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"Moon Mist" by Beverley Edwards; <http://jancollinselman.com/home.html>

"JOURNEY" ~ Pastel Paintings by Beverley Edwards

For this artist, a journey is not only a physical trip but also both a visual passage and a spiritual pilgrimage in search of special views in space/time. A special moment to capture the timeless essence of the "scene" when the viewer and the view/ the seer and the seen are one! It is this

experience the artist attempts to communicate to those who view the work. While the viewers may not know the particular scene depicted, they may relate the experience to what they have seen and do know!

Eric Weiner, a New York Times best-selling author, spent ten years as a foreign correspondent having traveled to Iraq, Afghanistan and Indonesia. He has served as a correspondent for NPR in New York City, Miami and currently Washington, D.C. He is a former reporter for the New York Times and was a Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford University. In his search for the definition of happiness or paradise, he has traveled the world. The Geography of Bliss was selected as one of the Best Books of the Year by Washington Post Book World. Man Seeks God: My Flirtations with the Divine is his latest work.

Weiner had me at The Geography of Bliss. I love this title, it drew me in. I love travel and psychology, which I studied in college- especially as it pertains to my own happiness! I also enjoy spending time with someone who has a great sense of humor. All of this is what caused me to pick up his first book; but it was the journey through the book's terrain that led me to want to read more and delve deeper through an in-depth interview. Join us as we discuss life, happiness and the dichotomy of the places within and outside of ourselves.

Eric Weiner Interview by Denise Bouchard

~ After all of your travels, you conclude that happiness is other people and that we should actually banish the term “personal happiness”. It’s interesting; there are two things that come to mind for me-one is that when I was in college, the first thing my psychology professor wrote on the board is ‘Hell is other people; but loneliness is hell.’ The second, is something I once read about a Buddhist teacher who was asked, ‘What is the difference between illness and wellness?’ Without saying a word, the teacher turned towards the blackboard and wrote the two words. He then put in commas and slashes so that what appeared was ‘I’ll/ness and We’ll/ness’. He simply said, “Don’t try to do everything by yourself.” I have sought to balance both

for myself with a family that I adore and carefully chosen close friends while still being open to the kindness of others, though not dependent on it. My question to you then is when you say 'happiness is other people', how do you define 'other people' (your family and close friends or people in general- and if the latter, where do these nice people live? Just kidding on the last part)?

Everyone. It is the sum total of our relationships that contributes mightily to our happiness. Certainly, family and close friends are a big part of this, but they are not the only part. There are also neighbors and casual acquaintances and the woman who cleans your office whose name you don't know. They all matter, whether we're aware of it or not. As I write in The Geography of Bliss, trust is an essential ingredient of happiness. It is relatively easy to trust those in our "inner circle" (family, friends) but much more difficult to trust strangers. Happy societies, though, manage to achieve this outer-circle trust.

~ When you say that "...by relocating ourselves, re-orienting ourselves, we shake loose the shackles of expectation. Adrift in a different place, we give ourselves permission to be different people." I agree and yet I'm also reminded of something actress Salma Hayek had said about how you can go to the most wonderful place on earth but you're still the same person when you get there. Sometimes we all take a little more baggage than just our suitcases on vacation. What is your personal process, as a self-described (albeit humorous) 'grump', for letting go and getting out of your own way to fully experience and enjoy a place?

Two words: No expectations. It's really that simple. Expectations get in the way of enjoying a place, or anything else for that matter. Squash them. Kill them.

~ In your latest book, *Man Seeks God*, you write of when you were rushed to the emergency room where a nurse whispered into your ear, "Have you found your God yet?" Wow. What a jolt that must have given you. Throughout your new book you seek 'Him' through the journeys into all

manner of spiritual practices. At the book's end you say you have your feet firmly planted on the earth; does this mean that you're more firmly entrenched in your earthbound, tangible beliefs in things you can see, hear, touch or that you've come upon a knowledge that both enlightens and grounds you? Many belief systems mirror aspects of one another. You've studied so many different religions. If you, according to your personal perspective, had to design the 'perfect' religion- a compilation of the best practices/beliefs you've discovered, what faiths would you borrow from?

What do we mean when we say we are “grounded”? That is the question. Alan Watts, the late British philosopher and part-time guru, often said that we are not actually materialists. Materialists are those who genuinely appreciate material things, take pleasure in them. We do not. In that sense, we are terrible materialists, not grounded at all. I think there's a myth out there that spiritual people are necessarily flighty, not in touch with the material world. That's not true. Truly spiritual people are also materialists—in the sense that Alan Watts meant. They have a deep appreciation, a reverence, for the everyday world that we inhabit.

