The International Challenges of Fixing the Problems Caused by our Solutions

by Molly Williamson

There is no such thing as a “clean slate” when administrations change. The international community is bound by a substantial array of treaty obligations, understandings, and commitments. Many of these instruments were “made in the USA” and reflect long-standing efforts by U.S. policy makers to promote market economies, strategic alliances, democracy, and human freedoms. In many cases, our country has joined the international community via regional groupings or coalitions of countries aimed at certain principles, such as establishing rules of war or addressing common threats: weapons of mass destruction, drug trafficking, etc.

No new administration can just hit a “reset” button. A war fought by the U.S., no matter how unwise or ill-planned, should not be viewed as “the last guy’s war.” It belongs to us. While the international community believes we have created a mess through the war in Iraq, and even as much as they may have advised against that war’s inception, they do not want us to walk away and leave the mess at their doorsteps. They think we have an obligation to clean up after ourselves. We, who claimed to have proof of weapons of mass destruction, argued we could not reveal our sources and methods, and insisted that the international community should trust our sophisticated intelligence gathering and support our use of force. As a result, whenever we again seek international consensus on the use of force, we may have to make our case against a backdrop of distrust. Our credibility is not necessarily a given.

Similarly, the world’s economic predicament is seen as a result of U.S. “creative” debt bundling and its packaging to the international marketplace. Whether and how we put our financial house in order will be critical to the perception and exercise of U.S. world leadership. Just as our credibility suffered as we asserted leadership in critical intelligence and asserted military and strategic superiority in the fight against terror, it has suffered as we created unfettered free market practices and asserted leadership in

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economic prosperity. We have a lot to overcome as we not only stop digging the hole we are in, but actually try to climb out of it. Yet, every effort to adjust our compass will contribute to restoring our credibility, especially if we succeed.

And the international community wants to see success and stability. A proven leader is desirable, so long as that leader is one the world can live with. The world community expects — and in some cases demands — that the U.S., as a proven leader, address a range of troublesome issues. First and foremost is the global financial meltdown. Not only are the traditional “first world” economies important partners who must be consulted and engaged, but likewise the prominent emerging economies of China, India, and Brazil are now inextricably part of the international economic fabric, both as producers and markets. We now are all implementing variations of domestic stimulus packages. We need to minimize the risks that we might work at cross-purposes; we could even, potentially, be mutually reinforcing. We need to be — and be seen as — working together. If any of these economies believe that we are gaining at their expense, we can expect setbacks or retaliations.

Strategic political issues most notably of major concern to the world community are: How we conduct ourselves vis à vis the Middle East, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Whether and how we draw back from our involvement in Iraq. How we choose to address the Arab-Israeli issues. These concerns will be subjected to enormous scrutiny. There will be some who want to stay on the sidelines and criticize, and others who will seek to become power brokers themselves.

And the U.S. will be expected to play a key role in addressing very tough global issues: the threat of nuclear weapons, whether in the hands of states like North Korea and Iran, or in the hands of non-state malevolent forces. Add to this the urgent issues of energy and environmental degradation: The entire planet must make transitions that require international cooperation of a type we have not promoted before. The global challenges of health, hunger, and population also demand international cooperation. Bird flu, HIV/AIDS, drug and weapons trafficking, refugees fleeing starvation and seeking better opportunity all ignore national boundaries.

Our tone and demeanor will count. Many countries — including close allies — have marveled at U.S. behavior, labeling it as arrogant. In a world where we were seen as the only superpower, we also were perceived as insisting on getting our own way as a matter of entitlement, and never needing to take “no” for an answer. That perception, held in many societies, heralded those with nerve to stand up to the Americans regardless of the merits of the case at hand. It invited friends to find ways to distance themselves from U.S. positions — just to prove they were not under the thumb of the American bully. And to a number of countries, an important lesson was drawn: a distancing from the U.S. may come with an acceptable cost: the U.S. may not always be right, wise, or best.

So, now we have a new administration. The world is closely watching, and it has expectations, not only of how we clean our own house, but how we choose to behave in the world.

