

Robert Fulghum

Crisis in the Cheese Aisle

It's mid-December in the City Market in Moab, Utah.

A small boy – in the five-year-old bracket – pitched a full-blown hissy-fit in the cheese section of the store.

He did not want cheese – he wanted candy canes – NOW!

His mother ignored him.

So he played an ace.

Came unglued – screamed, and fell on the floor kicking his legs.

The cheese shoppers retreated.

The kid ratcheted up the volume of his screams.

Having once-upon-a-time been both the parent and the child in one of these grocery store melodramas, I knew this could get ugly.

I felt like warning the kid: "Watch out, kid, you're about to get whomped."

His mother turned.

She stood softly still, looking down at him.

Here it comes, kid," I thought, "You are dead meat.

The mother kneeled down to the kid's level.

The kid went ballistic, bawling and kicking and flailing about.

In silence the mom reached out, locked her hands on the kids arms with a firm grip a mature lobster would have admired.

Slowly . . . she lifted the little monster up off the floor.

The kid played another ace – went limp, moaning, oozing tears, spit and snot. . .

She's going to drop him on his head, I thought.

Or toss him into the cheese.

His mother played her cards.

Slowly . . . she lifted the kid in the air, held him inches from her face, and said, oh so softly and gently:

"Bobby. . . you . . . have earned . . . a time out."

Then she kissed him on both cheeks, wiped away his tears, and hugged him oh-so-tenderly close.

The kid went silent, and snuggled up under his mom's chin.

She abandoned her shopping basket, and walked up the aisle and out of the store into the snowy day.

Silence in the cheese aisle.

How utterly wise and sane, I thought.

She didn't punish him – she rescued him from himself.

Last week, standing there pissed off in the cheese aisle, I remembered.
The mother's calming words to her child came back to me.
"Bobby, you have earned a time out . . ."

It's been a wild, stressful year for me – not bad, just manic.
Lots of big changes.
Pulling a full load for a long way.
Leaving me physically and mentally drained, and generally edgy.

Ready to fall on the floor and come unglued in the cheese aisle because I can't get what I want.

(Maybe somebody should drop me on my head . . . but don't throw me in the cheese display – what I want isn't in there, dammit.)

"Bobby, you've earned a time out . . ." I said to me.

But who is going to take me in their arms, hug me, and make it all better?
Who is going to rescue me from me?

That would be me, I guess.

And I thought, Bobby you don't need cheese, you need ice cream.

And that's what I got.

MEMBERSHIP

Consider this man:

Down on his knees in his bathroom, crawling around in the dim light of early morning, like an old dog sniffing around for random table crumbs on a kitchen floor.

He is naked, sight-impaired, stupid, and stubborn.

Naked – because he was about to take a shower.

Half-blind – because his glasses are in another room.

Stupid – because he's been down on the floor like this before.

And stubborn – because he won't abandon his quest.

There are certain adult activities that are done alone and never discussed.

Activities that are nevertheless probably quite common.

This is one of those.

The man has dropped a single pill on the bathroom floor.

An aspirin – not a diamond – just an ordinary aspirin – hardly worth his intensive search because he's got a whole bottle full of aspirin in reserve.

He knows that if a pill is dropped on a hard surface it won't stay where it is.
Pills roll away – into dark corners, into the next room or down the hall.
But if he follows the logic that the pill will be where it is most likely not to be found, that means the most unlikely place it will be is where it was dropped in the first place, and so that's why he is crawling around on the floor trying to beat the perverse moves of stray pills.
The man also suspects that if he gives up and stands up and walks away he will discover that he has stepped on the pill.

Yes!

It is there – on the bottom of his big toe, where it has been all along.
And, yes, he will pluck it off and put it in his mouth and swallow it.
Unwavering stubborn stupidity has paid off once again.
He has prevailed over the Law of the Dropped Pill.
This small triumph will frame the mood of the rest of his day.
For the time being, he is happy.

The things we do in solitude bind us to the rest of our race.
No matter how strange or disgusting.
He is not the only pill pursuer in the world.

Look – here is the same man.
It's late in the evening, and he is tired and hungry.
His wife is away and he is going to eat dinner alone.
He first opens the refrigerator door and browses around, sampling the odds and ends of leftovers – using his fingers.
Pasta salad in a plastic container is tasty enough to be taken out and added to his dining fare.
He's also found half a quart of orange juice.
He opens a can of tuna fish and squirts some mayonnaise into the can on top of the fish.

