

Humorous Musings on our Subject, or How Foxwoods Saved My Soul

When I first heard about the Gambling Conference I thought I'd propose a scholarly interdisciplinary paper from the Moral Landscapes of Literary Study -- Dickens, Dostoevsky, Don DeLillo's latest novel. But nowadays the Moral Landscape is the job of Schools of Management -- for the first time this year Finance concentrators outnumber any liberal arts major at BC. So I'll leave that to others at the Conference.

Meantime I take license to add a little light entertainment, and perhaps some moral ambiguity, to the LUNCHSCAPE today by starting in another literary place -- the Broadway musical comedy Guys and Dolls. I may do a little singing later on, but for now, the framework is that play's movement from the streets and sewers of freedom and risk to the Save a Soul Mission's prime mission -- TESTIMONY:

"Tell the people all the rotten things you done which you ain't gonna do them no more." "Well, I've always been a bad guy; I've even been a bad gambler. I'd like to be a good guy, and a good gambler. I thank you."

Testimony is good for the soul. Guys and Dolls links the Salvation Army and the theories of Freud to say so: "I'm just a repressed neurotic girl who is abnormally attracted to sin and therefore abnormally afraid of it -- and you're not the first guy to try that approach" says the Mission Doll to the gambler. I recommend testimony all around these lunch tables before me: tell each other your gambling sin stories. I'll go first. I'm a single senior female with disposable income: I'll offer a little personal history, next stop Foxwoods, three **domains of disturbance** --the money, the addictive allure, Other People, and finally, a return to literature and ambiguity with Robert Frost.

I'm Catholic: you're going to say bingo games. But no; that was city, I was suburbs. Another aspect of Catholic inheritance might apply though: my extended family was fertile, our own six was by no means the record, and for decades the weekend entertainment for the elders was card games at each others' houses, some children traded to baby-sit, others towed along to the bridge, canasta, pinochle and poker tables in the living rooms and kitchens— "somebody's short in the pot, Virginia!" Coming downstairs on a Saturday morning afterwards us kids would sample the dregs of the beer bottles before stacking them away – the family habit of sticking cigarette stubs in the almost finished bottles played a pivotal role in cooling those two potential addictions I'd say.

My first and prime addiction was and is reading, or some combination of institution and reading – the library and reading, the school and reading. Bonus game – writing and reading – paycheck from a newspaper. Jackpot bonus game – college teaching and reading – a living wage. A productive segue. My second addiction was soda pop – coca cola, tab, diet coke, ice water, for free, another healthy chain of substitutions. For a long time I could find no other addictions.

I was 13 when my young father died, and I first saw the film Guys and Dolls; as the oldest of six I was already temperamentally cautious, now I'm formatively risk averse. I loved the IDEA that you might bet a thousand dollars that one raindrop would beat another raindrop down a windowpane, but that was Sky Masterson, like my father, an idea in the sky. I bet on myself, worked my way through college, went to graduate school -- less a risk then than now.

Flash forward thirty years: my fair share of achievements, compromises and bewilderments. But something's not quite right. What's wrong? How to diagnose it? In

the mid 1990's I go to my god child's wedding in California and then to Las Vegas with my brother. And then, Foxwoods saves my soul.

Disturbance area I: money. With too few addictions I have enough. Virginia Woolf's independence buying 500 a year and a room of my own. And more. What am I supposed to do with it? Buy stuff. The problem with that is, you then have to keep all that stuff. I learned to buy things that dissolved, flooding an inner world and leaving me without piles of stuff, things like concerts and travel and the very smallest Georgian enamel garnet and diamond pin not even to wear, just to look at. Satisfying. I learned the delights of writing checks to charities and giving gifts to family. Balancing.

The consumer culture spread its addictive tail but I just never somehow connected: more than one purse at a time? Really? Months go by with hardly a charge on the Credit card – oh pusillanimous member of a consumer confidence society! The anxiety culture blinks its addictive warnings: oh that did connect, but I didn't like how it felt. What if, what if: I'm a natural renter but bought a condo; I'm an optimist but bought the best healthcare. What am I afraid of? Where to practice not being afraid? Where to practice being able to spend freely or not to spend?

