

Peristalsis: The Ongoing Story

by [Carl Nelson](#) (March 2021)



Long before my dotage, when I still needed a cheap place to live and work, wanted a girlfriend who wasn't pushing to get married and pregnant, and a job which would allow me enough time to get on with my artistic endeavors, I was casting about for an answer to the problems inherent in spending one's life in a non-remunerative endeavor i.e., the 'arts'. From what I can tell, these youthful artistic troubles have only gotten worse. When I was young, jobs were easy to come by and rent (if you were resourceful) nearly nominal. How things change!

I was watching a Jordan Peterson video in which he spoke about the wisdom of not choosing a career in which you don't fit, no matter the other indicators. You would be setting yourself up for trouble. Well, I don't find visibility within a group, so it seemed climbing to prominence within any organization just wasn't going to happen for me. My father never rose in rank as an officer, and I was cut from the same cloth, I figured. If I were a leader, nobody wanted to follow.

But then I didn't like following anyone either. I don't even like knowing where I'm going. I much preferred to drift and wander, run upon odd events and characters and perhaps chat them up a bit, hang around until a realization hits. This is the payoff. Then I'd drift off, or hang around if they looked ripe for the plucking of more insights, like a bunch of grapes. This surely made me a hard person to bond with, even if someone so desired. And surely, I would fill a strange leadership position.

Young Possum

*In his WWII photo of himself as a lieutenant aviator...
like slender leaves of grass, whose inclination
is to marshall their quiet where it was not well-
trodden,
off the roadside of the common path...
he had an easy gait, not particularly assertive,
just a clean way of getting there...
Dad always had the twinkle of youth,
the metaphor of promise in his face.*

*But he was a young possum, and he sits a lot now
looking out.*

*I suppose he thinks about home and bed, a few square
meals.*

*The ocean of his thought remains unspoken,
as if there were seas inside of him—crossed and
recrossed.*

*Sprawled in his sweat and wilting clothes,
he rests preoccupied by possumy matters.*

“I’ve always liked the opera,” he says.

*Though in my experience
he has never ever listened or been.*

*Collecting bits of brilliance
to the point that he has nearly stopped talking—
overwhelmed as he is with the rush of unrelenting life.
But he rouses himself for something he finds of dire
importance.*

“Investments,” he says, “are important.

*You need the money working for you so you
don’t have to work so hard yourself.*

And this is what your mother and I have tried to do.”

*With a vagrant’s place in the turbulence, urging
himself forward*

*a lost jigsaw piece of Creation with an unprepossessing
nature and a hiss,*

and the urge to waddle across a road and sidle up a

ditch...

he rests now taking observations, with narrow, rheumy eyes.

His lips are a thin, unspoken line.

His world was always an unstable place of odd occurrence and happenstance...

like an old pasture with bald patches.

The world, as a woman who doesn't care much for you or to make sense of her.

Dad was dappled and sunny and yet,

he never managed any celebrity in the world of men.

And while I enjoy two statements in conflict,

he enjoyed two squirrels arguing over a chestnut.

And he managed with his fruit trees and his gardening,

and with the joy he got from digging his parsnips

—sneaking something from its cold situation—

and frying them in cornmeal and butter for Christmas.

Dad spent a week with me re-roofing my house.

Up in the air above the neighborhood you could hear individual

sounds from various backyards.

It was like we were standing above creation

sharing a task—as if breaking bread—

on a slanted roof, working hard.

The air above the neighborhood carried sounds, clear as a bell...

like a blue cathedral's vault.

My father always wore hard soled brown leather shoes

with polyester socks sheer as cold nylons,

and like two officer twins, in these shoes he raked the yard,

shovelled snow and attended meetings.

There was something about those shoes of the Depression.

They carry the aroma, the scent of the engineer who the

*shoe fit,
and wore them. And now a boatyard of soles,
ghostly racks of shiny rows, fill his closet I coax for
poetry
and see glistening with condescension.*

*We both have the same bunched feet with high arches.
And I have the same look to my large hands;
like religious figures with their huge persistence.
The odd humor of it encourages me.*

Initially, I had fallen upon the idea of being a doctor. This got a very positive response from the family. It was an esteemed trajectory. I imagined myself working somewhere in a remote area, helping people to feel better and generally respected, while pursuing my interests. This hit a bit of a pothole, however, with my first externship to a Montana Indian reservation. I got on quite well with one of the practicing doctors at the clinic. But apparently the doctors weren't invariably well liked—I heard grumbles—especially if someone's relations in their care hadn't done well. And then there was stitching up the scalps of combative drunks at 3 in the morning. "Just try to get in one stitch," the nun nurse pleaded. My consultation with the doctor on call wasn't all that helpful either.

