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The Tao of Flitcraft: Some Thoughts on the Ancient Art of the Near-Death Experience

by Kevin P. Keating

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There is a private joke among my family (you'll excuse the redundancy of the expression; the reader will understand that most family jokes are of the "private" variety, but perhaps given the grim circumstances there is special need for emphasis here): I am, they say, the proverbial go-to man when a misfortunate loved one is in immediate need of eulogizing. Certainly I've written my fair share of these dismal things except that there is something so manifestly unfair about the solemn, and often gut-wrenching, proceedings that it would probably be more fitting to say that Heaven has blessed me rather inequitably with the honor of having to compose so many of them. But let it not be said that Heaven watches over us without a sense of the sardonic: On Monday, June 27th, the day I normally celebrate my birth, in this case the dreaded 40th (halfway to the finish line, one foot in the grave), I very nearly had the dubious distinction, not to say plain bad luck, of having one of my eulogies read back to me, or at least read back to my horrifically mangled and unrecognizable corpse.

Exactly who would stand at the podium and address the mourners is still unclear. Public speaking has never been my family's strong suit. I still recall with great indignation how my brothers squabbled over which of them would give the toast at my wedding reception. With great reluctance one of those buffoonish and unlettered roughnecks shuffled drunkenly across the dais and, gripping the podium with both hands, fêted his eldest brother thusly: "Kevin knew it was time to find a wife when there were more hairs on a bar of soap than on his head."

For this reason (and for a few others that I won't bother describing here) I much prefer that no one said anything at all. Besides, I don't want a low comedy roast; I want a show. One suggestion: I've always wished for a Viking funeral on Lake Erie, my body burning gloriously on a skiff laden with wood or fireworks or maybe hashish, my ashes mingling with the ever present graphite dust spewing from the iconic Cleveland steel mills, but something tells me that even in death I will continue to play the part of chastened dreamer and have to suffer the banalities of a Catholic funeral officiated by some doddering, sanctimonious priest fond of his ability to conjure up a suitably vapid platitude meant to comfort, or perhaps tranquilize, my sobbing relations. Not that anyone will shed real tears at my passing. I'm sure most will have the good sense to bring with them some freshly cut onions concealed in their dry tissues and monogrammed handkerchiefs.

With any religious ritual, you see, there is a certain amount of theater involved. Everything is staged. Just ask a fallen clergyman to expound on the distasteful hocus-pocus of transubstantiation, and he's likely to tell you, with a magician's knowing smile and a mischievous wink, how the juice and

crackers become the body and blood. In this regard a eulogy is not so very different than a grandiloquent soliloquy delivered with just the right amount of showbiz panache, a kind of artifice designed to draw one's attention away from facts that, ironically, are quite unspeakable. And I was about to become peripherally involved in case that, without question, fit under the general rubric of "the unspeakable."

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The days prior to my near fatal ordeal began on a rather ominous note, the details of which are suitable for the most lurid horror story. I was enjoying my morning coffee at a suburban Cleveland café and reading the Plain Dealer, or more accurately reading the headlines and skimming the stories (no need, is there, to read page after page of the latest congressional sex scandal?), when I turned to the obituaries, normally a thing I never bother to do. Most of the faces proved that the departed had succumbed to the Reaper's scythe at the appropriate harvest time, a small consolation perhaps and a halfhearted reassurance from the gods that the odds were still in my favor, but among the grainy photos of this fresh octogenarian crop was a photo of a 25-year old boy wearing a doomed smile. With morbid fascination I read the notice and discovered that I had a lot in common with this ill-fated fellow: We grew up in the same city, went to the same grade school and high school, and, like a lot of young people unable to find work in the industrial wasteland of Cleveland, we both began our professional lives in Chicago.

Hoping to learn the cause of his death, I slowly reread the notice only to find that the author had failed to disclose this vital information. I simply assumed the deceased had succumbed to some terrible illness. In this age of poisonous air and water, who can really feign surprise at the staggering number of young people contracting fatal diseases? What pithy saying did I hear the other day on National Public Radio? "Our genes load the gun but the environment pulls the trigger."