Cracking the Glass Ceiling

by Janet Heller

Fifty–plus years ago I filled out college applications on a primitive typewriter, using vast amounts of carbon paper to make copies. It was a tiresome and messy process.

My 17-year-old granddaughter recently completed all her U.S. college applications online and did so from Tel-Aviv, Israel. With Internet access to admissions offices, she had all the information and forms required. The process was a breeze and the seven-hour time difference was not of any importance.

In my day, some of her
college choices were exclusively male (Yale and Princeton), save for weekends when young things appeared like candy canes to sweeten the supposedly bleak lives of male undergraduates. Today, two of her seven choices have women presidents, the reality of which still gives me pause, and probably causes the few ancient alumni not yet in their graves to think longingly of the days when there were no such things as unisex bathrooms or coed dorms.

In the 1950s, with college diploma in hand and no engagement ring on my finger, I marched off to the nearest secretarial school to learn shorthand. It was the best way for an English major of no particular merit to get a toe in the door.

When applying to *Time*, I’d discovered that girls, which is what we were called, were not hired as writers. Our job was to look decorative while checking the encyclopedia to make sure the boys who wrote the copy had not made a factual error. The big honchos back then did not view the female brain as sufficiently evolved to handle editorial responsibilities. (Nor did they realize that their two or three martini lunches addled their own.)

On my first job, as I sat bored out of my wits at the receptionist’s desk at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, I was caught reading *The New York Times* by a former secretary of state. He commented on my reading material, inferring, I suspect, that it was unusual for someone in such a mindless job to have a mind. After two months, I was transferred to the U.N. Delegates Lounge and given a more imposing title: “Girl Friday.” I doubt this job category exists today. In that almost totally male environment, I had to play a defensive game, as the few of us in skirts (*de rigueur*) were considered fair game for diplomats far from home. We did our last-minute chores for our delegates, but were always mindful of being trapped in a corner by a heavy breathing man whose first language was not our own.

Today, many of the professional roadblocks are gone. The glass ceiling has cracked, and it is no longer assumed that the career of a professional woman who procreates will become less promising. If all things go well and my granddaughter graduates with the class of 2013, I hope the world will be her oyster in every way. (And I hope, by then, that the number of women in the U.S. Senate, now 13, will have climbed considerably higher.)

Lincoln, the Civil War, and the Charms and Terrors of Teaching History

*by Bill Evitts*

I have, once again, bumped into the question of what it means to be in the business of absorbing, synthesizing, and relaying information, and my understanding of it, to a curious public.

Take the matter of Abraham Lincoln. While this is the bicentennial year of his birth, our sixteenth president has been an American fixation since his martyrdom, and the fascination doesn’t stop at our own borders. There is a Lincoln City in Argentina. Cuba has named schools for him. You’ll find statues of Lincoln in Havana, Mexico City, Juarez, and London as well as Union Square, Guatemala, Brantford, Ontario, and the Israeli town of Ramat-Gan. Streets named for him can be found in Barcelona, Brussels, Caracas, Florence, Jerusalem, Milan, Paris, Rome, and Tel Aviv. Many Spanish-speaking countries issue Lincoln stamps; Nicaragua and Honduras have the most. There is a reproduction Abraham Lincoln log cabin in Denmark. The Japanese revere him because he overcame hardship to attain greatness and because he reinvented himself and his nation in a time of crisis, just as they did, twice. Germans admire him because he unified a nation at roughly the same time their nation was being unified. Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson, the president of Liberia, an African nation created for freed slaves who emigrated from the United States, notes their love of Lincoln stems not only from his role in ending slavery but also for his being the first American president to recognize
Liberian nationhood a decade and a half after they had declared themselves a sovereign nation in 1847.

The bicentennial, then, is heady stuff, and I personally have been swept up in it. I helped edit a massive new biography of Lincoln (Abraham Lincoln: A Life, by Michael Burlingame, JHU Press, 2009), and I currently teach two courses about Lincoln. But explaining Lincoln for a living — like teaching the Civil War, which I also do — requires any self-proclaimed authority to check his ego at the door.