He stands over the sink, eating the pasta salad with his fingers, gouging the tuna fish out of the can with a fork, and drinking the orange juice straight out of the container.

He would never eat like this in the presence of anyone else.
He would raise hell with his children if he caught them eating this way.
But in solitude, he follows a commitment to simplicity and efficiency.
Contented with his lot, he eats on.

Hold that image for a moment.

Take another look at the same man – his eyes are red and watering.
He has his annual case of allergy – runny nose, swollen sinuses, and a cough that begins somewhere down around his knees and comes out in a roar.
He is in respiratory distress because everything in nature in spring is in bloom, filling the air with invasive pollen.

Keep in mind that he is eating pasta salad and tuna fish slathered with mayonnaise, washed down with orange juice.
Standing over the sink.

It's a very satisfying way to eat – and it's easy to clean up afterward – no plates or glasses to wash.

The uneaten remainder of the pasta salad will go back in the refrigerator, along with the unfinished container of orange juice.
The tuna fish can will go in the recycling.

All is well – so far.

Suddenly – he is seized by an uncontrollable need to hiccup, sneeze, and cough, all at once.
While his mouth is full.

His mind tells him to just get his face down lower in the sink and let fly.

BLOOEY! BLOOEY! BLOOEY!

A volcanic eruption of food particles and respiratory gunk.

You can imagine the mess . . .

Thank God he wasn't at the dinner table with company.

He smiles, feeling wonderfully purged.

No harm done – and there were no witnesses.

For the moment he can even breathe easily.

And he can use the sink faucet hose to wash away the debris.

No problem.

The man is still happy.

As I said, some of what we do alone is strange and disgusting.

And comedy is never far away in solitude.

The man, of course, is me.

Pill chaser.

Eater over the sink.

Sneezer at awkward moments.

If this has never happened to you, you have something to look forward to.

If it has . . . then now you know that you are not as alone in the world as you might sometimes think you are.

You are a full member of the Society of the Pill Chasers of the World and the Spring Allergy Division of the Fellowship of the Late Night Sink Eaters.

Hello there.

GANESHA

Once upon a very, very long time ago there was a Supernatural Being.

He had a wife, who was also supernatural.

She created a boy out of earth to protect her privacy while she bathed.

One day, her husband came home to find a stranger guarding his wife.

In rage, he struck off the boy's head with his sword.

His wife was overcome with grief.

To appease her, the Supernatural Being sent out his minions to find a wild creature facing north, and bring back its head.

They found a sleeping elephant, cut off its head, and brought it back.

The Supernatural Being attached the elephant's head to the body of the boy.

He brought this new biomorphic creature to life and treated him like a son.

He gave his new son supernatural qualities.

He declared this son to be the Lord of success in new beginnings, with power over obstacles, and the special source of knowledge, wisdom, and wealth.

In time, human beings began to worship this new Being.
He was portrayed as a man with the head of an elephant.
To emphasize his humanity, he was given a round, fat belly – and is often shown in a dancing pose, smiling benevolently.
He's also depicted riding on a large mouse – a sign of his humility.

Do you believe that story?

More than a billion people in this world do.
They are adherents of the Hindu religion, rooted in India.
The elephant-headed creature is called Ganesha.
His parents are called Shiva and Parvati.
Most Hindu homes have an image of Ganesha in a place of honor.
He reigns as the most important representation of their conception of the gods.

* * *

I talked with a friend who is a native of India and grew up Hindu.
I asked about Ganesha.
He first related the mythical story I told at the beginning of this essay.
Then he related his experience with religious images.
At a young age, he was sent by his parents to a Catholic school for boys operated by the Jesuits.
They wanted him to get the best Western education possible – and wanted him to be fluent in the most proper English.
He lasted only one day in that school.

Why?

Because of what happened when he was taken into a cathedral to be introduced to the religious traditions of the Catholic Church.

He said the children first stood before the high altar.
Above it was a huge wooden cross on which hung the emaciated, tortured form of a man, with blood on his forehead, face, and hands – and with more blood flowing down his side from a wound.
A terrifying sight for a little boy.

When it was explained that this was the Son of God, and that he had been crucified by his Father to compensate for the sins of human beings, including the little boy's, the child ran screaming from the church and away from the school.

