

What Causes things to Happen?

by [Carl Nelson](#) (January 2025)



Between Employment and Enjoyment (Peter Wilson, 1982)

My friend Scot and I were mulling over plays in those days ... what makes them tick, what makes the action move forward. And Scot, being of a rational, blunt nature declared, "All plays start with a conflict. It is conflict which drives a play. And it is how that conflict is resolved," he continued, "which either makes or breaks a play. The trick is not getting into the fight. It's what you do, once you're in one—which creates a play."

Scot was saying this because both of us were writing plays, and so we were discussing how they worked, and, of course, how to make ours better, or, at least to make mine better. That is, how to get one going, at least. Because "the mark of any really good conflict is that you're stuck!" I'd remarked.

"I don't know what you mean by that," Scot replied. "If you're stuck, it's because you're simply not responding to the conflict. You either don't know what the conflict is—or you're backing down from the conflict you've imagined."

"I mean," I objected, "that the conflicts I imagine or have encountered don't seem to resolve themselves whether I would strike out in one direction or the other. They just are."

"I don't see how that can be," Scot fumed. "You go this way, or you go that way. You pick an alternative—and something's got to happen!"

"I guess what I'm saying is," he continued, "I don't see the problem. If doing one thing or the other won't resolve the conflict, then maybe what you're choosing isn't really a conflict. Maybe there's nothing there to resolve. Maybe you're asking a stone not to be a stone, a problem not to be a problem," he chuckled at this afterthought.

That rang a bell. A "gong" went off in my head. And then I wished Scot would stop speaking so I could think this through.

"That really interests me," I said, buying time.

"I know," Scot answered, with a huff of disgust.

"That is probably true," I said later. "As most of my conflicts feel more like imponderables."

"Excuse me, but I'm lost here." Scot's hands moved like storm tossed palms when exasperated. "Conflicts are not imponderables. How many prime numbers are there? Now that's an imponderable. But a conflict, like say, whether I should have my eggs sunny side up or not? That's resolvable by making a decision and taking your choice." He stared as if he had just been asked to repeat the world's easiest directions to a brothel.

Most of my life though, now that I was considering it, was about things not being the way I would like them to be.

"Things aren't the way I want them. THAT's my conflict!"

"That's your PROBLEM," Scot barked. "It's not your conflict. A conflict..." And Scot went on to reiterate what he had already said. And this was fine, as I was free for a time again to consider my own thoughts.

The answer occurred to me at a later date, while talking to another playwright friend, Jeff. We were talking about narrative movement again; about how a play was supposed to be propelled by conflict. Because I had been considering in the interim, how many times had I argued my way forward with anyone? How many times had getting in an argument moved anything in my life forward? If I were to be honest, what so often happened whenever I got in an argument—when things had reached the point of conflict, they stopped. So how could conflict move a story forward when, whenever I was in one, things stopped?

"This thought came to me completely out of the blue, Jeff," I

said. "They say that conflict is what moves a story along. But I think conflict only appears to move a story along. I mean certainly a conflict involves a lot of action and emotion. You take any point along the narrative arc of a story which presumes to be moved along by a conflict, and the conflict is still there. So, in actuality, there hasn't been any movement at all! At best, perhaps our opponents have been circling."

Jeff didn't say anything. Rather he simply listened with an aspect of sincere evaluation.

"No. I think what really makes a story change is generosity," I said emphatically. "For some reason, one character witnesses another character with a difficulty, or a problem, and helps him. And *that* is what moves a story along. The problem is no longer there. Nor is the conflict, actually."

Jeff nodded, smiling slightly with that same look of active evaluation in his eyes. I don't know if we were in accord. But he certainly warmed to the pleasant quality of the idea. That's his nature.

Conundrums

While eating brisket beside the Ohio River at a BBQ shack and reminiscing, my wife remarked that I used to grind my gears on a certain problem for years, and then I didn't do that anymore. And why was that?

All of which started me talking before thinking, and I said, "You see that out there?"

"There's the shore of West Virginia, the Ohio River and the blue sky. You don't see any problems. To create problems, we have

to do the work ourselves.”

My goodness, I hadn't thought of that!

So another day, while talking to my friend Scot, I said, “You know, all of the advances in my life have somehow sprung from some act of generosity I've performed.” And then added as a wistful afterthought, “That's probably why I haven't progressed very far.”