The challenge is this: the literature on Lincoln is simply massive. In 1939 a man named Jay Monaghan undertook to create a bibliography of everything ever written about him. Just listing all the titles produced a 1,079-page book. In the three score and ten years since Monaghan’s heroic effort, the volumes written about Lincoln have grown exponentially.

So every time a Lincoln “expert” steps before an audience — and, despite my background, I am far from expert status — he or she confronts individuals who are very likely to know something about Lincoln that the speaker does not, having read something the speaker has not. If the professor’s self-conception requires him or her to be “the sage on stage” who cannot be stumped, one-upped, or outflanked by anyone in the room, then he or she is likely in trouble.

The same holds true of any Civil War “authority.” Interest in the subject is so widespread, and the literature so vast, that claims to know it all crumble quickly.

The challenge of maintaining expert authority in the face of well-read students is particularly acute in the field of history. No other academic discipline is so completely approachable by laymen. The best cutting-edge scholarship — and the Lincoln biography with which I was involved — is a perfect example. It is totally accessible to the average intelligent reader. Try applying that same standard to professorial utterances in political science, philosophy, or English criticism, especially the journal articles. It’s not that history pros can’t screw things up; those smitten by deconstructionist theory can be maddeningly opaque, for example. Still, history overall is the most clearly presented of all academic research.

Not only that, but good history is regularly written by people without any formal academic credentials or faculty positions. Civil War military historian Bruce Catton did splendid work from a background in journalism. The prolific David McCullough holds no earned degree higher than a Yale BA, and that in English literature. Pulitzer Prize winner Barbara Tuchman (The Guns of August, The Proud Tower, A Distant Mirror) was entirely self-taught. And so on... which brings me to the whole point of the teaching/learning enterprise.

I realized, long ago, that if I gave a short-answer quiz to my students five years after they’d left my class they would probably fail it. Did that render my efforts pointless? What is the essence of teaching, especially in my own field of history?

First, I had to face that I am not personally strong at diligent, patient, exhaustive archival research. To quote former JHU President Steven Muller, I “don’t have the sitzfleisch for it.” What interests me is being a synthesizer and explainer, bringing a wide and diverse set of facts and insights together to create a platform for learning. My job is to give students the materials and directions to erect their own structure of knowledge. At best, a professor/teacher is like the starter in sourdough bread, imparting a living essence that keeps on going from generation to generation.

Homely similes aside (Sourdough bread? Oh, good grief! Can’t I do better than that?), what does this mean? It means guiding, rather than merely informing. It means planting germs of interest and ideas that will sustain themselves. It means creating a framework and a familiarity that students can use to take off on their own. It means leaving a residue of understanding long after the specifics (What year was the Amistad episode?) have evaporated. In history this usually entails a focus on stories that capture the essence of the situation. For example, offhand, I can’t rattle off the birth dates of the founding fathers, but I can tell you that when the Revolution began, Washington was a venerable 43 years old, Patrick Henry 39, Jefferson 32, Madison 24, and Alexander Hamilton a downy cheeked youth of barely 20. I know this because my point is that the Revolution was largely a young man’s business; Franklin, at nearly 70,
was the only really old “founding father.” The story carries the details with it.

In class, then, the best model is a partnership in which the professor is simply a somewhat better informed participant, the one who has thought about the subject the most and can provide structure. Beyond that, all is fair. We all swim in the same ignorance pool.

And that is why Osher Lifelong Learning Institute is such a hoot. Give me a room full of curious people who will absorb what I say, then talk back, and chip in their mite to the larger enterprise, and I am a happy and fulfilled guy. But I also know that I am not an indispensable guy. It’s entirely possible for people to accomplish an education on their own. The proof? Well, for one, there’s Abraham Lincoln...

Le Moulin de la Galette

by Harry Down, Jr.

