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## COMMUNITY

# My Two Moms

The very different lessons I learned from my mother and my mother-in-law

BY NINA LICHTENSTEIN

I recently lost my Jewish (former) mother-in-law Joyce, who was a warm, doting *yidische mame* and full-time balabusta—as well as the polar opposite to my stoic, Norwegian, formerly Lutheran, now agnostic mom Mona, a career-woman through and through. At 86, my mom just moved to assisted living in Oslo as she faces increasing dementia and challenges with mobility. Seeing my formerly spry, vivacious mother in such rapid decline has made me reflect on how my two beloved mother-figures have influenced who I've become as a woman, wife, and mother.

I was raised by working parents in Oslo in the 1970s; an urban latchkey kid who was never smothered with affection, I grew to be fiercely independent by need, not want. My mother expressed her love through verbal approvals and a quick peck on the cheek. In my childhood home, you'd hear the silverware hit the plates during dinner instead of chatter, especially when my parents had a disagreement. The silence was deafening. You never interrupted or picked from the serving platter with your hands, and you certainly didn't chew with your mouth open (we called this *smatte*—a fabulous onomatopoe).

As I grew into a young woman, something in me must have yearned for a different kind of family experience:

one where sharing emotions and moods was as natural as breathing, and where everyone could speak their mind without fear of...well, the silent treatment.

Then, at 23 and a newly minted Jewess, I joined my husband's raucous, intense tribe. Joyce was overjoyed that I had agreed to convert and that I took my new Jewish identity to heart. After all, she had not been thrilled when she was introduced to her son's "serious" but gentile girlfriend. She gave me Jewish books to read, was a kind guide and complement to my lessons with their (Orthodox) rabbi. It was she who accompanied me to the mikveh the day I converted, bursting with pride. Joyce pulled me into her soft, generous bosom and held me tight. When my three sons were born, she held them even tighter—her first grandchildren were Jewish after all, oh the *mechaya!*—giving her life new meaning: She was finally a bubbe. She cooked and cleaned and babysat and volunteered and visited the sick and took her aging mother in, nursing her to the end. She taught me how to make the clearest chicken soup and the most tender brisket, all from scratch; this is how you measure coffee, and this is how you clean for Passover.

At their family gatherings everyone spoke at once, demonstratively pulled meat off the bone and licked their fingers, fought like cats and dogs, yelled, and stomped off, only to cuddle in front

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BY JORDIE GERSON



of the wood stove minutes later. In the beginning I was overwhelmed (“how do you do it?” my mother asked, aghast after her first meeting with the *machatonim*), but I grew to love this aliveness, making it mine. Joyce and I remained in contact even after her son and I divorced after 23 years, until she eventually slipped away from me during the early years of her dementia. She had been a pillar of my life—in particular, my Jewish life—for decades.

Independent, career-driven, and a

feminist of the Gloria Steinem generation, my mom traveled the world in her 20s and only married my dad when she got pregnant at 29. She still wore high-heels and elegant business suits when she retired at 67, at which point she swapped out her briefcase and business-class trips to Paris, London, and New York with golf clubs, matching golfing-outfits in pink and turquoise, and tickets to stunning links in places like South Africa, Mauritius, and Florida. In her early 60s, traveling internationally for work and divorced from my fiscally irresponsible father—who made her life miserable and filled with shame when he served time for tax evasion—she had a glamorous affair with a Pierce Brosnan look-alike stationed in Hong Kong who was 20 years her junior. At 70, she fell in love with Bjørn, a dapper man her age who darted across the fairway before the 18th hole with a long-stemmed, red rose, asking her out for a first date on his motorboat. They had 13 great, adventurous years together before he died of cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I deeply loved (and still love) and admire both of my mothers: the biological one everyone says I resemble in both looks and gestures, who has taught me to be adventurous and fearless, as well as the homebody who showed me how to put family first—the most welcome fringe benefit to my conversion to Judaism and marriage to her son. Joyce (or Joey, as family and friends called her) had one man in her life, whom she met in college and married early, and together they started a family right away. Her husband Jerry, my (former) father-in-law, was an oral surgeon, and Joey chose to raise a family and “do the books” in his dentistry practice rather than pursue a career. They did everything together, including building a home on 80+ acres in rural Connecticut, riding tractors in their expansive fields, planting blueberry bushes, splitting cords of firewood from their own trees, and assembling elaborate stone walls with their own hands. Jerry nursed Joey at home through years of Alzheimer’s, until she succumbed to the disease at age 85, last year.

My grandmother Ruth died in a

hospital and all she wanted was to “go home.” But of course, that was impossible, since her only daughter, my mom, was working; in any event, the Norwegian welfare state promised to take responsibility from cradle to grave. I don’t think my mother ever washed or cut her mother’s nails or tucked her in. On a recent visit to Oslo, sitting close to my mother’s face with tweezers in my hand, plucking little gray stubs from her chin, I asked her if she did this for her own mom. “Never,” she replied. That kind of physical intimacy was just not part of her mother-daughter relationship. I felt sad for my grandmother and mother, thinking about what they had missed. I thought of the closeness that Joey had shared with her mother as she aged.

Mom, tall and lean with her straight back and muscular arms, showed me how important physical fitness was. In 1977, when the movie *Saturday Night Fever* was all the rage (I was an awkward, lanky 12-year old), she took lessons and demonstrated the Brooklyn Shuffle à la John Travolta to my girlfriends, with the Bee Gees blasting from our living room speakers. I wanted to die, but they thought she was the coolest mom ever, in her fitted jumpsuit and high heels. Not only did she start horseback riding with me when she was in her 40s, but would race her grandsons down ski mountains and take spinning classes well into her 70s. When her drop-foot prevented her from skiing and spinning, she had TRX suspension training gear mounted in the ceiling of her apartment, and wore a brace on her bad leg so she could *walk* the 18 holes without renting a golf cart. When I tried spinning for the first time in my 40s, and thought I would give up after the first 10 minutes, I visualized my mom in her padded Spandex shorts and thought, *you better stick it out; your mom spins, so can you!* She was a principled woman who said “no thanks” to seconds and pushed away desserts—but never wine—for decades. It’s only now, in her 80s, that she has begun indulging in sweets.

Joey, on the other hand, seemed to always have limped and sighed and moaned as she moved around at a snail’s pace, her matronly shape covered loosely in comfortable outfits. She was only

in her mid-40s when I met her, born in 1937 just like my mom, but somehow seemed older, calmer, slower, and more settled. She said mowing the undulating lawns surrounding their house was her exercise (even with an electric mower, it really *was* hard work—I saw how much it made her sweat!), and I don't think she ran a day in her life. She wore muumuus at home, stretch-waist pants, and sensible flats, and waddled when she walked. One spring she got up at 5 a.m. every morning with her husband to “do the track” at the local school's athletic field. This schedule worked for him, an early riser, but she gave up quickly. She preferred to sleep in and needed time for her slow morning routine, taking her carefully measured, percolated cups of coffee very seriously. Before I had kids, in the early days of my life as a Jewish woman, I loved spending lazy mornings at her house.

My two mothers, my role-models, lived lives as disparate as the vast ocean that separated them, and I juggled my desire to please them as much as my need to define the “right” path for me. Especially when I was raising my children, I felt as exhausted from “translating”

and negotiating between their expectations, trying to lessen their at times critical opinions of each other's cultural norms, as from the nitty-gritty of being knee-deep in my own mothering. That in-between role was already painfully palpable during my first son's bris, 28 years ago. Mom, rigid and in cultural shock, stood mute next to me in shul that day, while my beaming and sighing-from-joy mother-in-law flanked my other side. At the sound of my son whimpering when the mohel snipped, Joey squeezed my hand, kvelling, and I squeezed my mom's hand, whispering to her, “Don't worry. He'll be fine,” while my breasts pounded and leaked in response to my baby's distress.

I smile today, when I think of how much I differentiated myself from my mother. I like to say, and believe, that none of my choices were conscious, but guided by a need to create what the child in me craved: I was a stay-at-home mom until my sons were in middle school. I baked, served hot chocolate, and built snow forts with them on snow-days. My graduate degrees came later, part time, and despite them I didn't pursue a full-time career. I married an *accountant* (hello, Freud!), lived a traditionally

observant Jewish family life, deeply anchored in Jewish rituals and Jewish community, and said “yes, please!” to desserts and seconds as my waist expanded proportionally to how fulfilled I felt as a Jewish woman, mother, and wife. I smothered my boys in smooches, actually *am* loud, and through therapy I've learned to confront *and* repair, turning disagreements into opportunities for growth, instead of avoiding them, like my mom would.

All along, I've known my two mothers had one thing in common: They loved their children and they loved their lives. They were content and felt fulfilled, each in her own way, and this may have been the best thing they role-modeled for me. They also supported me and my choices, although they may not always have understood or agreed with them. In this I count my blessings as I navigate the many emotions around the loss of one, and the decline of the other. There is mourning and there is celebration in a full life. Opposites, but equals, like my mothers. And through it all, they continue to guide me on my way. ■

*This article was originally published on May 12, 2023.*

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## COMMUNITY

# My Mother on My Mind

What would it have taken to make her happy?

BY ALTER YISRAEL SHIMON FEUERMAN

**O**n Aug. 14, 1963, when I was a few months old, the famous LA gangster Mickey Cohen was beaten with a lead pipe to within an inch of his life by a fellow inmate at the Atlanta federal penitentiary. Cohen, who was 49 at the time, was presumed to be at his end and a Jewish chaplain was called to minister to the murderer.

That chaplain happened to be my father.

When my father got the call, he was at our home in Atlanta. He jumped into his '59 Chevy Biscayne and drove to Cohen's bedside at high speed—he was on official government business.

Dad had been prepared to recite the Shema with the famous gangster. He even fantasized that he would recite the *Viduy*, the deathbed ritual with him,

and Cohen would confess his crimes. (The crafty Cohen always maintained his innocence.)

