

BEST
o' the
FLY



John H. Farr

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Selected 2007 Columns from

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by

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publisher Bill Whaley: “Hell, I don’t care...”

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John H. Farr
Taos, NM

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Burning the Flag

The year was 1968. I was in the middle of trying to write my master's thesis to get a teaching job when Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated.

Earlier that spring, after years of hard work and study, I'd won a three-year fellowship to the University of Hamburg, Germany. A direct route to a PhD, the fellowship paid for room, board, tuition, a living allowance, and transport via ocean liner. But my local draft board told me that I couldn't count on a student deferment if I left the country, and the prospect of being called up overseas, where I'd have to report directly to a military base, was downright scary. I had no input from my family (including my retired military father), no one to turn to for support. The fellowship was the culmination of my last two years of work as a German major at U.T. Austin, and I was truly proud to win it. But we were all living under the gun back then: every time you made the grade and qualified for deferment, the Selective Service raised the bar and culled another few thousand from the campuses for Vietnam. No matter how hard you worked and did what you were told, your country kept trying to kill you. And this was when we had a Constitution.

In the end, I turned the fellowship down

and opted for what I thought was safety (oh, do we know better now). I'd never wanted to be a professor, anyway -- my goal in winning the fellowship was to earn a ticket to Europe for a few years and see what clicked. Going for the deferment instead of taking my chances dropped me into hell at a little junior college in Wharton, Texas, where the streets on the black side of the tracks weren't even paved.

You had to be there, brothers and sisters. I had a mustache and a paisley tie, which made me the token hippie teacher so the school could show that it was hip. There was a deputy sheriff parked across the street from my house every day for months. My first wife and I put oiled rice paper on the windows so he couldn't see inside with his binoculars. My mail arrived obviously opened much of the time. After my wife and I broke up, someone sent a female student to my house to try to seduce me. It was all too weird, and I sent her away. Later I learned there'd been a car full of football players just outside, waiting for her to scream so they could run inside and pound me into hamburger. This was rural Texas in '68 and '69, where the authorities could "kill you dead," as the saying went, and leave your body in the woods. *They read my mail, my magazines and newspapers too. They spied on me at home and in class.* And this was when we had a Bill of Rights.

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There was so much more. The KKK bombed the transmitter of the listener-sponsored Pacifica FM station that was my lifeline. By that time, there were so many GIs dying every day in Vietnam, the station broadcast the news by reading casualty reports over protest music or Ravi Shankar, ending with “and the war goes on...” I went to a hippie cafe in the middle of Houston, a local hangout for anti-war students, where they’d had to erect a heavy rope mesh barrier across the open front to catch the firebombs tossed by drive-by patriots. I remember sitting there and wondering if I’d be barbecued. And this was when we believed in the ultimate protection of the law.

When I was just a scared, naive, twenty-something kid, trying to follow my conscience and do my best, I could have ended up in jail or worse. But somewhere, sometime, at some point along the way, I could have found someone to plead my case, to set me free and punish my tormentors. Even if it was ignored in the breach, the Constitution was there as a bulwark of last resort.

Americans don’t have that guarantee today. What will happen when it all gets to be too much, when your kid’s been hauled away for “interrogation” for wearing the wrong T-shirt to school or questioning a politician, when someone with a grudge against you claims he saw you

talking to a swarthy fellow with an accent and then you lose your job? When you have no job, your house is gone, you can't pay for surgery, and no one will stand up for you, what does your citizenship count for then?

“You can't DO this to me!” Oh, yes they can.

It's codified.

It's who we are.

Field of Eggs



God *does* love me.

For at least 35 years, I've experienced only partial obeisance to what passes for reality. Blame it on a single dog-eared Alan Watts book, plants, or the electric finger of the sun. (Quantum physics is in there, too, if that makes this respectable.) Ever since I realized that the universe was all inside my brain, it's been hard to take anything except clay feet seriously enough to want to chop off someone's head. My own, perhaps, but that comes from the razor whirlpool of my youth.

None of this has saved me from madness and depression – enlightenment is true but fleeting (a holy feature, not a bug). I know I'm a thing of light inside a shell, however, and that the day you can pin religion on me is when you'll get your bacon from the sky.