*Moulin* is the French word for windmill. In Paris, there is a hill upon which, in olden days, several windmills stood to pump water for the city. That hill, *Montmartre*, well known throughout the world, provided the winds and updraft to power the windmills. At its absolute top stands the beautiful Sacred Heart Church (*Sacre Coeur*). On a sunny day, the church gives the impression of floating in the sky on the clouds.

Everyone has heard of the other, the *Moulin Rouge* or red windmill, a world renowned nightclub at which the *cancan* dance originated before the turn of the 20th century. We, a couple of GIs stationed in Paris at the very end of World War II, decided to see the *cancan* at the *Moulin Rouge*. Upon entering, we were surprised to be escorted to a ringside table by the *maitre d’*. Weren’t we lucky! “Oh!, but, *monsieur*, you have to purchase a bottle of champagne for these seats,” we were told. We accepted, sat down and, shortly, along came a costly bottle of champagne with five glasses. Next, we were joined by three ladies, who promptly filled the five glasses, emptying the bottle and drinking like fish. The waiter reappeared with a second bottle of champagne. I took control of that bottle and limited its access. Soon, the ladies departed and my buddy and I enjoyed the show. I say we were, at once, there twice that night: the first and the last time!

Hidden in the back streets of the same hill, we discovered the *Moulin de la Galette*, another dance hall more to our taste. Its “windmill” location was the setting of two famous art works: an 1876 picnic scene by Renoir and 1899 indoor dance scene by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec.

In an Evergreen art class [before we were Osher], Pearl Mades projected and discussed these paintings. I immediately recognized the name and place, for we had attended afternoon tea dances there. Being assigned to the midnight shift (10 p.m.–6 a.m.) at a GI post office, we had afternoons and early evenings
to roam Paris; plus, we were billeted near Montmartre
and able to explore the back streets of the area. One
afternoon we happened upon the Moulin de la Galette
as it was opening for its thé dansants and we decided
to partake. This resulted in an enjoyable time. The
dance floor was replete with Parisians, not tourists, as
at the Moulin Rouge. People of all ages enjoyed dance
routines dating from the WWI period. There were
old dancers dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns,
with their outfits dating back to the 1910s. There also
were young ladies in modern outfits. The male dance
population was small as a result of WWII; therefore,
many of the women danced together. Although the
building included a garden, there were no picnics as
shown in the Renoir painting, because a food shortage
remained.

Sometime during the dance, “Toulouse-Lautrec”
would show up, accompanied by the songstress “Jane
Avril,” followed by a couple of artists and dancers who
entertained the audience basically for tips and drinks.
Of course, these people were imitating the artist and
the entertainers depicted in his various posters. Later
in the evening, they would continue on their rounds
of the bars in Montmartre. Business was business! The
tips obtained allowed them to survive. The afternoon
dances were most enjoyable and, often during my year
in Paris, I would return.

One-hundred-twenty years ago, Renoir and Toulouse-
Lautrec each painted a picture of the Moulin de la
Galette, which became world famous. Seventy years
later I danced there. Then, 50 years later, Pearl Mades,
teaching her wonderful art class, takes me back in
memory and an Osher memoirs-writing course
prompts me to write this essay...Pearl, many thanks
for taking me back to the Moulin de la Galette. Is it
still there and holding afternoon thé dansants?

Oh! Yes. The buckets that appear in many old French
dance floor paintings did not contain water for the
floor. Horrors! They contained ground resin, which
made shoes glide beautifully on the dance floor.

Travails of a Traveler

by Margaret Tocci

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

–Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman has a lot to answer for. Many years ago,
inspired by his poetry and an ardent desire to see the
world, I set off—a young widow accompanied by her
four- and five-year-old daughters—on my first (but
not my last) trip to Europe. Like all travelers of the day
on a tight budget, I relied upon the information and
advice of Frommer’s Europe on $5 a Day. Discovering
that I couldn’t really afford any of the recommended
lodgings in Naples, Italy, I turned for assistance to the
“Suggestions from Readers” section in the back of the
book. There I found what I thought was an answer to
my quandary—an enthusiastic recommendation for
“a comfortable and extremely reasonable small hotel”
on the edge of the Santa Lucia District, which was,
according to Frommer, a fashionable area on the edge
of the seafront.