My father later recalled to me that Cohen was bandaged completely around his head like a mummy with only the tiniest slits for his eyes and mouth. Instead of a dying confession, the famous gangster held my father close and rasped into Dad's ear: “Rabbi, call my mother and tell her that I am OK. *Zi zollen nisht zorgen*. I don't want she should worry.”

My father, who was a genius at taking instruction, called the famous criminal's mother. I do not know if the conversation took place in Yiddish or English, but according to my father, it went something like this: “My name is Chaim Feuerman, I am the prison chaplain at the federal penitentiary in Atlanta. Mickey told me to call you and

to tell you not to worry. He will be OK. *Zorg nisht.*"

She said nothing and hung up.

To my father and everyone's surprise, Cohen recovered and some years later he was released from prison. He died in 1976.

But the story lived on in our family. When my father recounted it years later, he told me with an ironic laugh: *A mama's a kind is doch gevunden—a gosses—uber svet zein gut?* A mother's child is beaten in the head near death, and yet she shouldn't worry?

I guess it struck my father that even gangsters who have done horrible things "worry" about their mothers and in some way "care" that their mothers should think well of them and the lives they made—as though with a mere gesture to Mother, they could skip over all the terrible things they do to humanity.

Many years after my mother's passing, her happiness is on my mind as Mother's Day approaches. What could I do to make my mother happy? Would she be happy with what I have done with my life?

Why should it matter? Why should it matter now? Why did it ever matter?

Psychoanalysts know that it matters a great deal. There is something bedrock in us from our earliest months of life that is attuned to our mother's suffering—and happiness—both with herself and with us. In fact, it is a primitive impulse to *soothe* one's mother, and this impulse is present in the lowest among us—even criminals and psychopaths.

In the old world of my grandfather, they would say: *A zund muz zufridden shtellen di mameh.* A son has to make good by the mother.

If all goes well, in normal people, a highly sophisticated system emerges from this impulse. A man comes to symbolize his mother: He projects her image onto the teacher, his spouse, his customers, his children, his nation, his god. Freud said that all these become representations of the mother.

Why does that impulse seem to extend to all of humanity for some people, but remain limited for others? If we all had a mother, then why are there wars?

My mother was a beautiful woman with no plans for herself or me or anyone else, except to not upset anyone, and that we should have lunch.

My mother made my lunch and cut my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches into squares and triangle shapes. I loved her every time she did this and she seemed "happy" to do these "mommy" things for me.

It's an axiom in psychoanalysis that no one is forever happy with the mother they have. There was a time in my life when I felt that she should have paid more attention to me, she should have loved me more. And I was unhappy and, in turn, made her unhappy.

How laughable that is to me today! In the course of life, I came to understand that unhappiness is precisely what is so valuable in relation to one's mother. In fact, psychoanalysis calls it the pursuit of "unhappiness." We value unhappiness because of its clarifying properties. Unhappiness is often the beginning of the journey to becoming your own person.

My mother was busy with her own semisweet, beautiful, brooding life, trying to make sense of her sorrows and pleasures, her love of futility and her begrudging, perplexing, and gorgeous Jewish God.

Against that impressive backdrop, my role was rightfully that of a walk-on, a cameo. The idea that I should have been or was her "star" was the trouble and folly of my earlier life.

I think she unconsciously wanted an audience for herself—beyond the family. The problem was finding one. Once—*once*, mind you, in 1944, when she would have been 8 or 9 years old, growing up in England during WWII—she landed the starring role in a stage production of *Snow White* in Bournemouth. Her father yanked her out of the play. Not a place for a Jewish girl from a Hasidic family. But if her place was not in the play, where was her audience?

For many women of my mother's generation, the household was, among other things, a low-rent stage and the kitchen and the washer/dryer were her props over which she had a degree of creative discretion. In my mother's kitchen, for example, WQXR played all the time,

Ralph Vaughan Williams and Tomaso Albinoni, her favorite composers.

The laundry was in a basket near the bed in her room and she folded and put away the towels, sheets, and underwear every weekday afternoon while *As the World Turns* and *The Guiding Light* were on television. That is, except during the Watergate years when the soaps were preempted and Jeb Magruder, H.R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, and John Dean spoke into skinny microphones with a glass of water by their sides and a jowly Sam Ervin presided.

Perhaps she had a sense as she was getting older that she was losing what audience she had, but I was her audience forever and always.

My misfortune and my good fortune was that I fell deeply in love with her, her softness, her gentle looks. As her audience and critic I came to realize that the demands of reality, motherhood, rabbi's wife, caretaker of her parents, were overwhelming to her and unrelenting and spoiled her dreams and made her emotionally unavailable at times. She had lines she was given; I would have wished she could have said more of her own.

She could not ponder what most people ponder, which is to measure themselves against what they might have been. She did not hope or even imagine that her children would reach out for a prize that eluded her.

Yet ambivalence can beget admiration. And maybe that is the point of Mother's Day, a brilliant stroke of capitalism made to appeal to women of her generation—women who were not permitted to find out who they really were.

The analyst/thinker Adam Phillips refers to life as one big attention-getting project. Instead of asking people how they are, he suggests, one might ask how their attention-getting projects are going.

Mother's Day is a national attention-getting project for mothers and specifically, for what some would see as their thankless work. This popular commercial holiday ingeniously appropriated the powerful mechanism that forms in a child from a young age to want to please his mother and make her "happy."

Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott wondered whether the mother was created or discovered. There is a kind of love that is created *and* discovered through mutual seeing. That love is likely to extend to the rest of humanity and is the work of a lifetime. A mother who is merely a primitive provider creates a primitive soother.

One time when I was about 10 years old, I had “stolen” the chocolate Lollycones she had hidden for Pesach. I began to stuff myself with the chocolates.

I was already becoming chubby—a real no-no; for her, thinness was practically a religion. Feeling betrayed and alarmed, she tried to take the treats away and we were in a tug-of-war. The suddenly, she looked at my face and relented. “It’s OK,” she said, “you can eat them.” At that moment, I stopped eating the chocolates. I put the box away and I would never in all my days overeat again.

Mother’s Day may be a crass product of clever capitalism, but something

about it seems right to me. All these years after her passing, I am still interested in her, still thinking about her, her honor and even her happiness. This is because she did one unforgettable thing for me—and she didn’t even know it, though she might have known it somewhere deep inside. When I looked in her face, she allowed me to see my own. ■

*This article was originally published on May 11, 2023.*

NEWS

# You Are Not Destined to Live in Quiet Times

Humanity’s third major technological revolution is leading us into a future more promising and also more dangerous than any since the dawn of history. It’s coming faster than you think.

BY WALTER RUSSELL MEAD

**T**he COVID pandemic and the rise of AI have something in common. Between them, they have upended one of the most consequential debates among American tech analysts, and largely refuted the claim that progress in America was coming to an end—that the Adams curve was flattening out as a Great Stagnation cooled the dynamism of American life.

The case for stagnation was a strong one. Current technologies, advocates warned, were providing diminishing returns, and productivity growth in American life was slowing. The regulatory burden on innovation in the United States inexorably grew. Compared with the optimism that accompanied earlier innovations like electricity, indoor plumbing, the internal combustion engine, antibiotics, refrigeration, and mass communications, Americans

in the internet age seemed noticeably more risk averse and pessimistic about the future.

The stagnationists make some important points. But as my friend Tyler Cowen noted in his seminal 2011 book *The Great Stagnation: How America Ate All the Low-Hanging Fruit of Modern History, Got Sick, and Will (Eventually) Feel Better*, stagnation was never likely to be more than a pause. By 2020, Tyler saw the pause coming to an end as advances in medicine, battery technology, computing, and distance-working made themselves felt.

The alternation between a sense of stagnation and one of dizzyingly rapid change reflects, I think, the complexity of human society’s progression up the Adams curve. As a hiker begins to climb a mountain, it becomes harder to see the summit, and harder still to see—as the trail winds through forests and takes you up onto ridges and down into

valleys—whether you are in fact making any progress. But along the way, there will be moments when you get a clear view of the summit looming above you and the immense distances you have already climbed, and those doubts will be stilled.

The advent of AI and the COVID pandemic provided two such moments of clarity. The swift appearance and rapid development of practical AI applications on a mass scale has surprised and alarmed many people close to the industry. Geoffrey Hinton, widely credited with developing the intellectual foundation for modern AI, resigned from Google last week to warn about the dangers of an invention so disruptive that he regrets helping to develop it. Hinton’s warning follows a letter signed by some well-regarded tech analysts and industry leaders ranging from Steve Wozniak to Elon Musk cautioning that the unchecked development of AI could pose a threat to the stability or even the survival of civilization as we know it.

The pandemic also showed us how far we have come. When COVID hit, and a panicked population looked for ways to stay safe, Americans discovered something that made this pandemic different from all others: The development of both the hardware and software in the enormous invisible realm we vaguely refer to as “the internet” had reached the point where the majority of the productive activities of American society could be conducted by tens of millions of people without leaving their homes.

But the impact of internet-empowered

work from home (WFH) went far beyond helping us get past COVID. Without anybody really noticing, and with some of the world's most acute observers lamenting the end of progress, the technological basis for a total transformation of the American workplace, urban landscape, and even family had quietly taken shape offstage. The characteristic workplace of the Industrial Revolution, the large, centralized workspace to which white-collar workers commute like clockwork five days a week, is no longer an economic necessity. The megacity of the Industrial Revolution, with an economically dominant central business district surrounded by rings of suburbs, is no longer a natural and inevitable form dictated by the nature of work. The potential for mass WFH also points toward a profound change in the nature of the family of the industrial era—when, uniquely in human history, most children and most parents in non-elite families spent most of their waking hours living separately from each other.

Productivity statistics, which essentially divide the value of a worker's output by the amount of time spent on the job, do not capture these realities. Time spent at a desk is one thing, but the time spent commuting matters if we want to think more holistically. According to Census Bureau figures, the average commuter in the New York metro area spent roughly 75 minutes per day or 375 minutes per week commuting in 2019, the last year before the pandemic. During the pandemic, those workers produced essentially the same work without the commute, an efficiency gain of 15.6%. Factor in the reduced costs (gas, tolls, depreciation on cars, and bus and train fares), and it's clear that the WFH model offers significant increases in the efficiency of work.

