

Becoming Remarkable, Part 3



Sunburst, Charles Burchfield, 1929–31

One of the first things you'll notice when you move to Appalachia is that the people take their religion seriously. That is, you don't joke about religion, even 'innocently'. Because, just like dogs, on many of the locals you'll see their hackles rise if they sense any impiety. And don't think because you are on good terms that you will get a pass. You won't. God doesn't give a pass around here. It isn't uncommon for whoever you might be talking business with or using to get some work done—at least in West Virginia—to be a part-time preacher, with ambitions of starting their own church. Just on our way to the biscuit breakfast franchise downriver around thirty miles away, my wife and I counted twenty churches. And I can't remember seeing a tavern, by the way.

There exist a number of card rooms, named the CoffeePot. They also have strip clubs. I stay away from both, which is one of the benefits of life back here. You can stay away from the sketchy element if you want to. Don't seek it out, and it will more or less leave you alone—except for the dopers. They're burglars and make for bad neighbors. And they frequent abandoned properties.

I discussed the situation with a fellow in the Jacuzzi the other day beside the Camden pool in Parkersburg where I swim laps daily, "You know, the Chamber of Commerce advertises all of the wrong things about this place. To hear them tell it, it's just like every other place in its upwardly mobile pretensions—only not as good, or they wouldn't have to be beating their chests about it all the time, incessantly, enough to give a person a headache. Yes! I got it! I know you're from West Virginia. It's beautiful and you're proud of your heritage which is of struggle and survival and family and kit and kin and rich cultural heritage. But nobody is attracted to anywhere described over and over like that. 'Cause they know this is the language used to describe sh*tholes."

I can't say my rant endeared me.

But when I talk to my neighbors and the people I meet around town, they never talk about any of that—unless I've happened upon some Progressive who isn't scared to proselytize. Instead, they talk of the school sports teams, the hunting, the jobs situation, who's making a little money, and then some of the back stories about their relations and forbearers. What should be sold here should be all about the small, local and tactile, the quiet and remote with two hundred miles of trees between here and anywhere that's noisy, of a place filled with mute, remarkably shy people who travel through life rather in the raw. That's what we got, and that's what we should offer and be proud of. You can do pretty much as you please, as long as you behave yourself. And that's it. Done! Live with it, and

enjoy it, or leave. Work in your flower bed. Grow you garden. Hunt in the forest. Fish in the ponds and streams. Join a club. Build something in your garage. Be a volunteer fireman. Attend the local school sports events. Head to church, if you'd like. Mow your yard. And don't get drunk and rowdy and yell or we'll lock you up. And that's about it. You can download movies. Eat good biscuits and gravy. Get just about anything you want online and delivered promptly. Swim in the hospital lap pool at any hour in your own lane. Get where you're going free of traffic jams. And you'll rarely see your political representatives. It's all good! The near worst thing that could happen would be flooding. The worst that could happen would be the chemical plant upriver—that once poisoned us—blowing us all to kingdom come. But, it's a good living, supports a lot of community—and there aren't that many other places where we could afford to move anyways.

Stick Pin

*"We're just a stick pin on a map in their office in Texas.
They need to make a cut?*

—Oh, there's a little pin here we can pull."

—West Virginia Oil Company office receptionist

Imagine the pin hole, not bigger than a fly speck
in the paper map from where I was pulled.
Like I never took place. Nothing happened!

No one in my chair.

No one studying the monitor.

No one clicking the keyboard.

"Nothing here to see, folks. Keep moving!"

If people should speak of me,

it's as I've been un-imagined.

I'm bits of time drifting away.

I'm bits of effort disconnected.

I'm the vacant bit of organization,

oiling a smoother operation.

I'm a little tick-sized burrow,
ignored by the map it inhabits,
the person who made it,
even the time that has passed.

Who drove home slowly
to his double wide pin box—
and declared to his ginger wife,
“Well, it's quits.”

People don't read much back here, which is a puzzle ... because
there are so many Adult Book Stores.

However, I locate nearly all of my reading material online and
order it thorough Amazon. What with Facebook, I've acquired a
water cooler like group of acquaintances through whom I
network for the new thinking, the new books, the new
arguments. It's what's-going-on-out-there with a buffer. I can
connect with anywhere in the world. Finding a discussion or an
argument is as easy as typing. Plus, when you type, your
presence is as loud as the next person's. The Progressives can
swarm and type you down. But you are still there. Truly,
online “sticks and stones will break my bones / but words can
never hurt me.”

De-Friended

“I Didn't Know You Were a Bad Person”

Your take on things
speaks of such enormous ignorance of common compassion
and sensitivity to others
as to end our friendship.

Can't you see that nobody thinks what you think anymore?
That nobody agrees with you?
When you should embrace positive change and social justice,

you cling to what has "stood you in good stead" from acquaintance,
from your very, very limited experience
rather than to join with people in their enthusiasms
for the betterment of all!
I had no idea you were so bigoted.

You have the morality of a slaver,
profiting as you have from white, male privilege.
You care nothing for a better world,
self-satisfied as you are in this one.
You will not spread the wealth—
which isn't even yours
and would cost you nothing!

Can you even *understand* common feeling?
I shudder for your children.

There are a number of people who have fairly sizeable online businesses operating in these outlying Appalachian burghs. An online presence has no brick-and-mortar status indicators. A fellow in Parkersburg runs a thriving parts business for motorcycles out of two anonymous, formerly abandoned brick factory/warehouses. (As an aside, I was told he can sell a Harley for three hundred to a thousand or more dollars if in the photos he perches a lovely bikini clad woman on it.)

