


*“This Is Going On Your PERMANENT RECORD!” You’ve heard that threat, right? Did you shiver in your pants? Did you just laugh it away? Authority types just used those words to stop your fun and keep you in line, right? But, what if they’re true?*

**LIFE GOES ON:  
Wait, wait. There's More to the Story!**  
By John E. Budzinski

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This Is Going On Your Permanent Record

# LIFE GOES ON

Wait, wait. There's more  
to the Story!

*A memoir - Sort of*



John E. Budzinski

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## Integrity And Honors Classes— Oxymoron At Work

Some years ago Jennifer invited me to her son Nathan's high school graduation in Virginia. After the ceremony, a neighbor had a party for her daughter and the six or seven neighborhood graduates, including Nathan. Proud parents stood around celebrating their kids' accomplishments, and they had every right to be proud. Most graduated with honors and were on their way to top colleges in Virginia and elsewhere. And, they all had taken Advanced Placement (AP) classes.

Being the never-married, no-kids, single dude, I stepped way out of my realm and comfort zone at the party. After knowing me for forty years, Jennifer is well aware of my penchant for asking challenging and mistimed questions, even when I'm *in* my realm. In social moments like this that remove me far from my comfort zone, she worries about where I may go with my conversations. (For the record, her fears are baseless.)

Jennifer and her husband, Brian, stood with a small group of parents smiling and laughing and having the time of their lives, or so it seemed to me when I caught a glimpse of them. Like all couples, Jennifer and Brian give each other a look in social gatherings when it is rescue time. I've been around them long enough to know the look, and Jennifer wore it.

But, Jennifer was *with* Brian, and he really *was* having the time of his life. He wasn't about to come to her rescue. Jennifer and I have a similar look we use when we are in trouble. I wasn't so much in

trouble, just incredibly bored and frustrated that I was trapped in conversations I knew nothing about. She saw me standing with some other parents and realized she could rescue *herself* by rescuing *me*.

“Excuse me,” she said to Brian and the others she was with. “I have to go see John for a moment.” She wandered over wearing a look of “thanks for the rescue.” The look on her face turned to one of concern as she heard the nature of the conversation. She took up a spot within kicking distance of me and stood there, as I did, in smiling silence. I shook my head, seeming enthralled at what the parents said. After a few moments, Jennifer gave me a friendly nudge. I looked at her, “What’s the big deal?” Even being far removed from my realm of comfort, I still timed my questions well enough to assure those present I wasn’t a zombie. I knew nothing about what the various neighbors discussed with pride and expertise. I *did* know a little about basic courtesy and respect, though, and have learned tact and diplomacy.

Tact and diplomacy?

Yeah, that’s when you don’t know something you have sense enough to smile politely, nod your head in agreement, and keep your mouth shut.

To be honest, I couldn’t even attempt an intelligent question. I knew nothing of this world. Still, standing there I gained an education. While eating pizza with one hand while balancing a cup of root beer with the other, I learned a couple of things. First, I learned the honor classes were more difficult and taught in greater detail than regular courses, something I kind of surmised. Second, I found out the AP classes give students college credit. I didn’t surmise *that*. I had no idea.

Not having kids in high school, or anywhere else, school curriculum isn’t a subject of conversation I initiate and discuss when

out at a restaurant or at a favorite watering hole. So, such knowledge is not something I'd come across in my daily routine. My high school never had such opportunities. I doubt it was even invented yet. I am a writer. So much in the world piques my curiosity. Not *everything*, though, and certainly not *this*. It sat far outside my "need to know" zone, curiosity be damned. I had near-zero interest and did not see how any of it affected me and my world. (No, I am not usually so self-centered. Thanks for wondering. Self-centeredness is something you will see few mentions about in my permanent record.) I relied on tact and diplomacy to get me through. I smiled a lot, nodded my head, and kept my mouth shut.

Jennifer patted me on the shoulder as we walked to her house. "I am proud of you."

"What for?"

"You kept quiet. You maintained polite humanity."

"Polite humanity? Really, Jennifer? How did you think I'd act?"

"I worried you would argue about education and all..."

I smiled to myself. The reason I didn't question or challenge anything...? Remember when I inferred you need at least a little knowledge to ask an intelligent question? I didn't have even a smidgen of knowledge allowing me to do so. So, I listened, smiled on cue, and congratulated the parents and the graduates. I kept quiet because I didn't have a clue. I knew nothing.

Jennifer smiled. I mean, she knew if I couldn't connect all the dots while at the party, I knew there is a time and place to speak, and a time and place to be quiet. I do have some integrity and couth. I couldn't

connect the dots. Besides, this party was a time for the graduates and their parents. I knew how (and when) to keep my mouth shut, and the envelopes hidden in the desk.

Driving home to Pennsylvania the conversations at the party stayed with me. They made me angry. “Why are some students challenged more than others with these *honors classes*?” “Why aren’t all students taught the same subjects and challenged in the same way?” I had lots of questions. My conclusion? It’s not just unfair, it’s *unjust*—BIG TIME! How do school administrators defend this? I hope these school boards have their *own* permanent record because I want to be there when Peter asks them to defend it. I want to see them squirm when they discuss those policies that treat students so differently and unfairly. Because some students happen to be intellectually gifted, they get more and better education, and additional benefits, like college credit? Is that how it works? I don’t get it. Someone has to explain how this is fair.

“Mr. JB, what did you always get so upset over unimportant things?”

“What?”

“The Honor Society students—why did they upset you?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“At the party. You seemed upset.”

“What...? Peter, the kids didn’t upset me. The *process* did. Some students got something others didn’t. The worst part is, school administrators and parents assumed the other students didn’t deserve it, or couldn’t handle it. It wasn’t fair.”



“JB, the universe may seem unfair, and...”

“Well, it should not be so blatantly unfair!”

“You did not design the universe. Design has reasons behind it.”

“No, I did not—I am far from smart enough.”

“Hmm...”

“But, Peter, who knows? What happens if I had the chance to take those special classes with those who are smart enough? Something might have rubbed off so I could figure it out.”

“Yes, that could be...”

“Peter, I’d like to think if I had kids and came across this AP stuff, I would have spoken up. The fact I don’t see any evidence that my friends with kids spoke up bothers me, too. Couldn’t they see the unfairness... or is it they didn’t have the character and honor to turn down *their* special privileges?”

Laurel and Edward were the smartest and brightest two kids in my eighth-grade class, both winning scholarships. The money wasn’t great, maybe a couple of hundred dollars. Still, both appreciated the special acknowledgment. Laurel finished first and Ed second. They weren’t just the smartest kids in class, they were two of the best-liked, as evidenced by my classmates’ out-of-control reaction when our principal announced their names at graduation. Parents and family members smiled and clapped politely. We jumped into the air cheering and hugging each other, standing on our chairs, waving our arms wildly, and throwing our mortarboards into the air in celebration of

their honor. Aside from the very minimal scholarships, they got nothing extra because they were smart.

The class loved it when Laurel and Edward spoke up and asked questions. They didn't speak to ask a question. More often than not, their statement further probed statements teachers had made.

"So, if we consider Madison correct in his views from where his assessment came from, it must mean..."

"Yes, Laurel, that is a proper way to view it."

"And, if X is the flip side of Y, then Z has to be... because..."

"Correct, Edward."

The two of them had a way of explaining the lessons in language teachers didn't relate to—the street jive the class quickly hooked onto and understood. No, Laurel and Edward never dummed down anything. They had way too much respect for themselves, their classmates, and the subject. They intertwined street language with the technical and academic mumbo-jumbo, something the nuns (and most teachers) could never do. Yep, the class was lucky to have them, but you know what? The nuns were the luckiest and most grateful they had this pair as students. They made teaching easier than it might otherwise have been.

Laurel grew up to be a respected and honored educator and a vigorous advocate for students. Her students adored her for it. They cherished her, feeling blessed they had the privilege of spending time in her classroom. She made *learning* easier than it might otherwise have been.

I doubt Laurel ever gave any student anything extra because of the student's intellectual gifts. If anything, she worked hardest to help those not as blessed. A brain tumor ended her life. She was sixty-three.

Edward came to a 50<sup>th</sup> Class Reunion I'd arranged for some of my eighth-grade classmates, but I never found out what happened to him. Our conversations didn't touch on "So, how has life been treating you?" I am sorry I didn't ask more questions. He looked great, though, like life has done him well.

I was the antithesis to Laurel and Edward. I rarely spoke up or raised my hand. When I did, the class listened. Yep, no doubt the novelty of me doing so gathered their attention. But... my questions were different, often surprising teachers and classmates while making valid and important points. They may have led the class astray and broke the class rhythm, but they also led to lively discussions. It made me kind of proud.

"So, Sister, what did Thomas Jefferson's siblings think of his declaration? Didn't he have something like four brothers and five or so sisters?"

"Yes, he had a bunch of siblings, but I do not know, John. We do not have records of him ever discussing anything with them."

"Yeah. Maybe, but I would love to hear what Thomas Jefferson's brothers and sisters said behind his back. He had to be his parents' favorite child. 'Why can't y'all be like Thomas?' That had to irritate the hell out of the other siblings and grind their grits."

Come on, every story may have more to it, but not all of it needs perfect alignment. It's okay to take a different route, and if the class gets sidetracked along the way and doesn't end up where a teacher

wants to take it, so what? We are in school to learn. Didn't we learn? At the end of the day, it's all good, isn't it?