The ultimate impact on social productivity is likely to be higher still. The vast and cumbersome transit systems that the pre-internet economies required are costly to build and maintain. They contribute significantly to both public and private costs. If future economic growth can be unshackled from the need to endlessly expand these systems, so that cities and states do not have to invest such eye-watering sums in adding

new lanes to existing freeways or building and operating new transit systems, a lot of money will be freed up. Similarly, workers will have fewer costs even as they enjoy more free time.

The big waves of change we call economic revolutions don't just increase the amount of economic activity in a particular society. They change the nature of economic activity in ways that can be difficult to capture or understand. At the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, many economists shared the view of the physiocrats that agricultural production was the true basis of society and that all others were parasites. For them, agricultural productivity was the only kind that mattered. Industry, finance, and the service sector were irrelevant and unproductive. For these economists, developments like the early steam engines and spinning jennies were meaningless epiphenomena.

That would change. The Industrial Revolution would force shifts in economic theory and promote massive changes in the way economists measured and valued economic activity. Similarly, today as the economy develops and both the means of production and the objects of production mutate into radically new forms, we will have to develop new ideas about how the economy works and new measurements to tell us how well we are doing. Progress in the industrial era involved, among other things, developing new and faster ways to move commuters to and from the workplace. Progress in the information age may mean finding ways to help them achieve greater productivity without leaving their homes.

For all the talk of stagnation, the Adams curve remains a basic fact of contemporary life, and our society can expect new waves of both social and economic change as the 21st century proceeds. The best way to understand how that reality shapes our political and cultural environment is to step back from the present and look at the long view—at the role that technological and social development has played in the story of our kind. The picture that emerges is both promising and troubling.

The story of our species is full of surprises and plot twists, but just about

as far back as we can explore the fossil record, the human family seems to be preoccupied with two principal fields of activity.

First, from the time of our remote ancestors to the present day, human beings have never stopped developing new tools and thinking up new ways to harness natural objects and forces to achieve human ends. Second, we've never ceased weaving thicker and more intricate webs of society, language, and culture. (The third thing we keep doing, having fights with other groups of humans, is, I think, best seen as a byproduct of our web-weaving activity.)

Whether measured by social or technical development, we've come a long way. Our culture and our technology are both unrecognizably complex compared to the achievements of our forebears. Our ancestors chipped flints on the savannah; today our telescopes scour remote galaxies for signs of the origins of the universe. We once lived in small family units and survived on what we hunted and gathered. Today we build vast cities and feast on exotic foods imported from all over the world.

Materialists like Karl Marx would say that technological progress drives cultural development. Idealists will tell you that it's the culture and above all the ideas that drive events. To understand the arguments, think of the piano. Materialistically inclined musicologists argue that progress in the construction of new and more sonorous pianos allowed Ludwig van Beethoven to develop increasingly complex music. Their colleagues of a more idealistic or romantic bent would maintain that the unceasing demands by Beethoven and his contemporaries for better pianos to play the music they heard in their heads drove piano manufacturers to build instruments that kept the customers happy.

These chicken and egg controversies are hard to settle, but for my part, I've always thought Aristotle had the right approach. His definition of human beings as political animals points us to an understanding of human nature that integrates the "spiritual" and "material" elements of our lives into a seamless whole. As animals, we are grounded in the material world, but it is also part of

our nature to engage with the world of abstractions and cultural meaning that go into our common existence. We are amphibians, intellectual and spiritual beings who spontaneously and naturally engage in logical reasoning, aesthetic creation, and moral discernment; and we are physical beings who live and act in the material world from which we draw our sustenance.

Whether you go with the materialists, the idealists, or us incarnationists, the outlines of the story are the same. As far back into the distant past as we can peer, human beings have been developing tools and techniques to impress their will on the natural environment, and they've been interacting with each other to create an ever-thicker web of social interaction and cultural meaning.

This may seem tediously obvious, but if there's one thing I've learned over the decades, it's the importance of interrogating the obvious. What could be more obvious and even humdrum than an apple falling from a tree? Many of the great discoveries and achievements come about because a determined person grabs hold of some apparently obvious phenomenon, demands to understand it and, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, says "I will not let you go until you bless me."

There are three admittedly obvious things about the long story of human progress that I find indispensable when it comes to making sense of our times. The first is that while technological change and social and cultural change go hand in hand, they do not always move in the same direction or at the same pace—a fact that is particularly important when the pace of change is extremely rapid.

Living as we do in a time of rapid technological and social change, the gap between the world our institutions and cultural values took shape in and the conditions we live in today means that many of our most important institutions do not work very well. It is as if we were trying to run the software of the 2020s on computer hardware and operating systems from the 1990s.

Our political parties and institutions took shape long before the internet and social media existed. Our government

**“It looks as if we are entering an age of permanent revolution, in which radical technological and social changes cascade across the world largely nonstop.”**

bureaucracies, our schools, and our legal system were all built for conditions that no longer exist. Many of our labor market policies assume that people will work for one employer for most of their working lives.

Unfortunately, this is not just a matter of institutional hardware. Many of our political ideas and ideological assumptions also reflect the conditions of an earlier era. If society's operating system is running on the equivalent of a long-outdated version of Windows, that makes real reform difficult to imagine, and harder still to carry out.

The bad news is that this creates a pervasive and self-reinforcing sense of alienation and frustration as people interact with many different institutions that are not fit for the purpose. The good news is that thinking clearly about these gaps and their causes can help us develop a reform agenda that can substantially improve the way America works—and those changes, because they make our institutions more efficient as well as more effective, will often save money rather than require greater spending.

The second feature of the story of human progress that matters today is that we happen to be caught up in one of the three great waves of change that most historians dignify with capital letters

and associate with revolutions. The Neolithic, Industrial, and Information Revolutions all mark major milestones in the human story. The reality that we are now living through one of them is a fundamental feature of our time and one of the chief causes behind many of the problems and controversies we face.

Revolution is one of the most over-used words in the political lexicon, but no lesser word adequately describes the scale, disruptiveness, and consequences of these three explosive events in the human story. The Neolithic Revolution, as the wave of changes connected to the development of settled agriculture is often called, was much more than a revolution in the ways people fed themselves. It was, literally, the dawn of history, as the first writing systems developed to handle the greater needs for permanent recordkeeping and commercial transaction under the new conditions. Those systems did not just enable the rise of bureaucracies and mercantile trade. Oral traditions were written down, forming the basis of organized religion. Scientific enquiries and philosophical debates could transcend the limits of space and time, as scholars could read the words of their predecessors.

The Neolithic Revolution was a time of explosive social change. The rise of cities and the elaborate political structures needed to govern them are just some of the consequences of the shift. Class systems developed along with increased specialization of labor as the relatively homogenous communities of previous eras gave way to a world of kings, nobles, priests, merchants, artisans, peasants, and slaves. Armies with professional soldiers appeared for the first time, along with wars of conquest.

The consequences of the Industrial Revolution were similarly far-reaching. At the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, cavalry officers still charged across battlefields sword in hand. The last great war of the industrial era concluded with the detonation of nuclear bombs. From the Enlightenment and the French Revolution to the rise of Marxism and the Russian and Chinese revolutions, the intellectual and political movements of the last 250 years have transformed the face of the world and led humanity on

a series of adventures both magnificent and tragic.

The development of railroads, automobiles, and airplanes introduced changes in human culture and civilization that we still struggle to process. Unprecedented developments in mining, industry, and methods of energy generation and transmission have covered the Earth with the works of mankind. Urbanization, the rise of the industrial working class, the growth of nationalism, the development of mass public education, the cultural impact of mass entertainments like Hollywood movies: Each of these changes emerged from the all-conquering impact of the Industrial Revolution.

These are still early days, but the Information Revolution seems fated to be more dramatic still. A cascade of interlocking, interrelated social and technological change is driving global upheaval at an unprecedented speed. Before its work is done, the Information Revolution is likely to drive social, political, cultural, economic, and geopolitical transformations more sweeping and profound than anything the Industrial Revolution produced.

This is both a wonderful and a terrifying thing. On the one hand, humanity is becoming more productive and affluent than ever before. Already the average person with a cellphone has faster access to more information than anybody in the history of the world. New methods of research incorporating artificial intelligence have already accelerated the development of new treatments for disease, and the promise of these and similar technologies is only beginning to be fulfilled.

But that is not the whole story. New technologies enable government and corporate snooping on a scale that would have astounded (and delighted) Josef Stalin. Manufacturing and clerical jobs have been automated out of existence or outsourced to poor countries at rates that match the collapse of family farming in the 19th and 20th centuries. IT-enabled weapons and cyberattacks could make wars even deadlier and harder to avoid. Global and national financial systems, experiencing unprecedented rates of change and development

as AI and other new technologies enable financial markets to achieve levels of complexity and velocity that the unaided human mind cannot comprehend, could experience devastating crises costing trillions of dollars and upending millions of lives.

Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution continues across much of the world. Factories are still springing up in rice paddies across Asia; the first textile mills are popping up in some African countries. The massive migration to the cities across much of Africa and Asia continues even as the disruptions of the Information Revolution reverberate around the globe. The children of illiterate herdsmen scan social media on their cellphones. The world has never seen anything like this concatenation of explosive transformations, and the world that emerges from this era will be like nothing humanity has ever seen or dreamed.

This brings us to another feature of the ancient story of human progress that matters especially in our era: the tendency of human development to accelerate and intensify over time.

For thousands of years, the pace of humanity's growing technological prowess and social complexity was almost unnoticeable over an individual lifespan. Archeologists can trace the spread of new techniques for chipping flints and making tools through prehistoric human society; historians and archeologists can work together to understand the spread of new metalworking techniques in the Bronze and Iron ages. But change was slow, and many people around the world never saw a tool or had an idea that would not have been familiar to their grandparents. And even when change happened, it was usually seen as an exceptional development, a stone falling into a pool that would, after the ripples died down, resume its previous and natural calm.