A real act of generosity involves putting aside your own wants—forgetting about yourself and considering someone else for the moment. You see that they need some help. You see that you could provide it.

Maybe you've just got the stirs really bad. Maybe, for example, you have just had your feet operated on and are confined to your bedroom for several months, and have begun to go stir crazy what without having seen another person outside of your wife, mother and occasional dialog with the dog. Maybe you'd give anything just to be able to work up a real sweat and to smell the grass and the rain and the breeze on your face and to get all muddy with work.

Or maybe it was just a vulnerable time for me. Whatever it was, for whatever reason, one day when my wife came home, I committed an act of generosity.

Copier Sales

My wife liked to knit quietly, calmly, for long hours at a stretch. I liked to watch her knit. It was calming as watching snow fall, with the only downside being that she might ask me something, while the snow makes few requests.

“Hi honey,” she'd look at me and say. “What are you thinking?”

I rarely knew for sure or with any confidence. My thoughts nearly always ran a normal conversation right off its tracks. And I'd end up leading others through a solipsistic marsh and into a conversational swamp. The poet learns this: that his personal introspection isn't a good thing to share.

"You look sort of pensive."

That's the hell of it. My nature betrays me.

"I'm just thinking about life, you know."

She waited...

"And death. You know, the futility of all endeavor."

"You think too much." She sighed, and resumed her knitting.

I sighed. "I'm just sitting here, trying to think how to get some forward momentum."

"Oh, honey. You have lots of forward momentum."

"I'm sitting in a chair. I'm sitting here, in a chair, honey!"

Another Day of Being Me / Resist!

I struggle all day and
I struggle all night.
I struggle to the left,
I struggle to the right.
I struggle falling down
and I don't fold well either.

When I extend,
my nature's too thin.
And when I contract,
I'm rotund. It's a fact.

I'm exhausted when I settle in.
I'm horizontal when I settle out.
I'm prostrate when I awake
and beside myself going out.

Perhaps all would be better
if I abandoned my nature,
or returned my bliss for its retrofit.
All the while though, unfortunately...
it's another day of being me.

Resist!

Where my wife gets her nature, I don't know. But salespersons are suspiciously affirmative. It comes with the territory. Molten lava could be flowing all around, villagers screaming and fleeing, and a salesperson would still spin a rosy picture which describes a buying opportunity.

I was getting a little hysterical, I know. But the pressure was building. I was over fifty.

So to recapitulate that one day, while talking to my friend Scot, I had said, "You know, all of the advances in my life have somehow sprung from some act of generosity I've performed." When, in a flash of insight, I realized that a real act of generosity involves putting aside your own importance and considering another's. And when you examine the logic of it, it's surprisingly simple. Being generous is basically a matter of adopting someone else's values and desires over your own. And since hardly anybody was less successful than I, by being generous my life couldn't help but improve. Ironic, isn't it?

Indeed, life moves quite sinuously, counter-intuitively even, like a snake.

I was bedridden and on leave from my bus driving career after foot surgery and bored, and maybe I thought I'd help my wife out a little. She was the one who went out and did battle every day. She wore those business suits at the time with the padded shoulders. It was her business look, and in the mirror beforehand she had that jailhouse stare while applying her cosmetics. There was no overcoming it. I'd tried but, I'll admit, I couldn't take the pressure.

She'd practiced it day after day, week after week, year after year and against the best—I mean powerful law firm managers way up in their cloud-shrouded aeries.

More about my wife, who would roll torn strips of paper into pill-balls. I could calculate how her month was going by how many little paper pill-balls I saw. It was something her hands just did. She wasn't aware of it, until finally she would look down at her desk, as if at the scat of some little browsing desk pest with little pellets scattered here and there.

I must have thought there was something I could bring to the plate. That's how deluded a poet is. We don't see the world through its eyes. Like the cane-tapping, penniless, blind Homer, poets believe what we know to be worth something and must be heard. A poet is thus.

So I had offered my assistance as a chance to help my wife. A fellow nowadays, he doesn't get many of these openings. Women are pretty self-sufficient. They outsource their auto repairs, change their oil, and open their own doors. They fight wars and fires. They even run large companies. There's not much you can do for them. But I thought I'd seen a chink. 'She's pretty tough', I thought, but I'd sensed a little anxiety—maybe a flickering desperation. It looked a lot like an opportunity.