"I'm a little worried about his head trauma. It was near impossible to do an examination. And I can't get him settled to put in a stitch," I said.

"That's because he's drunk," the doctor replied.

"But he can't talk," I said.

"That's because he's *really* drunk," the doctor summarized.

I asked my doctor friend there how he managed his combative patients, and he said. "I stitch their nose to the mattress."

I really didn't flower where the rubber met the road. (And, it isn't a good place for flowers to be sure.) In dermatology I missed a big wart of basal carcinoma right on the end of a patient's nose. We had been sent in there to look at the fellow's rash, and so I didn't want to be so insensitive as to ask him about his nose—or even to glance at the horrid thing. In Alaska, I would have missed a woman's broken jaw if the boyfriend who tapped her hadn't had me take another look. Sure enough, if you pressed the mandible in a certain spot, one ridge of teeth became two, a higher and a lower. My diabetic got way out of control. "You nearly killed her," another doctor advised. And the internist there got so upset about me sleeping with one of his nurses that he wanted to wrestle me out in a field.

I am reminded of a fellow classmate in my first year of medical school who declared loudly while leaving the lecture hall one afternoon, that while he had been out into the clinics he realized that "I don't like sick people!" There was a silence. Then all continued on regardless. I never heard it mentioned again.

You Are Right Until You Are Wrong

*What is the difference between
what does not make sense,
and what we can't understand?
Well, it's good to make sense—
until nonsense works better
or something provides the practical answer.*

*Like using a boat
to ferry people across a flood—*

*it's the right thing to do
until you're overloaded
—and then it was so wrong!*

What had you been thinking?

I didn't really enjoy sick people but I did hope for them to get better.

However, I really didn't like hospitals or all the medical drama with its emotional extremes, gooey orifices, and the hygienic and non-hygienic grit. And I found the surgery suite to be one of the most boring places on this earth. Hours upon hours of standing holding slippery flaps of fat from falling into the operating field. "Our student here doesn't appear to be that interested? Perhaps we should take a vote on whether he should be allowed to remain," the heart surgeon spoke through his mask one late morning while tightening a stitch. His eyes rolled up towards the others.

"Do I get a vote?" I asked.

That killed the discussion. I don't know why.

I could understand the medical materials well enough, but the thought of my applying what I had learned to an actual person was like walking through that watery portal to an alternate universe. Applying what I knew—or for that matter, successful application of any sort—seemed so completely foreign to me as to be laughable. In truth, I had my hands full gaining full visibility and appearing competent. I drifted about in silence—monkey see, monkey do—haunting the circles of aspiring professionals.

Medicine is quite a bit about treating things that are not fully understood, and without a sure cure, but with perhaps a pail of ready fixes. So the medical mind is a huge

confederation of related facts and studies circling about a pressing problem without any certain outcome—but with great confidence, both for your own and the patient’s wellbeing. Our physical situation actually lives within probabilities. The living pattern in the carpet is the mystery, while the fringe is what we know.

My natural manner of thought was to dismiss nearly all I found in searching, to forget all but for that single glowing mysterious realization which I sought. And by that time the patient was usually dead. “You want perfect, you got to die.” I love this saying of my friend’s Polish grandmother so much, I keep repeating it. My mental processes make for good aphorisms, but this is not the sort of person you would want for a doctor! And it was taking all of my mental concentrations to maintain any accountability.

I had to walk away.

I joked for a while that I had probably saved more lives by quitting medicine than a lot of doctors have by practicing.

But who really knows, eh?

Zen Happens

*“Zen Happens”
ought to be a bumper sticker
alongside “Good News Occurred”
and “Petard Hoisting:
See schedule of upcoming events.”*

*Little miracles of apprehension
are pretty much what we’re all about;
pretty much what everything is about.
It’s all true, basically.*

*Plus perhaps what you've made up.
And the multiple choice answer is "D",
all of these.*

*It's the essay questions
which pose the difficulty.
And for these you'll need
a point of view.
So many horses.
So few winners.
The pigeon pecks at every seed.*

I'm not a quitter. (I received the MD.) But I have to say that I've always felt rather relaxed as a nobody and a disappointment. There is such freedom which comes with it. I used to criticize my artist friends for their unwillingness to take advantage of their opportunities. "We're nobodies!" I'd exclaim. "Let's exploit it."