After finishing my coffee, I went about my usual, lazy summer routine. As a professor of English, I sometimes find it difficult to invent ways to occupy my time, especially when classes aren't in session. Because I'm stranded at home with my eight-year old daughter, I sometimes feel as though I'm looking out over a vast and bitter ocean of boredom. I have long considered myself a committed writer (or perhaps a writer who needs to be committed), but of late I'd been suffering from, not exactly writer's block, but writer's procrastination. Why is it, I wonder, that so many how-to manuals on the art of fiction deal with writer's block rather than its obvious corollary? Writer's block, if we're going to be blunt about it, probably comes from a lack of talent as well as inspiration, but procrastination comes from something much deeper, some ferocious dragon lurking in the dark cave of the psyche--the specter of fear, fear of failure, fear of facing the page, fear of coming to terms with one's own mediocrity.

As I pattered among the shelves of books in my study and battled through another day of oppressive banalities, the phone began to ring. One call came in the early afternoon followed by another thirty minutes later. Consecutive calls? Something was up. But because I have little interest in speaking to people on the phone, I very rarely pick up and saw no reason to make an exception in this case. I admit to having a chronic aversion to small talk, or what is colloquially known among my peers as "bullshitting"; that is to say, I don't enjoy bullshitting with people over the telephone. I can

get away with this, I continually assure myself, because I am an introvert, a bohemian (or at least a middle-class bohemian, if there is such a thing), a bibliophile who is a bit off his rocker, and if I need to say anything important I will simply jot it down on a piece of paper and submit it to an obscure literary journal where, like any ordinary conversation, it will immediately be forgotten. The equation works the other way as well. Most of the people I know have a powerful aversion to reading, almost a paranoia of the written word, so lines of communication are often difficult to establish.

Typically my wife listens to the voicemail after she comes home from the office and then demands to know why I never answer the damn phone. I shrug. After twelve years of marriage this should no longer be a mystery. Sometimes I even refuse to pick up the phone when she's on the other end because I know she takes great pleasure in calling just so she can hang up on me. It's her way of expressing outrage for my latest minor infraction. She has earned a reputation for being short-tempered in a wide range of circumstances. Case in point: During a road trip she scolded me for not chewing a piece of gum long enough. "What a waste!" she snarled. But this time, rather than berate me for my negligence, she listened attentively to each message and afterward said, "First my dad and then my uncle called. They want to know if you still have the eulogy you wrote for my mom's funeral. A friend of theirs would like to use it."

Upon hearing this request, I'm ashamed to admit, I let escape a mirthless bark of laughter. "Your mother's eulogy? I wrote that ten years ago. I never save those kinds of things. I don't keep them on file." This was true. After delivering a eulogy I usually tore up the pages. To retain such an artifact of grief and suffering would be almost as macabre as keeping photographs of the beloved resting in a casket (something I once witnessed by the way--a man snapping pictures as he marched behind his father's coffin into the church). What kind of person wants such a memento? No, my eulogies were always one-of-a-kind originals, signed, dated, and then buried or cremated along with the corpse.

My wife, unwilling to accept this explanation, repeated her request with greater urgency. It seems that the funeral in question was for the young man I read about in the morning's paper. In fact his mother and my wife's mother were friends, students together in law school. Even after all of these years, this woman still remembered the brief eulogy I delivered. To be specific, she thought it touching that I chose to end the eulogy by reciting a prayer: "To die and not be forgotten, that is the only immortality we will ever know." Except it wasn't a prayer at all but a few lines, slightly altered, from a then recent translation of the Tao Te Ching, a bit of blasphemous rascality on my part, a way of getting back at the solipsistic priests with their tiresome tautologies. That I prefaced these words by describing them as a prayer only increased their heretical nature.