I'd thought that maybe, even with my poetical—maybe even because of my poetical nature—I could be of help. Perhaps while I was laid up, I could help by making a few calls?

My wife, of course, leapt at the opportunity. I had just gone from something else around the house to “a great idea” in no time at all. She furnished me with a long list of places to call and with a script of what to say. It sounded sort of ‘canned.’ ‘Can you really talk to people like this?’ I thought. “You really say this?” I asked.

But as it turned out she was right, and I was wrong. Not only could you talk to people like that, but they responded. Let me tell you, it changed my life. (Or, at least, it should have. The fact that it hasn't changed my life, I hold only myself to blame. I still can't seem to grasp ... something ... whatever it is.)

If she had wanted to help me by mailing out my poetry, I would have jumped at the offer too. (And later on, she would.) It's really hard to promote yourself. It's great to have someone in the background helping to hold you up; assisting so that you can move forward. Just the fact of them being there, well, it makes it all so ... substantial.

Not that I'm saying that I single-handedly made sales easier. The copier sales business was already awfully tough ... and getting tougher.

Actually, it would turn out to be the other way around. I was getting tougher.

I have always drifted into repetitive routine. I like metrical speech. Where others become bored, I find fields to explore. Spells are fashioned from repetition, for example.

Enter sales—telemarketing actually—which is a portion of the sales job so prone to discouraging, repetitive failure that the task is often undertaken by digitalized, zombie telephone

solicitors.

Surprisingly, with time I discovered that each discouraging, repetitive failure was like another power life in the ego weight room. Each day I called, and strengthened my will through constant introductions, constant objection; then increased the repetitions; increased the resistance; while maintaining a training schedule and a chart of incremental improvement. All of this comprised a training method for overcoming audience resistance—a very useful capability for any artist to have!

This newer peristaltic routine fed on the world as if it were a six pack of nutritional supplements, while being quite remunerative. After a few years, I took the time to calculate my hourly value in rough terms, based on the deals for which I had set the initial meeting which had closed. I impressed myself. In fact, I even became a little cocky.

On a cold call not that much later, the sole lawyer in his law firm began chewing me out for interrupting him at work. “Do you realize that I charge a hundred dollars an hour for my time?”

I paused..

“Well,” I responded. “My time pencils out to about one fifty (dollars an hour) spent on the phones.” I paused. “So you’re getting the better deal.”

He said nothing.

“You should be calling me,” I quipped.

On another day I was going through my list of follow-up calls. I called back an accountant, who I had spoken to the week before. He said, “I thought I told you I’m not interested.”

“No,” I said. “You said you would call me back.”

"Well," he said. "I'm not interested."

Oftentimes when people lie to you, they expect you to understand the subtext.

"I don't believe you," I laughed.

My job analogy would be as the football opponent who secured the fumble or intercepted the pass, which I then passed laterally to the wife, who ran it like a linebacker and usually scored! (She was good.) My efforts bulked our income, while I was included in her medical, retirement, and vacations. She manifested at work as one person, but produced with the resources of another half. (I was part-time.) This made her job easier. And I had a flex schedule which paid well. It didn't hurt that the wife was now more apt to listen to the person who buttered a slice or two of her bread.

I was dancing in the rain.

Cold calling trained and gave me the moves to become a bit combative and to go for the prize. I was no longer just having conversations. I was writing for the accomplishment. So that in my off periods, I finished three plays, a sci-fi/crime trilogy, several books of poetry and essays, and two self-help books, plus a mound of stuff never published. Until here I am, retired but still prolific!

Looking Back, an Assessment

My past life was as a filter feeder.

Of that, I'm fairly certain.

...browsing the currents like a salad bar,
and performing so well at it,

I was kicked upstairs. What can I say?

Those who do well are promoted.

And I loved the rewards of doing nothing

coupled with the idea... of doing something.
Never creating luck, but finding a living
served up and delivered
like room service. And...

I'll admit that things have fallen my way,
here and there. The tide has turned.
My ship's come in, gone out, and come in again.
Like the endless surf,
opportunities wax and wane eternal.
And I've always had enough money...
always had enough joy...
always had enough success...
Not always mine...

But my foundational genius
was not to quibble.

It all began, as far as I could fathom, with the simple declarative sentence (which, in many minds, is the most underrated thing in the English language). You simply repeat this simple declarative sentence, until it begins to get up, stride about and take on a life of its own. It's as natural as slapping a newborn on the butt. I have to say, it grasped my imagination. You simply have to tell people what to do! I mean, it blew all of my nuanced behavior out of the water.