But none of the nobodies wanted to hear it. This thinking doesn't go over well in a crowd of undiscovered genius. "Hey, let's just admit we're small potatoes, and make the best of it. Perhaps someday we'll be big spuds, but right now, why not say what we please?"

But they were all triangulating, self-censoring, building their corpus vitae, wooing a critical following.

Sometimes I think I avoid success, because the rewards of failure are more immediate and more useful. I needn't expend time, effort or money in failure's pursuit. Failure is "the sun in the morning and the moon at night". What's not to like? And besides, it's not like I've had to fight fame and fortune off with a stick. It simply makes sense to make peace with your situation. Just sayin'.

Failure has no audience to please, no society which

can be alienated, no boss, no patrons. The powers that be don't care much what I do. I'm not on their radar. In fact, I believe my failure is in their interest, and they would prefer seeing more of it. Failure is a finger on the pulse of the ever-present grumblings. Failures who will speak up give a credulous glow to this fantasy we call "freedom of speech". It's all rather like the Speaker's Corner of Hyde Park in London, where "open-air public speaking, debate, and discussion are allowed, as long as the police consider their speeches lawful". (Wikipedia) All of the while, keeping in mind that this platform, which marked the beginnings of free speech, was formerly the Tyburn Gallows.

Close to this spot, about 250 years ago, people were still being hanged at the infamous Tyburn Gallows. The gallows were installed in 1196 and by the time they were dismantled in 1783 more than 50,000 people had been executed there.

Everyone condemned to die at Tyburn could make a final speech. Some confessed; others protested their innocence or criticized the authorities. For onlookers, executions at Tyburn were big social events. Londoners could buy a ticket to watch executions from a seat on huge wooden platforms. —The Royal Parks (of London) website

Failure can be immensely productive. We learn from our mistakes, as they say. A playwrights group I was a member of, (see "The Odd Duck/A Memoir") was both the most unheralded and demeaned playwrights group in Seattle, and the one which mentored the most locally produced main stage playwrights.

The downside, as it's called, was that I no longer had a credible future—which, I was beginning to see the use of also, as it dithered attachments. Rats don't stay with a

sinking vessel. So, I bought a cheap fixer-upper in a sketchy part of town for my living and artistic needs. And then I went about looking for just enough employment to sustain me.

I pinballed from furniture mover to carpenter to school aid to salesperson to programmer to portrait artist to combos of all the above. I eventually found myself a fixer-upper in a rough neighborhood (as I've said) for fifteen thousand dollars on which I took out a thirty-year loan, for a crushing monthly payment of about \$103. While converting this home to my needs, I set about consolidating my employments and freeing my mind from those pressing survivalist concerns. Unfortunately, it can be more than a full-time job arranging enough part time employment to keep body and soul attached. Eventually, through artistic contacts, I found the job I was looking for: driving a city bus for the Seattle Metro. The work paid well with healthcare, vacation and a retirement plan and could be done on a part-time basis. All you really had to do was to turn the wheel a bit, and press the two pedals at the right times. If you could show up for work in uniform, uniformly on time, and didn't go off route, you'd not go far professionally, but could drive in circles forever. I'd found Jordan Peterson's rendering. The job's real difficulty was dealing with all of the Metro bus riders, who were a motley: ethnically, financially, legally, hygienically, mentally. And I enjoyed being what was essentially a tide pool 'filter feeder', nibbling on the various colorful to drab personalities paused at the fare box. In many ways, the job was a good fit.