My Indian friend said he could not imagine that he had ever done anything so bad that it would call for a father to torture and kill his son on his behalf.
The image gave him nightmares for days.
His parents sent him to a school operated by Quakers,
No crucifixes – no religious images at all.

* * *

I asked my Indian friend if any religious images had a part in his life now.
"Oh, sure," he said – "Ganesha – there's always been a bronze statue of him

on the family altar in my home. My mother prays to it every morning. And I wouldn't feel right if I didn't have a statue of Ganesha of my own."

And I replied, "Now let me get this straight. A crucifix freaks you out. But at home you have a statue that is the image composed of the body of a young man, who was decapitated by the god, Shiva, and whose head is that of an innocent sleeping elephant, who was also decapitated. Shiva stuck the two parts together, brought it to life, declared it to be his son, and said it should be worshipped. And all this to placate his angry wife. And you believe this elephant-headed deity can grant favors expressed in prayer."

"Well . . . yes . . . and no."

Why?"

(long pause)

"I'm not sure I can explain it. It's a matter of faith, not rational mind – a matter of culture and tradition and imagination."

No argument from me – I understand what he means. Because, if you were to tour the environment in which I live, you would find several images of Ganesha, large and small – traditional bronze figures from India, as well as abstract sculptures created with Ganesha in mind. And I'm not Hindu in the least.

* * *

You might well wonder why. And, if you want the truth, I also wonder why sometimes. The Southern Baptist Church I grew up in had no images to worship. It took literally one of the ten commandments that admonished: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." So there were no crucifixes in my church (and certainly no statues of Ganesha).

So what's my fascination with Ganesha about?

My Indian friend thinks my feelings about Ganesha are superficial and childish. He thinks I confuse Ganesha with Dumbo and Babar and Horton. Sentimental confusion. There's probably some truth in that. I see Ganesha through Western eyes. And I can't take too seriously a god portrayed as a fat guy with an elephant head.

And that's the point, isn't it. Having an image around of a god I don't take too seriously.

When I look at images of Ganesha, I'm amused. I always smile – and rub the belly on the biggest one I own as I pass by. Ganesha reminds me of the quest to understand infinite things in the context of living a finite life. Ganesha is a link between The Great Mystery of It All and Robert Fulghum's ordinary life on a Wednesday afternoon in September. It's a joyful quest, not one of agony and suffering. It's light-hearted, not fearful.

I do not worship Ganesha – I merely appreciate what he represents.
He is a metaphorical finger pointing at the amazing absurdity of existence.

Ganesha fills that gap between what I think and what I feel about Being.
Between what I can express and that for which I have no words.

Enough.
I'll leave it here:
Why is Ganesha a part of my life?
I think I know.
But I really can't say.
Words don't apply.
Some very important things are like that.
And that's OK.
It is what it is.

BUT . . . BUT . . . BUT . . .

A conversation:

“Your mother and I think you should get a job this summer.”
(Meaning: your mother doesn't want you hanging around the house or hanging out with your friends and getting into trouble.)

“But . . . but . . . but . . . what would I do? – nobody is hiring kids.”
(Meaning: my guys already have plans – the pool – the girls . . .)

“You're not a kid anymore, and you need to earn your own spending money.”
(Meaning: your allowance is about to be cut off because you do your chores in a half-assed way – which upsets your mother – and when your mother is upset, she upsets me, and I'm tired of being upset.)

“But . . . but . . . but . . .”
(Meaning: you don't love me anymore?)
Time for a quivering lower lip to intensify the encounter.

“When I was your age I had a paper route.”
(Meaning: lots of kids your age already have jobs – the good kids.)

“But . . . but . . . but . . .”
(Meaning: so . . . the axe has fallen . . . it's the end of the easy life . . . I heard this could happen.)

* * * *

You probably have been or are now the parents or the kid in this conversation, which is a sure sign of the changing of seasons and a child's maturation.
Summer is coming – the kid is not only growing up, but he's being pushed out of the nest for his own good.
Not that the kid sees it that way . . . yet.
Work and job are not active concepts in his vocabulary . . . yet.

A man I know was the kid in this deal once upon a time.
He faced the crisis by looking for an easy way out.
He talked with his best buddies who were in a similar jam.
(A parental conspiracy was behind this common plight, no doubt.)

