

Budzinski writes that he's fascinated by the mundane and ordinary moments of life. In this collection of 63 short essays, he offers readers musings on a range of topics from the joys of giving gifts to the art of writing.

Not That It Matters

By John E. Budzinski

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Not That It Matters

but I thought you might like
to know anyway



*stories and essays of
dubious consequence*



John E. Budzinski

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Dumber Day By Day

I am not sure if it is just me or if the entire world doesn't get it anymore. All I know is it seems as I get older, I'm also getting dumber. It used to be so easy to figure things out, but lately, I wonder.

On Saturday morning, I woke energized with noble plans. It was going to be a great day, until... The wind howled, and the rain fell in proverbial buckets—an off-the-charts nasty day. I wasn't about to risk getting pneumonia running about outdoors, so I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat down to do the bill-paying thing. I usually save this task for Sunday nights, but with the rain falling and the day being so rotten, well, you know.

We all hate this task. The only thing making it remotely tolerable for me is only two of my bills require me to write a check, stuff it in an envelope, hunt for stamps, then head to the post office. The rest get paid via my bank's online bill-paying system. My usual drill is to look at the total amount owed for each bill, click pay, and rapidly go on to the next bill. I *never* read the statements. Who has the time? I rely on blind faith that the accounts are correct. However, with the rain and wind this Saturday morning, I was not in a rush to go anywhere, so I took the time and actually read the bills.

Have you ever read your bills—in detail? I don't think I ever had, and after doing so this time, I am glad I never did.

Utility bills completely dumbfounded me. My cell phone bill listed seven different taxes: *Fed USF Cellular*, *FCC Regulatory*, *Operation Compliance Fee*, *City Tax*, *State Tax*, *Telecom Relay Charge*, and *911 Enhanced Surcharge*.

YIKES!

Does *anyone* understand any of this? I am sure the company explains these taxes and fees somewhere on their website, but I didn't

see it right away, and I was not about to go on a search-and-destroy mission to find it.

The phone company also hits me with a \$5.00 fee for opting out E-Bill/Auto Pay. If I let them debit my account automatically each month, I'd save the \$5.00. I have enough paranoia about all this online and electronic payment world and identity theft. Do you think I'll let the company enter my account like a thief in the night to take their payment? No, thank you. I'll pay the five bucks and placate my paranoia.

All these fees and charges came to twenty-nine percent of my bill.

My head hurt after viewing my cell phone bill. You would think that would be enough, and I stop reading the bills and just pay them. Nope. As I said, I am getting dumber by the day. I trudged onward, trembling all the while to the electric bill. I read it and became dizzy!

The electric bill also included a list of taxes and fees. Besides the state and local taxes were charges for *Customer and Delivery*, *Energy and Service*, *Stranded Cost*, *System Benefit*, and *Consumption Tax*.

EGAD!

Reading the list made me nauseous and blurry-eyed. One good thing, though, is the electric company provided an easy-to-find explanation for each fee. I knew I should have paid the bill and gone on, but as long as I was here and had nowhere else to go, I read the explanations. I will not try to explain them to you, but one charge electrified my incredulous feelings about this: the *System Benefits Charge*. The electric company describes it like this:

This charge funds the energy efficiency programs for all customers and assistance programs for customers within certain income guidelines.

In other words, we pay for people who can't.

Now don't get me wrong. I am all for helping those in need. What I don't want, though, is having it forced upon me or hidden amid an incomprehensible, bureaucratic menagerie of pulp.

That was it. Just like that sailor man, I had all I could stand. I signed out of my bank account. I got up, poured another cup of coffee, and went out and stood in the wind and rain, much to the wonder and amusement of my neighbors. There's a lot I don't get and don't understand. Pneumonia is not one of them, and right then, getting *it* was more appealing than having to sit down and look at one more bill to pay.

Pigeon—Sometimes You Can Think Too Much

I killed a pigeon today. Does that shock you? You may think, why would anyone kill a poor, helpless, cute little pigeon? What a monster I must be! Before you call the SPCA and Pigeon Lovers of America, let me explain. You see, it wasn't my fault—no, it *really* wasn't!

The morning was bright and sunny as I drove down the interstate. I came to a bend where the road goes up a hill and then quickly back down. Just as I got to the top, less than a couple of hundred feet ahead of me, were several pigeons smack dab in the middle of the road.

I traveled along at highway speeds, and I was on top of them (literally) in half a heartbeat. Those pigeons were happy as can be right where they were, and they didn't move an inch. I swerved to another lane, hoping the thud I heard was a pothole or a rut in the road. Nope, the thud was not a pothole.