We arrived in Naples after dark and took a taxi from
the train station. I assumed that the driver’s double
take when I stated the address was due to my halting
Italian. When the taxi pulled up to the hotel, I was
so tired and so busy dealing with two sleepy children
that I hardly noticed the three women standing on
the corner under a street light near the hotel. Nor did
I really register the strange look from the desk clerk
when I checked in. Dawn brought light, not only
literally but figuratively.

In the breakfast room I found only one other guest, an
American woman who had also consulted Frommer’s
book, arrived the night before, and quickly realized
that the other guests seemed to be checking in and out
extraordinarily quickly and without luggage. In fact
we had checked into an establishment serving “ladies
of the evening” and their clientele. After breakfast
when I informed the desk clerk that we’d be leaving
immediately, he nodded knowingly and favored me
with a big smile.
Suggestion #1 to all travelers: Beware of travel bargains that seem too good to be true. They usually are!

Many years have passed since that first trip and while I fancy I am now an experienced traveler prepared to cope with all “vagaries” of the road, new challenges always arise. For example, having logged considerable driving time in Italy, I decided a couple of years ago to forgo the stress of driving, surrender my car keys and enjoy the luxury of train travel. After all, I had mastered the finer points of such transport, i.e. punching your ticket on the anonymous-looking machines at the head of the train track before boarding so the conductor doesn’t scream at you, sitting as near as possible to the luggage storage racks at the end of the carriage to prevent your bags from being stolen, sticking to your guns when demanding that someone remove their carcass from your reserved seat, etc. Little did I know that my passenger skills were due to be challenged in spectacular fashion.

On board a “local” for a trip from Rome to Orvieto, my husband and I watched carefully for the signs of the train’s approach to our destination. Experience had taught us that the trains stopped only briefly at small stations so passengers had to be ready to descend as soon as the doors opened. Consequently, at the first sign of Orvieto we moved our luggage to the exit. Imagine our stunned reaction when the train pulled into the station and the door of the carriage facing the platform failed to open.

We struggled with the door handle, opened the window and shouted for the platform personnel—all to no avail. Even as we pleaded for assistance, the train began to move. Faced with the prospect of missing our destination, I acted in desperation. I threw open the door on the opposite side of the car, the one facing another track. After checking that there was no oncoming train I threw out our luggage and jumped after it, shouting all the while for my husband to follow. He leapt just as the train speeded up, landing with a jarring thump in the midst of the luggage. As the train disappeared from sight, I heard a shout of laughter and a round of applause from the passengers standing on the platform. Luckily, no railway personnel spotted our inelegant descent. Exiting on the wrong side is illegal.

Suggestion #2: Make sure you’re in good physical shape before you board an Italian train!

The Orvieto adventure came as no great shock—danger to life and limb is a proven motif in my travels. Take the time I was held for ransom in Tarbes, France...A friend of rather nervous disposition and little-traveled in foreign climes had joined my children and me in a last-minute trip from Spain to England. We had departed in such haste that we had failed to pick up any French currency (pre-Euro days).

But when we paused in Tarbes to fill up our rental car with gas, I wasn’t worried about payment because I was carrying an American gasoline credit card that plainly stated on the back that it was good at stations all over the world. Alas, the owner of the station didn’t agree. When I attempted to pay him after I had filled the tank, he vehemently rejected not only the card, but also my offer of both American dollars (a much desired currency in those days) and Spanish pesetas. My friend, a fluent speaker of French, tried to reassure him that any or all of these payment methods were valid and legal. But the station owner grabbed my arm and started hauling me into his tiny cubicle shouting at the top of his voice that I had stolen his gasoline and that he was holding me until the bill was paid in honest French francs. Unfortunately, it was early on a Sunday morning. Neither banks nor currency exchanges were open.