They considered robbing banks – even got as far as writing notes to give to tellers.
That was the fun part.
And reality dampened their parade into infamy.
All they had for armament was one feeble pellet gun, and they couldn't agree on which bank
or what to do with the loot or where to hide out after the crime.

They considered going into kidnapping – even wrote some ransom notes.
But they couldn't agree on a victim – the only kid they could think of was an iffy choice – his
parents would probably pay them to keep him.

Faced with the choice of being penniless or stealing from his mother's purse,
or doing crimes that would land him in the penitentiary, he was desperate.
So . . . he looked into this paperboy thing.

Learning that the only slot open was a morning route was a shock.
Like most teenagers, he had seldom seen a sunrise.
He heard it happened every day, but he had not been there to see it.
And having to get himself up at five in the morning seemed absurd – functional
consciousness did not usually kick in for him until at least ten.

But having his allowance cut off motivated him.
And his father's suggestion that he was not one of the "good" kids made him mad.
So . . . he signed on as a morning newspaper carrier.

A year later he was still on the job – and he had learned these lessons:

1. To be a newspaper carrier meant he was in fact the CEO of a small business franchise –
getting an education in fundamental Capitalism.

He accepted product on credit, delivered the product, collected for his service, paid off his
bill, and kept the profit.

No accounting to his parents for his income or expenses was required.

He had become an independent businessman.

2. Initiative pays off: If he offered special delivery service – paper delivered before a certain
time – paper placed in a certain place – paper not thrown against the house or door, but
delivered quietly – he was tipped by his clients – and the tips were gravy – all his.

Clients who trusted his service were even willing to pay him several months in advance if
asked – saving him collecting time.

3. Getting up early and out of the house before his parents were up meant he didn't get
hassled about anything – he never saw them in the morning.

4. Early mornings are a fine thing. Quiet, peaceful, and interesting. He saw a side of life he
hadn't known existed, and thereby was introduced to basic Sociology.

He saw those who were sneaking home after being out too late. When people came out to
fetch their newspaper off their porch he saw them in their underwear or nightgowns. He
noticed the lonely who were sitting in a porch swing waiting for him. If he took time to chat,
his tip increased. He heard the shouting of those engaged in early morning family fights. And
once saw a young couple making love in the back seat of a parked car. Stark naked.

5. Early mornings are even a finer thing if you notice the sky – the sunrises, the stars, the moon, and the changing of the seasons.

6. When you're awake and alone and walking in the early morning you think about a lot of things you would not think about if still asleep in your bed. Years later, the man I know turned that into a habit that fed his writing.

7. If you have a morning paper route, you have the dignity of holding a job, and also the rest of the day for the pool and the girls in summer. A double dip.

But making money gives you thoughts of how to make more money.

Capitalistic ambition rises up.

Your clients know you and trust you – and if you offer them other services . . .

Mowing lawns, weeding gardens, hauling out the garbage, sweeping sidewalks, cleaning out garages, washing cars, walking dogs – things like that, well you're on a roll and your bankroll expands rapidly.

You the Man!

Your paperboy route becomes the personal turf of an entrepreneur.

* * * *

The man I know never looked back from that first job.

But it was woven into the tapestry of his memory.

To this day he can fold a newspaper without looking down – and throw the paper accurately onto a porch from the middle of a street.

And he never had that conversation with his parents again.

They shoved him out of the nest and, much to his surprise, he flew.

In years to come he would find work digging ditches, cleaning out steam tunnels, mucking out stables, washing dishes, mopping floors, waiting tables, and driving a truck. He was a cowboy on a working guest ranch, a bartender in a hotel, and a painter. All a legitimate part of his resume – he actually did all that – and got paid for it, too.

He learned he could get his hands dirty, his body tired, and his mind numb – and still get up and get the job done another day. He was never fired.

Every one of those jobs was an education.

Every one of those jobs shaped his mind about himself and his world.

Every one of those jobs gave him an appreciation of what other people do.

And there were wise mentors around in all those endeavors who added as much to his understanding of his humanity as any teacher in school.

Oh sure, the jobs were low-paying, temporary, often hard and exhausting.

Sometimes it rained, sometimes it snowed.

But the entry-level work spurred him on to college and a profession.

He thinks of all those jobs he had while young as fundamental to his finally growing up and becoming an independent, on-his-own adult.

You probably can testify to these truths out of your own experiences.