Yes, I often also made some wise-ass remark. I got some laughs and reactions, but more misplaced and mistimed attempts at humor led to this result.

"After hours, Sister, how do you think the founders' conversations went down when they hoisted a few at the local pub?"

"John, I am not sure... what they discussed or if they 'hoisted' a few."

"Well, Sister, I can't speak for all the Founding Fathers, but I'll bet good old Ben Franklin hoisted more than a few." Yes, the class laughed. Yep, I trashed the classroom synergy and the lesson plan ran amok. And...

"JOHN EDWARD, this disruption of the class is going on your permanent record!"

Yeah, of course the class cringed, but they also laughed. What may be more important, my classmates may have opened their minds and thunk a little differently and considered new possibilities. It may have led to some interesting dinner conversations. Is that so bad?

I bet right now you are reassessing some of your assumptions about good old Ben Franklin and his fellow 1776 Philadelphia elites. Yes, I'm stretching it a bit, believing I made such significant contributions to my classmates' clearer and more enlightened education. Even I know I'm pushing it, thinking I made classroom time greater than otherwise would have been, except in the outlandish realm of science fiction. But, you get the idea, right? More to the story?

There you go.

“JB, I sense a bit of hostility. You want it all to be a slam dunk and want complete fairness and justice. Do you not get it? The universe does not work in such a finite mode.”

“Sounds like a design problem to me, Peter.”

“The purpose and design have continuity of thought. You know how the scales of justice are, do you not?”

“I wonder *now*, but I’m sure you’ll fill me in on all the details and clarify and explain it...”

“Well, The Boss will decide and explain. I am here as a guide, nothing more.”

“I hope he includes the universe’s design and purpose.”

“All in good time, JB. To everything there is a purpose and season...”

“Yeah, yeah. To everything there is a season and purpose under heaven—Ecclesiastics. I get it, I Get It!”

“Patience, Mr. John. Patience.”

“You know, Peter, I get the seasons and the scales of justice and all—I really do. But... now and again I think Lady Justice cheats and peeks through the corner of her blindfold. When she sees something she likes, she throws a couple of grams of gold to tip the scales to favor the honor students or...”

“The world has not been some conspiracy set up to make you a victim of circumstances... excuse me. Let me blow my nose.”

“Please explain ‘teacher’s pet’ theory, then.”

“You are too much the cynic, JB. The world is not as unfair or confusing as you may consider and believe.”

“You should do something about your cold.”

When nuns, teachers, or other adult-like figures call you by your last name, you know you’re in some serious trouble, but there’s a possibility for a reprieve. BUT, when they call you JOHN EDWARD, you’ve crossed the line of reprieves. Hell’s fury (and the nuns’) is going to crush you. The *only* reason parents give you a middle name is so when anyone uses it, you know, in no uncertain terms, you’re in serious trouble. It’s the law! It’s the reason crime reporters meticulously seek the middle names of perpetrators. When you see your middle name in a crime story, one thing is certain. The judge has revoked your bail and there’s no chance for parole.

The few times teachers called on me during class, it wasn’t because I feverishly waved my hand—“I know, I know! Pick me, PICK ME!” Of course I could answer many of the questions my teachers asked—don’t be ridiculous. I read the textbooks. I did my homework. Early on, though, I saw teachers had favorites, or so it seemed to me. I didn’t see any attempt to balance the scales of education justice fairly and equitably. No matter how high I raised my hand and how crazily I waved it, teachers called on the same kids all the time.

Okay, so maybe it wasn’t ALL the time, and perhaps Lady Justice didn’t rig the scales. Still, it happened often enough to see the fix was in, which didn’t bother me. I stop raising my hand. When teachers *did* call on me, they didn’t do it out of a sense of fairness. They looked at me like gazing at the stray cat who hangs around the yard. They fed me now and then, not out of kindness, but more out of guilt and pity.

The teacher's pet theory is not some academic myth or legend. It's real! The funny thing is those of us who were *normal* parts of the class kidded and teased the teachers' pets. The pets didn't care, not at all. They got good grades. They were first in line at dismissal time. AND, when they got home, as a reward, they had extra dessert and got to stay up late with older siblings watching TV. Why is it you never see benefits afforded you, and those you could have taken advantage of, until it's too late? Didn't you like extra dessert? Didn't you like staying up late? Wouldn't you have studied more had you known? Yeah, so would I.

One day the teacher's pet theory benefited me (or against me, depending on your perspective). Our class discussed the concept of free will. The discussion strayed in many directions until our teacher brought up the subject of instinct. I do not remember all the details except for this. Sister broke the class into several small groups to further the discussion. My group included Francis (Buddy), one of those teacher's pets. Ugh!

The question she asked us to discuss: "Do dogs have free will, or do they operate on instinct?" We talked within our groups for ten minutes, then came back together as a class. Sister chose several students to make their arguments. Both free will and instinct proponents made their case to sway others to their point of view. The arguments jockeyed back and forth for several minutes. After our group and full-class discussion, almost the entire class came down with conviction on the side that the dog had free will. Even those who argued for instinct became convinced. The dog can go to see if someone remembered to fill his food bowl. He can go to any person in the room or stand by the door asking to go out. He has free will and can choose.

The argument did not sway Buddy. He stood his ground and insisted instinct drove all the dog's behavior. He stood almost alone, 100 percent confident of his assessment. I sat next to Buddy, smiling and shaking my head at the classroom dynamics. Sister saw me and knew I had something on my mind. Yes, experience told her she should let me be. She knew better, but the class hadn't settled the argument, not yet.

Silence.

No one had anything else to offer up or additional views. So, despite Sister's better judgment, she asked, "What do you think, John? Do you agree with Buddy?"

"Well..."

I paused for a moment. Some classmates smiled, anticipating my reply. "What devious response has he conjured up that sick mind of his?" My classmates knew under my quiet persona lurked a playful, peculiar, yet astute way of looking at the world. They waited for my reply.

"There's more to it than deciding between free will or instinct."

Sister knew she shouldn't ask, but she opened the door. She had to let me walk through it. "Go on..."

"Well, Sister, there's something else to consider."

"Which is...?"

"Um, it's kind of like when you stand on the side of your desk holding the ruler in front of you with both hands. We know you're



annoyed and it's time for us to shut up and listen. Most important, we better be sitting at attention."

She scrunched her brow, trying to figure out my reasoning and explanation.

"And... where are you going with this, John?"

"It's in the middle, Sister," I continued. "Neither instinct nor free will completely describes what's going on. The dog, and us, know what gets positive rewards and what gets negative punishment—what reactions come from which." I paused for a couple of seconds. "It's conditioning—learned behavior." The class lost it and erupted in laughter.

Sister excused herself for a moment and stepped into the hall. I heard her laughing. She got control of herself, came back into class, staring me down as she walked to her desk. Sister took out a journal, flipped to a specific page, then bull-eyed me. She sat down, wrote a few notes, tapped the journal with her ruler, and put it back in her desk. I'm betting my permanent record got a new entry right then.

I'm sure I didn't do much to become a teacher's pet right then. Sister stood up, her eyes still fixated on me. You could hear the graveyard breathe. The class sat quiet, motionless, and at attention. Have you ever had a Dominican nun stare you down? Sister's menacing look would have stopped a suicide bomber dead in his tracks. This time, though, the look wasn't the North Pole cold one I knew so well. A half-wink of her eye made me consider, maybe today the permanent record transgression received just two stars, instead of the usual three or four—and perhaps, a small smiley face.

As I recall, instinct won the day, but not the instinct telling me I should have said, “I don’t have any idea,” when Sister asked my opinion. Every question doesn’t require an answer. Every story didn’t need detailed explanations from me. Sometimes shrugging your shoulders is the best response. Being the introvert and keeping my mouth shut was fine, and often the most sensible thing to do. But then, the envelope pusher in me finds it near impossible to back down from a challenge, even when there’s not a delusional chance in hell of me winning.

Besides the teacher’s pet theory playing out against me, logistics played a role, too. My eighth-grade class had forty-nine of us in it. I sat in the last seat in the far back corner of the classroom. Even if I raised my hand, a forest of raised arms and bouncing and waving hands stood in my way of catching the teacher’s eye. She would be hard-pressed to see me.

One day something the teacher or a classmate said pulled my chain a little too hard. Some ongoing discussion duped the class into an agitated stupor. Someone had to furnish a reality check, and guess which someone got elected? I *had to* push the envelope—again—to keep education honest. So, along with raising and waving my hand like a crazy banshee who needed to use the boys’ room immediately, I stood on my chair. Sister saw me. How could she not?

She looked at me, putting her hands up to her eyes, pretending to be looking through binoculars. “Well, who is that way back there?” She then gabbed on with a two-minute diatribe telling all how I’m so out of sight way back there in the far reaches of the room, it’s strange to see me participate. “I bet it feels good, Mr. Budzinski, to join in and be an actual part of the class.” Yeah, her playful wise-ass remarks and use of my last name mocked me. Yep, she made me uncomfortable

and nervous. (But, at least she didn't use my first and middle name.) Her sarcastic one-liner got a rise out of my classmates and gave them a delightful laugh at my expense.