I looked in the rearview mirror and saw feathers flying in the air, pigeons scrambling for cover, and one lost soul tumbling to the side of the road. My sunny morning wasn't so sunny anymore, and I felt bad about killing the bird.

Not that it matters, but I've been thinking and rationalizing about that bird all day. I know it wouldn't bother me if I had hit a seagull or crow, and I would look for a medal if I had hit a *buzzard*. But, if I had hit a hawk, I'd feel *worse* than I do now. I'm not sure why that is. I have seen a myriad of roadkill along the side of the highway, and it has never bothered me. Of course, it wasn't *me* that killed any of them!

I know it's sadder to see a raccoon on the side of the road than it is to see a possum. I don't even want to talk about cats or dogs. Unless you are from the deep backwoods of Appalachia, you probably care more about a raccoon than a possum. Seeing a dead squirrel may

not bother you. But I'll be willing to bet that seeing a dead chipmunk would.

There must be answers to these questions, and I proposed them to some friends. They felt my forehead, smelled my breath, and took all the sharp objects with them when they left. They learned long ago, "John's in one of those moods—again! Leave him alone."

Sociologists say all of us are products of our environment and culture. We find comfort and security in familiar stimuli. The people we meet, our experiences, the places we live, and the things we come in contact with help shape our character. That is why it takes time to adjust when moving to or visiting a new place. It takes time to get accustomed to the stimuli at work there.

I wonder. If this *is* true, where in my past did this pigeon stimulus hit me!? I understand why I root for certain teams, consume special foods, and listen to specific music. But why do I care about a pigeon?

One friend told me, "You're the writer. Figure it out."

If being a writer means I am supposed to figure such things out with ease, I'm going to look for a new profession because I am doomed to fail.

What were those birds doing on the highway? Were they lost and stopped to check their maps? Why weren't they in the park by the popcorn man and hot dog vendors doing pigeon-type things, like dancing on the heads of statues and whitewashing the sidewalk?

Do you find life frustrating? I do. It seems obsessed with throwing at me many things I do not understand. I can't explain why sunsets are better than sunrises or why there are more blue things in my life than any other color. I do not know.

There are a couple of things I *do* know, though. First, today I have been thinking too much and have a headache. And second, I am sorry I hit that bird.

Induced Separation

I ran into Hoy, an old acquaintance of mine, in Manchester, New Hampshire, a few days ago. Hoy and I have a right number of plentiful differences, mind you, but we do have one thing in common—we're both political wonks.

Old Hoy and I met some years ago near Keyser, West Virginia. I stress the word *old* here, as I am pretty sure Hoy has crossed the triple-digit line age-wise. And I swear, there are times I actually *believe* him when he talks about marching with General Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. Hoy was here in New Hampshire checking out the presidential candidates.

Hoy and me met up at the Merrimack Diner and were hoisting a few cold ones, catching up on things, when he began talking about current events. Now, I don't know much about where Hoy's formal education begins or ends, you understand. But you sure don't need much more than a sixth-grade education to come up with solutions to the world's problems, at least as Hoy sees them. And boy, has old Hoy conjured up some new, creative, and straightforward solutions when it comes to what's going on in California these days.

"I don't know 'bout you Yankees up here in Hamp'she, but I've had it with all that political twaddle taking place out in that land of California."

"Yeah, so what about it?" I asked.

"JB, the more I see what's a hap'n, the more I see my wallet 'bout to get a lot thinner, so much so that there ain't enough space for the moths to be hangn' around in no more."

Now, Hoy and me being just acquaintances, you understand, there is plentiful stuff I don't know about him.

But I *do* know that when he is on a roll, one should hunker down, call for another cold one, sit a spell, and listen. I nodded as Hoy kept court.

“Seems to me them ’lected officials out there done went on a Billy Gates spending spree with Barney Google income. I hear they burned out some of them silly-cone counting machines in the process, trying to get all the bills ciphered up. The newspapers say it’s all because of what’n the governor’s been doing for a whole bunch of months and that may be the God-fearing-honest truth.”

“So, Hoy, is the governor to blame?”

“Don’t rightly know. But I recon’ them people out there seem as mad at him as we was that day Colonel Ketchin done run his truck off the mountain and slam-dunked it in the pond out by Red Creek. T’wasn’t much ’bout it ’xcep’n he was jack-rabbiting it from them ATF fellers with eighty-seven jugs of his best lightn’.”

“And...?”

“Well, for the next six weeks, o’ Henry down at the bait n’ tackle shop had plum lots of people have the hankering to take up fishing all at once.”