You had to start somewhere, someday.

Now you know how it works . . .

For the man I know, it all began with a conversation in late spring – when his father said: "Your mother and I think you should get a job this summer."

Little did he know where that would lead . . .

PLAYERS

“What would you like to eat for dinner, dear?”

“How about lamb stew and pecan pie for dessert?”

“Pecan pie? Since when do you like pecan pie?”

A conversation last Thursday in the canned-soup section of a natural foods grocery store in Durango, Colorado.

The lady asking is a trim, well-dressed, grey-haired woman in her sixties.

She’s busy focusing on the infinite assortment of soup on the shelf.

The lady glances over her shoulder at me.

She turns and laughs.

“Oops, you’re not my husband – please excuse me.”

“I’ll come if you make the pie,” say I.

She looks me up and down.

Laughs again.

“Well, for you, I just might.”

“I’ll have to ask my wife,” say I.

Just then her husband walks up.

A trim, well-dressed, bald-headed man in his early sixties.

“Your wife is hitting on me,” say I.

“She wants to make pecan pie for me tonight.”

He laughs.

“She’s good at that – that’s how she caught me. And I always tell her that if she finds a better deal than me, take it – good pie is good bait.”

We laugh.

These two people are what I call Players.

People with light hearts and quick wits.

People who will jump into a social game and play it out – just for fun.

Even though they are usually strangers to one another, Players have the ability to sense other Players somehow.

It’s the slight grin – and the twinkly mischief in their eyes that gives them away.

If I am ever in a position like Noah – building an ark to float out the flood,

Players will be chosen as passengers – this married couple, for example.

The encounter continued:

“Excuse me,” say I – “I’ll be right back.”

When I find the couple again I tell the lady, “My wife says I can come.”

“Where’s your wife?” asks the man.

“She’s the tall, pretty young blond at the cheese counter.”

The man looks over at Willow.

Laughs.

“You can come if you bring her,” he says.

"We're not into mate-swapping, Charley," says the lady.
"Not yet," he says.
They laugh and head off to the checkout counter, arm in arm.
Players.
Wish I could have gone home with them.
I bet she makes a hell of a pecan pie.

Here's another example of a Player.
I'm standing out in the cold dark of last Friday evening at the main door of Moab's City Market – ringing the bell at the Salvation Army kettle.
One of the assistant managers is taking a break and he comes out to stand by me and make small talk.
He's young, with high good energy – always friendly toward me.

"How's it going?" he asks.
"Well, the kettle is getting full – the Moabites are always generous – but I think I'm beginning to hallucinate."
"Why's that?" he asks.
"Well – it's strange – there's only one door to City Market, and I'm standing right in front of it. I'm pretty observant and like watching people.
But I swear that some people go into the store and never come out again.
How can that be?"

The assistant manager laughs.
"You're not losing your mind – you just don't know the truth about City Market."
"What's that . . .?"
"You know those big swinging doors back of the fruit and vegetable section?"
"Yes."
"Well that's the secret entrance to our lower floor – the basement – there's a full casino down there – slot machines, blackjack, roulette – dancing girls – the works. People in the know go down there, and they use the back door when they leave."
"Really?"
"Yes, indeed – City Market makes more money from the casino than from groceries. Next time you shop, go through those doors and ask a clerk to show you the stairs to the casino and the bar.
The password is: Fun and Games – tell them Eddie sent you."
He gives me the twinkly mischief look, laughs, and goes back inside to work.
A Player.
Next time I'll put the kettle out by the back door.

One more example:
That same night, while ringing the bell, a man comes up to stand beside me.
Big man. Big belly. Long white beard, long white hair topped with a leather cowboy hat.
Down jacket, jeans, work boots. Sack of groceries in one hand.
He's eating a fried chicken drumstick held in his other hand.
He looks vaguely familiar – where have I seen him before?

"Ah, Christmas," he sighs. "Does me good to stand here and see people put money in the pot."
"You must like Christmas," say I.
"Yes and no," he says, "sometimes I love it, sometimes I hate it."

"Why's that?" I ask.

"Look at me," he says. "Every year I play Santa Claus around town – I'm born and built for the part – hair and beard, belly, sense of humor – a natural. So several years ago I got a Santa outfit and now I go to schools and parties and do my thing."