Having been educated by the Jesuits, I was familiar with the Church's teaching on death: Immortality comes from one's acceptance of Jesus as a personal savior, not from such paltry things as memories. To be fair, maybe the Church is right to take umbrage with this Far Eastern mumbo jumbo and warn credulous Westerners, desperate for a loophole, to be leery of abandoning their own traditions in favor of maxim-spouting New Age gurus. Still I believe the Jesuits are missing the larger point. Everyone, including Jesus, is destined for oblivion.

Most scholars believe Jesus's public ministry lasted anywhere between six

months and two years, and what little information we do possess of his life comes from four contradictory gospels written decades after his death. I can, if you wish, split the difference and say that Jesus preached for just over one year, but this still leaves us with the overarching and ultimately insoluble question: What in the world was the man up to for the other thirty odd years of his life? In the absence of solid evidence, history must remain silent on the matter, and I have yet to meet the Jesuit presumptuous enough to take a guess. The job always seems to fall on the Christian fundamentalists, by definition the most relentlessly critical of any word that does not explicitly appear in scripture and the most pathologically adverse to any addendum to it, who nevertheless are seldom at a loss to invent the most unconvincing and bromidic back-story for their redeemer.

To better illustrate my point, perhaps I had better use a less revered though no less contentious figure. While works like King Lear and the Sonnets are often described as immortal (and surely even this is hyperbolic), their mortal creator alas has been consigned to the tepid realms of myth and legend. I'm an enormous fan of the so-called Shakespeare Wars, and one thing I have gleaned from these pedantic debates is that no one really knows who William Shakespeare was as a man...or even if he was a man at all. Could Beatrice and Rosalind and Lady Macbeth have been part of the furtive oeuvre of the Queen of England? Aside from a few revealing lines scattered throughout his plays, the bard left us practically nothing of an autobiographical nature (unless one believes the recurrence of cross-dressing to be a small but important clue to one of his less permissible fetishes; certainly the Sonnets suggest something of a rather ambiguous sexual nature).

The everyday experiences of Jesus and Shakespeare have been forgotten, and what is true of these men is true also of us. If we pause for a moment to think about who we are, we will soon come to the inevitable realization that we lack real self-knowledge. Can a man of forty recollect enough of his past--who he was as a boy of five, of ten, of fifteen--to have a truly accurate portrait of himself? All that remains, it seems, are fragments of a past largely beyond recall. Given time we might actually come to appreciate this "amnesia" as one of Nature's greatest boons. After all, do we really want to know who we are and what we have been? Of course this acute memory loss may also manifest itself as a sort of dementia, the most pernicious form of which can be seen in the fervent multitudes whose desire to die, at least symbolically, is nullified by their even greater desire to be "reborn" after undergoing some utterly benign experience like, say, an immersion in water. These are precisely the kinds of religious practices at which the redoubtable polemicist and self-proclaimed anti-theist Christopher Hitchens sneers:

I once spoke to someone [Hitchens writes in his memoir Hitch-22] who had survived the genocide in Rwanda, and she said to me that there was now nobody left on the face of the earth, either friend or relative, who knew who she was. No one who remembered her girlhood and her early mischief and family lore; no sibling or boon companion who could tease her about that first romance; no lover or pal with whom to reminisce. All her birthdays, exam results, illnesses, friendships, kinships--gone. She went on living, but with a tabula rasa as her diary and calendar and notebook. I think of this every time I

hear of the callow ambition to “make a new start” or to be “born again”: Do those who talk like this truly wish for the slate to be wiped?

Petty though Hitchens makes it sound, the deep yearning for the “slate to be wiped” is a universal theme hardwired into the human psyche, probably because, whether we want to admit it or not, the slate will be wiped once and for all, and in an attempt to cope with this grim and unavoidable state of affairs, cowering humanity has concocted a plethora of mythic imagery-- Christian baptism and the swift waters of the river Lethe. In this regard Taoism is somewhat more accepting of the facts than most other ancient philosophies, and it strikes me that one of the indispensable lessons of the Tao can be summed up in just this way: “To die and to be forgotten, that is our true destiny, and to fight against this inevitability is not only futile but also the cause of so much of our misery, angst and chronic frustration.”

