

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**SOON I'LL CELEBRATE ANOTHER BIRTHDAY. IT'S** too bad the earth doesn't have a real birthday. It might remind us that the planet had a beginning and — as it circles a medium-sized star whose days are numbered, too — is moving inexorably toward its end. Irrespective of human accomplishments and human folly, the sun will eventually run out of fuel, expand into a red giant, and vaporize the planet. Of course, something catastrophic could happen well before then: massive solar flares spewing murderous gamma rays into the atmosphere; a supervolcano bringing on a global ice age; a killer asteroid crashing into the earth. Actually the threat from outer space isn't as remote as it once seemed. Earth has been hit many times by asteroids; there's no doubt it will happen again. The very largest asteroids, capable of causing global climactic catastrophe, collide with the earth on the average of once every hundred thousand years. But even a smaller space rock could kill tens of millions of people if it struck a densely populated area — and there's a 1 percent chance of such an asteroid hitting the earth this century. Talk about a terrorist threat! And right now we're as clueless about how to deflect such a rock as we are about how to find a bomb in an airline passenger's underpants.

**IT'S A COLD WINTER MORNING, STILL DARK OUTSIDE,** and I'm hurtling through space at thousands of miles an hour with a cup of hot coffee in my hand. Amazing! Because I've been in this body for nearly sixty-five of Earth's orbits around the sun, I'll soon have enough frequent-flier miles to qualify for Medicare. Eventually I'll have enough points to request a corner suite in a nursing home, where a pretty young aide will coo sweet nothings while giving me a sponge bath. Amazing! And then come the drugs: ketamine, lorazepam, and enough medical marijuana to impress even an old pot-head like me — not to mention my own morphine drip. Now how amazing is that!

**MY DESK IS A MESS. MY HEART IS A MESS. HUMAN** history is a mess. The global financial system? Let's see: One word, rhymes with *guess*. Politics? Don't make me laugh, don't make me cry, don't make me spontaneously combust as I read the headlines. Even with Barack Obama in the White House, the United States is a mess. Washington, D.C.? Clean up your room! Moscow, London, Beijing? Sweep the floor! Organize your sock drawer!

**TWO DAYS AGO I SKIPPED A MEETING TO GIVE** my daughter Sara a ride to the airport. Then I had lunch with an old friend. He told me he still meditates for an hour every morning. "Every morning?" I asked. Yes, he said, he hasn't missed a day in more than thirty years. Call me a devoted father; call me a spiritual slob. I, too, believe in the value of a regular meditation practice, but I'm hardly an A student. Sometimes I miss a few days; sometimes I miss a few weeks.

Naturally I have plenty of excuses. I can pretend that every morning I meditate on emptiness when I open my notebook to a clean white page. I can argue that publishing more than four hundred issues of *The Sun* has been like attending more than four hundred month-long meditation retreats. Yes, I can make plenty of excuses — or I can sit on the cushion and follow my breath.

So yesterday morning I meditated for twenty minutes. Then I had a perfectly awful day. Do I get my twenty minutes back? I mean, if I'd waited in line for twenty minutes to buy an umbrella, and was unable to open it once it started raining, and, when I finally did get it open, discovered it was full of holes, wouldn't I have insisted on a refund?

Well, this morning I waited in line to get my refund, and guess what? No refund. Not only that, but for twenty minutes I had to listen to someone complain about the terrible day he'd just had.

**I'VE ALREADY BROKEN ALL MY NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS,** gutted my new constitution, ordered the border police to shoot on sight anyone approaching with a smile on his face and a self-help book in his hand. Is it any wonder my country can't reduce its carbon emissions?

**NO MORE ROUGH STUFF, NOT THIS MORNING. I** don't think the prisoner has anything left to say. After all, how many times can you bludgeon a sixty-four-year-old man with the same old existential truths? "Emptiness is form; form, emptiness." *Big deal*, he sighs. "Death comes suddenly and without warning." *Eat me*. Maybe there are more clues buried in his unhappy childhood. Maybe we need to get out the photo albums again, and the report cards, and the depositions from his boyhood friends. Still, if I have to study one more transcript or listen to one more bugged therapy session or connect one more set of dots to discern the underlying pattern of his famous melancholia, I'll scream. Is it possible he's simply of no use to us anymore? Should we take pity on the poor son of a bitch and let him go? That's assuming, of course, that he'd leave willingly and not insist that he's gotten used to being here, that it's the only home he knows.

**EVERY DAY MY EGO PERPETRATES THE MOST** egregious kind of identity theft.

**I LEFT MY STORY IN A BARN SO SOMEONE ELSE** could keep milking it. I left my story in the fitting room; it didn't fit me anymore. I left my story at the hospital because it wouldn't stop bleeding. I left my story at the rest stop; it needed a rest. I left my story at the body shop because it always wanted a different one. I left my story with some cash so it could never say, "Poor me." I left my story without saying where I was going because I didn't want it to follow me; it never even noticed I was gone.