I look him over – now I remember – I saw him at the library earlier in the week in his Santa suit – with little kids crawling onto his lap to get their pictures taken.

And now Santa Claus has come to visit me!

I just didn't recognize him in his off-duty work clothes.

"Being Santa must be fun," say I.

"Well, sometimes – but little kids are mostly a pain in the ass.

I scare hell out of half of them.

Their parents plop them into my lap, and the kids shriek and scream and cry while the parents laugh and take pictures to send to relatives – it's weird.

The kids have runny-nose colds, they wet their pants, one even threw up on me last week. I get so much slobber and snot and crap on me I have to have my suit cleaned almost every week.

On top of that, the little bastards are the essence of greed.

All they can say is, "I wanta and I wanta and I wanta."

"Why do you do it, then?"

"Well, once in a while something happens that makes it worth the effort.

Yesterday, at a small school, this little kid climbs onto my lap – all quiet – with his hands folded into fists. He just sat there, dumbstruck. So I asked him if he wanted to say anything to Santa. He nodded.

Then he opened his fists – a dime in one hand, and a nickel in the other – 15 cents – a lot of money to a little bitty kid, I guess.

And he tells me that he wants to give me his money to give to some little kid who doesn't have any. He wanted to give me money to give away – imagine that!

His mother said it was all the kid's idea.

Santa Claus is supposed to be jolly and laugh, not cry.

But this little kid made me cry.

That made my Christmas."

"What makes Santa laugh?" I asked.

"Well, yesterday this kid about ten gets up on my lap – too big to visit Santa, I think – but he has something on his mind.

What do you want to tell Santa?

He's grinning from ear to ear – hardly able to speak – but he says – get this – he wants a Dodge Ram pickup truck for Christmas – a real one – and he wants volume 4, 5 and 6 of the porn videos Girls Gone Wild.

I ask him why he wants only volume 4, 5, and 6?

He says his father already has volumes 1, 2, and 3 in his closet.

I damn near fell off my throne laughing.

Then I noticed a man standing in the back laughing, too.

The boys' father – he put him up to it."

"You're pulling my leg," I said.

Santa grinned.

"Maybe," he said, "but if you don't have a wild imagination, you can't be Santa Claus, now can you?"

He laughed and walked off into the parking lot – where he left his sleigh, I guess.
Another Player.
He's on my passenger list for the Ark – the kind of Santa we'll need.

I go around looking for Players.
People who carry foolish joy in their hearts.
People who make the weight of the sorrows of this world bearable.
Their laughter gives off light in the darkness of winter.

You may know one – encourage them – get in the game.
You may even be one – please carry on the good work.

Bless the Players, say I – may their tribe increase.

LIGHTNING

In a loose-leaf binder labeled "Kindling For the Fire" I keep random notes on a wide variety of subjects – small items to provoke my mind.
For example, page 12 – Lightning.

*

September in Seattle ends like Mother Nature is behind in her housecleaning and is going to get it done all at once.
Re-arranging the furniture and emptying the garbage cans.
Scouring wind, slashing rain, liquid lightning, rockslide thunder.
Tonight she's working late, sparks are flying.

*

Lightning: It's one of those things that looks a whole lot better at a distance than close up.

*

Anyone who says that falling in love is like being hit by lightning hasn't been hit by lightning.
And may not know much about love.

*

If it's true that lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place – maybe that's because the exact same place isn't there the next time it strikes.

*

Meteorologists say that lightning happens 40 to 50 times a second on our planet – more than 1.5 billion times a year. You can go to the web and see where it struck all over the world in the last hour.

*

If there is lightning, there is thunder – always.
If you don't hear it, you're just too far away.

*

I saw a T-shirt that said: "Fight the Menace of Lightning."

*

My uncle Roscoe distilled corn liquor out in the woods somewhere.
He offered me a sip once when I was a kid.
Asked me if I'd like to taste lightning from a jar.
I did and it was.

*

In North Carolina last summer I saw a tall church steeple with a cross on top that was topped with a lightning rod. There's a realistic religion – have faith, but use the brains God gave you. Trust the dealer, but always cut the cards . . .

*

Mark Twain said that difference between choosing the just the right word in a sentence and a feeble one was the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

*

Roy Sullivan held the Guinness record for the number of times one person was hit by lightning and survived – seven. He was outdoors as a park ranger most of his life. He retired. And at age 71 he killed himself on account of unrequited love. Lightning finally got him . . .