According to Victor H. Mair, Professor of Chinese Language and Literature in the Department of Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, the concept of the Tao is probably deeply embedded in the human mind. To bolster his theory he offers some new and fascinating philological evidence. The word Tao (pronounced dow) may have had an archaic pronunciation like drog or dorg. Mair goes on to argue:

This links it to the Proto-Indo-European root drogh (to run along) and Indo-European dhorg (way, movement). Related words in a few modern Indo-European languages are Russian doroga (way, road), Polish droga (way, road), Czech draha (way, track), Serbo-Croatian draga ([path through a] valley) and Norwegian dialect drog (trail of animals; valley). The latter two examples help to account for the frequent and memorable valley imagery of the Tao Te Ching; ways and valleys, it would appear, are bound together in our consciousness.

The nearest Sanskrit cognates to Tao (drog) are dhrajas (course, motion) and dhraj (course). The most closely related English words are track and trek...Following the Way, then, is like going on a cosmic trek. Even more unexpected than the panoply of Indo-European cognates for Tao (drog) is the Hebrew root d-r-g...which yields words meaning “track, path, way, way of doing things...”

The universality of this imagery is difficult to ignore. During a traditional Christian funeral, to give but one example, you are likely to hear of a journey through a valley, usually in the form of that most famous and proverbial, if clichéd, verse from the Hebrew scriptures, Psalm 23, which in the King James version is translated as “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me...” Maybe the anonymous poet of this Psalm, when composing these lines to express the great abstraction of death, was tapping into a universal pallet of images that had the same pleasing effect on Lao Tzu, the man attributed with having written the Tao Te Ching. Lao

Tzu maintains that one should not cling to the things of this world. "He who is skilled at traveling leaves neither tracks nor traces." The implication here is that the vale of death's shadow is analogous to the eternally nameless Way. "In metaphorical terms," continues Lao Tzu in Victor H. Mair's translation, "the relationship of all under heaven to the Way is like that of valley streams to the river and sea."

But on that gloomy November day ten years ago, as I gazed out over the traumatized faces of my mother-in-law's Christian friends and family, I instantly surmised that a long exegesis on the Tao Te Ching would not have offered much in the way of consolation and may even have riled a strict adherent of the more esoteric philosophies of the East since, at least in Lao Tzu's quasi-mystical view, we should train ourselves to think not in terms of life and death but in terms of being and non-being. Death, like life, is illusory, part of the mysterious, indescribable, unknowable Way of all things.

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Later that evening, while searching through the obits online, my wife stumbled upon the gruesome story of the young man's untimely demise. It was all over the Chicago papers and even made national news. One cumbersome headline ran, "Autopsy results are inconclusive in the death of a man who was partially eaten by his pet pit bull." The man, a habitual drug user, had taken an overdose of some undisclosed illicit substance and was thought to have been dead for some days before the dog began to dine on his decomposing face, neck, chest and arms. At first it was unclear if the dog had ingested any flesh while the man was unconscious. Further evidence suggested that the wounds were inflicted postmortem, but the initial lack of hard facts did not prohibit the most craven bloggers, hiding behind the anonymity of their laptops, from assailing the world with their vile opinions and facile explanations.

As one writer gibed, "What is a poor dog to do when the dimwitted junkie of an owner decides to OD without leaving the door open? Gotta eat somehow to survive, right? Hope the doggie finds a good new home with normal folk." Another blogger, making the same puerile point more succinctly, wrote, "The idiot overdosed on his latest fix, and the dog got hungry waiting for something to eat. Easy solution." Believing these people were starting to get a little boring about it, another commentator posted, "This story is sooooo stupid! No one is blaming a starving dog for eating what is probably the only thing it could eat." Still others, perhaps getting to the real heart of the matter, took issue with the parents. "Don't blame the dog, blame the guy's father for not checking up on him sooner. If I had not heard from my son for a few days and I knew he had a dog, I'd be checking up on him, or making calls to the proper authorities."