Yes, I had thin skin and her comments hurt, more than a little. No, I didn't like it. Yes, she embarrassed and intimidated me. No, I was not too embarrassed. Yes, the intimidation posed a challenge I had to meet—the introvert had to make a play to have the last laugh. As they say, payback is hell. In the best stereotypical and completely uncool, southern-hillbilly drawl I could muster, I blurted out my diatribe.

“Y'all see, Sistah, dis is why I nev'r *do* raise my hand. I knows y'all out to git me.” Nope, you do not talk to a nun with such a glib attitude. Yep, I got a bigger laugh from the class. No, she didn't stare me down, this time. A good bet would be she pulled out her journal, again. And yes, I got another entry in my permanent record.

I bet you can tell education and school puzzled me. No, I never doubted the value of school and I enjoyed going, most of the time. I had some days of being bullied. I will not discuss then as I overcame it, and *Life Goes On*. However, some things always seemed unfair and out of touch to me, such as those AP classes. We grasp onto strange concepts as we learn, and they all don't come from sitting in a classroom. Education has many aspects and we learn and get educated in various ways and places. Yet, I expected school to tie it together, at least a little.

I've mentioned this too much, but I *was* the quiet, well-behaved kid, most of the time. I understood most subjects quickly, did all the work as best as I could, and rarely made trouble. If teachers, or anyone else, told me what's expected, what the boundaries are, and the rules

of engagement, they could leave me alone. I'll be fine. I'll comply, mostly.

Kids like me do not need attention. We're low maintenance, which is why we're often overlooked. Only ghosts notice and pay attention to the invisible. Average is... well, average. If I wanted to get some attention now and then, I had to do something bold, distinctive, and individual. I had to leave the choir and sing solo. That's what I did. I learned how to push the envelope. And, being so much out of the ordinary for me, it worked. I got *some* attention.

I found education puzzling and weird, but then, much of the world surprised me, and still does. It's my childlike curiosity still running amok on overdrive. I noticed things no one else sees. If they do, they pay scant attention to it because of its simplicity. For me, simplicity *is* the whole point—to see it and marvel at it, right? What makes life so much more fun and exciting? Well, duh! There's no question this trait of noticing made me an excellent photographer. I took pictures of what people may notice, but no one sees.

"Peter..."

"Yes, JB."

"Why is simplicity so complicated?"

"Ah, I do not grasp what you ask."

"Well, this probably has nothing to do with anything, least of all my permanent record, but..."

"Do not be so sure about what is or is not included in your..."

"Yeah, yeah, will you let me talk, please?"

“Forgive me, JB. Please continue.”

“Thank you. As I was saying... Well, the clouds blow away or change form. The snow melts away. Pretty fall colors fade to brown. Soon the trees stand there naked, yet few people notice. Before you know it, the trees get their new green jackets.”

“Where are you going with this, JB?”

“Well, I can get why complicated things go awry, the overt-thinking part of design. But... it seems simple should last. I have a bunch of rocks. I picked them up from a bunch of places and all.”

“Yes...?”

“But I’ll be damned if I can remember where. Some came from beaches and others from the mountains and... who can remember where else? Something told me to pick up the rocks—some simple reason. It must have been important right then. You’d think I’d remember.”

“You do not, JB?”

“No, Peter, I don’t. But I can’t throw the rocks away either. They mean nothing to no one. Even I do not know why they are so important to me, except they are, and I can’t throw them away.”

“Simplicity has complexity? I see...”

“No, you don’t, Peter. Stop pacifying me. Is there a toilet around here?”

Inquisitiveness aside, outside of the obvious news and social trends, no one ever considered me the most informed kid in school.

(Not true in later years.) Of course I wanted to explore everything, and know it all—almost all of it, anyway. Weren't you the same? My problem is circumstances prevented me from becoming the intellectual explorer I envisioned. I wanted to be the character venturing forth with courage, fortitude, and confidence. *Seaward ho! Hang the treasure! It's the glory of the sea that has turned my head.*<sup>1</sup>

After dad died (I was eight), Mom did all she could to keep the house and family (Mom, four kids, and the cats) together. We didn't exactly have the time (or inclination) to sit around the dinner table, turn off the TV, and discuss current events and books. Mom did drop us off at the library often enough, and I tagged along with friends when their parents took them. However, we never developed a weekly routine of heading off to the library Tuesday evening after supper.

Still, my friends and I had bicycles. The library was a short four-mile ride, so on various days we headed off on one of our far too infrequent book quests. I'm thankful for my education and those who taught me math and how to read and write. I extend my eternal gratitude to Mr. Pepe, a high school history teacher (and football coach), for making studying history exciting and a must-get education. Countless other teachers brought much into my life, making it better. But, whoever she is, the one person who gets my never-ending and eternal gratitude and thanks is the one who taught me the Dewey Decimal System. Once I learned Dewey, education became simple. I could track down anything I needed (or wanted) to know. As a side benefit, I found out I had the power to travel to all the places I dreamed of visiting, and I could head off to foreign lands and distant worlds on

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<sup>1</sup> *Treasure Island*, Robert Lewis Stevenson

a whim. I didn't need a passport. If you gave me a Dewey Decimal Code, I'd be off on my travels.

Time is the thing getting in my way. It's my greatest enemy. There's never enough time. (Which is a significant advantage of eternity, I guess. Time doesn't begin or end.) I plan to live to be 135 years old, but even having all those years is minuscule to what I need. Even hanging around for all those years will not be enough for me to take in all around me and explore all the places I haven't been.

School frustrated me because there's always more to learn, more to know, and the rest of the story to discover and explore. In truth, I never did as well as I wanted. I doubled up on my allotted share of stupid mistakes and made careless errors. My impatience and short attention span made me rush to finish the work so I could dive into something else. But, there's more to *that* story.

Math, geography, science, history, and other subjects had classroom time limits, and we did not spend time with each of them every day. High school and college were the same. Time was the unrelenting enemy. Yes, I picked up most things quickly, and well enough, maybe not to get an "A" but to at least pass the next test. In college, though, much of it required spending extensive time out of classrooms and lecture halls. A little while back I told you of my character flaws. Well, college professors had a major flaw, too. They had a zeal for including questions on a test you could only answer by reading the information found in footnotes.

Once I nailed Dewey Decimal, I could track down information on any subject I wanted, including footnotes. I could investigate whenever I wanted, for as long as I wanted, or at least as long as the library stayed open (twenty-four hours during exams in college). Yep,

I have plenty of reasons to thank those teachers and librarians who helped me hone my Dewey Decimal skills. Learning *how* and *where* to find answers may be more important than the answers themselves—learning how to learn.

The librarians had reason to thank me, too. They were busy and often had more people standing in line needing help finding books than the librarians could assist. When I saw someone looking for a book, I stepped in to help, especially with the younger kids. I enjoyed helping them learn Dewey and loved seeing them get excited finding all the right books.

“Thank you for helping me, John. I am going to make sure this gets into your permanent record.”

Um, just so you know, no one ever says things like that, at least not the permanent record part.

But...

“Hmm, Mr. Budzinski. Two more overdue library books. I’ll make sure this gets you’re your permanent record!”

Yeah, that’s par for the course. You can see why I want to find where they keep my permanent record, right? It definitely needs some careful (“I’m only trying to be fair”) editing.



## Close, But No Champagne

The only thing close to reflecting my permanent record is my credit report. A yearly ritual has me spending three days rummaging through the three versions of it. With four-plus decades worth of credit history, I spend a maddening few days making my way through the dozens of pages, charts, graphs, explanations, and whatnot. My credit report ritual begins with a morning pot of coffee and some bagels or muffins. It ends three days later when night falls, and I open a bottle of wine and heat some chicken fingers. This may not sound like much of an exhilarating yearly ritual, but then, I'm not much of a ritualistic guy, let alone exhilarating. After many years of reviewing my credit report, this is as good as it gets. Besides, it's just a credit report, not World Series box scores. How exhilarating do you expect or need it to be?

I've seen mistakes over the years, or at least entries not telling the *whole* story. The cool thing with credit reports is that they allowed me to enter explanation notes and challenge the veracity information. The *uncool* thing is nothing I ever wrote in my defense ever removed anything from the report, even the incorrect items. But at least my "rest of the story" explanation became a part of the record for all to see (providing they read the footnotes). It seems my permanent record should afford me the same consideration—if I could find it before I'm standing nose to nose with Saint Peter, and The Boss.

Several years ago while reviewing my reports I saw someone had entered defamatory data and remarks. Nope, I didn't take umbrage over them. I became pissed off! I was buying a house and these transgressions on my credit report complicated the process more than

I needed. Dale, my mortgage broker, called me. “John, we have ourselves a minor problem.”

A couple of years earlier I moved and did all those things you do when you change your address, like telling the cable company to switch my service to the new address. Well, the cable company made the changes. I didn’t have a second of service interruption. However, the company kept billing me for service at my old address, along with my new one. Of course, I did not pay both bills. The bills kept accumulating for several months and things got nasty when I refused to pay *both* bills. The battle continued for months and my credit rating got a massive ding with the derogatory notes hitting my credit report.

I jotted down more than a few pointed words of elucidation in my defense on my credit reports—all three of them. After several heated and angry phone calls and some exchanged letters filled with all kinds of threatening legal mumbo-jumbo, the company and I settled our differences. The mortgage company approved my application without a hitch. The situation could have made my *worst things ever to happen to me* list, a very short list as it is. But then, I never got overly excited about personal misgivings, my thin skin notwithstanding.