There isn't much volatility or growth in the business community here, so there aren't many quick opportunities for the venturesome capitalist. The young entrepreneurs who build their empire generally assemble a quilted collection of various going concerns they've acquired piecemeal through an umbrella organization. The youthful wealth around here is a little like octopi.

Since many of the citizens have poor credit, and the gas and coal industries are cyclical boom and bust concerns, rental properties are good value. And many of the ambitious local

workers will feather their nests by acquiring these until bit by bit they are large enough to support a permanent employee or two. The housing market as a whole though is fairly sluggish.

Abandoned properties can be a problem when the inheriting owners have moved out of state. And out of state owners can be a problem, when the properties they own are not kept up nor managed well—such as a seedy trailer park two blocks away and kitty corner whose owner up and told a nearby resident that he didn't intend to either sell or fix it up. It was sending him a nice income in the mail just as it was.

So why do I like it back here?

One reason is that as a poet and writer I can like it about anywhere that's peaceful and quiet. A depressed area is fertile soil for me. The last thing I need is a 'burgeoning artistic climate' with retreats and workshops. We have air conditioning and I spend a lot of hours at my desk anyway. The stories back here are a lot closer to the soil than the ones I would hear in our suburban cul de sac outside Seattle. I know all I want to know about the corporate cubicle ennui. The lives I generally encounter here are not encumbered by professional personas.

The people I meet while walking Tater Tot, my dachshund, are unaffected—and when they are, it's amusing. The community theater aficionados at our monthly reading group with their powdered white hair affect the haute couture. They are the acquired taste, rather like the sweet flavor of Sherwood Anderson's "gnarled apples".

A past afternoon my wife and I had lunch with our neighbors in an Applebees. We compared stories of the recent neighborhood doings. In so doing, the neighbor's wife (who is warm, generous, friendly, and a sort of social worker with a thread of larceny) incidentally related how they would use ramen

noodles as the base ingredient of the food the inmates would create during the eleven months she spent doing hard time in Texas.

The inmates added everything they had available. "It was actually very good," she said with a perky smile.

Another neighbor from across the street (who had a part of her brain surgically removed) appeared out of the dark late one night as we were sitting on the back porch. She had a pair of baby possums perched on each shoulder and she stopped to introduce us. (They were 'mum'.)

As we were stopped at the light prior to taking the bridge into West Virginia, my wife and son were yelling "Look! Look!" So I looked. The fellow in a dented rice burner with a couple passengers in the turn lane beside us was driving with a yellow python wrapped around his neck. I peered closer and the snake was wound around and with its head, resting languorously on the driver's windowsill, taking the sunshine. I decided I needed a photo.

But while I was digging in my pocket for my phone, the wife and son shouted, "No! No pictures."

"But, it's interesting."

"He could shoot you!"

"Why would he shoot me? He obviously wants attention." I kept digging for my phone.

"They can do anything around here! You never know!"

By the time I got my phone out though, he was already moved ahead and turning left out of view. So, no picture. Sorry.

Eden

"But we didn't just eat the apple,

*we cooked and fermented it
and woke up with mud
on the one side of our face
and stars on the other."*

–Eve's recollection

In the heat,
where the sky was caught lingering
on the pond's surface
along with trees and butterflies,
twinning the mind of God,
a rock was tossed
by scroungy kids,
who jumped in after,
disturbing the connection
in undulating ripples.

In the hissing summer heat
precious things
like dragonflies,
(like Forbidden Fruit)
part for rocks which shatter,
and splatter
the porcelain face of Beauty.

Now when I peer into Paradise,
I see only carp with gaping mouths,
and catfish that have camped in my lax mind
amid the old license plates and busted coolers
of Eden.

So it's quiet, peaceful, culturally homogenous, non-political,
enduring and protected by a 200 mile buffer of forest and
farmland from any major metropolitan area. Arts and reading
are unusual pursuits—as perhaps they should be. Conversation
and cooking are the quite usual pursuits – as they possibly
should be. Sports and the outdoors and music are the leading
interests. Bars are fairly few and far between, so that clubs

and organizations form the backbone of most activities and musical engagements. And church is still attended—faithfully by the wife, occasionally by me.

But like audiences everywhere, you never know for sure how your remarks will be received. I chose to attend the Sacred Way Poets monthly critique group some time after I had settled in after our move. They didn't appear affiliated with any educational or community organization, and they seemed to harbor a respect for the sub textual of life, that is, it's metaphorical and spiritual dimensions—so I chose them. I would sometimes read them poems which I troubled over because though they seemed true enough to me—they weren't necessarily complimentary to the area, such as this one, (though not this specific one):

Appalachian Suspicion

Suspicion seems the default position of some.

It follows you from the porches
and lives in the face of the café hostess.

“What do you want?”

“To eat.”

“Are they with you?”

“Yes?”

“Follow me.”

It's as if the café were a speakeasy

with some confusion about

who of us is allowed?

Even over such a small thing as a slice of pie,

“You want desert?”

You get that look.

“Would that be okay?”

Perhaps people here are as suspicious everywhere

—but they don't wear it like their best Sunday clothes.

My goodness!

Perhaps we're supposed to meet after several generations,
at the wedding of second cousins,
that is, if things were done proper.
Or otherwise go about it as our part and parcel
of a feud, lawsuit, armed engagement or dispute.

But likely as not, I would find they not only were just fine
with the poem, but liked it! They'd laugh, as if I'd just lost
my cherry.

You have to love a people like that.