“Yeah, Hoy. But tell me. What’s all that got to do with what’s going on in California?”

“Well now, just like’n you got all these here politicians running amuck trying to be president here in Hamp’she, seem them California officials got them their own log-jam of people up and trying to become governor after they toss the one they got now out with the bathwater.”

“Hoy, I don’t follow you.”

“Well, JB, it don’t make no sense to me why a body would want to jump into all that muddle. But seeing they have all them factories locked up and closing down and all, I guess a job’s a job.”

I know I should have left right then. But this conversation was like a car wreck on the other side of the road. You don't want to add to the congestion on the highway, but you've just got to slow down to see the EMTs work at putting the victims back together.

"So, Hoy, what's your plan?"

"All this craziness we got in this here country got its start out there, right?"

"I guess. So, what's your...?"

"California's been the spawning ground for all this fertilizer in the making, right?"

"I guess."

"So, I think maybe it's time that the rest of the lower forty-eight starts to protect ourselves from the lunacy that has become that California's state motto."

"And?"

"Well, we done and settled that thing and put into bed 'bout no state being able to break away and secede from the Union, but we did never talk about booting a state out if the locals have taken one too many swigs from one of the Colonel's bad batches."

"Huh?"

"You see, out west, they have this here ornery San Andreas guy who'd done been sleeping for a real long time. I read where those scientific boys say that when this here San Andreas feller finally wakes up, he is going to be in one ornery, cantankerous, and unruly mood. He's gonna go about splitting his gizzard—start a-rockin' and a-rollin' and just might up and shake, rattle, and roll that there California place right on into the ocean."

I sat back. I didn't have a clue about where Hoy was taking me.

"Now, it don't matter much to me on whose fault it is for all that trouble they are having out there in left field. I just don't want none of it to start climbing up one side of them Rocky Mountains, then get a

good running start and start a-bopping and tumbling down the other side and spreading that putrid matter cross the plains and on into the rest of the country right on up to Hamp-She. So, I got a plan. I calls it Induced Separation.”

“Hoy... Induced What?”

“We should not ought wait for that San Andreas guy to up and get out of bed on his own. We should help the feller along, you know, set an alarm clock for him. I recon’ three or four of them there nuclear-type weapons of mass destruction them United Nations folk are jittery and hot and bothered about will do the trick. Now if we take them boom-boxes and well place them within the butt of Andreas, that should light up his gizzards and rankle his spirit up and give him one helluva attitude problem enough to knock that California place clear into La-La Land and off into the Pacific for good! We can get them NRA types to guard the border and tell’n them that they can shoot on sight any Californ’n type person trying to high-tail it away befor’n Andreas gets spooked out’f bed.”

Hoy has a point. Now if you excuse me, I have to go and put in an application at my local flag-making company. I figure after we put Hoy’s plan into action, they’ll be hiring big time, and I’ll be really busy with lots of overtime pay as folks start wanting to replace their old, out-of-date fifty-star flags with new ones with only forty-nine. Who says we can’t get this here economy a-tricklin’ down!

A Promise Remembered—A Secret Shared

My modest and uncomplicated philosophy of life is not deep. It is simple, but it has served me well, and I like it. It says this:

You must get older and bigger and take on a more mature and adult-like image as age plays mischievous games with you. But nowhere is it written that you have to grow up in the process.

That is why I have always enjoyed talking with young children. They are much smarter than we give them credit for, and they can spout forth the most incredible wisdom. The key is talking to them as little people rather than little kids.

Laurel's niece, Megan, and I had such a talk some time ago, and I remember the conversation as if it happened yesterday. I sat in the living room flipping through a magazine, waiting for Laurel to get ready for our date. Megan strolled in from playing with her sisters. She had never had any issues running up to me, but this time, she hesitated. Megan, wearing a sly smile, walked cautiously toward me. She paused for a moment, then sat down beside me. With her apprehensions, fidgeting, and giggles, I knew I better be wary of a little girl with pranks in her eyes.

Megan kept looking at me. But as soon as I looked at her, she spun away and covered her face in peek-a-boo fashion. It took a few minutes, and with laughs overtaking her, I finally persuaded her to tell me what was so funny.

“What is so funny, Megan?”

“Are you and Aunt Laurel getting *married*?”

Her more accusatory than inquisitive question made me squirm. It was a shock. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath, attempting to regain my composure. I asked her, “Um, Megan, why do you think we are getting married?”

“I saw you kissing her!!” Megan’s giggles became more uncontrollable.

