

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**MY WIFE, NORMA, IS IN THE BEDROOM, SITTING** cross-legged in meditation, observing one thought after another rise and then fall away. I'm down the hall, sitting in my armchair, one leg crossed over the other, staring at an empty page. Not one decent idea on the horizon. Not a single bell ringing in my empty sky. Where are all those thoughts when you need them?

**THE PROBLEMS JUST KEEP GETTING BIGGER, DON'T** they? When I was a young man, it was civil rights; it was an immoral war being fought in a jungle ten thousand miles away. But even then, unbeknownst to us, the planet was getting hotter. Those hundreds of thousands of people who drove to Washington, D.C., in 1963 to listen to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech or, a few years later, to march in antiwar demonstrations — how much did they contribute to global warming? How about those 20 million people who showed up for the first Earth Day celebrations in 1970? Talk about a carbon footprint! Now that we better understand the scope of the problem, however, what sacrifices am I willing to make? Shall I vow that I won't eat anything I haven't grown myself or bought from a local farmer; that I'll bicycle everywhere instead of driving a car; that, if I absolutely must fly, I'll climb on the roof and start vigorously flapping my arms? How about not publishing a monthly magazine? But I don't want to complain about global warming this morning. Instead I want to thank the sun for shining brightly during some very dark years. I want to thank the earth for how kindly she's welcomed us. Believe me, we didn't know it would turn out this way.

**I DIDN'T WANT TO GET OUT OF BED THIS MORN-**ing. I didn't want to get dressed, stick my head out the window, and wave to my readers. The sky was dark, of course; it always is when my alarm goes off at 5 A.M. Rumors that the sun would soon rise swept through the crowd, but I knew this was wishful thinking. They wanted the night to be over, but I reminded them that, as usual, the darkness had other plans. They wanted me to say something upbeat and reassuring, but I reminded them I wasn't that kind of man.

**REMINDER TO SELF: I DON'T HAVE TO PRETEND** to be anything other than a sixty-five-year-old mammal who's still trying to lose a few pounds. I don't have to climb to the top of the mountain, then return to my people with ten new and improved commandments in my hand. Just a word or two of encouragement will do. For example, I can reliably report that wandering for forty years in the desert isn't such a big deal — not when it takes ten years to get rid of a single bad habit; twenty years to shuck another; thirty years to discover the simplest truths about what it means to love some-

one. I can do forty years in the desert standing on my head. I can eat forty years for breakfast, then ask for more biscuits, or another quart or two of milk, or, what the hell, the whole damn fattened calf. Do I exaggerate? Of course: one more habit I'll probably carry to the grave.

**I WONDER: IS REINCARNATION REAL OR JUST** some goofy idea I picked up in a former lifetime?

**IT'S ONE THING, AND A GOOD THING, TO EXTEND** compassion to all living beings. It's another thing, and a foolish thing, to be concerned with whether others *perceive* me as compassionate. It matters to my ego, of course; my ego is eager to turn any selfless act into a photo op. My ego, you might say, is always running for reelection; no term limits here. My ego stays on message. My ego accepts cash, checks, and credit cards. My ego is always willing to make one more speech, shake one more hand. *No problem, says the ego. Leave it up to me, me, me.*

**SOMEONE SENT ME A BUMPER STICKER THAT READS,** "Nonjudgment day is near." It can't come soon enough. For even though I've learned the importance of nonjudgmental awareness, I still turn nonjudgmental awareness into a goal, then judge myself for not being more nonjudgmentally aware.

**IT ISN'T PRAISE I YEARN FOR. IT'S MAKING ENOUGH** time each day to sit here and praise You in all Your masterful disguises. Peek-a-boo, I see You. No, God, You can't hide from me today. You can't hide in the Bible, and You can't hide in the mists of Judeo-Christian chicanery. Peek-a-boo, I see You, no matter how distracted I get by my nonstop shenanigans. Am I busy today, too busy to pause in mute adoration, too busy to let my heart break open again and again?

**WHAT CAN I BE GRATEFUL FOR THIS MORNING?** I'm grateful for my trillions of cells chattering away in a language I'll never comprehend. I'm grateful that I couldn't run all the way up the hill today; thank God for hills. I'm grateful that, while reading the *New York Times*, I could get only halfway up the hill of understanding; thank God for human nature. I'm grateful for the end of eight murderously long years of George W. Bush's presidency, setting his black mark on the first decade of the twenty-first century. I'm grateful that no city has been wiped out by a nuclear weapon in nearly sixty-five years. I'm grateful that more Americans believe in democracy than you could guess from reading the headlines. I'm grateful that the man I used to be walked out the door forty years ago, briefcase in hand, a confident smile on his face, and hasn't been heard from since.