Someone recently spoke more sharply to me than I expected. I immediately felt as dirty and angry as a junkyard dog and spent the next two days barking at a mirror. I even got a sore throat, and a sinus infection came roaring back. *If I had been a country, there'd be 10 million dead.* It seems to me that one could learn from this, though all there is now is the din of braying, fear-crazed hordes. I wish

they'd get a life and let the rest of us have ours, but since they won't — apparently — there's nothing for it but to fold them all inside us like an omelet of everlasting love. (Yes, I really said that. I don't know where it came from, but I like it.)

Reality, though, is for the birds. In truth, I mean, like for the distinctly happy ones I saw one day in a pristine meadow in the Valle Vidal, or for another flock I saw one evening heading for their roost in a stunning untouched canyon south of town — a perfect jewel of Nature's own creation, now to be carved up for fancy homes, where selfish bastards will take chunks for themselves and smash the covenant 'twixt man and Gaia. ["BARK-bark-bark-bark!"] Oh yes, the omelet... How could I forget?

It's easy, actually. As natural as salvation, as open as a tomb.

A man comes rushing at me with a knife, I'll either run or kill him dead like thunder. He stands across the road and sharpens it, perhaps he only wants to whittle, but we live in a time where even wishing for a blade is grounds for being stomped to death. Under the circumstances, what's surprising is that there are so many of us left.

I've said before that if the course of our adventure coming from oh-so-fat-and-sassy life in Maryland with five college degrees and 4,000 pounds of crap between us has taught me

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anything, it's that the same observer looks out on everything that's shiny-new or cracked and broken; on firm young skin or wrinkled cellulite, on big fat paychecks or scary Visa bills. To these I'll now add swarthy non-Methodists with AK-47s in their teeth or clean-cut lunatics in suits; rapine developers or deadly pure ascetics; dirty, barking junkyard dogs or puppies clean enough to kiss and slobber over... Hold it up to the light and there you go, a kaleidoscope of concepts, chatter, and broken dreams. A river of tears, a bushel of ripe bananas. What the hell. WHAT THE GODDAMNED HELL!

Sometimes when I'm losing it, an angel makes me sleep. The other night I dreamed a beautiful woman and I were standing by a lake that stretched far away to dark green mountains. It was like no place I'd ever been, with *absolutely giant* trees like magic sequoias rising from the shallows and the banks. I couldn't believe how tall those trees were, how calm and peaceful the surroundings. There were even big white egrets flying through the mist.

Now if I tell you I had a damn primeval vision, you can take it to the bank! Well sir, I did, so dump it in the pan with all the other stuff. Crack me open and add me too, and you, and you, and you, and them. Fire the guards, bring the troops home, plant a garden, watch the sky.

All you need to know is "red or green?" and

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don't go barking at no mirrors, please.

Busted Down in Babylon



She called from Arizona because I'd sent her a video.

My mother lives 600 miles away, and I hadn't telephoned since late October. Last week, though, I made a one-minute video of myself and emailed it to her. (A very nice video, too, I'll have you know.) The sight of me had emboldened her, and her voice was strong. She was holding up really well for being almost 85 and never doing anything the least bit healthy, I thought. She exercises on the inside, though, from working out things like how my wife and I should come live in her doublewide:

"... and Kathy would have a *home!*"

Oh woe be unto me, foul strangler of wifely ambition! It's a husband thing, of course. Either that, or the notion of having our own place (again) is foreign to me and I'm stupid.

"We're doing fine here, but thank you."

"I tried to get you a home," she said, referring to the check that helped us close on the Still Pond place back in '88, well before mildewed old dumps in the Maryland countryside cost more than mansions in Spain.

"I know, and you did. We're very grateful. We had a home."

"Yes, but you LEFT IT! You didn't STAY!"

“It’s a big, wide, wonderful world out there, Mom...”

But of course I’ve never had the slightest little regret. Not even when my honey was living 1,200 miles away, I’d just had the most alienating “holiday” conceivable, there was nothing left in the bank, and I wanted to drive my truck straight into the gorge. Not even then had I wished, even for a moment, to be living back on our 2.57 acres by the Chesapeake Bay, with my sweetie’s academic cancer factory checks paying for it all, while I pretended to make art in my studio, mowed the grass, and watched teevee all night. Who would, right, much less admit it, except under waterboarding or motherly love? She knows, of course, and puts the energy to other uses.