Tell me. What is the worst thing to ever happen to you? I may be out of the mainstream here, but nothing comes to mind. No, I have not lived such a challenge-free life. I’ve had those moments.

There had to be some moment when disaster struck and I blurted out, “*This is the worst thing that ever happened to me!*” I’m positive my mother, siblings, and friends laughed. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic. Stop over-reacting.” Yeah, it’s easy for them to say—it didn’t happen to any of them. “If you want a real disaster,” one would offer, “wait until next year.” Maybe, but their distant prognostications didn’t fill

me with relief and far from making me comfortable believing the future is bright and cheery.

What is the worst thing ever to happen to me? Beats me. I can't think of anything because, as they say, life goes on. As so it does. I know because I keep living it. Life doesn't allow time to ponder over every insignificant event, and I am not about to prioritize the list by moving the embarrassing and unhappy ones to the forefront. That's just plain dumb and silly. And this doesn't just hold for horrible and disastrous things. It's true for the happiest and most joyful moments, too. You may as they say, "Be on top of the world," but before you can blink twice you're back to reality, all life preservers gone, and you're treading water to stay afloat. Your team won the championship last night, and you had a blow-out of a celebration. But this morning you're back to yesterday's grind—out into traffic, back to school, and off to work. You still need to do the laundry, and the grass doesn't mow itself. Yep, life does go on. At least, until it doesn't, and Peter is escorting you down a long white hall to see The Boss while you freak out over the permanent record sitting on the cart he's pushing.

One Halloween, Joseph, a classmate who had a very charming and delightful, albeit scattered, older sister, Joan, were at his house getting ready for trick-or-treating. Joe and I were set on how we would dress for the evening. I'll tell you about it in a moment. But Joan had her issues. She rushed around getting ready for a girlfriend's Halloween party, and if anything could go wrong, it did. Joan broke fingernails, ran out of nail polish, and dropped a stitch or two in some costume gown she had put together for the event. Worst of all, her hair curler overheated, scorching and taking out more than a few locks of her long light-brown hair and turning into dark auburn. Saying she ran around in a panic is understating a teenage girl's angst trying to impress her friends, and undoubtedly a boy, at a Halloween party.

“THIS IS THE WORST NIGHT OF MY LIFE!”

I sincerely hope that’s true because in reality, it was nothing to write home about, even here and now. I’ll tell you, though. I suspect over the years Joan had a few other nights challenging for the title “The Worst Night Of My Life.” She always had some travesty and panic going on. It may not be kind to say this, but she provided grand entertainment.

“You were not very kind to Joan on Halloween, JB.”

“Excuse me...”

“The time at Joseph’s house. Can you explain...?”

“Um, no... ah, I guess not. But, Peter, On Halloween? She ran around the house in spastic convulsions.”

“Did you have to laugh?”

“Peter, I was a jerky eleven-year-old kid. It was funny, and...”

“You should have been more supportive.”

“Peter, the dog barked, the cat ran for cover in the basement. I laughed. Besides, the smell of her burning hair kicked off the smoke detector. Joe and I expected the fire department would be there any minute.”

“You were not kind to laugh, mind you. You should have helped.”

“Peter, her parents laughed! What should I have done? I threw some water on her hair when I saw it smoke. Does that count?”

“Water, JB? You do not get a wine toast for throwing water.”

“Wine toast? I really think champagne was in order.”

I never had the challenges Joan did when I got ready for Halloween. Deciding was easy as most of the time me and my friends dressed as bums or hoboes. It didn't take too much time, effort—or curling irons. Our drawers had plenty of old clothes, including worn-out jeans and torn shirts, so who needed the costume design expert? We were used to rolling around in the dirt, and you don't need a makeup artist to rub some of it on your face. Our hair usually was in its bum-like state—mussed. The toughest and most challenging part came from swiping a few Stetson cigars from one of our fathers. Throwing on an old railroad hat or wearing a baseball cap sideways, and we were good to go. We got our treats without pulling or performing any tricks. No one ever asked us to tell a yarn from our days on the rails or perform a hobo song before giving us candy. We knew hoboes were dirty and bum-like, and that was that. We didn't need more.

Then... time passes.

You get older.

You read.

Reading churns imagination, which takes off and runs with wild abandonment of any sense and reality.

Reading also incites curiosity.

So...

You travel—to feed your imagination and to placate your curiosity.

Except... Travel begets more questions.

You must explore further—to find answers to *those* questions and see if reality matches the folk tales. And... exploring can leave you disappointed. Often the reality is not as much fun or satisfying as movies and folk tales. At least, that's how reality played out for me. Until...

One day reality plopped me down smack dab in the middle of Britt, Iowa, where I found myself among hoboes—the *real* ones, not the Halloween make-believe-wanna-be version Joe and I were.

Let me make a little segue. I'm curious. This entire planet and its inhabitants fascinates me. I'm not proud. I'll talk with anyone. Sitting and chatting away with the characters I meet is part of the fun of traveling. And while being willing to talk *to* anyone, I cannot talk *with* everyone. So, to compensate I read a lot and stop in all kinds of libraries and museums. Many are the great and famous ones in the big cities. Most, though, are the small, tiny, and neglected ones I find along the side of some lonely county road, the ones even the locals have forgotten.

I used to tear out stories and articles from magazines and file them away. I assumed someday, eventually, I'd find time to write about it, and I needed a reference point. Half a lifetime ago I came across one such story called *Farewell to the Hobo* written by Ralph Gooding, aka Hood River Blackie. Maybe the romance hit me. Perhaps the travel and adventure aspects of the story made me curious. It may have been learning something new. I don't know. However, the piece struck a nerve. The magazine piece dates back over thirty-five years as Ralph

Gooding died in 1985 at age fifty-eight. He threw his backpack into his first boxcar at age fifteen.

You've torn stories out of magazines or clipped them out of newspapers, haven't you? Maybe you did as I did. For years I cut interesting stories out of magazines and newspapers and pasted them in scrapbooks. I have five three-inch-thick scrapbooks stuffed with such clippings. Something in the stories seemed important, even special when I first read them. Those unique stories needed preserving. I ripped Hood River Blackie's five-page tale out of the magazine and filed it away. I know this sounds silly and absurd, but Hood River's story struck a nerve when I read it. Something in my consciousness told me to file the story away. Someday I would need it. The nerve still tingles dozens of years after the fact. The story it begat, however, still requires a conclusion. It has to come time to write, "The End."

I don't have the article any longer, at least not in its paper form. Months ago, in my quest to simplify my world and reduce life's clutter, I tossed it out, along with many other decades-old papers and articles jammed into my office file cabinets and boxes stored on closet shelves. Before trashing it, I scanned each item into my computer to preserve it for posterity. The process took many hours over several weeks.

When I came across *The Last of the Hoboes* in my files, I reread it. I'm sure it didn't affect me the way it did when I first read it thirty years ago. Of course, back then I didn't have any connection to it. I had not been to Britt, Iowa. If I were to die today and someone came across the story while digging through my files, I'm sure it would mean nothing or have much significance. Even my family and close friends who know me the best would wonder why I kept it. I guess one or two may say, "It's only John's curiosity running wild again—playing silly games." I doubt, though, if even one of them could tell

you why the story resonated with me the first time I read it and why it resonates with me even more today. That bothers and saddens me. I need to work on explaining me to others—before there *is* no more to the story.

Why did I save an over thirty-year-old magazine story, especially one with no direct or current connection to anything in my life (other than a mild Halloween connection)? I'm not so sure. Still, the story of Hood River Blackie ended up in this book. It means something—to me! I'm sure it says something about me, though I doubt you will find what it may be on some page of my permanent record.

Near the end of the article, Hood River Blackie reflects on the train's sounds as they ride the tracks. "Clickety-clack, you can't go back." Well, yes and no. Yep, it seems there always is more to the story. When a hobo dies they say he's 'caught the westbound.' Poetically speaking, he's heading into the sunset. Since reading Hood River Blackie's story, every August I've wanted to head off to Britt, Iowa. August is when the hoboes gather for their yearly convention. It took a long time for me to get there, though. I remember the first time I did.

When I plopped myself down at a table with my bowl of Mulligan Stew, it didn't take long to see I didn't mirror any of my table-mates, these characters of the road surrounding me. Nope, I didn't carry a card making me a member of this hobo tribe. Rather, I appeared the conspicuous stranger, like a train engine heading down the wrong track. Still, two sparkling blinks of the eyes, a gigantic smile, and a hearty handshake and hug later, they accepted me as if I were a long-lost family member. We had a great time chitchatting about the places we've ventured and the characters who've touched us along the way.



I've been around, visiting forty-nine of the fifty USA states and most Canadian provinces. Add in a couple of dozen foreign countries, and I have a good-size collection of road-stories to tell.

Later that night at the campfire, I found a spot upwind from the smoke. I stacked a couple of milk crates on top of each other, plopped myself down, and chugged hobo-punch while chowing down spicy beef, grilled vegetables, and of course, Mulligan Stew. The hobo crowd thrilled at having this writer-photographer in their midst. With smiling faces and slaps on my knee and thigh, and pats on my shoulder—genuine enthusiasm—they cajoled me into telling my stories. My preference is hearing others tell stories. I surrendered, though, and this introverted storyteller relished in the attention. You better believe I enjoyed every minute of my time on stage.