For a while—it took awhile—I thrashed about. But practice anything; do something enough times and often gradually whatever you're doing begins to work. Whatever I was saying began to come out sounding reasonable. Repetition has its way of channeling you, like water, down the already well worn passageways. Charms are built from repetitions (as I've said). Say, "Last year Sharp copiers were number one in digital placements," for example, with enough brio and confidence, and it begins to take on a life of its own. Say you just start off

with it as your sentence. It begins to attract other phrases. Your voice drops. It takes on a power, but with a casual flip of emphasis at the end, like the knob on a large door turning. It could mean something good—be going to a good place—or something bad—be going to a bad place. It's all a matter of emphasis.

Life certainly looks different depending upon your station within it. This should come as no surprise. Imagine watching an ant carrying a bread crumb, then imagine yourself as the ant sweating under the bread crumb. Ethics—which truly, artists are quite sloppy about—were actually more strict in business where money, livelihoods and the law are involved. So ironically, the virtue preening which artists (and culture in general) habitually engaged in vis a vis the business world was water off a duck to most sales professionals. Piss on 'em. Fighting for your livelihood will do that to you. And I went a bit native.

While watching sales work, it appeared that sales was just how life moved, how it breathed, inhaled and exhaled. The nature of sales had something to do with the life force, which was all tied up in there with acquisition. If I could just grasp what it was, then I would be moving along with life also, and acquiring.

I just had to 'get up to speed'. I was like a pedestrian walking in the gusts of grit and dust alongside a freeway. As soon as I acquired a used skill set and was traveling with the other vehicles, I imagined the whole thing would get a lot more congenial. That is, the other cars would merge. My wife would remember where I was and what I was doing a few minutes before and, if things continued to go on as well, would even begin to remember what I'd said.

Sales people were lively, cocky and combative. "Hungry," they call it. They dressed well. They were athletic. They spent money. They flew to fun vacations. And I enjoyed their

chatter.

I'd thought sales required some special feeling for people. But it wasn't like that, anymore than fishing requires some special feeling for fish. People become fishermen because they want to catch fish. Believe me, it works better than anything. The fish really respond to it. Maybe they feel sought after. I don't know. (You'd have to discuss it with them. Maybe do some Pisces-analysis.)

But I'd always loved chatter, and salespeople were chatterboxes on steroids. They were chatter cannons. It was a muscular, whiz-bang sort of vernacular: go, go, go...

"What are you doing?" Our manager, Daryl, said one afternoon as he trotted past me with his tie fluttering over his shoulder.

"I'm thinking," I replied.

"You can do that with a phone in your ear!"

Bullpen Chatter

"So what do you want me to do? If you had 'the perfect world' from Jerry, what would it be?"

"Saddle up! She told us she'd meet if we get there in the next fifteen minutes."

"I went and met with them personally, got down on my knees, wore holes in my pants."

More Bullpen Chatter

"Well, let me give you the other option."

"That's why I'm wondering the time frame on this."

"We'd love to get the paperwork done on this today."

Meanwhile, down the way, Daryl has halted in his brisk stride to lean into the office of another sales manager, and they bark like dogs. But Daryl's story dominates.

"So the woman said she couldn't meet."

"My mother's in the hospital," she said.

"What hospital?" I asked.

"Overlake."

"I met her there, and we signed the deal." Daryl barks one loud laugh, spreads his arms to take a bow, turns, and steps towards his office.

Copier salespeople are some of the most competitive businessmen around.

As I was saying, you just walk down the aisle and one after another, the others might start to bark like dogs in the pound.

A cubicle inhabitant prairie dogs Daryl as he passes by. "What is that?"

"What is what?"

"You call that a tie? You actually wear that to an appointment?"

Daryl, powering up, turns.

"Yes, and then I close."

"Coffin-lids? It looks like something to be buried in."

Full-on frontal confrontation.

“What the hell is it between you—and my tie?”

“It’s nothing man. It’s just sort of ... funereal, you know?”

Daryl unloads. “This is a three hundred dollar Italian tie. Which I purchased, when they threw in these...” He reveals a silk sock with raised brows. “Oh, I get it. You just wanted to use that new two-bit word, “funereal”. You must have just looked it up. Or did you get it from our ‘poet’ over there?”

The fellow glances at me.