As I clicked through this dreck, I found a few unexpected pop culture references ("Sit, UBU, sit... Good dog") as well as an occasional bad pun ("Face: Its what's for dinner"). Although some people blamed this grisly and unfortunate episode on the particular breed (one study reported that pit bulls accounted for 59% of all dog bite related fatalities in the United States and that between 2006 and 2008 pit bulls were responsible for 52 deaths or the equivalent of one pit bull killing a U.S. citizen every three weeks), I was astonished to find that most of the online commentators were rather deferential toward the dog and decidedly less forgiving of the man who, because he had a serious drug problem, apparently deserved to have his

face “recycled.”

I found the story disturbing, in part because the thought of my famished shih-poo, crouching atop my lifeless body and nibbling at my nose, made me shiver, but also because my wife and I were planning a weekend trip to Chicago to celebrate my birthday, and we would almost certainly be passing through the same neighborhood streets where this man once lived. I could already feel the bad vibes emanating from the bars and restaurants where the man’s friends would surely be gathering that weekend to mourn his passing and tip a few pints in his honor.

I reject outright the idea of a supernatural order and give no credence to the laughable notion that restless spirits wander the earth but, as it would later turn out, the young man from my hometown may have played the role of guardian angel and saved me from my latest near death experience.

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Common sense tells us that men and boys (that is, those members of the species most lacking in common sense) are far more likely than their female counterparts to seek out situations where they can get themselves readily killed, and the chronicle of my life is certainly fraught with many such examples. As a boy of three I was discovered playing on the “choo-choo” tracks next to my parent’s apartment where I was very nearly killed by a locomotive barreling down the line. As a boy of four, and already something of a wanderlust, I hopped on my Big Wheel and, without informing my father, set off on a journey to visit my grandparents. My perilous trek through the tough neighborhoods of Cleveland came to an abrupt end when I managed to stop traffic at Detroit and West 117th Streets. A middle-aged man pulled over, put me in the back of his station wagon and, running his nervous fingers through his greasy comb-over, asked where in the hell I thought I was going. For most children this surely would have spelled the very end of the journey, but to my great fortune the man was an acquaintance of my grandparents and delivered me safely, and unmolested, to their home.

In my twenties I worked third shift as a boilermaker at an oil refinery near Canton, Ohio and one night watched in stunned horror as a tower filled with petroleum suddenly exploded, hurtling a co-worker fifty feet into the air. Chaos ensued. Men ran for their lives. A seasoned journeyman yanked me toward the nearest gate and, invoking a familiar biblical injunction, told me, “Don’t look behind you and don’t stop!”

As a man of thirty, while riding my mountain bike, I struck a cement curb, flew over the handlebars, and felt (or maybe heard) my clavicle snap in two. Had I landed a few inches to the left my brain would have been spilling through a gaping hole in my skull. In my mid-thirties I went to the Pennsylvania wilderness to visit my wife’s hillbilly kin and, after drinking a few vodka tonics around the fire, decided it was a good time to take a spin on their prized ATV. I was tearing along a muddy trail at a pretty good clip when I lost control, flipped over, and went pinwheeling into a muddy ditch beside a copse of hardwood trees. Why my neck didn’t snap I do not know.

But my most recent opportunity to dance with death presented itself on the weekend of my 40th birthday. I was staying at the Sheraton Towers and Gardens in the Streeterville section of downtown Chicago with my wife and

daughter. The weekend was uneventful enough until the morning of our departure. Unable to sleep, I found myself wandering through the hotel lobby at six in the morning and decided to take a leisurely stroll down the street to buy a strong cup of coffee and a newspaper. The forecast called for sun and mild temperatures, but the day greeted me with a gentle mist and a cold, gray sky.