My body jerked instinctively, and I turned away from Megan, hiding *my* face. Nothing in my past prepared me for such a conversation with an eight-year-old girl, and I worried about the direction this conversation might take. I tried to think of some sly and artful way to change the subject. Megan, sensing my nervous and embarrassed state, changed it for me.

“Don’t worry, JohnBoy. I won’t tell anyone. I can keep a secret.”

I looked down at her and tried to keep a roaring smile from escaping. This little munchkin was making me fall madly head-over-heels in like with her. The roaring smile teamed up with a silly laugh and found its way out. I brushed the hair out of her eyes and said, “So you can keep a secret, can you!?” as I tickled her.

“Sure! Don’t worry!” she said, hearing her sisters call her, and got up and hurried outside to report back to her sisters.

It had been six or seven weeks since I heard from Laurel, a very unusual thing for my letter-writing-fiend of a friend. So, when her letter came, I was excited. I always enjoy getting letters from friends. Stories about new jobs, home improvements, promotions, trips, and the kids fill them. Then, every so often, amid all the good cheer comes news that freezes you.

The smile I had when I opened Laurel’s letter disappeared into disbelief and shock as I read it. “I’m sorry I haven’t written in a while, but things have been kind of crazy here. Megan died in a car crash and...” The letter shook. My eyes glazed over, and I couldn’t swallow. Was what I read true? I thought of Megan’s mother, father, three sisters, and Laurel and her family. I thought of my own two nieces.

Daily happenings in the world today occupy the mind of this writer. Headlines and news flashes scream about deadly weather,

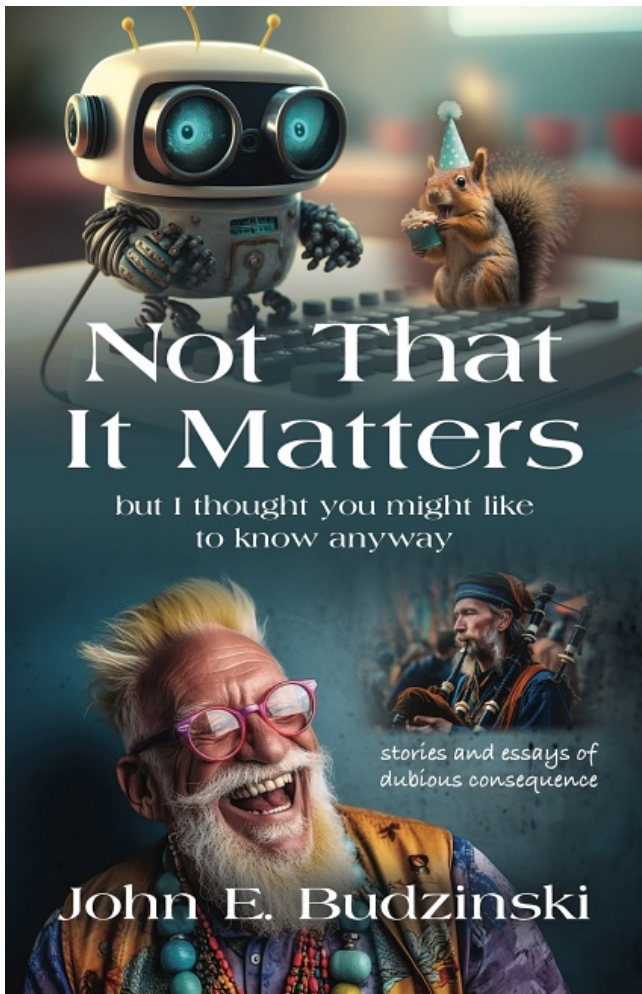
divisive politics, mass shootings, natural disasters, war, and more. The stories come from all places and continents. Yet, with all that is going on, my mind is trying to make some sense of why an eighteen-year-old girl died in a car crash.

I remember family and friends and the events and occasions we shared, moments and times that shaped our lives. We now have one more to add to the list.

I remember Megan and the secret I shared with my young friend.

About The Author

John E Budzinski is a storyteller. His stories are uncomplicated musings about life's mundane events, the events most people never notice because of their simple and unobtrusive nature. John takes the time to notice them, and to write what he sees and experiences. Many of his stories display cynical and jaded views. However, he blends his sarcasm with an astute wit that is always positive and optimistic. John is well-traveled and an accomplished photographer. He grew up in Stratford, Connecticut, and resides near Iowa City, a UNESCO City of Literature.



Budzinski writes that he's fascinated by the mundane and ordinary moments of life. In this collection of 63 short essays, he offers readers musings on a range of topics from the joys of giving gifts to the art of writing.

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