Nevertheless, while I sat in a chair under the watchful eye of the station owner, my friend drove off in a distraught state seeking a way to pay my ransom while my children cried in the back seat because someone had taken their mommy. She returned almost two hours later, after her hysterical pleading, combined with the tears of children, finally convinced a hotel manager to exchange the exact sum owed (money exchange privileges were normally confined to hotel guests). When she presented the appropriate currency to my captor, he carefully counted the money before motioning me to rise from the chair and depart the premises, all the while muttering about American thieves. I have returned to France many times, but
never to Tarbes. I’m not taking any unnecessary chances.

Suggestion #3: Avoid Tarbes at all costs, even if you’re carrying the right currency!!!

My Short Life as a Nudist
by Barbara Orbock

Dubrovnik is a unique town [located in the extreme south of Croatia], a kind of open-air museum alive with gaiety and vigor. In 1983, Dave and I spent a week there at the sobe (B&B) of Rosina Pulitka. During the day we walked the walls of the old town, explored the markets, visited museums and watched artisans at their crafts. In the evenings we attended concerts by local folk singers or the Dubrovnik Symphony, followed by candlelight dinners and drinks at lovely restaurants. The pace was leisurely, people were friendly, and life by the sea was romantic.

Near the end of our stay we decided to skip sightseeing and spend the day sunning and swimming. The beach was a narrow stretch of sand on the Adriatic just outside the town gates, an easy walk from our sobe. When we told Rosina of our plans, she suggested that we try Lokrum instead. Every morning, as we ate breakfast on her beautiful patio, we looked across the sea at that lovely island, but had never thought of going there.

Rosina assured us that we wouldn’t be disappointed. Lokrum had both a regular beach and a nature beach — and both were very nice. She packed our lunch, and we collected our swim suits, towels, and reading material, and soon were off to the ferry.

The ferry was filled with locals and tourists of all ages. Our seat companion was an overly friendly German named Gunter, who talked enthusiastically and nonstop about the nature beach and how it was a yearly destination for him. By the time we debarked, Dave had made up his mind which beach we would be heading for.

A ten-minute uphill walk brought us to the entrances of both beaches. Dave turned left; I turned right. Topless I’d done, but since I knew nature was synonymous with nude, I was not about to strip naked with the likes of Gunter on the beach.

Dave disappeared down his chosen path and I selected a resting spot on a grassy knoll not far from the chain link fence that separated the two beaches. I must explain that in Dubrovnik, like in most of Europe, beach is a loose term. Usually there is very little sand. Instead you get pebbles, patches of grass, rock ledges, and boulders. They are beaches because they border water of some sort.

The October sun was warm. The sky cloudless. The sea a shimmering turquoise. I settled comfortably for the day with my novel of choice. Every once in awhile I’d look up to spy on the activities beyond the fence. Disgruntled because I could never see anything, I decided to nap.

I was just about asleep when someone tossed a pebble that hit my back. Dave, donned in his swim trunks, was standing by the fence.

“Come on over. You’ll have a mammoth ledge to perch on, and if you’re lying down no one can see you—not even Gunter.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Where’s Gunter?”

“Haven’t seen him.”

Somewhat reluctant, I packed my gear and followed Dave to his ledge. It was flat and spacious, and he was right—unless someone occupied the smallish outcrop to my right—no one could see me.
I quickly stripped and lay down on my towel. There was a path below my rock and I could watch the nudists parade to and from the water. Tall, short, skinny, fat, old, young—all were having a wonderful time. One elderly dear even had a walker.

Toward afternoon Dave decided to take a swim. I declined. Even though I was in better shape than most of the adults, I was more comfortable as a voyeur than as a participant.

Dave wasn’t gone ten minutes when the empty rock to the right was claimed by a middle-aged male with a pleasant face and not a badly-put-together bod. He spoke. I nodded, then ignored him, greatly relieved he wasn’t Gunter. However, I slipped on my reflecting sunglasses, which gave me the advantage of keeping an eye on him without his knowing it.

In the course of the next hour he continuously arranged and rearranged his towel. In between he posed in every provocative position possible. During this entire routine I feigned disinterest. Being flat on my stomach with a book in front of my face, he could see little of me except my bare backside. That he was entitled to—after all, it was a nature beach.