I told stories of the places I've been and the experiences I've had. What were my most important stories? Easy question. They involved the characters I met along the way, characters like Hoy. (I'll tell you Hoy's story later.) My self-conscience level dropped as hoboes smiled and laughed at my tales. I loved telling my stories with a perfect amount of exaggerated pontificating to keep the laughs and smiles alive. I thrilled at the "tell me more" excited questions the hoboes lobbed at me. Still, my words reeked of boredom compared to the hoboes' stories.

I told stories.

They *performed* them!

Using voice inflection and exaggerated accents, the hoboes put on a show. They patted their heads and bellies and waved their arms with wild and crazy animated hand gestures. I'm sure their body contortions and movements kept their chiropractors busy after the fact. One

moment their voices damaged ears with shrieks and shrills. Then the milk crates I sat on shook, and my shoes tightened from their earthquake baritones. They enchanted me by giving life to their characters with the presence of location and time. All the while I rolled on the ground applauding. Storytime was never so much fun—show-and-tell on steroids. And it all happened while sitting around a campfire enjoying some hobo chow along with a *special* hobo beverage.

Who needs smartphones, streaming video, or other such distractions when you can sit around a campfire surrounded by animated characters filled with stories they can't wait to tell and perform? Towns, villages, and all neighborhoods should have a fire pit where folks come together for Friday night for storytelling time—where they tell stories about themselves, each other, and the world around them, as they see it.

Few of these guys and gals have ridden the rails, hopped freight cars heading out of town, hustle a meal at the back of a restaurant near closing time, or had the sheriff rustle them out of the county. Still, the stories were fun to hear. Each hobo told tales with passion, respect, and love—Pure Joy!

Tears came mixed with the smiles and laughter. Several hoboes caught the westbound over the past year, and many eyes glazed over when old friends and buddies told *their* stories. I teared up a little as I listened. Sad? Yeah, of course, as expected. But also happy and appreciative. I came to know these lost characters and share in a part of their lives from stories others told about them. If people can hear and remember your stories, you're never gone and always close by.

In *Nothing Special—Just A Life*, I told some Christmas stories. I forgot to tell this Hood River Blackie story. It comes from a social media post I made near Christmas a few years ago.

My friend Henry sent me a post on one of my social media outlets for a “Christmas Recipe” called “A Mulligan of Happiness.” It’s listed below. Mulligan reminded me of Mulligan Stew. Mulligan Stew reminded me of hoboos. Hoboos reminded me of Hood River Blackie and his “Farewell to the Hoboes” story I read decades ago. Then, I remembered the Hobo Convention in Britt, Iowa.

Years ago I heard a song about Hood River Blackie written by U. Utah Phillips. The chorus goes like this. *Hood River roll on, there’s so much to remember, the old times are gone, Hood River roll on.* The lyrics and song play reflective and sad. They can bring on tears. Yet, they also play out with the joy of friends and a history remembered. The song came to mind as I sat around the fire pit with the other hoboos, drinking down hobo punch and drinking in the hobo stories.

Phillips could have been singing about any one of a number of hoboos found on the headstones in the hobo cemetery in Britt, Iowa: Hardrock Kid, Mt. Dew, Pennsylvania Kid, Slow Motion Shorty, Connecticut Slim, Lord Open Road, and others. Hobo history may be a minor entry in American history’s grandeur, but you cannot call it trite. It’s important to those who lived and were a part of it.

Aspects of your life and history wouldn’t have much relevance to me. But then, I wasn’t there with your family helping to create it. Those aspects are your *personal* “rest of the story.” Do you still wonder why it’s so important? There *are* parts of stories we forget to tell. They are stories I never *imagined* existed in my Halloween days of dressing up like a bum or hobo. I learned much and became

educated during my time in Britt, Iowa. I hope some of it found its way into my permanent record. Here is an example.

Most people clump tramps, bums, and hoboes together. I know I did at one time, with good reason. Did you ever study tramps, bums, and hoboes in school? I sure didn't, so lumping them together seems fitting. Who knew? But I don't clump them together anymore. Nope, not since my hobo education in Britt, Iowa. The difference is this. A tramp is a person who travels and will work only if he can't get some chow or a place to flop down for the night any other way. A bum will neither travel nor work. Hoboes travel *to* work. You can learn a lot when you hang out with hoboes.

What were your favorite or your most significant learning times? Did you plan them out and control them, or did they just happen—an adventure and experience? I'm positive I received my best and most useful education by accident. I'd be out running errands or doing something or another when unrelated things happened. Each time the happening taught me a lesson, like learning the difference between tramps, bums, and hoboes.

I stumbled upon something—a sign, or building, or a book. Maybe I went to the library for one book and came home with another. Perhaps I saw a poster for a lecture that day, and I hung around to listen. It took little time or effort to wander off my planned route when I heard music playing in the distance, around a corner, or from a basement. It always piqued my curiosity, and I had to investigate. There's no doubt those educational moments ended up being the most fun. More often than not, I never got back to my planned route or what I needed to do. By chance, one day one of those unplanned routes took me to Britt, Iowa... and I had supper with hoboes.

I guess that's why, along with all the collected stories I can and did tell, there are many I forgot to mention and stories needing completion. For the record, I kind of like that. I like having reasons to get to tomorrow, and beyond. I enjoy the sense of needing to return to places I've been before, to finish up and conclude what story began there. Yep, life *does* go on. But, along with retracing a step or two, it's okay to get sidetracked along the way. How else would I have met the hoboos, although I've spent way too much time talking about them?

"JB, what's with you and the hoboos?"

"What do you mean?"

"It seems they found a place in your being."

"Maybe... I don't know. It could be the romance, Peter... freedom, dreams, both those lost and those I'm chasing... I can't explain it."

"Why did you not become one?"

"I don't... I... I think because of books?"

"Books? I do not follow you..."

"Peter, I need books. Three books are heavy. Can you imagine lugging around three hundred of them?"

"Excuse me, I have to sneeze."

"You should take care of your cold."

"I do not have a cold. It may be an allergy, seeing it has only happened since you got here. Maybe I am allergic to you."

"You wouldn't be the first one. I should tell you about Alison and Brenda."

“Um... Another time.”

“Peter, we’ve talked about staying focused and remembering to walk again after stopping to think. But... I’m pretty sure... No, I’m certain my best days, the most useful ones, happened by chance when I didn’t stay focused. Maybe the people who have the most fun and do the most useful things are those who allow themselves a few distractions now and then.”

“But, JB, I am not convinced by your way... you have no productivity... Where is the value?”

“Value...? It’s all a matter of opinion and perspective, isn’t it? Besides, we overrate productivity.”

Do you remember me saying I became a victim of circumstance? It’s true. It happens all the time, it seems. For instance, one August circumstances had me in Iowa and saw a sign for the Hobo Convention. The Hobo Convention had been on my bucket list for many years. Yes, I had things to do and had somewhat of a schedule to maintain. But I had the time and my schedule wouldn’t be so out of whack if I hung around for a couple of extra days. I took a room at a small motel not too far from Britt and stayed. I’m glad I did.

There’s no time to go through all the things I learned from the hoboes, though I’ve already told a lot. The rest will wait for another time in another book. Still, there are a couple of comments you should hear. They’re not mine. They come from my friend, Noah.

Noah and I shared adventures at the Great Wall, on glaciers, chasing vampires in Transylvania, and many more. The last time I saw the hoboes, my young friend, Noah, came with me. Noah had just turned fifteen when we first ventured off to see the world. Our first trip

took us to Alaska. At twenty-five he was not so young when I took him to visit the hoboes.

He had two observations of the hoboes. The first was this: “They remind me of hippies.” Noah’s only possible knowledge of hippies comes from reading books or seeing TV documentaries. It’s possible his aunt and uncle told a story or two—both could have been, and it wouldn’t surprise me if they both spent some of their post-teen days as hippies. His uncle, Mark, always reminded me of one with his mannerisms, full beard, and how he dressed and spoke. Noah’s parents might have had some hippie conversations. His mother had a particular affinity and fascination for them, thinking, “...in another time and place...” She said her hair was once hippie-length to her waist. But, his observation hit the mark, at least with the stereotypical notion of the free-spirited, take life as it comes nature of hippies.

I doubt any *actual* hoboes roamed Britt, Iowa. Yes, I guess some of those at the Hobo Convention, those who’ve spent more than six decades wandering this planet, may have had some hobo days, but they were few. Some may have had uncles and aunts, and maybe even their parents who were hoboes. What *is* true is, all the people who gathered in Britt appreciated the romance and legacy of the hobo. They respected history. They can remind you of Civil War and Revolutionary War reenactors who gather to live in another time and place, even if for only a weekend.

No matter. It makes Noah’s second spot-on comment much weightier. “They are some of the friendliest people I ever met.” Rarely does a group welcome strangers so warmly, and the strangers become immediate family. All visitors to the Hobo Convention in Britt become family. They have time to sit around the campfire and tell their stories, and of course, they all get their share of Mulligan Stew.

The best Mulligan Stew is like a potluck supper where whatever you bring may end up in the pot. If it doesn't make the pot, it becomes part of the buffet table surrounding the pot. All the hoboes brought something for the pot. I brought nothing, other than my cameras, my stories, my hunger, and me. They let me eat, anyway, and were delighted I stopped by. I was family.