After making my purchases, I started back to hotel and managed to get about fifty yards past the nearest intersection when I heard a loud crash. At first I didn't bother to look over my shoulder to see what had happened. I spent most of my twenties in Chicago, first as an undergraduate at Columbia College in the Loop and then as a boilermaker on the near westside, and those years of living in the city had conditioned me to the incessant metallic screeching of the el and the deafening rumble of cranes and wrecking balls across the checkerboard of construction sites. Still, there was something not quite right about the sound I heard, and after walking a few more yards curiosity got the better of me.

When I turned around I saw the twisted hulk of a yellow cab hanging halfway inside a parking garage. The damage was such that I initially thought the heavy garage door had slammed down on the vehicle's roof, caving it in and trapping the passengers inside. How then to account for the man lying on the sidewalk ten feet away? The frame of the cab was so crumpled that no one could have been ejected. It was only later that day, while watching video footage of the event captured by a security camera, that I was able to piece it all together.

The cabbie, attempting to pass another car, suddenly lost control, fishtailed ninety degrees and slammed into the side of the parking garage. As the taxi slid across the rain-slicked street, it struck an unsuspecting pedestrian, swatting him like a tennis racket and killing him on the spot. Emergency vehicles arrived minutes later, and the paramedics, rather than rushing the victim to the nearest trauma center, simply bagged him right there at the scene. About a week or so after the accident, I ran into a firefighter friend of mine and asked him about what seemed like an unusual practice. "Yeah, well, whenever we see gray matter, that's it, we don't even bother performing CPR."

I played the video footage again and again and noticed that, in the background, not far from the spot where the cab begins to lose control, there is a solitary figure walking in the direction of the Sheraton. There I am, serene as could be, with Death literally breathing black exhaust down the back of my neck.

Witnessing the aftermath didn't change my composure all that much, which is more than I can say of those closer to the accident. Before summoning help, the parking garage attendant proved incapable of doing anything other than run around in circles. After a long, dramatic delay the cabbie, like some famous actor making his first appearance onscreen, managed to force open the mangled door and stood trembling in the cool, June mist. When he saw the body in the street he put his hands on his head and let out a low, miserable, protracted wail. Within minutes the police arrived, sirens blaring, and shooed the dumbfounded gawkers from the terrible scene.

I plodded away, thinking that if I'd been delayed by the cashier at the store just thirty seconds I would have been the unfortunate man now being zipped inside the body bag. Oh, then I would have been in real trouble. I could

imagine how my wife would have woken up in the hotel room to find that I was missing. She wouldn't worry about me or express concern or ask the doorman of my whereabouts. She simply would have stewed in the room for an hour or two and let herself slowly grow more and more irritated, working herself into an epic rage, until she actually fantasized about my death.

As I ambled unscathed into the hotel lobby, I started to wonder why men even bothered with marriage. It then occurred to me that this latest brush with death was a truly pivotal moment in my life and a quintessentially American one at that. Our books and movies abound with examples of the middle-aged family man who is suddenly plunged into an existential crisis and then, after assessing his situation, decides to light out and start his life all over again. Here it was, the eons-old rebirth theme, this time played out on a secular rather than religious stage.

One of the more famous examples of this theme can be found in chapter seven of Dashiell Hammett's noir classic The Maltese Falcon in what has become known as the Flitcraft Parable, about an ordinary man who decides one day to walk away from his humdrum life:

Here's what happened to him [explains the protagonist of the novel Sam Spade]. Going to lunch he passed an office-building that was being put up--just the skeleton. A beam or something fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk right alongside him. It brushed pretty close to him, but didn't touch him, though a piece of the sidewalk was chipped off and flew up and hit his cheek... He was scared stiff of course, but he was more shocked than really frightened. He felt like someone had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works.