But over the last 700 years, the rate of human progress began perceptibly to pick up steam. Starting in Western Europe, the rate of technological and social change accelerated as a new kind of dynamism made itself felt. Windmills, double-entry bookkeeping, cannons,

printing presses: World-changing inventions poured forth at an unprecedented rate.

This acceleration changed the way that history works. The Neolithic Revolution, associated with settled agriculture and the invention of writing, came thousands of years before the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution was only about two centuries old when the Information Revolution started to hit late in the 20th century. Increasingly, especially with advances in genetics and the science of the brain coming so quickly, it looks as if we are entering an age of permanent revolution in which radical technological and social changes cascade across the world largely nonstop. For people in our time, rapid and accelerating change is the norm; we hardly know anymore what stability feels like.

Much of the intellectual history of the last two centuries revolves around the efforts of great thinkers to wrap their heads around the Great Acceleration. The family of intellectual and political movements generally known as the Enlightenment grew out of the recognition of thinkers ranging from Voltaire to Goethe that something fundamental in the human condition had changed. Philosophers like Kant and Hegel were not just, like many of their predecessors,

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interested in unraveling the nature of existence. They found themselves drawn to the study of change. They were aware that the social and technological basis of European society was changing from decade to decade and even year to year. They wanted to understand what this meant, why it was happening, and what it portended for the future.

A heightened awareness of human progress and its impact on events led to the integration of philosophy and politics. “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point however is to change it.” Those words inscribed on Karl Marx’s tomb highlight the new sense of mission that impelled generations of thinkers to turn their understanding of the historical process into a concrete political program. Liberals and socialists developed competing programs to accelerate the process of progress and share its benefits more widely based on their understanding of the technological and sociological forces at work.

These debates still echo in politics today, but many 21st-century thinkers and activists have increasingly moved from a fascination with the fact of change to an alarmed analysis of the effects of its relentlessly accelerating rate. Change itself is old hat for us today. In 18th-century Europe, reflective people understood that the rate of historical change was significantly greater than in past times, and they were conscious of ongoing progress in technology and society as the unavoidable background of their own lives. In the 21st century, we don’t just feel the presence of progress. We feel the acceleration of progress as the Information Revolution unfolds. It is the consequences of that acceleration—both as we experience it today and as we extrapolate it into the future—that engage our attention and, increasingly, our concern.

Progress in small, measured doses is an exhilarating and energizing thing. But can there be too much of it? Can an individual or a society overdose on progress? Can the rate of social, economic, cultural, and technological change drive a particular society into a political, psychological, and moral spiral of crisis and dysfunction?

“Apocalypse used to be a religious, even a mythological concept. But in our time, it is becoming a political possibility.”

Judging from the history of the Industrial Revolution, the answer is yes. The Russian Revolution and the Nazi rise to power are only two examples of societies overwhelmed by the social and political stresses that rapid modernization brought. The Industrial Revolution and the international conflicts that accompanied it shook the foundations of social order around the world and produced a uniquely stressful international situation. Tested to the breaking point by the combination of the domestic and international consequences of the Industrial Revolution, Germany fell into one kind of abyss, Russia into another.

They were not alone. The multiethnic, multicultural states that characterized much of 18th- and 19th-century Europe disappeared in orgies of bloodletting as the Hapsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman empires dissolved. The collapse of Iran into the dismal fanaticism of the Islamic Republic, the serial disasters of Maoist China, genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, and beyond: Each of these tragedies has its own distinct set of causes and consequences, but without the domestic and global upheavals associated with the Industrial Revolution and its numerous transformations of the human arena, it’s unlikely that any of these tragedies would have occurred.

The Anglo-American world was

spared the worst of these upheavals, and after the horrors of World War II much of Western Europe and Japan seemed to have made their peace with the Industrial Revolution. During the long Cold War era, and with even more confidence after the fall of the Soviet Union, most people in these societies assumed that the political stability and social peace they had finally managed to build was a lasting and permanent achievement.

But is it? What if the Information Revolution, as seems likely, arrives faster, propagates more widely, hits harder, and digs deeper than the Industrial Revolution ever did?

As the rate of change increases globally, even the nimblest and most adaptable societies must struggle to adjust. The social and political unrest and dissatisfaction in the United States, leading some to fear an irretrievable breakdown in our political system, reflects America’s difficulties in coming to terms with the latest wave of tech-driven social and economic change.

America’s difficulties are not unique. Both democratic and authoritarian political systems around the world are facing new strains under the pressure of economic disruption, cultural conflict, and the corrosive impacts of social media.

The sense is widespread today, among elites as well as among the public at large, that the dogs of technological and economic change have slipped the leash: that things are happening to us faster than we can understand, much less control. “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind,” as Emerson wrote in the turmoil of the Industrial Revolution. Today, as I’ve written before, many feel that we don’t surf the web as much as the web surfs us.

Faced with the evident consequences of an accelerating rate of progress on an already-frayed social fabric, both intellectuals and activists have, since the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, looked for ways to slow, stop, or reverse the incoming tide. It didn’t work for King Canute, and it didn’t work for the 19th-century Luddites or the 20th-century Agrarians. Genies are not easily persuaded to return to their bottles. Progress is not going

away, and change is not going to slow because humanity would like a mental health break.

The answer to the perils of progress cannot be less progress. As we've seen, the processes of technological and social development that we call progress are grounded in human nature itself. William Blake might have moaned about the "dark Satanic mills" overspreading the beautiful English countryside as the Industrial Revolution lurched into existence, but those mills could no more be stopped from proliferating than the sun can be stopped from rising.

Nor *should* those mills have been stopped. For all the evils of the Industrial Revolution, and for all the toxic social and environmental consequences we have inherited from it, both the material and social conditions of human life substantially improved because of it. Billions of people moved from illiteracy to fuller participation in the riches of human knowledge, from subordination to fuller participation in political and cultural life, from subsistence to affluence and from bondage to freedom. To cite a much higher authority, the blind saw, the deaf heard, the lame walked, and the poor had good news shared with them.

The Industrial Revolution was both soaring triumph and searing tragedy, glorious cultural and scientific achievement and unspeakable cruelty and crime. Far from being unique to that epoch, the mix of great good and great evil is what we see wherever we look in the long annals of our kind. The rise of the Roman Empire, the allied victory in World War II, the decolonization of Africa, and the history of the United States of America all combine these features of extraordinary accomplishment and shocking horror.

That is how we human beings roll. Our story of progress is not a made-for-children television special. History is rated X, not G, crammed to the bursting point with violence, injustice, foul language, nudity, and smoking. We've sailed on bloody seas to get to where we are, and the outlook is for more of the same. Trigger warnings should be posted in every delivery room. The world is

not a safe space, and the arc of history is nobody's poodle.

The way to cope with the onrushing waves of change and upheaval at home and abroad is to use the unprecedented financial, technological, cultural, and intellectual resources that progress creates to address the wrenchingly urgent and stupefyingly complex problems it inevitably brings. As a political movement the Luddites made nothing better for anyone. It was the wealth that the Industrial Revolution created, and the new forms of social and political organization that accompanied it, that allowed reformers to make the mills less dark and satanic over time.

If we are to surf the waves of change now rolling toward us instead of being overwhelmed by them, it will be because we have the wit, the wisdom, and the maturity to keep our psychological balance as we learn to bring the unprecedented resources of the Information Revolution effectively to bear on the unique demands of our time.

That would be a difficult task if the only challenge we faced came from the accelerating pace of change that defines our era. But there is one other complexity to consider. As the pace of change surges at an ever-increasing rate, the prospect of a fundamental change in the conditions of human existence looms larger from year to year. Will AI supersede humanity, leaving us inferior to the machines we have made? Will we upload our consciousness into cyberspace, perhaps downloading again into cloned designer bodies? Will we blow ourselves up in a nuclear holocaust or destroy ourselves in a series of climate catastrophes?

Apocalypse used to be a religious, even a mythological concept. But in our time, it is becoming a political possibility. The Silicon Valley tech lords speak of the Singularity even as some of them invest billions in longevity and consciousness research they hope will make them immortal. Climate activists warn of an imminent catastrophe even as the great powers rearm.

Progress has done many things for us, and few of us would exchange the dentistry, for example, of our time with that of even the recent past. But

progress turns out to be paradoxical. Human ingenuity has made us much safer from natural calamities. We can treat many diseases, predict storms, build dams both to prevent floods and to save water against drought, and many other fine things. Many fewer of us starve than in former times, and billions of us today enjoy better living conditions than our forebears dreamed possible.

Yet if we are safer from most natural catastrophes, we are more vulnerable than ever to human-caused ones. Not only do we all live under the shadow of nuclear weapons and artificial general intelligence. We also live under the threat of financial catastrophe from the unanticipated convulsions of a banking system that few of us, and perhaps none of us, really understand. The impact of human industrial and agricultural activity on the natural environment threatens our future whether from climate change globally or the effects of air pollution in our hometowns. The social anomie characteristic of a decadent Blue Model society combined with the availability of cheap drugs contributes to more than 100,000 premature deaths in the United States each year. The 20th century saw stunning advances in medicine that saved millions of lives; millions more were lost in the fierce and unrelenting wars and repressions of that terrible time.

While the ever-accelerating and ascending wave of human progress has brought us to peaks of achievement and affluence that our ancestors could scarcely imagine, it has both failed to keep us safe from the most dangerous predators of all and—to the degree that the rate of progress has become a major force of destabilization—progress itself may now be the greatest source of danger humans face.

As I wrote in my last essay, we live in a singular century, and it is impossible to grasp either the psychology or the politics of our time without considering how this new reality affects a world that is already laboring under unprecedented stress. ■

*This article was originally published on May 08, 2023.*

## THE REST

→ Following a security threat that prompted a Michigan high school to shut down for two days, and citing increased worries about keeping students safe amid the rising number of shootings across the country, **Flint school district officials will ban the use of backpacks on school grounds** at least until the end of the academic calendar. “In my 15 years of service here in Flint Community Schools, I’ve never felt the way I do now,” director of student services, Ernest Steward, said at a meeting announcing the district’s decision. In 2021 at a high school about 30 miles from Flint, one 15-year-old student shot 11 people and killed four students, though several parents in the Flint district were skeptical that the backpack ban could effectively deter a student determined to attempt a shooting. A Bureau of Justice Statistics report counted a **total of 93 school shootings during the 2020-21 school year**, the highest in more than two decades.