Hoboes were the original road warriors. Long before the road movies, hoboes traveled the rails with no particular place to go other than to find some work. Yes, romance exists in traveling to places you've never been. Some places became favorites, places where they could pick up some short-term work, find a hearty meal, wash some clothes, and get cleaned up with a shower. No long-term stays. They always had somewhere else to go and some train to hop to get there.

Along with minimal possessions packed with first-need logic, they carried news, stories, and life's counsel to pass on and share. However, deep inside, they also held onto a place called home and the need to get back there; back to family and friends—someday, soon. Until then, one backpack pocket included time—sufficient time to sit a spell, listen, tell old stories and learn a couple new ones, and time to explain their news and stories, and hear the news and yarns of others.

You can hear those stories firsthand at the *Columbia Center For Oral History* at Columbia University in New York City. You can listen to “The oral history of Hood River Blackie, a mid-20th century hobo, that is a phenomenal look at the evolution of American culture from the turn of the 20th-century to more recent times. He becomes an unexpected barometer of cultural and technological attitudes in our rapidly changing society.”



Time slows, almost stopping when you listen to the stories. Your mind takes off and runs wild, imagining awestruck Huck Finn and Jim Hawkins<sup>2</sup> type boys sitting around a track-side campfire, way past any reasonable bedtime, hanging on each word the hoboes utter. You can bet if there were any girls present, they would be far from the likes of Becky Thatcher and more like Scout from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Yes, there were women hoboes such as Hobo Queen Derail, Catherine Lady, Pearl of Indiana, and others.

If you think the days of the hobo are in the past, you would be wrong. Today, these Rubber Tramps travel the highways in campers and cars, pulling trailers instead of riding the rails. As described on a Rubber Tramps social media site, “They stop and stay wherever they choose for however long they want. But eventually, as long as there’s a way to put gas in their tank, they move on.” Being a Rubber Tramp sounds appealing. Campers and RVs have room for my books.

Besides campfire storytime, hoboes had song time. The songs tell the stories of these kings of the road, like Steam Train, Baloney Kid, Minnesota Jim, and Songbird McCue, the Hobo Kings who caught the westbound for the last time. One song has these words: “Bums drink and wander around, tramps dream and wander too, but a hobo was a pioneer and he preferred to work for food. He knew how the nation was doing by the length of the sidewalk cigarette butts.” Think for a moment. How long are the cigarette butts in your world? Do they tell how well *you’re* doing?

My favorite times spent in the hobo jungle came at night. After chowing down the Mulligan Stew and swigging the last of the Jack Daniel’s, we gathered around the fire pit, telling stories of life on the

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<sup>2</sup> From *Treasure Island*, Robert Lewis Stevenson

road, the journeys taken, and people met along the way. Soon, someone strummed a chord or two on a guitar or banjo, giving us the only queue we needed. We were off, singing songs in musical keys falling somewhere between sandpaper tenor and Appalachian twang. Guitars, banjos, and fiddles needing a twinge of tuning and string tightening accompanied us. Those untuned instruments? Well, they sounded mighty fine in the night air, accompanied by some voices more trained than you might imagine. We even had a harmonica or two wailing out high-pitch sounds akin to an old steam engine whistle ringing out in the early morn, while heading out the freight yard. “Come with *Me*. Follow *Me*.” See—and experience the stories. Live to tell them.

Only then can you fill in the blanks and get the rest of the story, a story you never knew outside of Hollywood B movies and distorted folktale narratives. You learn the *real* tales. You create better and much more satisfying stories, which are also much more fun. Life at fifty- or sixty-something...? For sure... but, why didn't I find this when I at forty-something, or better yet, when I was fifteen?

And... here we go, again.

So, in honor and memory of Hood River Blackie, Hardrock Kid, Mt. Dew, Pennsylvania Kid, Slow Motion Shorty, Connecticut Slim, and Lord Open Road, I give you the following recipe. I hope you can get to Britt, Iowa, to learn firsthand and appreciate an underappreciated part of USA History.

### Mulligan of Happiness

Take a large bowl, fill it with sunshine. Add a bit of patience, faith, and kindness. Sift a cup of romance with a teaspoon of sympathy, a teaspoon of

*Life Goes On – Wait wait. There's More to the Story!*

forgiveness, moisten with a teardrop, adding tolerance and friendship along with ambition. Mix well with stardust, fold in imagination, place in a heavenly blue pan, bake well with the light of God's candle. Serve every day, and it will bring you a Mulligan of Happiness.

Yep, now that is what I call excellent eating!

## Irish Stew Begets Stories, And Songs Of The Road

*My heart begin to roam around and I begin to sing,  
If that freight train goes through this town, I'll catch it on a wing;  
I pulled my cap down over my eyes and stepped up to the track,  
I caught the stirrup of an empty car but never did look back<sup>3</sup>*

When you ride the rails long enough you learn to read them. For sure, you'll misread a tie or two or throw a switch and head off in the wrong direction now and then. It's okay. Sitting around the fire pit at storytime you can relay your misfortune and warn others. And of course, learn from others' foibles. You also learn where you can get some work and where you can steal a meal at the back of a friendly chow hall, where things are hunky-dory, at least for the night. While you've never been, is there a reason not to go? You need the work, right? You want to—you need to see for yourself. So, you hop a freight train to Wichita, Santa Rosa, Chattanooga, and you're off.

I don't want to romanticize my life and deeds and cause you to long for your lost dreams of high hopes and adventure, nor do I want your family and friends blaming me because you hopped the next freight train out of town. But, to a greater extent than I ever imagined, a chunk of my life kind of follows this route. It sort of explains why

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<sup>3</sup> "The Wild and Reckless Hoboes," George Rebeau

there's *always* more to the story. It almost supports my excuse as being a victim of circumstance, too.

As a kid, my family and friends chided and kidded me about my visions of grandeur and dreams of exploration, my wanting to go off and see the world. Those dreams developed because of one thing—skepticism. Nothing I saw in my little world anchored me in place. I knew there had to be more. I read books. I listened to folk songs. I saw movies. I wanted to hit the road to find out if it was real and not some con job perpetrated on me to keep me engaged and coming back for more—to buy more books and records, to see more movies, and to...

“Come down off your high faulting fantasy, John,” family members and friends would say. (But I like the view.) “People like us don’t go off gallivanting around the planet.” (Why not?)

Skeptics and non-dreamers chirped in, “There John goes again, off on some wild and ridiculous treasure hunt to Atlantis and beyond.” (And you’d watch TV, instead?)

My visions of grandeur and travels no doubt came from listening to my Uncle Tony tell his stories. At seventeen or eighteen Tony joined the Merchant Marines and ventured off to see the world. My siblings, cousins, and neighborhood friends loved sitting by his feet listening to his animated tales. None of them loved his stories and hearing him tell of his adventures as much as I did. Did Uncle Tony embellish those adventures a mite? Yeah, of course he did. And gullible me bought into it more than anyone. But who cares. Fun is fun, and his animated and embellished tales were total entertainment and became the fodder for my dreams.

I made up my own imaginary adventures and experienced them with fantasized colleagues. Together we traveled the world with

courage and the heart of explorers. No, I didn't hop and hitch rides on freight trains (something I regret *not* doing). But I did book last-moment passage on planes flying off to some curious village or hamlet. I sat in a tavern overhearing someone jawbone about something or another, or I read a story in some magazine or newspaper, and well... I had to see for myself. Often I got in my car, checked the gas, picked a direction, and headed off—without much of a plan other than to go somewhere I've never been.

After enough time and miles riding the rails or county roads, you don't need schedules or timetables. Instinct tells you where to get on and off and where to turn. You know the rules of the road, and of the tribe you call your own. The barn on the hill is more than a landmark. When you pull into the freight station downtown, the smell of cooking grits, ham hocks, and beans blowing in with the south wind can come from only one place—Stephanie's Hog Haven, and you're in Boise. It is the same when you travel the blue highways. Complicated interchanges don't faze you. You've dodged your share of potholes and speed traps, and you're on a first-name basis with many county magistrates.

I grew up in Stratford, Connecticut, and attended college in Richmond, Virginia. It was an ideal college location for me. Richmond was close enough to Stratford to allow me to get home quickly in case of an emergency, yet far enough away to stop family and old friends from barging in unannounced. The distance was also far enough away to keep me from going back on a whim or because I became homesick. The fact is, my college work kept me too busy for homesickness to become a problem (besides, I wanted to get away from home). Also, family and friends had good enough sense to squelch any emergencies.

I made the eight hundred miles round-trip down I-95 four or five times during my two years in Richmond, then dozens of weekends for three years after when I traveled from Connecticut to Fredericksburg, Virginia, to see a girlfriend. There weren't any shortcuts, not considering I had to pass through New York City. The trip took a little over seven hours with a stop for gas and other necessities. If I pressed and timed it right, and the state troopers had made their speeding ticket quotas for the month, I could knock it off in under six and a half hours.

Aberdeen, Maryland, sat at the halfway point. I stopped there to top off the gas tank, stretch a bit, and get some food. Aberdeen had its required share of fast food joints, but after so many trips up and down the interstate I had more than my fill of them. On one trip I decided to explore other options. Two right-hand turns off the interstate I found a little strip mall. In the center of the stores sat a diner. There was nothing particularly special about it, but it was not fast food and I was hungry. The moment I walked in I smiled. Irish music played and not one face displayed a frown.