My “top five” list of religions would include: Sufism (for its heart) Jainism (for its non-violence) Buddhism (for its do-it-yourself approach) Christianity (for its unconditional love) and Judaism (for its food).

~ Ram Dass of *Be Here Now* fame once said that he had the experience of being unhappy in the most beautiful places on earth and being truly happy and at peace in the most crowded, noisy, dirty slums of India...so it makes one wonder if it is where we are at any given moment in our minds or if it is location. You explain in *The Geography of Bliss* that happiness is outside of us. Do you feel that after your second book, *Man Seeks God*, that at least a portion of contentment, the part concerned with our spirituality, lies within or did you find this also to be attained in the external? Do you feel that happiness is fed by spirituality?

When I say that happiness is outside of us, I actually mean we've internalized the culture "out there." So, in this sense, I don't buy the distinction between "inside" and "outside." As for Ram Dass, that slum may have been a "happy" place, in the sense that he felt happiest there, for whatever reason. Beautiful places are not necessarily happy ones. It's telling, though, that he did not feel the same way in both places, the beautiful setting and the slum. Place matters.

Is happiness fed by spirituality? No. I would say it is the other way around. Spirituality feeds happiness.

~ There was a couple who moved to the Caribbean and not only was their life idyllic, but so was their love- they even saw the flash at the end of each sunset (legend has it that only true lovers can see this). There were monkeys on the island, however, who would swing down from the trees and steal the sprinkler heads from their lawn and on a more serious note, a fire crew that would show up late and often didn't have access to enough water. How important is it on the quest for happiness, do you think, to let go of our need to control our environment?

Very important. It's tied to the need to drop expectations. We expect (demand, really) that life be a certain way and when it's not we're unhappy.

~ There is actually a place in the Berkshires called The Option Institute where Barry Neil Kaufman and his wife, Samahria, feel strongly that, as they state in the title of their book, happiness is a choice. You take long walks with instructors in nature as they try to turn your negative thoughts into optimistic questions. I know that it's helped many, many people. Yet being a bit of a Woody Allen myself, I called them once and we went through the drill; it was funny because the person on the other end of the phone ended up saying, "Wow. You really do have a lot that you're dealing with." It was a stalemate. Happiness, to me, is not always a simple choice and coming from a family where happiness was an obligation, I feel strongly that people have

the right to not always be 'on'. Do you think, given all your observations and research, that happiness is a choice?

Yes, I do believe that happiness is indeed a choice (for most of us), but that it is a choice that we need not always make. There is nothing worse than the “unhappiness of not being happy,” as historian Darrin McMahaon puts it. In modern America, there is tremendous pressure to be happy all the time. The result is that many of us walk around with a nagging feeling that there’s something wrong with us—Why aren’t we happy?—when, really, that sort of continuous state of bliss is unrealistic, and even undesirable. We need to experience moments of unhappiness so that we can appreciate the happy ones. More than that, there is a beauty to sadness that is part of the human condition. As Hilmar, an Icelandic composer, told me. “I am basically happy but I also cherish my melancholia.”

~ Some of your readers wanted to know of all things “...if they should move to happy places like Iceland or Bhutan” and you answered, “Perhaps, if that is where your heart lies, but the point is not necessarily that we move to these places but, rather, that we allow these places to move us.” I loved what you said here. I feel that being moved isn’t location specific; it depends on the individual’s perception and experience of any given place. Certain places have become a part of me. For example, upon arriving home from St. Thomas, I hardly wanted to wear shoes for the longest time. I felt a lessening of inhibitions, wanting to walk free and barefoot, more attune to nature. What place has most influenced the way you move through the world?

India. Without a doubt. India taught me to let go of expectations. In India, nothing works the way it “should”. Trains don’t run on time. Conversations meander. Negotiations never end. This can be infuriating. So you are left with two choices: 1) Try to force India to conform to your wishes, and quite possibly go insane. Or 2) Let go. I chose number two. I try to carry that lesson with me wherever I go. I often fail

miserably, but I try.