→ **A record-breaking 11,000 migrants were apprehended on Tuesday while attempting to cross the border**, already surpassing the 10,000 daily surge that officials expected to arrive as the Title 42 border law expires on Thursday. “We’re already breaking and we haven’t hit the starting line,” one DHS official told NBC News, which also reported the Biden administration is preparing a directive to Border Patrol “to begin releasing migrants into the United States without court dates or the ability to track them.” That policy, an unnamed official said, will be applied “only to migrants who have been carefully vetted,” though it’s unclear yet what that vetting process will entail. Currently, border processing centers equipped to only hold 18,500 people are beyond capacity, with an estimated 27,000 in the facilities. “It’s a public health danger. We will start having people die,” the official said.

→ After months teasing the big reveal, House Oversight Chairman James Comer has unveiled the findings of his wide-ranging **investigation into the Biden family’s business ties to foreign entities, though the Wednesday press conference and 30-page memo spearheaded by Comer lacked the smoking gun that directly implicated the president himself**. Focusing on entities in Romania and China, the investigation cited **no illegal activity while documenting some \$10 million flowing to a network of businesses with ties to Biden family members** and several associates with the memo asserting that “it is not credible” the president wasn’t at least aware of the deals. However, there was no evidence presented that substantiated the president’s involvement. “We believe that the president has been involved in this from the very beginning. Obviously, we’re going to continue to look,” Comer said, noting that this was still the “beginning stages” of the investigation. So far, the details released will likely add more woes for the president’s son, Hunter Biden, given new revelations of his business entanglement with a Romanian official who’s been accused of corruption.

→ After deliberating for around three hours on Tuesday, a Manhattan jury said that **Donald Trump had sexually assaulted writer E. Jean Carroll in a New York clothing store in the 1990s, and then defamed her by calling her a liar**. The nine-member jury voted unanimously in favor of Carroll, awarding her roughly \$5 million in punitive and compensatory damages. It’s likely that the decision will do little to sway public opinion about the former president as he maintains his frontrunner status for the Republican nominee in the current 2024 election contest.

## THE BIG STORY

**On Sunday, President Biden ordered that the flags at the White House and all public buildings be flown at half-staff in honor of the eight people massacred on Saturday by a gunman armed with an AR-15-style rifle at an outlet mall in Allen, Texas. It was the nation’s 199th mass shooting this year.**

Since 2021, Texas alone has seen more than a dozen mass killings with four or more victims. Family members of those killed in the Uvalde school shooting last year have joined the effort by some state lawmakers to increase the minimum age to purchase an AR-15 rifle from 18 to 21, though the bill wasn’t expected to receive enough votes on the floor of the Texas House despite unexpectedly passing a committee vote on Monday. Speaking to the press before a vigil for the victims, who ranged in ages from 5 to 61, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said he would not seek to tighten gun laws because they would not stem the rising number of shootings. Rather, the governor sought to focus on the “root cause, which is addressing the mental health problems behind” these shootings.

—Sean Cooper

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# How Hannah Arendt's Zionism Helped Create American Gay Identity

The pioneering gay writer and editor Michael Denny, who died on April 12, learned from his teacher Arendt that an individual can be free only as part of a free community

BY BLAKE SMITH

**H**annah Arendt left behind little in the way of an obvious institutional or intellectual legacy during her brief years at the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought during the 1960s. The student who best understood her ideas—and the example of her life—as a summons to action in the world, was Michael Denny, who died recently, shortly after the publication of a memoir-anthology, *On Christopher Street*. The book records how his teacher inspired him to abandon his Ph.D., follow her to New York, and found what would become America's most important magazine for gay men—*Christopher Street*, along with its associated publishing line, Stonewall Inn Editions—in the late 1970s and 1980s, those pivotal years that saw first the emergence of a distinct gay male urban culture and then its near-annihilation from AIDS.

Arendt would not seem to be an obvious inspiration for a gay men's magazine. Even if there is a certain chain-smoking archness in her 1964 interview for the German television show *Zur Person*, she is not among the straight women whom gay men single out for a typically ambivalent yet ardent brand of admiration, in what is usually a perverse sort of drag-performance-by-proxy. Arendt's political philosophy, organized around claims about human nature supported by examples taken from ancient Athens

(while engaged in a covert but insistent critique of her own former mentor, Martin Heidegger, who had awakened her to philosophy before covering himself with shame as a proud member of the Nazi party), can seem both frustratingly distant from the historical present and icily indifferent to the problems of minorities. Denny's insight, however, is to have grasped how the apparently abstract universals of Arendt's teaching grew out of her urgent engagement on behalf of the Jewish people in the 1930s and '40s.

Reading Arendt's philosophical writing in light of her Zionist activism from that era, Denny saw how central concepts of her later work made what can be easily dismissed as “lifestyle politics”—the publishing of magazines and novels; the demand for a space of cultural distinction—not a distraction from “real” politics, but an urgent task that makes politics, in Arendt's special and widely misunderstood meaning, possible. Arendt, Denny continually reminds readers in *On Christopher Street*, held that a person can be connected to humanity in general, to his own uniqueness, and indeed to the possibility of transforming himself, only insofar as he is a member of a free community—of a group that possesses the power to build and maintain what Arendt called a “world,” a domain in which members of a group can appear to each other, revealing, remaking, and remembering themselves.

Today, Arendt has many admirers in American academia, and a wide midwit readership that consults her writings for political and moral apothegms applicable to our ongoing crisis, whose origins they imagine as coming from the right and never from inside their own intellectual homes. Every university of any repute has on staff some left-liberal scholar who mistakenly sees in Arendt an ancestor of her own utterly conventional politics while doing her best to ignore the difficult, apparently reactionary positions Arendt took on everything from racial integration to immigration and the welfare state. If Arendt had been a man, she would have been, if not “canceled,” then consigned by right-thinking scholars (and therefore cherished by right-wing cranks) among such other Teutonic anachronisms as Oswald Spengler and Eric Voegelin. Arendt is spared this fate at the price of being misunderstood.

She gets no better treatment from her centrist humanist admirers, who transform her into a defender of the warmed-over, 19-century liberalism that passes among them for “free thinking.” Her work—with its horror of cliché and mental conformity, its appreciation for the exchange of diverse perspectives, and its appeal to the fragile vitality of independent thought (its reminder, indeed, that these two words form a pleonasm)—is one of the fragments that holdouts within the academy shore up against their ruin. To find a prestigious ally (a woman! a refugee!) in their resistance to the identitarian posturing that has become essential to elite self-performance, they make of Arendt a liberal individualist, an understanding to which Arendt would surely have responded with a Germanic feminine version of the genteel revulsion that Marshall McLuhan summons for the moviegoers in *Annie Hall*.

Arendt's famous 1963 letter to Gershom Scholem, who had reproached his old friend in the aftermath of her reporting on the Eichmann trial for her apparent lack of love of the Jewish people, seems, but only seems, to confirm the cosmopolitan tote bag reimagination of the philosopher. Her famous statement, “I

have never in my life ‘loved’ any people or collective ... I indeed love ‘only’ my friends,” seems to find Arendt a kindred spirit of those who wish to thwart our hastening spiral of mutually antagonizing collective narcissisms by insisting—in an apparently more humane version of Margaret Thatcher’s dictum—that there is no such thing as society, only individuals. But, as Arendt continued in her letter, if she could not “love” the Jewish people it was because “I cannot love myself.” Her response should be read not as a declaration of independence from the demands of the collective, but as a political equivalent of Cordelia’s speech to Lear.

Arendt did not remind Scholem that from 1933 to 1949 she had abandoned scholarship for Zionist activism, sometimes at personal risk, engaging in everything from the practical organizing of relief efforts to writing essays for German- and English-language magazines like *Aufbau* and *Menorah Journal*—in which she called, with urgent anger sharper and hotter than any merely speakable “love,” for a Jewish army and a new Jewish self-consciousness. Arendt’s life had for so many years been lived for the Jewish people, she implied, that she could not look on “them” as something separate from “herself.” She was not proclaiming the sovereignty of the individual, but rather the nonexistence of the latter in isolation from the group that provides its stage of action and frame of meaning—what Arendt called its “world.”

Arendt’s Zionism was as idiosyncratic—and to many, as frustratingly perplexing—as her view of a person’s constitutive mix of personal uniqueness and unwithdrawable membership in a human community into which we find ourselves thrown. She called for Jewish unity while acerbically critiquing every Jewish political institution, tradition, and perspective, from Europe to the United States to Palestine—advocating an implausible postwar order in which a Jewish homeland would be secured as part of a vast post-Ottoman federation of nationalities extending from Europe to the Middle East.

Her disappointed hopes, her years of struggle alongside and against other

activists, and, as she reminded Scholem, her sense of propriety—her inner alertness that to speak of such things would be an obscene self-sundering, bringing to light feelings that have their authentic life only in intimate darkness—perhaps explain why in her later reflections on politics, such as *The Human Condition* (1958) and *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt wrote as if she had not spent a decade and a half as a Jewish activist. Some would say, hardly as if she were a Jew. But the political experience she did not acknowledge having was specifically Jewish, and the path to the rediscovery of what she often called the hidden treasures of ancient Greek thought went directly through Zionism.

Indeed, many of the claims Arendt makes in her work after the 1940s should be understood as translations into universalistic terms of lessons she derived from her reflections on the world-historical emergency of European Jewry. What she described in later years as the problems of modernity—the end of authoritative traditions for orienting moral and political thought and action, the dangerous seductions of Marxism and ethno-nationalist fascism, and the stupidity of self-satisfied liberal elites unable to recognize these desperate conditions—were a cosmopolitanized version of the story she had told in her Zionist writings about, and to, Jews. She saw the latter as unable to return to traditional religion (cut off from it forever by the failure of Sabbatai Zevi’s messianism and the transformations of the Jewish Enlightenment and Reform movement) and faced with the task—from which communism and Revisionist Zionism threatened to divert it—of building a specifically secular Jewish “world” anchored by, although by no means taking place only in, its historic homeland.

