

First Person . . .

Taking Care of Business: Further Along the Sabbatical Trail*

Robert Genovese**

Mr. Genovese continues a personal account of his sabbatical experience and the insights and meaning he found it to have.

Talkin' Bob Dylan

¶1 Out behind where I live there is open desert. My dog and I have always taken walks together there because we never run into anyone and the mountains and the desert are all around. I made a prediction a while back that before many years passed the area would be filled in with houses. And now it's starting to look as if the dog and I will be out of luck even sooner than I thought. Not long after the second half of my sabbatical started,¹ we were out there one morning when something unusual happened.

¶2 While we walked, I was suddenly struck by a wave of questions that came out of the blue. *What if this is all a game?* What if there's no real purpose to what we're going through, and we're just clinging to blind faith? What if this sabbatical doesn't work like it's supposed to, like the one before it had worked?

¶3 The earlier part of my sabbatical was a reenergizer, doing exactly what I'd hoped it would do. I was worried now that it couldn't be duplicated. But when I thought a little more about it, I realized this one was probably doing what it was supposed to do too. The problem was that I felt uneasy about what was happening. I was beginning to ask myself questions I didn't want to hear.

¶4 Of course, the sabbatical had started off on the wrong foot. About a month before it began, I was doing something my wife always warns me not to do. (I never, ever, by the way, use the word "nag" when I speak of my wife.) Unwisely, I failed to heed her enlightened warnings and ended up herniating a disk in my back. The resultant temporary nerve damage sent a pain so persistent and dentist drill-like down my leg that I can only describe my reaction to it as whimpering.

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** Head of Technical Services, University of Arizona College of Law Library, Tucson, Arizona.

1. For an account of the first half of my sabbatical, which occurred the previous summer, see Robert Genovese, *Highways, Buildings, and Mountains: Driving My Way through a Sabbatical*, 94 LAW LIBR. J. 343, 2002 LAW LIBR. J. 23.

For most of the month leading up to my sabbatical I was incapacitated, sleeping in a chair at night, and taking pills that succeeded only in turning me into a strange mongrelization of Alfred E. Newman and Kato Katlin, with a touch of the Blizzard of Oz thrown in, but never coming close to handling the writhing agony I was going through. The recovery, I was told, would be slow.

¶5 There went most of the plans I'd made for my sabbatical. I had to take it easy now. No exertion. No hiking or climbing. No packs on my back. No driving into the mountains. What was left but to think of questions to ask myself?

¶6 Out in the desert with the dog, I must still have been feeling some residual effect from the pain pills because I had a short conversation with Bob Dylan. I'd been humming one of his songs. Maybe it was *Not Dark Yet*.² All of a sudden I found myself talking directly to Dylan, telling him that the way I saw it our society couldn't possibly last much longer . . . or maybe I meant our civilization. Anyway, I talked to Bob about what they might call us once we were gone—the way people of our time refer to the Sea Peoples or the Celts. I didn't think it would be anything geographic because we've become far too global and all encompassing for that. Maybe something descriptive, though. The Prolonged Warfare People? The Civilization that Consumed Itself? Or something simple like The Malignancy? Whatever we might be called, it didn't seem to me as if this civilization could prevent its self-destruction. I told Bob that the biggest shame of all was that artists like him probably wouldn't even be remembered after it was all over. Just think of the Greeks, the Egyptians, or any of the others who came before them. How much from those civilizations has been hopelessly lost? So many ideas, so many creations, gone as if they never existed. And the way I saw it, the indications for disaster are already here—overpopulation, environmental destruction, narrow self-interests, apathy. It might not take much to push us over the edge. Then all the music and poetry Bob gave to the world might just go up in flame, and the smoke from the fire would be blown away by the wind.

¶7 Bob didn't answer back, by the way. One can only project desires on someone like Bob. But I suspect he might agree with me, at least in principle. It does seem as if humanity is riding on a pendulum. It creates itself, then wipes itself out, then starts at the beginning again. Nothing seems to be remembered. Thirty or fifty years after kids are returned home in body bags, the horror, the waste, the senselessness is gone—*poof*—and people are ready to start learning once again what a mistake they're making. So what's a working stiff to make of this? Is there a point to laboring your life away and telling yourself there's a higher purpose to all of this, only to find out it doesn't matter how hard you work, or who you are, or what you believe in because it's all going down the old sump pump anyway, and they're bringing in a new team. Well, that's a hell of a way to start a sabbatical, if you ask me; but as my wife says, I hate everything (and that's why she loves me).