“You are so sensitive! You know what? I like your tie. ... I love your tie!”

Daryl nods, and leaves.

The fellow calls after... “All I’m saying is it needs some, I don’t know... lilies!”

In my wife’s and my second year of work together, I made the appointment which led to the biggest deal our company had made that year.

“So, I figure out of more than one million phone calls I have calculated were made by this sales organization this past year,” I jiggled my drink. “I made, arguably, the most important one.” I nodded, while speaking to our VP of Sales at the annual convention that spring. “And I’m not even an employee!”

It was a bit of crowing, I’ll admit.

He stared at me for a moment, then turned to speak to my wife about something else.

“Do you realize, honey, that this past month, eight of the ten deals that I closed were from appointments that YOU made,” my wife said.

I didn't say anything.

“I wonder if you realize how much I love you?”

My Stock Rises

Now and then, suddenly,
I'm somewhat in demand.
A ripple of interest,
a freshet of air,
nothing very tangible
but a sort of
shimmering acknowledgment,
so subtle as to weigh less
than a mirage
and which could be withdrawn
at any time,
in case, for any reason,
my stock should fall –
without any acknowledgement
that their estimate
had risen.

When I was just starting out—to become a painter at the time—I needed somewhere to live and work. So I bought a really cheap fixer-upper in a poorer section of town, which looked a bit like a farmhouse—which it had been in the late 1880s—perched on a hillside of fruit trees. I'd stroll around the neighborhood for diversion. This is what artists/poets/writers have traditionally done.

My locale was a checkerboard of cyclone fences, overgrown shrubbery, mangy yards, missing sidewalks, and old cars lining driveways, often with a dog chained to a tire or pacing behind the fence. Anybody with a house and yard had enough possessions to warrant investing in a steel cyclone fence. And anybody with enough scraps to feed a puppy could have a seriously vicious dog.

When I passed the corner of a garage or the crack in a Leland hedge, the German Shepherds, Dobermans, and Pit Bulls would slam the fence, barking and snarling. The Chihuahuas and Poodles, too, jumped like crazed fleas on the backs of sofas and drooled on picture windows. In their front yards too, animals frothed. Taking a walk got the whole neighborhood riled up, as it happened that everything was triggered by my passing.. All the while I stubbornly imagined I was strolling the English Lake District in pastoral communion with the ghosts of Coleridge and Wordsworth.

The white-collar world wasn't so different. The salespeople in their cubicles often barked whenever another passed by. Disruption in the pack, when one spoke above another in the bullpen or in the meeting room, was dispelled when the alpha dog growled or took a quick nip.

"Fuck you!" contests were like a jump ball in basketball and occurred as often, especially when the action was vigorous.

Anyway, I slowly—and painfully—learned not to say or do anything to provoke them. This could be anything unusual, strange, an arcane word, perhaps, or involved speaking out of school ... mostly that is, trying for a presence. It was pretty simple; don't speak unless in response. It was all about who controlled the conversation. Provoking a conversation was an invitation to confrontation. In the dog world this would be like eating first. You would be picking a fight.

Eventually my social interaction was weaned to a few upbeat

salutations, and my conversation to a few careful sales platitudes. "It's all good." "Well, there it is."

"Good morning," presented too much of a presence. A simple, "Hi" was more deferential. Anything more was bound to be tested and tried.

As our color specialist noted: "This is a very adversarial environment."

While on a prize trip to Mexico, I witnessed an aggressive street vendor back away cautiously as our VP waved and met his come-on cheerily, like a smiling mongoose, pivoting and advancing.

Sales meetings were theater.

"That's when you have to instill a sense of urgency in them! You go in to the customer and say: "Shit! Change it!" The VP pumped his arms, exhorting the Junior Sales Staff.

"You just go into the customer and say, "Shit! Change it!" A junior sales member acted out our VP's delivery in the bullpen later, as she reiterated what she had learned in the training session about getting the customer to upgrade.

"Shit! Change it!" No. "SHIT. Change it!" Or. "Shit. CHANGE it." How about? "SHIT! CHANGE IT!!!" Soon they were all laughing, pumping their arms and barking like dogs, shitting and changing it

[Table of Contents](#)

Carl Nelson's latest book of poetry titled, *Strays, Misfits, Renegades, and Maverick Poems (with additional Verses on*

Monetizations), has just been published. To have a look at this and more of his work please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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