"Recumbent Tree" by Paula Herman; <http://www.paulaherman.com/>

With an MFA in fiction and poetry from Sarah Lawrence College, Gwendolen Gross has made her mark in both mediums with her novels receiving critical acclaim, her being dubbed "the reigning queen of women's adventure fiction" by Book Magazine and her poetry having been selected for the Adrienne Lee Award. Gross was chosen early in her career for the PEN West Emerging Writers Program. Now the author shares her experience in the field as an award-winning writing instructor, having led

workshops at Sarah Lawrence College and the UCLA Extension online. Her novels include A Field Guide, Getting Out, The Other Mother and her most recent, The Orphan Sister (Simon and Schuster).

Displaying a clear passion for nature (both human and environmental) in her novels, Gross capably navigates the untamed aspects of the writer's imagination and examines with almost scientific preciseness the content of the most complex human relationships generation to generation against a natural backdrop. She tell us of her New England memories swimming in Walden Pond, the character of the Australian rain forest, the needed perspective that the outdoors gives, the fortunate legacy women have inherited growing up in this time, language as a tool, story structure and the charge of writing in groups. Gross leaves a lasting impression with her capacity for warmth, grace and pure daring- whether it was tenderly relating to a recent loss in my life or discussing an adventure horseback riding, she comes prepared, whatever the occasion. This is a capable, up-for-nearly-anything woman who, during her undergraduate course work at Oberlin College, spent a semester in Australia with a field studies program, studying spectacled fruit bats in the rainforest remnants of Northern Queensland and took a summer job at the Boston Museum of Science handling snakes and reptiles on stage. Gross strikes me as exactly the sort of person you'd want with you on any adventure- dynamic, compassionate and sure to encourage fun wherever she goes. Join us as we embark on a journey...

Gwendolen Gross Interview by Nicole M. Bouchard

1) Your novels feature a recurrent theme of the adult child needing to break free from the symbolic familial hold, the promises and disappointments of the past and distinguish themselves as a separate being, taking the best of their experiences, healing the empty spaces through the creation of their own family life- marriage and children balanced with career. Just as the characters go through these 'rites' of initiation into their next phase, at what point did your personal revelation come and did your writing help you to integrate the newly discovered with treasured foundations into a cohesive

new being?

Oh my goodness, what a thoughtful question. Hm—it hasn't happened yet? No, I believe it has—I suppose writing is all about frame and distance, separation and attachment, just like the moving timeline of personal history. The truths of the world are finite and oft-repeated, and the job of novels is to show these truths in a story that brings the reader closer to the writer's way of living in the world.

If you're looking for a more personal response, I suppose I did a lot of early growing up, because of my own family's traumas (my mother had a devastating accident on my 12th birthday; my parents divorced when I was in my teens)—as many people do, I found that writing things down, real things and invented things, gave me some power over the world, gave my experiences both a more bearable dilution and a promising continuing narrative. Reading books was a specific sort of company and comfort—I wanted to offer my own eventually.

I always kept notebooks, full of complaint and observation. I always read. Between those things I found language as extraordinary tool. It stops things, it codifies opinion and experience, and at the same time it's malleable and subjective.

I started writing novels before I had children; having children has given me additional depth of emotion and fear and joy and anticipations and superstitions and cleaving—the joint separation and attachment I mentioned at the outset. Mostly joy.

2) The male characters of the preceding generation in novels such as *Getting Out* and *The Orphan Sister* have an unattainable, patriarchal persona that seemingly affects the female protagonist's (daughter's) relationships, delaying them from approaching happiness with the men that are right for them out of fear of repeating patterns. In fellow Sarah

Lawrence author Alice Walker's short story, "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring", the protagonist struggles with how to portray the men of her ancestry in art. Did influences from your education, the time in which you grew up- one where women truly came into their own, instill in your writing a message of liberation and perhaps a dual caution to the young to not settle into traditional gender roles of generations past nor let love pass by for fear of sacrificing the self?

I do think my generation of women has a peculiar, particular, and fortunate legacy. When I was little, my mother was an artist, but she was at home doing her art. Other mothers in the neighborhood were working mothers, and this was a novelty, and was both appreciated and judged. Still, I was taught that I could do whatever work I thought was important. My stepmother is only a little younger than my mother, but I watched her struggling to be both a working and available mom.

I am lucky: I work from home. But not everyone has these choices, and the experiences of my mother and my stepmother made me aware of my own. I honestly didn't expect to marry until my 30s at least, imagining that staying single would be the best method of allowing myself young adulthood. I met my husband on my 21st birthday, and though we weren't married until mid-twenties, he is my best friend, best supporter, best partner—and I believe we have been lucky enough to have a symbiotic relationship as we both experienced young adulthood—and now, gasp!—middle adulthood. May it continue on until we are old and wise. As my grandfather would have said, kineohora.