When I was growing up as an Air Force brat, we moved over 40 times before I graduated from high school. Some of those were moves within the same community, but whole sledgehammer changes of household, every one. One such move was from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia to the rail of the loathsome Rhine: occupied Germany under perpetual overcast, no TV, dark bread and funny cars. I built model planes, avoided baseball, and bought Jerry Lee Lewis 45s with my saved up 25 cents per week allowance like any red-blooded 11-year-old would do. An intense but limited existence: while no one was actually hurting, my memory is

one of absolutely grinding artificial poverty, preemptively imposed to stifle wild outbursts of joy and pleasure.

And then one day an opportunity arose. My mother and father announced that as an incentive toward earning good grades, they would award each of us school-age siblings a whole quarter for every "A" on our report cards. I thought I had it made, since A's were all I ever got. This would be like six weeks of allowance all at once! When the wonderful day came around, I ran home and proudly presented my report card to my father, who was already handing out big shiny quarters to my younger brother and sister:

"Sorry Johnny, none for you," he told me.

"B-but I have all A's!" I wailed, clueless and stunned.

"We *expect* you to get A's," said my mother, stepping in from the kitchen. "These are for your sister and brother."

"But-but..." etc.

* * *

The call is short this Saturday. We wish each other well, I tell her I love her. But mainly I keep going, faster all the time.

Message for the Fourth



The last ten miles of rocky trail going down into the canyon took at least an hour, most of it in first gear.

When I got to the primitive campground at the bottom, it was obvious that no one had visited in quite some time. The views of the high canyon walls all around me were breathtaking. I went skinny-dipping in the river and afterwards sat in my chair watching shadows move across the cliffs. There wasn't another human being for miles, and Verizon was dead. I could have fallen out of the sky, tumbled from another era entirely. The only sounds were bird calls and wind in the trees.

I have probably never been so physically alone in my life. Only my wife knew where I was, and she was in Maryland. No one had seen me go into the canyon. I had a book with me and of course my computer, but I didn't want to read or write. I didn't even want to think.

As it turned out, no thoughts came, and I had no visions. I hadn't expected any, but I had thought I might get a little lonesome. I didn't. I was completely at ease and felt no fear. When it got dark, I climbed into bed in the truck and simply went to sleep. I remember waking up a few times, looking out at the moonlight, and marveling that

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it was so quiet. There was never a thump, a skitter, or a scrape. No bears, no mountain lions. Not even a skunk. It was like camping in a church that had neither a building nor a name. In the isolation of my experience, I felt myself expand and fill the canyon with my spirit. From wall to wall and end to end, there was only me, the rocks, the trees, the birds, a turtle and a garter snake I'd seen down by the river, and flies that buzzed around my lemonade in the sun. As I drifted in and out of sleep, I felt calm and safe as warm clean sand.

The drive home was spectacular but uneventful. Time passed. Eventually I thought some more about the things I'd seen and the fact that something called or pulled me, how I had driven out across the plains with no more goal than simply going there, that I had allowed myself the freedom to explore.

I also remembered the raven.

It happened early on. I was standing on a rock next to a tall Ponderosa pine on the edge of a precipice at the actual entrance to the canyon, watching a raven banking in a tight circle in the stiff wind just above me. I was staring very carefully to make sure I had it pegged, because the bird had made a noise I've never heard a raven make before: it whistled at me with a sound very much like the shriek of a hawk, only more full-bodied, longer, and strangely piercing. This didn't make sense: why

would a raven, of all things, be whistling at me? I heard the sound again. Just then the raven dived in my direction, descending to land in the pine tree, I assumed, except it kept on coming. It was diving straight at me, and I saw the raven's face front-on. Not with my eyes, however, but with my mind: *instantaneously filling my entire field of vision was the close-up face of the raven, with gleaming black beak and big red eyes!* I ducked, obviously, heard the raven whistle again, and decided not to linger. It was as if the bird had projected an image of its warning face directly into my brain...

*Nothing like that has ever happened to me before.
And what does America have to do with this? Nothing!
Not a blessed, goddamned thing!*

No politics, but think about it. I did.

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That's it! You've read them all, but this is just a sample. For more writing like this and other news, please visit JHFarr.com or visit the [FarrFeed](#) blog. A big thank-you to Adobe, MyMac.com, Horse Fly publisher Bill Whaley here in Taos, and my brother in Austin who tossed me some tips. -- JHF



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