2. BOB DYLAN, *Not Dark Yet*, on TIME OUT OF MIND (Columbia 1997).

¶8 Bob disappeared then and left me in solitude to mull about how tiring the world was becoming. It's as if it's being turned into a giant computer chip with a blatant logo tattooed across its printed circuits. We go along, doing the things we do day after day, but we hardly ever pay attention to what's around us. We're oblivious. I don't know if this is an attitude or a trance; if it's something new or if it's always been around.

What's Real and What's Not

¶9 An example of just how oblivious we can become happened one morning as I was driving to work. There was an overwhelmingly glorious sunrise taking place. It just kept going and going with bold, glowing colors and all the pastel puffiness of a Disney movie. The mountains in front of it became black silhouettes, but, in places, they were streaked with deep patterns and subtle shadings. The scene had everything—color, drama, tranquillity. But no one was looking. Cars were lined up beside me at a light, four lanes across. The ubiquitous construction trucks rumbled through the intersection. Everyone stared straight ahead, like zombies. Is this what we've been reduced to?

¶10 I reached the conclusion during my last sabbatical break that I needed to start taking care of business. By that I meant that I needed to integrate the thing I got up to do each and every day more closely with what was going on in my mind. It's in the routines of our own daily lives that we fall victim to just those qualities about life that were becoming so tiresome to me now. I didn't want to become another driver lost in a fog every morning, and I didn't want to forget the lesson that my earlier sabbatical had taught me.

¶11 An analogous situation can develop with a profession. Efficiency in whatever kind of work we do is a good thing. Providing a service, fulfilling a need, carrying out a mission are all meaningful endeavors. In a profession such as librarianship, however, efficiency with no other goal than that of being efficient—without art, without humanity, without the perspective that we have been entrusted to preserve the glories of human thought—is a quality devoid of character. The concept of a library cannot be the same as that of a drug store. If this were the case, my professional life would be as scary as the giant computer chip taking shape before my eyes. Luckily, this entrepreneurial trance—for lack of a better term—hasn't completely overwhelmed the library where I work. Even this good place, however, is not immune from the tide sweeping in and making life seem as if it's only being lived over the counter, no matter what our livelihood. What does it do to us when a book, when knowledge, becomes just another product we're serving up? What do we turn into?

¶12 I wondered too what it was I'd turned into over the years. I don't think I'm the same as I was twenty years ago when I started out. It's hard to judge yourself, of course. We tend to see only what we want to see, but what of the others out there? Do they see what I see, and does it matter? The only way to answer questions like

these is to step back, to—as the preacher might say—objectify your world, look around, and try to figure out what’s real and what’s not.

Don’t Bother Me, I’m on Sabbatical

¶13 This was the motto for my sabbatical. I said it whenever people asked me to do something so they would know I was *supposed* to be doing something else. Of course, outside of the people who know me, it probably struck others as being anywhere from nonsensical to annoying. If you say something enough, however, it eventually becomes funny—and that’s the way this was intended.

¶14 In truth, I did have something else to do. Despite the herniated disk, I was able to complete my sabbatical project—visiting law libraries in the east to take digital photographs of their facilities for a Web site I created.³ The trip east was not as adventurous as the first part of my sabbatical, taken in the west for the same purpose the previous summer. Then I’d driven into the Sierras along the Pacific coast, deep into Lewis and Clark country, and across the deserts of the southwest, camping and finding solitude wherever I went. Not so in the east.

¶15 My apologies to all the easterners, but there’s not much adventure left for me in that part of the country. Having been born in the east (as most westerners have been), and having lived there more of my life than in the west, I speak from some experience. The east is too closed in and restrictive. There’s not enough wilderness left. In contrast, where the dog and I run just behind my house, reality can be so glaring at times it seems almost unreal. That may sound contradictory, but some days everything is so vivid, so precise, so dramatic, so empty and large, so infused with light and color and perspective that it seems as if I’m standing in a painting, a photograph, or a scene from a film. Reality is overwhelmingly present, but its periphery is blurred and diffused; it whispers in your ear that you’re in a dream. I like that feeling.