I don't remember if the joint had Irish Stew or corned beef and cabbage, but I saw some comfort food items up on the menu board—subs, burgers, fries, and whatnot. Being such a creature of habit, I ordered a couple of cheeseburgers and onion rings. One bite and I discovered this small joint had the best burgers on the I-95 corridor, and I stopped there every time I traveled it—north or south.

Once full-time employment put a few dollars in my pocket, it became flyover territory. Whenever I traveled to Washington, D.C., and Richmond from New York, Boston, and Manchester, New Hampshire, I flew. One trip, though, I had a few other stops to make along the corridor, so I drove the route I knew so well, or so I believed. When I got to Aberdeen I got off the exit and tried to find the diner

with the Irish music I remembered from my college days. I never found the strip mall. The place where I left it? Long gone, remodeled past any recognition. I found myself in a place I had never been. Nothing looked familiar. The saddest part is I never saw it change. Life is frustrating. You travel back to a place in time because you need to tell the rest of the story, or close old unfinished chapters. Once you get there, though, you can't find where the chapters left off.

This is so dumb. My life did not revolve around this Irish joint. During my college years in Richmond and three years after, I ate there maybe eight times. Still, I missed it. More to the story? Yes, of course.

I love Irish folk songs. Don't ask when, where, why, or how it came about, but its roots had to come from right where I grew up. The neighborhood had Slovak, Polish, Italian, and an extensive collection of Irish families. Those surroundings gave me a large fill of Irish music, be it at church events, picnics, or stopping by my Irish friends' homes. Though it's a real good bet my *complete* appreciation of Irish music materialized at this restaurant in Aberdeen, Maryland. I don't remember the name of the place or if it had Irish cuisine. The menu may have included Irish Stew and corned beef and cabbage. I don't remember. What I remember are the great burgers—and I remember the Irish music. Waiting for my burgers and onion rings, I had no choice but to listen.

Yes, of course I heard Irish music before. Come on. I may have been only in my early twenty-something years, but I didn't live a cloistered and sheltered life. Even my introverted self got out among the crowds. You can bet I chugged a pint or two in Irish pubs in Hell's Kitchen in New York or in my old home stomping grounds in Stratford and New Haven, Connecticut. And I found numerous joints in other villages and towns I found along the blue highways. Standing in this



diner in Aberdeen, though, I listened to the notes and words. I listened to the melody, pacing, and timing. I listened to *everything*. What did I get from it all? I discovered I enjoyed the music—a lot! The songs abounded in emotion, jumping from sad and reflective death and dying to joyous, fun, and optimistic wedding celebrations.

“Hey, Peter...”

“Yes.”

“Does my file give any credit for Silent Appreciation?”

“Silent Appreciation? I am puzzled, JB. What do you mean?”

“Well, it may not be like an erupting volcano, and often no one knew anything, but does Silent Appreciation of things count for something—songs, leaves playing tag, noisy fog...?”

“You have an interesting proposition, JB. You present a good question.”

“Thank you, sir. Is there a good answer?”

“Yes, there is, but...”

“Peter, it seems too many people roam through life without a clue as to the things going on around them. No one takes time to appreciate the ant carrying some massive twig on its back.”

“An ant carrying a twig?”

“Well, maybe it’s a dumb analogy, but...”

“No, JB, it does make sense. It is back to the forest for the trees and...”

“No, Peter, it’s not like... It’s kind of the opposite. Everyone tries to explain and digest everything and... they don’t relax and appreciate the silent joy in front of their noses.”

“That, Mr. JB, is what you have always *not* done.”

“No...? I’m not so sure. So much rushing and going, and... Well, yeah... I guess. But, there’s more to the story if you want to hear it.”

“Well, maybe later, but not right now, JB. As they say, ‘tis a long way to Tipperary.”

“What the hell do I care how far it is to Tipperary. We’re not going there... are we?”

The music touched me because of where I stood at the time, holding halfway between two colliding worlds at different extremes. My college world had become incredibly important to me. How could it not? Yet, I couldn’t share it with my home world. No one in *that* world had any connection to what I was experiencing. What’s sadder and more disturbing, few took time to try to connect and empathize, even a little. Yeah, I didn’t try hard enough or make the greatest effort to explain it. So it’s a fair assessment to say few people got a whiff of my penchant for Silent Appreciation, or other things. I’m sure I became something or another when growing up. In fact, I know I did, and...

I did grow and change—became different. When I plopped myself down in some other place far from my safe comfort zone, I had no choice. I had to adapt—grow and change. Coming home to Connecticut, I seemed the outsider trying to fit in. It had to be the same for any of the other kids I grew up with who flew the coop, so to speak,

then came home with tired wings. I may have been back home, but the reality of the moment made me a stranger, so much out of place. My body language and attitude had to be sending messages, but no one asked me to explain them, even in passing. No, I never took anybody aside to explain it, so I guess some blame is mine. In all honesty, a lot of responsibility is mine. Did I abandon the old neighborhood gang? Did they abandon me? Maybe we abandoned each other. Do you think this is part of the reason my permanent record is twenty-six inches thick?

My only defense is, it's not the style of an introvert, at least not of all of me. No, it's *not* a great defense. It no doubt shows, though, when I grew in my adventurous times, my emotional being often stayed home. Maybe being emotionally healthy *and* having sound growth requires a few things, like how to reach out and touch. Maybe it requires us to learn when to pull in and embrace. Perhaps it's being able to relax and allow both of those to happen. I doubt I relaxed often enough. It also requires trust. I hate saying this, but I'm not so sure I always trusted (or knew) me, let alone others.

Standing in that restaurant made me smile. Irish music, even the sad songs, enriched me. I sensed optimism in them, even in their sadness. It's so nuts. It might be why I never relaxed often enough. I knew things may be less than thrilling right now, but life will get better. It goes on, doesn't it? I can't relax. I had to stay alert and ready—not trust too soon.

A couple of times I dawdled after my order came. I stood by a side counter nibbling on an onion ring or two as if I were waiting for something else I ordered. Truth is, the song playing pulled me in and I wanted to hear how it ended. If you listen to National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, you appreciate this penchant. When you're

driving home from work you're listening to a story, but the story is not finished when you pull into your driveway. So you turn the engine off but don't go inside. Instead, you sit in the car listening until the end. You've been pulled in and engrossed so much with the story, you need to hear how it ends. They call them *driveway stories*.

The music in this restaurant played out like that for me. Yes, I heard the music before. I didn't block off the world secluded in a sunless loft hidden down an ally where the city's sounds never reach. I lived and experienced life, *and* Irish music. But Irish music didn't exactly rise to the highest levels of my musical repertoire before stopping at this restaurant. Mostly I listen to the same generic music we all hear, the stuff at weddings, bars, and backyard picnics. And the Irish families and classmates I visited didn't throw on the Irish jigs when I came over.

While being held captive waiting for my food, I had no choice in my entertainment. This restaurant only played this Irish fare. Some tunes I knew by heart, the same old Irish music I experienced in the past. But, much of it captivated me. I had never heard it and I had time to listen, and came to appreciate it. The dumb thing is that gaining an appreciation and love of Irish folk music shouldn't surprise me.

The more to the story is, I always enjoyed and cherished the likes of Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, the Kingston Trio, and others, which really are not too far away from Irish music. I guess, Irish music is a natural transition to hobo music—songs from a life on the road and of people, places, and riding the rails.

They are songs Noah has never heard. Heck, most of the people I ever met only heard them now and then, if ever, except my fraternity brother, Steve. He is the character we all should be lucky enough to

have passed through our lives. Steve is a free spirit with a lackadaisical, “wait until next week” attitude. Mixed in with that attitude (unsettling to some) are grounding and core principles. Yes, those core principles changed as often as he changed his socks—that is, when he wore socks.

Steve lived for creating life’s stories. After college he packed a bag and headed to... Well, I don’t remember. Europe? Up to Canada? Who knows? He asked me to come along. I had no reason *not* to go. The job market didn’t consider me the hottest candidate with a multitude of companies jockeying for position to make me job offers. So, some new life didn’t wait for me to work for a sensational company. Nothing so critical or important needed my attention at home in Connecticut. Besides, doubts developed and I needed to consider if I had outgrown Connecticut. Was it home, anymore? Why *not* go look for a new home? Some student loans needed paying, but lots of other ex-students had loans. The loans could wait, couldn’t they? Could life?

Regrets?

I don’t know.

This is certain. Had I gone with Steve, I’m convinced there would be a much more extensive collection of *the rest of the story* stories in my repertoire to tell, enough to fill three or four more books. The trade-off is the rest of the story stories I collected on the timelines I traveled would not be here to tell. Timelines and trade-offs. Too many choices to consider. It’s the best part about life. It’s the worst part about life. It’s a major reason bars and bartenders exist. We need a place to go to ponder all this, and someone to talk to when we get there. Yep, *it is* a

long way to Tipperary. *Whack fol the daddy o, there's whiskey in the jar.*<sup>4</sup> And you wonder why permanent records are scary?

Life? The thing I hate the most is choices—and the various timelines we travel because of them. You'll never hear me call them mistakes, but we all make bad choices, don't we? Hmm, how can you be sure? Life gives you one timeline—it's not like a wine tasting or some new-age restaurants on the swanky side of town where they let you taste a dish before you order. You can't sample a timeline before you walk it, and I have never come across any place allowing you to have the life experience, and then pay as you exit.