I'm not saying it can't get a little out of hand, this practicing: you've got to have rules if you're going to go to the casino. Virginia Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway walked across Hyde Park and threw a coin into the Serpentine pool – not her whole quarterly allowance from her husband. And of course you can give it away as well as throw it away: you can watch your charitable gifts increase to the measure of your dwindling mortgage and take rational pleasure; you can put your hand in your wallet at Sunday Mass and take irrational pleasure if you've forgotten to make sure there's a \$10 in there

and so have to hand over a \$20. Once in a while now I find I can even put some not-strictly necessary charge on the Credit Card. Both ways, I take my stake to the zone of guaranteed lightness-of-being in Ledyard and leave it there, along with, sometimes, that secret extra cushion-stake I occasionally permit myself to throw into the Serpentine. And it wins me sweet hours in...

Disturbance area II: visual pleasure. When I go to casinos with my brothers they peel off immediately to the video poker machines, and stay there for hours, looking at the same faces of cards, sometimes multiplied a hundred times. I on the other hand need the visual arrest, visual allure, visual astonishment of the multi-colored multi-lined multi-themed multi-narrative gaming reels, rolling, spinning, cascading top to bottom, catty corner or even right to left – diamonds panthers coins masks clocks starlings ghosts fruits flags flames angels aliens bats balloons snarling babies and little singing hot dogs.... “let’s all go to the snack bar.”

I want THE ARRAY. You remember THE ARRAY, a stock Star Trek theme, a visually alive energy field capable of reforming realities, a visual tractor beam all glittering complex surface with a plot beneath. I missed the whole pin ball machine video-game visual interactive world of electronics 1970 to the present and I catch up with it at Foxwoods. My other relationships with screens are cerebral: I’m a critic when I go to films, I’m multitasking when I watch TV. In the casino the eye on its own is engaged and ablaze, pulled to and into the screen, beyond the picture to the pattern. I’m in love with the line, not the payline. There used to be just one line, now you can press all the buttons and a vivid knot of 20 or 50 lines shows up beneath the coins stars etc, invisibly connecting, visibly connecting only when you hit. Make it happen again! make it happen

again! Says my reptile brain: the news from cognitive science presented in the Globe's estimable research article a few weeks ago was no news to me.

There are rules for this disturbance area too, of course, practices designed to help me enter the spell and more important practices designed to help me break the spell. The key one here is moving, walking, changing machines, repositioning, and in this emerges...

Disturbance area III: Other People. Other people are necessary to the experience for me: I swiftly leave an unpopulated area of a casino. It works like this: attuned to visual pleasure on the screen one looks over to other people with surprise, disorientation, recognition, and then, of course, identification. Other people look like—you think you feel and look yourself; pleased. Other people have some odd habits — their hands make mystic motions on the screen to make it come out right. But then, I've been known to talk directly to the Random Number Generator chip in the machine: "Are you kidding!?" I say.

I'm a casino lone wolf mostly, and I meet my kind, circling, repositioning, but I also meet mother daughter pairs down from Rhode Island looking for the right two slot machines next to each other, or halves of couples separated between slots and tables, and we talk while playing, about the illusory but almost real personalities of the machines, and about their children, and the drive through the countryside, and the better Mohegan Sun buffet and the casting on General Hospital.

By careful casino design, of course, it's harder to see the Other People that are not like oneself, the Other People whom the cautioners from the Moral Landscape tell you are also there...haggard parents with children locked in the car, grim elders run out

of social security money, the insecure young guy in the TV advertisement “makin’ it while fakin’ it.” It does give me a turn to see a busload of wheelchairs and oxygen inhalators moving clogingly down the aisle, though they’re talking happily together it seems, and my discomfort here, of course, is looking at age and sickness. Am I taking THEIR money here? Should I be giving them mine? Time for another contribution to the Boston Food Bank?

Oops, back in the Moral Landscape, with a poem now. “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by.” Oh really?

Should we be in responsible financial sharing community with each other and with our own present and future needs – roads and bridges, cities and towns, health and education-- through direct transparent taxation? or take the occluded and occult casino road? In a recent Globe column the respected Joan Vennochi quotes Robert Frost’s famous poem as if it were clear both that we should take the road less traveled by, and that we can recognize which road that is. But Frost, the old would-be Fox, actually made his two roads LOOK EXACTLY ALIKE. It’s an old old world, and both paths toward anything are equally deeply grooved by centuries of traveling; it’s also a brand new day and each road’s layer of leaves is still untrodden. Sorry, there’s no clue to the less traveled by, except by probably devious hindsight. We’re back at Guys and Dolls again and it’s prime lesson: “you’ve simply got to gamble, you get no guarantee....Now doesn’t that kind of apply to you and I? you and me?” “I thank you.”

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