¶16 So the trip east, while it had its moments, couldn’t compare to the one preceding it. But, as I had finally concluded during my conversation with Bob out in the desert, it still accomplished what it was supposed to do. It made me think. It gave me the precious opportunity to step back and look around; and, if I’m really objective, I can’t discount the experiences it provided either. I was able to spend an entire month traveling in a car with my family—a bracing and truly mixed blessing. If reaching the heights and plumbing the depths isn’t something of an adventure, I don’t know what is. I enjoyed accompanying my teenage son to Gettysburg—which evidently has now become a place where large buses idle beside curio shops; to Antietam—in a crowd-wise sense, much better, as battlefields go; and to the Smithsonian so that he could satisfy a not-yet-disturbing gluttony for all things relating to modern American militarism. I spent a pleasant

3. ROBERT GENOVESE, DESIGN FEATURES FOR LAW LIBRARIES, at <http://www.law.arizona.edu/library/librarydesign/> (content updated Nov. 4, 2002).

afternoon strolling with my daughter through aisles of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese art trying to mitigate her growing addiction to chocolate with pacifying Eastern perspectives. All of us went out for dinner one evening in Little Italy, and I learned that the most fruitful method for obtaining a large gratuity from tourists is for the waiter to simply utter the phrase “fuggedaboutit.” My wife and I saw an albino deer leaping across a meadow in the Finger Lakes region. Don’t know if this meant anything, but I am really trying with this eastern adventure thing.

The Big Question, or Menudo?

¶17 But let’s return to the heart of the matter—the opportunity I had to ask myself necessary, albeit uncomfortable, questions. It is my conviction that the major reasons for taking a sabbatical are to gain a perspective from which to look at our chosen profession—where it’s heading and what meaning it has—and to assess who we’ve become as individuals while moving further along in our lives. If we don’t do this from time to time, there is a real danger we’ll fall into what we like to call at our house the “tape loop,” in which we just confine ourselves to repeating the same old learned behavior over and over and over again, like the remnants of the Beach Boys. This can be insidious because you often don’t realize it’s happening. Just as teaching faculty require a break to breathe new life into their instructional *shtick* or research fetishes, so too do librarians, who have to deal so closely with their primary clientele. This doesn’t necessarily call for a technique of skin peeling rivaling that of the Gang of Four, just a short sabbatical in which we can get back to ourselves. For those of us fortunate enough to have this opportunity, we should never feel apprehensive, guilty, or hesitant about taking advantage of it. In a sense, it’s our duty.

¶18 So let me return to the desert with the dog. Dylan has disappeared completely, and I’m putting my brain through the wringer by examining the human condition. Now that I’ve determined to my satisfaction that our civilization is about to come apart at the seams and throw a tantrum in which it rips to pieces all the nice things it has managed to accumulate over time, I’m left to contemplate my own little universe functioning within it. Let’s see, should we accept the Noble Peace Prize, or defuse tensions by starting a war? Tough question, but not mine. I doubt that librarians were ever consulted about the destruction of the first Alexandrian library.

¶19 My big question, or, if you prefer, my little cup of intestinal stew, involves whether what I’m doing has any meaning in light of the dismal point of view I seem to have.⁴ Does what I’m doing have any bearing whatsoever on this non–Martha

4. I want to make it abundantly clear that I do appreciate this little jewel of a planet we find ourselves on. I just have a difficult time with the way we’re digging it up, cutting it down, building on top of it, and covering it with a blanket of expectorant. Likewise, I find our human life form to be no better, and at times decidedly worse, than other flora and fauna existing here, which we seem to religiously relegate to a minor position when they interfere in the most minimal way with what seems to be our livelihood—interfering with them. Well, so we’re homo sapiens-centric. That’s the way it is.

Stewart world painted on the ceiling of my brain? I seem to lead two lives, one internal and one external.⁵ One is in the inner space where the awareness we define as our self hovers, and the other is out there functioning in the world, communicating, relating to the constructs that dictate what we think and say and do. Maybe everyone does this. Most of us spend most of our time in the external space; some of us virtually all of it there. There's probably a strong case to be made for this being the way it should be; that otherwise we'd be walking around with our heads in the clouds all the time and nobody would be picking up the garbage. It's a good argument.