When Dave returned from his swim, my demonstrative neighbor and his towel immediately disappeared. I relayed the details of the encounter, which sent Dave into a fit of laughter. Then he told a story of his own. Seems Gunter was standing on a rock above the swimming area doing some posing of his own—frontal, side, derriere—all for the benefit of the small tour boats that plowed the waters around the island. The passengers gawked at him through binoculars and snapped him with telephotos. They waved and he waved back.

At the end of the day, again fully clad, we made our way down the hill with the others to the ferry slip. Dave put his arm around my shoulder. “Have a good time?” he asked with a puckish grin.

“Just barely,” I replied and kissed his cheek.

Mainiacs

by Jerry Downs

It was one of those juvenile, implausible, hare-brained schemes you look back on years later and wonder what on earth you were thinking. But there we were (my wife Betty and I), in the office of a real-estate agent in Camden, Maine, whence we had driven in our elderly VW bus, having left our three children in the care of their grandmother. We were in quest of a bit of land, preferably on the water but with at least an ocean view.

“And what saht of dolluh figya did you have in mind, de-ah?” inquired the agent, in that barely comprehensible Downeast accent. (In Maine, “de-ah” is equivalent to the Baltimore “hon.”)

“We are thinking around five thousand,” I remarked, rather grandly.

Poker-faced Maine reserve is notorious, but for once we saw that facade crack. The agent (we’ll call him Calvin) appeared to choke. He turned away from us toward the window; his shoulders heaved slightly. Finally, he turned back. Five thousand, it seemed, was the going price around there for a foot of shoreline property. Makes for a rathuh narrow cottage. Now, if a view of water (fresh, not salt) might interest us, he could send us to dozens of lakes and ponds back toward Augusta that were in our, uh, price range.

As we sidled toward the door, properly chastened, he called after us. He did happen to have one lead we might look into, a nice lot back toward China. (China,
Maine, that is; Maine also features towns named Norway, Mexico, and Paris.) The lot in China was alleged to have a view of the ocean.

We found the lot. It did have an ocean view. I climbed part way up a tree to find the tiny speck of blue. We also took a look at some lake sites. The car got stuck in a mud hole on the way to one. At another, I tossed a stone clear across the “lake.”

Oh, well. Back to reality. We had planned to visit a friend at a place called Deer Isle. Perhaps he could suggest some inexpensive summer rentals. Clearly, Camden was not for us. But, as it turned out, Deer Isle was — and is.

In the first place, it takes some work to get there. Near Bucksport, you turn off the “coastal highway,” U.S. 1, which runs through Camden where the swells live. You drive 20 bumpy miles to Blue Hill, then 18 even bumpier ones — and you are there. I will not attempt to describe it: Deer Isle is “just” a Maine island, one of so many islands that no two cartographers can agree on the exact number. But then again, we are only two of the many who’ve had the strange experience of crossing a soaring bridge and winding causeway for the first time and knowing that we were home. You know the kind of place. If you are lucky, you have one too, and it could be anywhere.

The series of miracles that led us to Greenlaw Cove, with its 400 shore-feet of pink granite ledge and no human habitation within sight, must wait for another day. For now, suffice it to say that, stupendous as the bargain was, it was twice that $5,000. So, here was earthly paradise, all ours, thanks to a loan from my mother and a mortgage from a friendly banker in Ellsworth. Funding for any possible structure in this pristine paradise? Zero.

But we had a tent. And a flashlight. We bought a Coleman stove. We were in business. Well, sort of. We bought a five-gallon water can to be filled at a convenient spring. We bought a heavy canvas bag to hold a block of ice. Did I mention that the road ended at the top of the hill? We had to schlep that stuff down a 200-yard trail to the tent site. Friends used to ask, “What do you do in Maine?” Ha.