So what about Arendt’s vision appealed to Michael Denny, a young man from a working-class Irish Catholic background? In part, simply the brilliance of the teacher. As a friend of his told me after his death, Denny had met Arendt while working as a busboy in the faculty dining room. He would talk with her as he cleaned tables; gradually, she began

timing her meals to coincide with his shifts. Arendt convinced Denny, then an undergraduate with dreams of serving in the newly founded Peace Corps, to stay on at the university for doctoral study under her supervision. When she left Chicago in 1967 for the New School in New York, he followed her, continuing to sit in on her seminars even as he left academia for publishing.

In an essay written during these years about her own teacher, “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” Arendt recalled that he had made her believe that “thinking can be learned.” That is—and rather contrary to the solitary vision of thinking Heidegger provides in much of his written work—thinking, however much it happens only within an isolated person, is a relation between people. Arendt, too, taught thinking; and, in a manner surpassing her teacher, taught how thinking is an uncanniness that connects and recombines us.

Arendt taught *thinking*—and she taught that thinking requires what she called a “world.” Just as the student needs a teacher, the thinker, in order to think at all, needs a community whose members she can address and argue with. It is not a question, of course, of creating a community out of thin air, or of taking an abstract, universal humanity as one’s audience. Rather the task, which is explicit in Arendt’s Zionist writing but only implicit in her later work, is one of more fully and expansively elaborating the world we already share with those with whom we are by virtue of historical circumstance, but perhaps not yet by virtue of our own conscious concern, in community.

Denny saw *Christopher Street* magazine, which he helped found in 1976, and its associated publishing line Stonewall Inn Editions at St. Martin’s Press, as instruments for building a gay male world. In Arendt’s theory, a world is sustained by, and maintains the possibility of the exchange of, different perspectives on what interlocutors understand as being—albeit in a not yet fully agreed-upon way—the same object. In her later work, this is usually presented as a problem of “judgment” in which people have diverse points of view about some third thing—whether

they are making aesthetic judgments about, say, a painting, or ethical judgments about an action. But in the case that most compelled her early thought, as in the case that preoccupied Denny, the “object” at stake was the supposedly common identity that did not quite unite those who debated its meaning.

For it was not at all obvious how different sorts of Jewish people from across the globe constituted a single Jewish “world” as a stage for debate about so-called Jewish politics. Indeed, Arendt in her Zionist writing insisted that this world and this politics would have to be created through exchanges of judgments, and through appeals to a community that as yet existed more in the eyes of its enemies than in the hearts of potential future members.

Homosexuality is perhaps only a little less ancient than Adam and Eve, but, like Zionism, *gay* male life is a much more recent creation, one elaborated by activists who tried to transform themselves into something like a people. In its cultural politics of building a gay male world, *Christopher Street* featured poetry and short stories, helping launch the careers of the major gay writers of the late 20th century, such as Edmund White, Andrew Holleran, and Larry Kramer. It also ran many essays that contributed to an emerging awareness that there was a gay male canon in American letters, running from Walt Whitman and Hart Crane to John Ashbery and James Merrill.

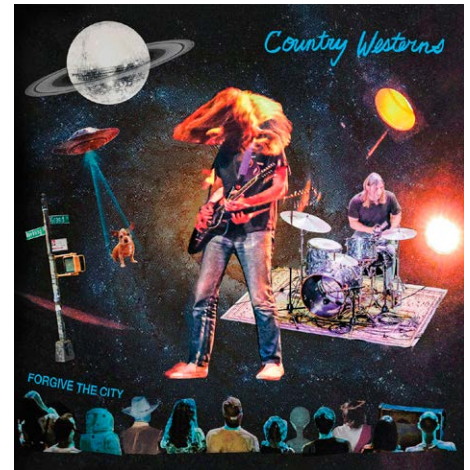
*Christopher Street* was by no means the only venue for the construction of a gay world, but Denny and his colleagues were perhaps the sharpest-minded defenders of its specificity—their demand that it be a world *for* gay men. In a debate that has now been largely forgotten, but which dominated gay intellectual life in the 1970s, Denny’s Arendtian perspective, with its debts to Zionism, was ranged against a vision of politics in which gay men were to be a kind of shock force for a broader sexual-cum-socialist revolution.

*Christopher Street*’s main rival for the minds of gay male intellectual readers was the Boston-based *Fag Rag*, a self-proclaimed “radical” left newspaper. *Fag Rag*’s writership did not see

gay men as a distinct group that needed to build a world of their own. Rather, it saw them as one of a number of oppressed groups with a common interest in overthrowing heterosexual, patriarchal, white, Christian, etc. power. Its pages gave equal space to women and men (*Christopher Street*, after a few experimental power-sharing issues with lesbians, booted them from the magazine). It featured gay men who made feminist-inspired critiques of masculinity, pornography, and leather, while promoting a supposedly sex-positive, gender-bending neopaganism. They were the eunuch vanguard of the post-male alphabet soup left.

In the years before the AIDS crisis (1976-81) *Christopher Street* did not have an obvious line on “sexual liberation” countering that of *Fag Rag*. While some of its articles cheekily investigated the history of glory holes where anonymous oral sex was on offer, many others lamented what was already seen by many gay intellectuals as the excessive hedonism of the era immediately before AIDS. One March 1980 essay critiqued the “Tyranny of the Penis”—a title that could have been taken from an issue of *Fag Rag*. But promiscuity tended to be seen as problematic because it might undermine the possibility of forming stable couples among gay men, rather than because it epitomized the patriarchal power of the phallus (*Christopher Street*’s contributors did not evince any great opposition to the latter). They tended to be sympathetic observers or active participants in the shift over the course of the late ’70s toward a more masculine gay male style of dress and comportment, featuring denim, cowboy boots, and other items of masculine accessorizing.

The lack of agreement, however, was the point—*Christopher Street* was meant to be a space in which gay men could disagree with each other about what gay men should do (what they should wear, read, and suck), and even about what it meant to be a gay man, provided they agreed that there are, and should be, gay men. *Christopher Street* did grant occasional room for feminist perspectives, from an interview with Gloria Steinem to a short story by Andrea Dworkin, and



## Album of the Week

### Country Westerns *Forgive the City*

The era of the hipster Bruce Springsteen revival has been gone long enough to make a comeback in 2023. An album like the Country Westerns’ *Forgive the City*, their new second album and their first in three years, shows that looking to rock heroes still pays off.

Springsteen looms large over the Country Westerns, as do The Replacements, The Heartbreakers, and X. There’s a ramshackle sense to the band, which its members describe as “punk rock chutzpah with a classic rock sheen.” What that means becomes clear on “Knucklen,” *Forgive*’s opening track. “If I’m candid I feel mean / I’ve been drunk in all dreams / When they shut down the street, it was a kind of relief,” spits out Joey Plunkett, the project’s lead singer.

That’s a reference to COVID, which hit the Country Westerns hard. During the pandemic’s peak, one of the band’s mentors, David Berman of the Silver Jews, died just before going on tour with them. In the wake of Berman’s death, Plunkett described the band as being “back at square one with the ‘we’re just this garage band, who cares’ mentality.”

That loss reverberates through *Forgive the City*, but so does the need to keep pushing forward. The Country Westerns are equal parts despair and glory.

—David Meir Grossman

to representatives of the Marxist left like Jean-Paul Sartre. But these were presented as glimpses on something of potential interest to an imagined gay community, not as voices that must be, as we say today, “centered”—as a moral-political teaching to which gay men should conform.

Michel Foucault—whose thinking in his last years was deeply informed by his encounter with the emerging American gay culture presented in its pages (and thus, in a strange roundabout way, to Hannah Arendt)—explained in an interview with *Christopher Street* that he was excited to see that gay men were, thanks to its efforts, at last able to imagine themselves as political agents in their own right without recourse to feminism, Marxism, and other rhetorics of the left. Foucault had perhaps read Denny’s 1981 “manifesto,” published in *Christopher Street*, consisting of 16 “propositions” for gay politics. The central proposition, No. 8, began with a quote from Arendt, in which she claimed that “a man can live as a man,” that is as an individual (although perhaps with a special unintended resonance in its new context as a call for gay male specificity), only “within the framework of a people.” The word “framework” is deliberate and significant. “A people” is something *made*—to be sure, out of existing materials. Culture—the exchange of perspectives in philosophy, fiction, criticism—creates the framework within which we can act together. Denny concludes, “a gay culture is a political necessity for our survival.” The point of gay politics, Denny insisted, was not to make gay men’s discontent a kind of lever for the overthrow of our regime, but to build “power” so that gay men could invent forms of life together, creating the cultural resources by which they could pursue their necessarily mutual happiness.

Many readers took issue with Denny’s propositions, and particularly with his ninth, which rejected the *Fag Rag* line that gay politics was just one iteration of a broader “social question.” In a response to discontented readers’ letters, charging Denny of decoupling gay liberation from its alliance with the left, he answered that “genuflecting

“If Arendt had been a man, she would have been, if not ‘canceled,’ then consigned by right-thinking scholars among such other Teutonic anachronisms as Oswald Spengler and Eric Voegelin.”

before the icon of socialism,” as he, in passing, charged his longtime collaborator Ed White of doing, “is an act of cultural piety, not political insight... a very weak basis on which to build a new politics.” (When I emailed White to ask about Denny and his Arendtian view of politics, White replied tersely that he had never known Denny to speak of her—a statement that contrasts with the memories of others in their circle.)

Denny countered that a “radical gay politics” was one reflecting and contributing to the creation of the forms of gay male life that were developing in the present—“not to the century-old theoretical tradition of the left, which strikes me as *intellectually* conservative, even old-fashioned.” That tradition subsumed supposedly local and contingent struggles in an overarching agenda intended to bring about a new social order. It had a place for gay men qua gay men (or for Jews qua Jews, women qua women, etc.) only to the extent that their social movements could be interpreted as vehicles for progress toward a universal egalitarian horizon in which antagonisms would, at last, be dissolved.