¶20 Not long ago I went to Canyon de Chelly and hiked down into the bottom, where it's another world from the one that's up on the rim. For those not familiar with Canyon de Chelly, it's a spectacular, steep-walled sandstone canyon—a natural wonder that has the added attraction of numerous, well-preserved pre-Columbian cliff dwellings. It wasn't a particularly difficult hike, but it was steep in places and exposed. A trail drops over the lip and switchbacks cross the face of a creamy colored cliff only slightly less vertical and a little lower than most of the other canyon walls. There are some sheer drop-offs and you have a beautiful view of the branched canyon with its dusty green and yellow line of tamarisks, cottonwoods, and sycamores snaking through sunlight and deep shadow. You pass around bulging red bells of rock and scattered junipers and then through a tunnel into the cliff itself. When you come out the other end, you are at the bottom. In front of you is a single hogan with a cottonwood beside it and a rail pen filling the air with the smell of goat. A path winds past this, across a small bridge over a stream, and into the filtered light under the trees. That's when the magic of the place really hits. Under a canopy of overhanging branches, the sunlight dapples through to the pathway and the wood is permeated with a silence that wraps you in a cocoon of solitude. You follow the water with a timeless quality hovering in the air around you and break out of the trees to the awesome sight of towering cliffs that are a nuance of color. Cinnamon, ivory rose, faded turquoise spilling into charcoal gray; long stained streams of color running over niches, hollows, horizontal cracks and sheer, smooth canvases of rock. At the base of the canyon wall are ruins, a complex of buildings on two levels: one on the canyon floor, the other on a ledge above it at the entrance of an overhang, with the White House ruin set against the dark shadows.

¶21 I hadn't gone on a hike even remotely as strenuous as this since I'd injured my back, but I didn't even give a thought to my physical condition until the hike was completed. I felt fine. In fact, I felt perfect. I had reconnected down there with that internal place where bulging intervertebral material isn't a problem. Maybe this is what it takes to step beyond not only the limitations we've come to accept, but also our imperfect vision of what is actually happening. In other words, we have to enter the internal in order to examine the external.

5. I have discussed this condition previously. See Genovese, *supra* note 1, at 344, ¶ 6.

¶22 I've often asked myself why I like to go into the back country and sleep outside under the stars where it can be cold or uncomfortable or sometimes a little scary. I think it might have something to do with the fact that I feel more alive there, or that I appreciate alive-ness more if I'm aware of the edge of comfort and not so insulated from it. That's what the time available during a sabbatical can do. It can provide you an opening through which to take measure of things. I may not be a good example of the use of this time. My conclusions may come more from the fringe. The fact remains, however, that this experience of self-assessment and reevaluation is there for anyone to take advantage of, perhaps in more positive ways than I have.

Something of a Conclusion

¶23 Writing an article such as this really isn't different from doing anything else. Not only are there rules to follow, there is an accepted structure to maintain—in this case, an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. So here's a conclusion that might be what I really think, what I think I have to think, or a combination of both.

¶24 I can't say for certain that what I do has significance in the great scheme of things because maybe any conclusion I draw to a question like that is really only a rationalization. What I do think is that my choice of profession, despite it being more or less accidental, was probably a good one for me because it came with all the traits I would look for in a worldly pursuit. Librarianship has always been a protector of the valued products of civilization—while not always its jewels, at least its honest attempts. It has always been a storehouse of beauty, truth, and knowledge, not just for their protection, but also for their dissemination. It is a collector, an organizer, an analyzer, a broadcaster. When left to its own devices, librarianship does all of these things with no hidden agenda, with liberal interpretation, and with courage when facing less expansive views about what things should be available to everyone. Librarianship is a humanity with something of a science mixed in, but it should never be wholly a science, nor wholly a business. Being only one of these things would cause it to lose its universality of outlook, and its perspective would then be dictated by very small concerns indeed. When it comes time for me to leave this profession, I will have the satisfaction of knowing that I was a part of something from the side of light.

¶25 The big question buried within my question, however, is one that's always been asked. *Who am I?* There probably isn't an answer to this one, but you have to ask it on occasion. What you do will never be as important as who you are, but if you have a better idea of who you are, you can do what you do better.