Two weeks into our first summer, Miracle #2. Down the trail came Charles and Martha Robinson, children of old-time friends of my parents. Implausibly (again, it was implausible), they 1) summered in Deer Isle and 2) somehow had found out where we were. Charles, whose heart of gold is housed in a gruff exterior, asked, “Why are you sleeping on the ground? Where is your tent platform?” I confessed that I didn’t know one end of a hammer from the other. General Charles took over. He was back the next day with a portable generator, chain saw, and hammers. More schlepping. We (our two sons and I) had purchased the requisite lumber and nails.

Two hours later, the tent stood proud on its new platform.

Charles then asked, “Where are you going to put the house?”

“HUH? We don’t know how to build a house.”

“Anybody who can read can build a house.” Charles was director of the Baltimore County Library. “But for now, just remember this...You’ve just built a floor. Do it again, without the planking. Stand it on end. That’s one wall. Do it three more times. I’ll show you how to make roof rafters. We can do ‘er in three days.”

We bought the book Your Engineered House; it is a treasure. That was almost forty years ago. Nine small buildings still stand at Downseast — and we still don’t believe it.

Epilogue: Miracle #3: With Building #1 standing, we began to dream. How about electricity? Kerosene lamps are romantic but smoky and a fire hazard. We found that bringing power a quarter mile from the main road cost more than the land. End of dream, for that moment.

Meanwhile, we heard about Evergreen (that, O best beloved name, is what Osher was formerly called). Kathy Porsella threw an introductory luncheon. We sat next to Anne Allen and Walter Dandy. Their son, John, a former student of mine, is in the solar electric business, we learned. And where might that be? Why, Downeast Maine, of course.
About a month after we got a real road all the way to the house, a large white van rumbled down the hill. Dandy Solar Electric announced the logo on its flank.

All that was years ago, but we still relish moments at the general store when the natives fume about the latest power outage (there are three or four each summer)—and we smile a secret smile at the thought of our dandy, outage-immune electrical system.

Ice Cream for Breakfast
by Laura Black

It is my first time in Israel. Each morning I awake and gaze out the hotel window. I am filled with an intense sense of wonder. Abraham, our guide, meets us daily. He escorts us through days filled with a sense of poignancy. I am not prepared for the intensity of emotions erupting in me, as under Abraham’s capable tutelage, I experience firsthand the places where thousands of years of our turbulent history occurred.

Today is our last day with Abraham. He arrives early, filled with an uncontained passion for his task: to give us as much of Israel as possible in our short time with him. He arrives with ice cream.

“Today is National Ice Cream for Breakfast Day! Let’s have ice cream for breakfast!” he exclaims. Ice cream for breakfast, a concept so totally appealing, yet one that has never before occurred to me. We rejoice. “Yes, ice cream for breakfast.” It feels so right. It feels so good...

Spending these days with Abraham, I have observed his unabashed joy, his skill at living in the moment. As an Israeli, Abraham knows too well the fragility of life. He relishes the gift of a day, an hour, a minute. He cherishes what matters and disregards the rest. Abraham seems to understand that too much of life is dedicated to blind adherence of unwritten rules. While some may make sense, our reluctance to question is startling. Does questioning even occur to us? Or, do we consider challenging the status quo, but afraid of being judged, do we cowardly retreat?

Spending those days with Abraham, I am overwhelmed to learn so much about my history. Learning so much about my history, I am transformed. I learn to honor my present.

English Lesson
by Leight Johnson

1. The roundest knight at King Arthur’s round table was Sir Cumference. He acquired his size from too much pi.
2. I thought I saw an eye doctor on an Alaskan island, but it turned out to be an optical Aleutian.
3. A rubber band pistol was confiscated from algebra class, because it was a weapon of math disruption.
4. A grenade thrown into a kitchen in France resulted in Linoleum Blownapart.
5. Atheism is a non-prophet organization.
6. I wondered why the baseball kept getting bigger. Then it hit me.
7. A small boy swallowed some coins and was taken to a hospital. When his grandmother telephoned to ask how he was, a nurse said, “No change yet.”
8. A chicken crossing the road is poultry in motion.
9. The short fortune-teller who escaped from prison was a small medium at large.
10. A backward poet writes inverse.
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