Although many activists and academics try to prove the contrary, the left’s grand horizons have often disappointed gay men. For much of the 20th century, their primary manifestation was

Marxism, which saw male homosexuality either as a revolting bourgeois (even fascist) practice—or as one of the many sites for political combat to be redirected toward the revolution. Gay men who desired the freedom to create a specifically gay male culture were at best nuisances and at worst enemies.

The New Left of the ’60s and ’70s was only apparently more open to sexual minorities. If it promoted “sexual liberation,” it was in order to use gay men as a battering ram against traditional morality—not least masculinity. That gay men remain *men*—that their stubborn inassimilable particularity consists in nothing less than their attachment to masculinity, even if it might strike Judith Butler as “parodic”—made them permanently suspect allies of the post-Marxist cultural left that saw men (white men anyhow) as the oppressor class. Attachment to masculinity, however much attenuated today, makes gays equally unreliable members of the coalition of supposedly marginalized groups imagined to constitute the “progressive” or “woke” left, or whatever it is one might call the current ruling ideology of the Democratic Party and its associated elites in corporate life, media, and academia.

Arendt was a critical reference point not only for Denny but a number of other contributors to *Christopher Street*, who often compared the gay male experience in the 1970s with the historical experience of Jews in Europe and the United States. Some of the appeal of such parallels, doubtless, was that so many writers and subscribers were New Yorkers, whether Jewish or not, who were living in a milieu where debates about Jewish identity, culture and politics were commonplace. Moreover Jews—like gays and unlike most women, Black people, prisoners or the other oppressed groups whose troubles were given much place in *Fag Rag*—had to think about their relationship to the non-Jewish world with some connection to the problem of “passing,” of having it within their power, to an extent that was always uncertain, shifting, and never total, to hide or reveal their “identity.”

It was no accident that the

existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre had made Jewishness (in the 1944 essay “Antisemite and Jew”) and homosexuality (in his 1952 book *Saint Genet*) special topics of analysis; they illustrate, with particular clarity, what he understood as the complex union of determination and freedom that makes up every human life. We are born with certain traits, and involuntarily acquire others in the course of living. We are said by others to be such-and-such kinds of people on the basis of these traits, and are treated accordingly. Thrust by our bodies, desires, environments, families, cultures into roles, we are free within them, to a degree we can perhaps never rightly know, to act them out in various ways, including, sometimes, to deny them and “pass” as something else.

Gay men and Jews—that is, those homosexuals who choose to live a distinctly modern “gay” life and those Jews who, with whatever relation they bear toward their religious traditions, live in a secular society—have seemed at times to instantiate the problem all modern people face of having to invent a life for themselves out of materials we have not chosen, to wrest, in some measure, autobiography out of biography. For the contributors of *Christopher Street*, Arendt’s ideas could be a call to resoluteness in addressing this challenge—or the grounds for a condemnation of what seemed to be the sterility of gay and Jewish life in America.

In a 1981 essay, “The New York Gay Cult, the Jewish Question ... and Me,” journalist Neil Alan Marks used Arendt’s writing on political theory and Zionism to critique the “bourgeois” gay male scene that had emerged in New York, San Francisco and, to varying intensities, other major American cities. Gay and Jews in the United States, he argued, were still at the level of what Arendt had described as the “*parvenu*” Jews of prewar Western Europe. These *parvenus* were often more “European” in taste and consciousness than the gentile elites they thought they were imitating. But, as Arendt saw it, they lacked both religious and political virtues. They had lost the faith of their ancestors but had not become true secular elites; they merely play-acted as wealthy

“The innermost meaning of the acted deed and the spoken word is independent of victory and defeat and must remain untouched by any eventual outcome.”

Frenchmen, Germans, etc., and as beneficent leaders of charity organizations that cared for their ostensibly less fortunate brethren in the same manner that animal-rights activists care for animals: as ignorant recipients of benevolence.

Instead of building a modern, secular, Jewish world, Arendt implied, *parvenu* elites kept playing to a gentile audience that regarded them with condescension or hatred. Their charity to poor and foreign Jews was not an attempt to create a world in common with them by recognizing them as both an audience and actors on Judaism’s stage. It was because they were alienated from the very possibility of, or desire for, such a world, that *parvenu* Jewish leaders were so unable to respond to the steadily worsening challenge of antisemitism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Marks drew parallels between what he saw as the American Jewish *parvenu* experience and that of the emerging gay culture. American Jews with a “traditional humanist middle-class” sensibility hoped they, or at any rate their children, could succeed at “making it”—that combination of economic success and social climbing—“without taking advantage of anyone along the way.” Likewise, gays had hoped for a kind of “sexual liberation” that would free them from legal repression and moral stigma

while also giving freer rein to the “universal desire to be sexually exploiting and exploited.” Both groups wielded progressive slogans appealing to the possibility of a gentler, less discriminatory America, while organizing their personal lives around competition for status—which is indeed another name for the American dream.

Denneny’s account in *On Christopher Street*, understandably but regrettably, writes out voices of despair like Marks’, which reveal how, even on the verge of the AIDS crisis, some who shared his intellectual debts to Arendt saw a much bleaker picture than he did. Denneny likewise wrote out of his story how Charles Ortleb, for many years *Christopher Street*’s editor-in-chief, drew on Arendt in a hyperventilating 1979 essay that treated the release of William Friedkin’s film *Cruising*, set in the gay S&M subculture, as a prelude to anti-gay hatred that could culminate in something like the Holocaust. In a grim irony, as AIDS devastated the world of *Christopher Street* in the following years, Ortleb frequently denied, in print, any connection between the disease and sex, making himself responsible for innumerable deaths (having survived the crisis, Ortleb now devotes himself to COVID denialism—battling in both struggles the same foe, Dr. Fauci).

Invoking the ideas of Arendt—and using them to build a shared world in which ideas can be exchanged among members of a group to enlarge their inseparably collective and individual freedom—offers no guarantees of decent outcomes, anymore than it did for Arendt herself, whose campaign for a particular, perhaps impossible, kind of Zionism linked to a peaceful, federal solution in Palestine, ended in a failure on which she rarely reflected in public. But Arendt’s legacy still challenges us, as she put it in *The Human Condition*, to consider “that the innermost meaning of the acted deed and the spoken word is independent of victory and defeat and must remain untouched by any eventual outcome, by their consequences for better or worse ... action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness.” In this breathtaking departure from all conventional standards,



her declaring the building of a world for magnificent action and thoughts to be as much beyond good and evil as it is beyond prudent and foolish, Arendt shows herself to be, no less than Foucault and more than her despisers like Costin Alamiariu, a radical heir to Nietzsche whom we have only begun to understand.

Denneny's 1979 essay "The Privilege of Ourselves: Hannah Arendt on Judgment" is the only scholarly paper in which he addresses the work of his mentor. It begins where Arendt ended, with the opening sentence: "After Hannah Arendt's death in December 1975, friends found in her typewriter the title page, with two epigrams, of her projected work on *Judging*." It then brilliantly retraces the problem of

judgment throughout Arendt's work, showing how the thread linking her otherwise confounding redefinitions of terms like "world" and "politics" is the exchange of different perspectives on a common object or problem, within a community of interlocutors whose points of view vary but who remain committed to communication and to the sense that what they are disagreeing about is in some not-yet-defined way *the same thing*.

For the next four decades, Denneny pursued what he called, in an email to me, "Arendtian praxis, putting many of her ideas into practice in a concrete way" by building a world of gay letters in which the pursuit of individual excellence within a community of

competitors, admirers, peers, and fellow strivers was directed toward an open-ended freedom to invent new forms of life. When I emailed him earlier this spring, for an essay on their relationship that has suddenly become an obituary, he was reading again through her complete works. A few days before his death, he told me that he had not read his 1979 essay since it had been published, and, looking back over it, in what he did not know were some of his last hours, he was relieved to find that he and Arendt had been struggling with the same problems. To continue that struggle is to continue their world. ■

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FOOD

# The Waiter

He found success as an actor and a baseball player, but this may be the role David Mogentale was born to play

BY JULIAN TEPPER

**O**n a morning shortly after Christmas, David Mogentale was balancing two smoked salmon platters and a plate of latkes in his hands and screaming at a line of customers snaking through the store to get out of his way. The wait at Barney Greengrass, at Amsterdam Avenue and 86th Street, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, is often up to an hour long, and those waiting can end up blocking the path of the busy staff.

At 63, Mogentale is no longer in the same shape that made him a baseball star at Auburn. But at 6-foot-3, 230 pounds, his imposing physical presence is reminiscent of the actor who would serve as understudy to both Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly in the 2000 revival

of Sam Shepard's *True West*. That Mogentale would also get cast as a drug dealer on *Law & Order* is not particularly surprising—his bright, aquamarine eyes and salty goatee suggest something slightly menacing. He wears a black Barney Greengrass baseball cap over a bald pate, his brown fringe neatly trimmed, and a white uniform on top and bottom with a pair of red Nike sneakers. Mogentale, known around Barney Greengrass as the Big Boy, has a talent for taunting and razzing the customers, while keeping them on his side. His methods have been developed over the course of decades and are exceptionally well-honed.

That same day, around the midmorning rush, a woman in a white, fur-lined parka with long blond hair cascading out from under a Yankees knit skullly

was telling Mogentale that he *had* to wait on her.

"We had so much fun with you last time."

"I don't remember you," said Mogentale, tallying up a check on a waiter's pad. "When was this?"

"Just about a week ago."

"Yeah, well, no, I don't remember. But you see that guy right there behind the desk? That's the owner, Gary. Go up to him and say, 'The Big Boy really makes the whole experience. I wouldn't even come here if not for the Big Boy'—go up to him and tell him *exactly* that, word for word."

