. A half-hour later, we're still waiting. It won't be much longer, the pilot says. He thanks us for our patience.

WHEN I TRY TOO HARD TO GET MY LIFE INTO order, I forget the order that gives rise to this life — an order born of mystery, but an order nonetheless.

BEFORE FALLING ASLEEP LAST NIGHT, I READ THE words of a spiritual master who said his aim was to pry me loose from my illusory "me-ness" and awaken me — right here, right now — to my true nature. Enlightenment isn't just for a chosen few, he insisted, nor is it necessary to meditate for thirty years before seeing through the illusion of separateness. His words stirred something in me, since, as a young man, I imagined I'd become enlightened by the time I was old. But now that I'm an old man, becoming enlightened in this lifetime seems as implausible as recapturing my lost youth. Obviously, this makes the notion of a sudden awakening very appealing. But so are advertisements for skin creams that promise to erase wrinkles or a little blue pill that will let me go on pretending I'm the greatest lover in the world. As I put the book down and closed my eyes, I wondered: How do I distinguish the truth of what he says from my desire for what he says to be true? And when I got up this morning, I was still a dreamer rubbing sleep from my eyes.

THE YOUNG BOY IN ME IS AMAZED AT WHAT I can get away with now that my face is wrinkled and my beard is gray. Instead of posing as a young man, at which I was adept for so many years, I can pretend to be an old man. Hell, I'll even have myself fooled by the end of Act Three.

I'M NOT THIS BODY. I'M NOT THIS PERSONALITY. Yet when someone calls my name, I turn my head and answer. So, too, do I identify with this moment in history. It also calls to me — as an American who reads the same headlines day after day: about the mother who cried when her son fell in battle; about the law that bans grieving ("Unpatriotic," they say); about the king of the mountain and the king of the valley and the war they keep fighting, a war without end.

HOW ODD TO TURN ON NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO recently and hear Rush Limbaugh. In an interview with a reporter for the BBC, Limbaugh described how he became deaf in 2001 over a period of just a few months — a frightening ordeal, no doubt; surgery addressed the problem, and he was able to hear again. At least, he was able to hear what he wanted to hear, a distinction it's still apparently difficult for him to make. Yet are Rush Limbaugh and I really so different? Deep down, I know that separateness is an illusion; that making "I" my central reference point leads only to suffering; that we're all part of something deeper and more magnificent than the rational mind can comprehend. But my ego won't be convinced. Like some megalomaniacal talk-show host, my ego jabbars on hour after hour, day after day. Once in a while, a miracle occurs: my ego shuts up and I perceive the truth clearly. But moments later, as if nothing had happened, my ego resumes its regular programming.

VISITING A SICK FRIEND RECENTLY, I WAS RE- minded how much a hospital depends not just on doctors and nurses but on orderlies and janitors and clerks; and on the paramedics who drive the ambulances and on the mechanics who keep the ambulances running; and on inventors who dreamt up the life-saving devices and on the high-school science teachers who taught those inventors how electricity works. "Independence," wrote George Bernard Shaw, is a "middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth." It's humbling to remember that at practically every moment, someone, somewhere, is working hard on my behalf: a farmer in California is watering vegetables I'll one day eat; a young man in New York is writing a poem I'll read, weeping; a woman is finishing her residency in anesthesiology, her eyes perhaps the last eyes I'll ever see.

I WANTED TO MILK THE DAY FOR ALL IT WAS worth, as if Time were a cow and all I needed was a bucket. But no sooner did I get started than Time swished her tail and the bright new day was gone. *How could that be?* I gasped. Time raised her head and looked at me with eyes so big you'd think there would be room in them for some compassion. *Don't forget your bucket*, Time said.