*

I was told by a little girl that lightning happens when God is taking pictures of us. Remember to smile . . .

*

Poem:

Over my fleecy underwear.
I have on my hooded raincoat.
I have on my black wool hat.
I am dry and cozy warm.

I have on water-proof trousers.
I have on my rubber boots.
I can't stay indoors and watch.
I'll go out into the storm.

It's a very private thing
Being outside in the rain
Maybe God will take my picture
Light me up this early morn.

COLORED MAN

In the summer of 2010 I learned that I am now White.

Awakened from an afternoon nap by my wife's voice talking to someone on our front porch, I called out in sleepy stupor:

"Who was that?"

"A lady from the Census Bureau of the United States of America, dear."

"Did she ask about me?"

"Yes. One question was: 'Does anybody sleep on your couch?'"

"I told her that would be you – and she could view you in place at the moment if she wished. She declined."

"What else?"

"You might be interested to know that you are White now."

"Not Caucasian?"

"No. White. Caucasian is not a racial category anymore."

This is good news. I never really liked being Caucasian.

That's someone whose racial roots are in a mountain range in the middle of the former Soviet Union – the Ukraine, maybe.

A Caucasoid.

Not me. Never was.

I feel better being de-classified by the government.

But not so good about being re-classified without my consent.

White?

That's a color, not a race.

I know. It just means 'of European ancestry' – Europoid.

But Europeans aren't White, either.

The last time I was in Europe, I looked around...

Mostly pinks and browns and grays and yellows.

If skin color means something, we ought to be accurate, don't you think?

The next time the census people go to work they ought to bring a color chart like the ones used in paint stores.

You could pick your color by holding your hands and face up to the chart.

That seemed like such a fine idea that I made a special trip to a paint store to test the method and check me out.

(I emphasize here that just considering hands and face won't do.

They are the color most affected by sun and use.

They don't really match the rest of you.

Next time you're naked in front of the bathroom mirror, check you out carefully.

You'll see.

The truth is that the area most original in color is your butt.

Even that's not White, in my case - more the pale color of aging vanilla yoghurt.

Overall, my skin coloration could be a pattern for nursing home camouflage.

But in the paint store I just looked at matches for what could be exposed in public – hands, face, legs, backside of arms, and cautiously, my stomach.)

The paint samples most like colors of me ranged from “Walnut” at the dark end to “Candle Light” - with areas in between of “Vegetable Patch”, “Melon Cup”, Cappuccino”, “Orange Creamsicle”, “Honey”, “Rose”, “Ivory”, and a few spots of “Aubergine”, “Magenta” and “Pennies From Heaven.”

That news ought to impress the census taker next time.

My wife is a professional artist, and when I asked her what colors she would mix up to paint me, she looked me over and said, “Umber, yellows, reds, blacks, blues, and even a touch of green.”

“No white?”

“Well, that would be the underlying base to start with, but there wouldn’t really be much white showing when I finished. I don’t care what the census lady said. You’re not White and never will be.”

In truth, I am a Colored person – a mongrel mutant – mostly blotchy beige.

Easily mistaken for lumpy pillows on the couch.

And it was just as well that was the case when the nice lady from the Census Bureau of the United States of America came to call.

The category Colored is not in her manual.

And I don’t think she would have been open to the reality of me rising up off the couch to express my argumentative opinion.

Even if I showed her my butt.

As for race, we know now from DNA and genetic testing that most of us are a mongrel mix.

The categorical imperatives of the Census Bureau just aren’t accurate.

Despite their good intentions, some further revision is required.

I’ve lived long enough to remember growing up in the American South when there were separate restrooms and water fountains and entrances marked “For Colored.”

“Colored” was once a pejorative category.

The facilities were for the sole use of those forced to live their lives inside the lines drawn by the law and cultural discrimination.

We were segregated and separated by color as an indicator of race.

We’ve progress on through stages so that “colored” people are now “Black.”

But they are not really black any more than I’m white - they’re shades of brown.

Things have changed – improved a lot – but the work remains unfinished.

Essential to progress is a personal mindset:

I think of myself as a colored man now.

It’s a realistic, positive category.

All of us – all of us – are colored.

In the infinite shades of the human race.

I repeat – I am not White – I am Colored.

If you want proof, I’ll drop my pants for you and show you my butt.