3) Naomi Epel in her resource for writers entitled, *The Observation Deck*, includes a section entitled, "Take a Walk" that speaks of the importance in stepping out of your thoughts into the open air if only for twenty minutes or so. She quotes Henry David Thoreau:

“I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least... sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all earthly engagements.”

You display your passion for nature in *Field Guide* and *Getting Out* as well as the latter part of *The Other Mother* in which a housewife takes an Outward Bound trip. There is a reflection of your own interests and experiences with nature and animals such as your summer job at the Boston Museum of Science and your field studies of spectacled fruit bats in Queensland, Australia. How does your experience as a writer affect the way you see and observe the natural world? How do the outdoors/interactions with animals refresh mind, body and spirit when your work is primarily of the mind?

I love that set, The Observation Deck! I also love Thoreau, and grew up in New England and swam, from time to time, in Walden Pond. Beautiful quotes.

I have always thought of outside as its own character in books—whether the Australian rainforest or tamed lawns in my own books, or other books, Cape Cod in Elizabeth McCracken’s In The Giant’s House, the invented worlds of Tolkien (I’m reading The Hobbit aloud to my daughter—as my dad read it aloud to each of us as children; I realize how much Tolkien influenced my writer’s—and reader’s—ear.)—a big chunk of the joy of a book is that it is in a specific place, influenced by weather and buildings and the sensory world. In real life I need outside, it gives me perspective on what silly little rabbits we really are, and it also makes me marvel at how we survive.

4) There are epilogues in two of your novels. Talk to us about the art of the epilogue (how and when to use one), its importance and the general process of letting go of characters once a novel is done and knowing that point in the story where the denouement is complete.

I must be honest—I hadn't noticed. Not that I haven't thought about epilogues, but I hadn't noticed that I used two. I suppose when I think of the overall shape of a book, it has a beginning (which can be in medias res, in the middle, or way before the beginning of the core "what if" of the novel, or simply the chronological beginning), a middle (which hopefully moves you along and keeps you reading), and an end, which can be when you get back to the middle and move beyond, oh, there are many choices here—but regardless—beginning, middle (or Muddle, as Avi would say) and end. Then there's the struggle to tell the most important bits: the who, what, when, where, why, and how, of course, but in a novel you get to grapple with the big what if. And a what if isn't necessarily complete enough at the chronological end of the story. Tolkien refers to the future throughout The Hobbit—using omniscient point of view (this also allows him to give you panoramic views and both close third person and the movement of entire armies of elves)—but in modern realistic fiction we tend to shy away from omniscience as distancing (the truth is, if it's too much work, our readers might not go the whole bout with us). But an epilogue allows for a little fold in time, a little projection, a little satisfaction in the arrow at the end of the timeline.

5) Tell us about the writing workshops you've conducted through Sarah Lawrence and the UCLA extension. What are some of the primary questions you are asked by your students when it comes to the craft of writing? In terms of their lives and backgrounds, what are some of the most prevalent reasons that your students choose to take a writing workshop? (ex. self-analysis through the written word, acknowledging a latent creative side, trying to tell their life story...) As an instructor, what are some of the things you've learned about writing from your students? (Any specific anecdotes to share?)

I once had a lovely student who was sure she was writing a novel. She had worked at a famous zoo and had dazzling

anecdotes. Like many writers, I think the idea of the story got in the way of the actual telling sometimes. She branched out and took one of my poetry workshops—and lo! As much as she had thought she knew nothing about poetry, she had a poet’s ear, a poet’s eye, a poet’s sense of language that hadn’t been apparent in her fiction. It was amazing how she read poems, followed a few exercises, and came out with whole poems, scintillating observations of moments and places and emotion. I love teaching poetry and I love teaching fiction—I’ve taken workshops in playwriting, and essay—and I’ve taught essay as well (I really love dwelling in the what if, though, for which fiction is the easiest home). I suppose I’m suggesting that anyone who wants to write should read everything, try writing everything, remember that you can use all your materials, and all your art supplies, and maybe you’ve been trying to sketch with a brush.

I am also continually amazed by the charge of writing together—I’ve taught writing practice workshops forever (I credit Judy Reeves for bringing writing practice formally into my life—she has wonderful books on writing, too) and am frequently stunned by the room full of work that emerges when we start with sixteen minutes on something like “write about telling a lie from a first person point of view”. People want to share, want to be led, and want to lead.

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present authors for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss the craft of writing with them.

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