How would my life (and the world) turn out had I gone along with Steve? What, and whose, timelines would I have altered? Mine, for sure, but a bunch of other people's, too. Those I met on my chosen timeline, I wouldn't have. Those hanging out on a different timeline I didn't meet would be known characters to me today.

How does that change the world?

Better off?

Worse for the beating?

Who knows?

It probably doesn't matter... does it?

Steve came home, grew up, and made a living doing something or another. A fraternity brother told me he bought and sold gold and was a boat captain for a while. He farmed a bit and engaged some other avant-garde livelihoods, or so I'm told. It all sounds exciting and

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<sup>4</sup> "Whiskey in the Jar"

fascinating, but I can't say. I never reached out to Steve. He never pulled me in. Today he has five (or is it twenty?) acres in the Tidewater section of Virginia. He invites old friends and fraternity brothers over now, and they all shoot guns and cook over an open fire pit. I've never received an invite, no doubt because he couldn't remember where I hung my hat at the moment, nor did Steve have the inclination to take time and find out. I've had many addresses. You know the deal—out of sight, out of mind. It's the same with most of us—to some extent, anyway.

Steve and Marylou have been together for more than forty years. Steve warrants a few paragraphs in my permanent record. He deserves to be there. In all its strangeness, I envy something in Steve's life. Mixed in with the eccentricity and avant-garde behavior, he has a grounded and moving stability. What is that? Well, he may not always twist and turn the same way the wind blows, and the shoes on each foot may not match, but he lands on his feet, whatever the circumstances, or shoes. Life goes on, and Steve is happy to tag along.

He's also done some writing. I can't help believing a permanent record should not only include the things you've done (bad and good) but also those things you could've, would've, and should've done. Steve serves as a reminder to anyone who peruses my permanent record, nothing is complete. There's always more to old stories, a new story to write, or a new ending to conjure up somehow.

My writing dates back decades, beginning because of hormones. I wanted to impress a college girlfriend's father. He was news editor of the local paper in Fredericksburg, Virginia. I wrote two op-ed pieces attempting to impress him. I opined about deficit spending in the first. I remember nothing of the second.

“So, what did Dad think of my stories?”

I expected Jennifer to relay his critique on the shallowness of my presentation and beliefs, and how I failed to make my argument. Dad wasn't a teacher, but I expected him to lambast me for my grammar, tone, and spelling mistakes all the same. Plus, I dated his daughter, and it's a father's God-given duty and right to rag on such a guy. I'm sure there's some rule or law, as with middle names.

“Well, John Boy... I talked to him, and...” She paused for a few moments, searching for the right and kind words to tell me her father considered my stories trite, and they sucked. She searched for a way not to embarrass or discourage me... or hurt my feelings.

“And what?”

“Well... he did not mention... the writing... or anything like that.”

“Yes...”

“He... was more impressed someone *your* age would think... and then... *actually* sit down and write about such topics.”

Nope, I didn't expect a reaction like that—it's nowhere near the response I expected. Of course, I'm not sure what response and reaction I *did* expect. I'm sure I expected Jennifer's father to be a typical father. Don't all of them think their daughter's boyfriend is a jerk? I wanted to show him, “Well, so it's true and I am a jerk. But at least I'm a smart jerk whose brain scan still moves the needle, a little.”

I smiled at Jennifer's comment. It appears I didn't convince her father I *was* a smart jerk, but at least I showed this newspaper guy I could think and write a bit. I'll take it. The strange thing is, does being



a “smart” jerk make my permanent record any finer? I mean, smart or not, a jerk is still a jerk, right?

“JB, you need perspective.”

“Perspective!?! What the hell do you think the rest of the story is?”

“No, it is not...”

“Excuse me, Peter, but I have lots of perspective. Did you even read anything I wrote?”

“Yes. It is all right here on the cart.”

“Well, flip through it, and...”

“I have. But the big picture is where the focus lies, but...”

“But what? Isn’t the big picture what’s important?”

“Yes, JB, it is. Please. Let me finish. The big picture needs details.”

“There are details and...”

“You leave much of others and much of you out.”

“Leave much of me out? Peter, I was nothing more than a scorekeeper. I’m not the story. I wrote what I saw.”

“You left out how the score made you feel and be.”

“No one cares or gives any hoot about how I feel or be...”

“Then, JB, why should you do the writing? If no one gives a hoot, why tell the rest of the story...”

“Because, Peter, that monstrosity of a volume on your cart, my permanent record, needs explaining...”

“It needs the details...?”

“Well, Peter... Too many details slow things down. So, why should they be a concern?”

“Because, JB, details fine-tune and explain... the...”

“The rest of the story...?”

“Could be. Yes. Exactly!”

“Spiritual Enrichment, Peter?”

“Forest for the trees, JB.”

“There you go again. Yeah, well, Peter, as thick as that thing on your cart is, it looks like you cut a lot of the forest down to create it.”

A year after my futile attempt to impress Jennifer’s father with my writing abilities, I attended a peace march in New York City. The anti-nuclear protest attracted a couple hundred thousand people from dozens of states and countries, including surviving residents of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Japan. In the mix of people, an idealistic twenty-five-year-old from Stratford, Connecticut—Me!

Fate is a funny creature. During my twenty-something years I became a fan of newspaper editorial and op-ed pages. Yet, while they were on the next page, I never did much more than glance at the letters to the editor. They were not part of my *must-read* newspaper ritual, like reading the box scores.

A few days after the rally in New York a letter to the editor in my local paper caught my eye. The writer, a World War II veteran,

criticized the protest march, calling it “...the biggest display of stupidity I have ever seen.” I took umbrage with his statement. It hit a nerve. In fact, it pissed me off. I was there. I was not stupid.

The veteran’s letter brought a slew of reader responses, including prompting me to write my very first letter to the editor. My agitated and lengthy reply came in longer than the newspaper’s length guidelines allowed for letters to the editor; however, the editors did not edit or shorten it. They ran it as written. I strongly disagreed with the veteran and presented my case in a firm, logical, and intelligent way. I used conversations I had with others at the rally, including those who had survived the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombings. I made my case and felt good about what I wrote.

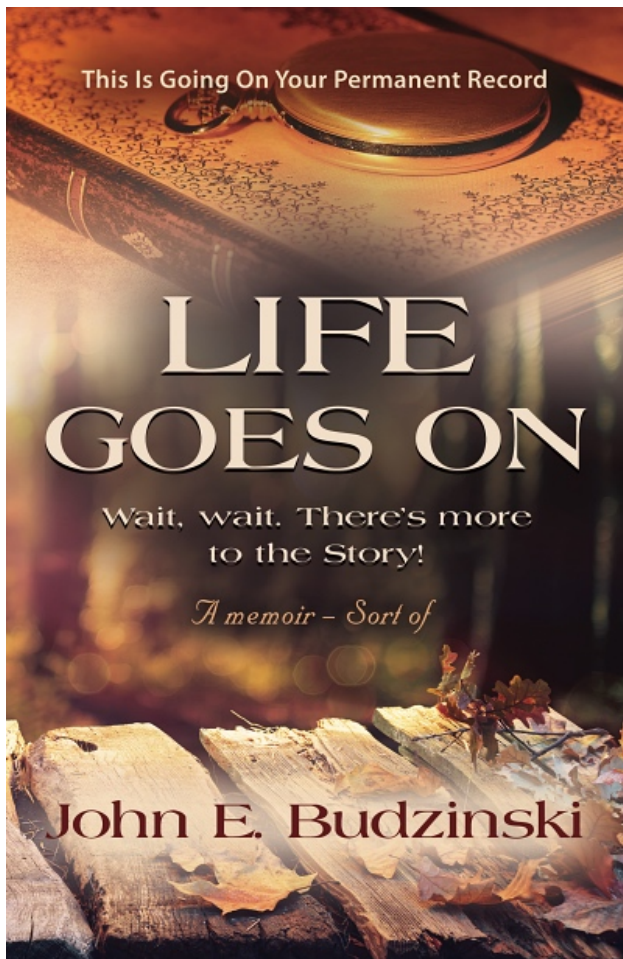
My letter elicited dozens of replies, including a pointed but angry retort from the veteran. The letters came down divided between readers agreeing with me and those agreeing with the veteran. After one more (much shorter) response from me, the newspaper ended our discussion. The experience made me a fan of letters to the editor page and I became an avid reader (along with box scores). It also did something else.

Something clicked inside me. I discovered I could write and elicit a response with my thoughts and ideas—with my words. It seemed I *could* make an intelligent argument. I enjoyed the attention and had fun hearing comments from friends and coworkers on what I had written. (I never knew so many people read those letters to the editor, other than those who wrote them.)

Life went on, and I didn’t pen many words for publication again for several years. What’s the rest of *that* story? I don’t know. Did I get everything off my chest and out of my mind? Obviously not—else you

wouldn't be reading this. Was it critical or crucial? Not too much, I guess, or I'd remember and write about it, and you'd be gagging as you read it. More to the story...?

Maybe.



*“This Is Going On Your PERMANENT RECORD!” You’ve heard that threat, right? Did you shiver in your pants? Did you just laugh it away? Authority types just used those words to stop your fun and keep you in line, right? But, what if they’re true?*

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