Nothing frees the soul for transmigration like a routine, which has, through the province of time, been promoted to a subroutine, and thence to a sub-subroutine, eventually moving out of focus, then out of mind like intestinal rumblings or like the myriad of spinal reflex routes which maintain our posture, standing quite still, while the mind, like General Patton, conducts its inspection and

dresses us down. Driving a city bus is the closest I ever came to perfecting a solution to the difficulties inherent in supporting oneself as an artist while bringing the stubborn necessities of life to the task level of *peristalsis*. Bus driving is a created routine of uniform attire, uniform work, same bus, same route, same stops, same time of day, same passengers, same greetings, and the same paycheck with retirement and benefits every two weeks. I would sometimes blink aware, as if I were the thing being digested in the dark tube of endless routine, suddenly awake to the peristaltic process—or as I awakened, as it was always the same. At times it seemed the days were something bouncing on a roulette wheel. Each day at whatever time, I was doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same manner—having just landed on a different number. So it seemed almost as if I were to blink properly, I might be in yesterday or three weeks past come tomorrow. Why couldn't my life be similarly transformed simply by imagining it so, alas! *Nevertheless, it surely seemed that bus driving was a set up for the transmigration of my soul into verse.* It was just the guts of the matter which kept me from totally drifting off into space. I had a body. The 'heart of the matter' is actually a tube. We must eat. Even poets are anchored by space (shelter), and time (needed to write), and hunger (the need to chew, and snack).

While the bus proceeded along its proscribed route picking up and dropping off passengers, I would pull and push all the proper levers in somewhat of a rhythm with the phrases in my head. Then, when I happened across a line that delighted or intrigued, I would jot it down on the back of a torn bus transfer. And when I stopped either at a light or a bus stop or halted during a traffic stoppage, I would stuff this scribble into my swelling, (decorated with thread 'pills'), cardigan's right vest pocket, then continue along in folic with the muse while pulling down a check. During those years when I was writing plays, at times pregnant bits or full streams of dialogue would speak to me, while a theatre set

hung like a haze over the road. I scribbled dialogue down rapidly at the light until someone would say, "It's green." (These inspirations have a brief shelf-life in the recent memory e.g., witness Coleridge's pleasure dome, never used.) Or I would scribble madly during debarkation at a bus stop until someone would pass by grumbling, "Well, I guess I'll get off here too, then," casting me the look.

By allowing myself a generous following distance, I found that by outsourcing the chauffeuring to a deep-sourced neural handler, I could still maintain a good driving record while daisy picking with the muse. As a safety tip, I recommend it. The shining peak of my gut-like power was reached one morning in an event which still astonishes me. I had switched to the morning run lured by a bit more time or a better route or some such thing—or perhaps I was fleeing from the imprudent selection of something else, such as school kids. But the morning route required my rising from bed at 3 am, confused as to whether the *Chupacabra*-like events being discussed over the clock radio by Art Bell from his high desert broadcast studio outside of Pahrump, Nevada were the real morning news, a dream, or none of the above. The early hour so threw my sleep off, that I often signed in the register and then drove off to do my duties while still in a rather zombified state. This was not a problem though for my peristaltic intelligence, which simply folded this decreased attention into its running programs as if a new line of code had simply been added to its algorithm. My drowsiness simply lengthened the peristaltic wave of its neural plexus to a deeper alpha state, like a submarine which was diving further than it had ever gone before, but without the creaking of the hull or the depth meter vomiting salt water.

Every so often, while driving I would snap aware to wonder what occurred for the past 15 minutes. Had I stopped and picked up all my passengers? Had I driven past a stop? Where was I along the route? I looked in the passenger mirror

and the riders were normally settled. Everything being okay, my attentions would flag once again. These little flashes of awakening fear, like the morning alarm, I soon got used to. The intervals grew longer.

One morning I awoke from the reveries of my morning express run to discover myself pulling up before my home in Southeast Seattle several miles from the downtown corridor, glad that the day's work was behind me. But, as I sighed, I wondered why I had stopped before my house rather than pulling into the yard/driveway as I usually did? It was then I realized that I was still in my articulated bus. Looking in the mirror I saw fifty-some morning commuters. Some were glancing puzzled out the windows, or wondering back at me in the mirror. There was a long pause.

“Oops,” I said into the bus microphone.

This got a laugh.

I apologized meekly and rushed them the several miles back to downtown.

They responded quite sympathetically overall. Some looked at me and chuckled lightly as they debarked. One thanked me for the tour, as the rougher areas of Rainier Avenue and SE Seattle were places she'd never ventured. “I always wondered where Borracchini's Bakery (in Seattle's Garlic Gulch) was, and now I know.”

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Carl Nelson has recently published his newest Self Help Book, *The Poet's (30 Year) Marriage Plan*, which is a useful collection of interlarded poems and prose advice (schemes), all celebrating the hallowed institution of marriage. To learn more about the author and peruse his work, please visit