

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**TODAY IS EXACTLY EIGHT YEARS SINCE A DRIVER** slammed into my daughter Mara's car, leaving her nearly paralyzed and breaking her pelvis in seven places. Within a few months she was back on her feet, fully recovered. But shall I pray any less fervently for her this morning than when I sat beside her in that hospital room? Shall I take the well-being of any of my loved ones for granted just because the phone hasn't rung? Why pretend the universe is any less mysterious or life any less precarious? During Mara's hospital stay I learned that there are 208 bones in the human body; that bones are strong, very strong, twice as strong as oak; that bones, which are all that's left of us when the rest has disappeared, can endure for hundreds, thousands, even hundreds of thousands of years. Yet bones break. Praise the broken world, I prayed. Praise the bones that mend.

**WE'RE ALL CROWDED INTO THE HOSPITAL CORRIDOR**, waiting for word about the ailing economy. No, it doesn't look good: vital signs worse each day, internal bleeding, liver and kidney functions starting to shut down. *Do you remember, someone whispers, when she started partying all night with those subprime lenders, then began gulping down credit-swap derivatives as if they were vitamins?* Of course the hospital staff has seen it all before. The U.S. economy seems addicted to these periodic cycles of boom and bust. Let's face it: collectively we're like some hopeless romantic who moves from one affair to another (the junk-bond bubble, the dot-com bubble, the mortgage-backed-securities bubble), always in love at the beginning — what's not to love? — and always in despair at the end. Eventually we rise from the ashes, sweep them under the rug, vow never to make the same mistake again — and, after a suitable period of mourning, fling open the windows and start flirting with the new neighbor, who looks like a million bucks.

**YES, WE'RE IN A RECESSION. BUT SOONER OR LATER** each of us will lose something more important than our savings or our job. Will we have the resilience to deal with sudden illness or injury? With the death of a loved one? With any of the innumerable misfortunes life may have in store? I remind myself that every experience can be a teaching if I'm willing to see it that way; that suffering, too, can be a teaching. In fact, suffering usually gets the teacher-of-the-year award because I always sit up and pay attention when I'm in physical pain or when my heart has been broken or when I witness the anguish of someone I love. To honor the teaching doesn't mean welcoming suffering with open arms, or looking for the silver lining of a tragedy with the kind of relentless optimism that denies painful feelings. I remind myself that blessings in disguise remain disguised until they're good and ready to reveal themselves — and even then, the blessing might simply be that a particular setback has taught me to live more fully in the present, or deepened my compassion for

others going through a similar difficulty, or underscored the paradox that we're ultimately alone and inextricably bound to one another.

**THE PHONE RANG AT 3:15 A.M. — WRONG NUMBER** — and I couldn't get back to sleep. So I got up and got dressed. Before the sun came up I'd read a stack of manuscripts, found a cure for cancer, and convinced Osama bin Laden to turn himself in. But I'm still sad. Go figure. You'd think someone as productive as I am could learn how to stop worrying and be happy. But the black dogs of depression keep nipping at my heels. Women haven't cured me. Sigmund Freud hasn't cured me. Nor have all the self-help books I've read, or the legal and illegal drugs I've ingested, or the spiritual big shots I've met who've told me God is right over there; no, a little to the left; now back up a step; you forgot to say, "May I?" (Not that I have much use for God this morning — at least, not for his current alias, which is *dog* spelled backward, so the joke's on me. *Arf-arf.*) How did I get stranded here: sixty-four and counting, the windows of my mind covered with grime, a roof that leaks, a door that's coming off its hinges? A real fixer-upper, that's what I've become: just perfect for an elderly gentleman who isn't afraid of a little hard work.

**I SAW MY NEIGHBOR N., WHO IS IN HER EIGHTIES**, slowly making her way down the lane with her walker. Not having talked with her since her stroke, I asked how she was. "Good," she said. She asked the same of me. I managed a non-committal "OK." She asked what I was doing these days. "Oh, the usual," I replied. "Reading, writing, worrying." She laughed. "At my age," she said, "you don't worry anymore." "Well," I said, "that's something to look forward to."

**SCIENTISTS CAN IDENTIFY 4 PERCENT OF THE** physical universe; the rest is made up of dark matter and dark energy, the exact nature of which is unknown. Of course the universe isn't just out there somewhere, far, far away. The universe is you, is me, is here, is now. Is it any wonder we're a mystery to ourselves, that human nature is a conundrum none of us can explain? As the astrophysicist Arthur Eddington has written, "The universe is not only stranger than we imagine; it is stranger than we *can* imagine."

**HOW ABOUT A MAGAZINE FOR THE DEAD? (I'M** thinking ahead.) A magazine that cuts across meaningless demographic lines, appealing to both men and women, Republicans and Democrats, breathers and nonbreathers. A magazine that doesn't presume to understand the dead any more than it understands the living; that doesn't diminish the dead or turn them into second-class citizens — like "seniors," only worse. There would be Interviews with the Dead. Dead Readers Write. Every year I'll write a Dead Friend of *The Sun* letter. No ads.