Flitcraft had been a good citizen and a good husband and father, not by any outer compulsion, but simply because he was a man who was most comfortable in step with his surroundings... The life he knew was a clean orderly sane responsible affair. Now a falling beam had showed him that life was fundamentally known of those things. He, the good citizen-husband-father, could be wiped out between office and restaurant by the accident of a falling beam. He knew then that men died at haphazard like that, and lived only while blind chance spared them...

[He] knew before he got twenty feet from the fallen beam that he would never know peace again until he adjusted himself to this new glimpse of life...he would change his life at random by simply going away.

The story has many antecedents. One of the more disturbing is the gothic fable "Wakefield" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, about a man who has reached "the meridian of life" and decides, after ten years of matrimony, to abandon his wife. It's a most familiar tale, explains Hawthorne, "which appeals to the general sympathies of mankind. We know, each for himself, that none of us would perpetrate such a folly, yet feel as if some other might." On that count

Hawthorne may be in error.

In some of my college courses I teach Paul Auster's Moon Palace, a novel that focuses, in part, on a painter named Julian Barber who leaves his family and travels to the deserts of the American southwest in a kind of spiritual and artistic quest. I have also taught Jon Krakauer's Into the Wild, about a well-behaved, middle-class, college boy who abandons the comfortable trappings of his life and roams the empty spaces of the continent until he dies alone in the Alaskan wilderness. The theme is not an exclusively male one either. The pugnacious Christopher Hitchens begrudgingly concedes that his own mother, Yvonne, wanted to "make a fresh start of it" in middle life and expressed her desire to leave her husband, always referred to as "the Commander", and live out her remaining days in Israel. Shortly after divulging this secret to her son, Yvonne took her own life in a hotel room in Greece. So it goes, as Mr. Vonnegut would say.

When faced with the unending constraint of certain social institutions like marriage or a nine-to-five work routine or the relentless vapidities that constitute life in the manic-depressive suburbs (to paraphrase Sylvia Plath), people naturally begin to yearn for liberation, for release, for a bit of warmth and sunshine to creep back into those dark and dreary places where the soul resides. A traumatic event, a Flitcraft episode, can be the key to our escape from the sickness and withering decay of this voluntary imprisonment.

But I elected to return to the hotel, the dutiful spouse and father, the reliable eulogist, the would-be Flitcraft, and in the days following my brush with death I began writing this essay, a small contribution to the soon-to-be-forgotten conversation of humanity. To engage in too much wish-thinking is a dangerous thing, and so let this essay serve as the encomium to the Flitcraft within me, the restless wild man who dreams of one day waking from the shadowy valley, the impenetrable Way, the maddening Möbius strip of the quotidian. There are people--I have known a few--who want to not merely investigate the obscure realms of an unfettered imagination but to begin living an altogether new, thrilling, dissolute, and possibly self-destructive life. Let me not be counted among them.

Somewhere in the shadowy regions of our brains, most of us understand that we are always beginning anew, that each moment is yet another tiny branch in the infinitely vast fractal of life, blind chance, luck, randomness, evolution, call it what you will, but because our minds are incapable of grasping the complexity and mindlessness of the natural order (or is it disorder?), we have created all sorts of high-stakes games to bolster the illusion of permanence, all of them designed with one thing in mind: that for the game to continue the deck must eventually be reshuffled. Only we won't be sitting at the table when a new hand is dealt.

Kevin P. Keating's essays and fiction have appeared in a number of literary journals, including *The Stickman Review*, *Mad Hatter's Review*, *Underground Voices*, *Smokebox*, *Fringe*, *Perigee*, *Plum Ruby Review*, *Fifth Street Review*, *Juked*, *The Oklahoma Review*, *Slow Trains*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and many others. His short stories have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Story South's Million Writers Award, and the Ben Hoffer/Best New Writing Award. His first novel, *The Natural Order of Things*, is scheduled for publication in November 2012 from Aqueous Books. He currently teaches English at Baldwin-Wallace College in Cleveland, Ohio.

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