Mogentale refers to his waiting style in the same way he does his acting: "brutal." He so identifies with the term that it has found its way into the username of his email address: *brutaljoe*. The "joe" refers to *Killer Joe*, the eponymous character in the play by Tracy Letts, which Mogentale introduced to New York theatergoers in 1994 at the now defunct 29th Street Rep. Mogentale sees brutality as a kind of calling. Say the word and his eyes open wide and he comes alive, a devious and playful imp. In the highest grossing entertainment product in history, *Grand Theft Auto V*, Mogentale provides the voice of one of the stars, Nervous Ron Jakowski. It's a voice that overflows with Mogentale's playfulness,

but also his passion for playing the role of the bad guy. Mogentale is Hobbesian by nature, but he is also an artist—an artist of the dramatic arts, and, unmistakably, of the Jewish dining room.

For the better part of the 20th century, a waiter at a New York Jewish eatery lived by his tongue: “What do you want?” “Hurry up, I don’t got all day!” “Here’s your check, now pay up front!” Kindness and patience weren’t his strong suits. Ask for more coffee, a clean fork, an extra slice of rye, and you would very likely never see him again. At the end of a meal, he would tell you it was a “real pleasure,” and then roll his eyes. But the death knell on this brusque, no nonsense, quip-happy waiter has been sounding for a while. In a 2006 article for *GQ*, Alan Richman said that the closing of Ratner’s, the iconic Delancey Street kosher dairy, marked “the end of the era of the professional Jewish waiter.” A blog operated from 2013-15 by David Manheim, a waiter at Katz’s Deli on Houston Street, was called “The Last Jewish Waiter.” Carnegie Deli is gone—Lindy’s and the Stage Deli, too.

Barney Greengrass is one of the few remaining appetizing stores from that bygone era when Jewish cuisine thrived throughout the city. The founder, Barney Greengrass, first opened shop on Amsterdam and 114th Street, serving smoked fish and pickled herring to local Jewish clientele. Thirty years later, New York state Sen. James J. Frawley would nickname Barney “the Sturgeon King.” Future patrons would come to include Franklin D. Roosevelt, Meyer Lansky, Zero Mostel, Jerry Seinfeld, John McEnroe, and Anthony Bourdain, to name a few. Over the next century, the décor would hardly change—Barney Greengrass could double as a museum dedicated to the refrigerators and display cases manufactured between the world wars—but the reins of ownership would be handed down through familial lines, first to Barney’s son, Moe, and then, following Moe’s death, to his grandson, Gary, the present-day owner. In 1992, Gary Greengrass hired Mogentale, an up-and-coming actor and onetime baseball star at Auburn University. While not Jewish, Mogentale can count himself as one of the last “Jewish”

“To this day, I don’t get why I never took a real shot at the big leagues.”

waiters. It is quite possibly the role he was born to play.

Barney Greengrass was far from Mogentale’s first waiting gig. After arriving from Pittsburgh in September 1983 and finding residence at the YMCA on 63rd Street, off Central Park West, for \$60 a week, Mogentale worked at a discotheque on the East Side called Adam’s Apple, while studying acting at the New York Academy of Theatrical Arts. He finagled his way into a class with a casting director who had a competitive softball team by telling her he had been a star right fielder at Auburn. He dominated the softball league and was rewarded for his great bat and glove with a small part as a bartender on *As the World Turns*. (He shared screen time with Julianne Moore, Meg Ryan, and Marisa Tomei, all cast members on the show.) Mogentale got his SAG card. But for a while, no other roles came.

Meanwhile, Mogentale had taken up a new waiting job at Tavern on the Green, working doubles on Saturdays and Sundays. He soon discovered his penchant for overstepping the basic lines of fine dining: Knowingly serving the wrong dishes, making inappropriate jokes with customers, and, when necessary, ignoring them were all part of his waiting style. A diner who complained about the

temperature of his steak found Mogentale pressing his thumb to the meat to see whether he was correct (according to Mogentale, he was not). The stunt led to his suspension. Mogentale relocated to Empire Diner on 22nd Street and 10th Avenue, and then to Memphis Restaurant on the Upper West Side, and then on to E.A.T., on Madison Avenue. One of his regular customers at E.A.T. was famed music attorney Allen Grubman, who took a liking to Mogentale. During the 1990 Christmas season, Mogentale, assuming a level of comfort with his customers that would become his trademark, wrote Grubman a poem.

#### ODE TO A MELONHEAD

When the day gets dreary,  
And hard to take,  
When people are brutal,  
And a smile harder to fake,  
When the tempestuous artist  
is ranting,  
Though we are not fully awake,  
And the coffee is stale,  
Not to mention the cake,  
We look up to see Grubman enter  
the place,  
A smile lightens the forlorn waiter’s  
pale face,  
For Grubman brings a Yule-  
like tiding,  
Great joy and good cheer,  
And waits for a melon, sweet,  
plump, juicy, without peer,  
When he has finished we all know  
one thing,  
His charisma has changed us,  
We almost can sing,  
And just when he’s leaving,  
Just before he has went,  
The gruff murmur from that fine,  
gentle gent,  
We strain to hear, our ears are  
all spent,  
“Grubman,” he barks, “add twenty percent!”

Grubman loved the poem and told Mogentale that he would get him a job at a restaurant where he would earn a lot more money than he did at E.A.T. That place was Barney Greengrass.

“I went into Barney Greengrass,” said Mogentale, “and there was Moe

Greengrass behind the desk. He told me, ‘Well, my son is taking over, and I like you, but he’s the one in charge of everything. And he’s the one who’s going to have to hire you. He’ll be coming in at 3, so, talk to him.’”

Mogentale interviewed with Gary, and he got the job.

At the time, Mogentale doubted he would last longer at Barney Greengrass than he had anywhere else. Why would he? And who cared? Waiting tables was just a way to pay bills while he waited for his breakout acting role, the one that would make him a star.

Mogentale was born in Pittsburgh, in 1959. His mother, Dolores, was a stay-at-home parent, raising Mogentale, his younger brother, and his sister. His father, Eugene, was an engineer at Ohio Ferro-Alloys, a metal producer. When David misbehaved (seldom), they would forbid him his favorite activity: going downstairs at 4:30 in the morning, as he did every day before high school, to practice hitting with his Johnny Bench Batter Up, a popular sporting good from the late 1970s that tethered a baseball to a batting tee in such a way that the ball circled back around to the hitter upon contact, allowing it to be struck again and again.

“That would really upset me. That was all I wanted to do, practice hitting.”

Every morning, after an hour and a half with the Johnny Bench Batter Up, Mogentale would go out in the rain and cold of western Pennsylvania and run up hills to increase his speed before the school bell rang at 8:15. As a child, Mogentale worshipped Roberto Clemente, the Pittsburgh Pirates star outfielder, and he was intent on becoming as great a ballplayer. But in an area of the country where rock infields with no grass were the only kind of baseball facilities to be found, colleges didn’t recruit, and he received no scholarship offers.

## MOTHER’S DAY

You never call.  
[tabletmag.com/tags/mothers-day](https://tabletmag.com/tags/mothers-day)

He found a spot at Valencia College, one of the best junior colleges for baseball in the country, located in Orlando, Florida. After two years at Valencia, he went back home to Pittsburgh and considered his options. He didn’t have many. But a friend’s sister who played golf at Auburn University in Alabama agreed to talk to the baseball coach there on Mogentale’s behalf. To his surprise, he was invited down to the campus for a chance, albeit a very small one, of walking on to the Auburn team. By this time, Mogentale had a little bit of a resumé, having hit decently at Valencia. Without any promise of making the team, Mogentale still had to enroll at Auburn. During fall scrimmages his first year, he made the Auburn second team.

Between periods of success at the plate, he would fall into slumps. Frustrated, Mogentale went to a bookstore seven miles away in Opelika to find an instructional book on hitting. What he discovered was Charlie Lau’s *The Art of Hitting .300*. (Hall of Fame legend George Brett was a disciple of Lau’s and swore by his hitting approach.) Mogentale bought the book and read it cover to cover that night. The next morning, he set up his Johnny Bench Batter Up and began to practice hitting the Lau way: weight back, bat in the launch position, stride with front toe closed. At the next practice, Mogentale came up to bat, and on the first pitch he hit a shot back up the middle. Then he did it again, and again. For the next three weeks, Mogentale couldn’t miss.

“That book came to me—it was a God-like moment,” said Mogentale.

That spring, he got bumped up to the first team, where he ended up third in hitting with a .295 average. His great bat would continue into his final year, when he hit .348 and was named all-SEC. In his best performance at Auburn, Mogentale got five hits off Jimmy Key, the all-ACC Clemson pitching sensation who would go on to win World Series titles as a starter with both the Yankees and Blue Jays. (Mogentale did it with a broken finger, too.) One scout told Mogentale that he was the best pure hitter in Alabama. But Mogentale would go undrafted by the pro teams. He opted

not to attend any open tryouts, a decision that still perplexes him.

“To this day, I don’t get why I never took a real shot at the big leagues,” Mogentale said. “I could have been a .300 hitter. I really believe that.”

Mogentale left Auburn after the 1982-83 school year. At 23 years old, he had only ever known baseball, and he was eager to launch himself into unfamiliar territory. He had always been secretly curious about acting and he began taking classes at a local acting studio. His teacher, Char Howard, got him a gig doing dinner theater in Pittsburgh. Though completely new to the dramatic arts, Mogentale liked the experience so much that three months later he moved to New York City to pursue acting.

It would take Mogentale seven more years in New York to discover 29th Street Rep, the company he joined in May 1990. Hungry to find great unknown plays, he traveled often throughout the Midwest, visiting small theaters. One bitterly cold night in the winter of 1993, Mogentale sank down into the back row of a 30-seat theater in Evanston, Illinois, to watch *Killer Joe*, a new play by an unknown playwright, Tracy Letts. (A 19-year-old Michael Shannon starred.) Mogentale was blown away by the tale of a Dallas police officer who moonlights as a hitman. He had a meeting with Letts the following day to discuss the future of *Killer Joe*. Letts told him that one of the reviewers, Hedy Weiss of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, called it the worst play of the year and that another, Richard Christiansen of the *Tribune*, said it was the best. Mogentale told Letts that he would like to put the play up in New York immediately, and Letts agreed.

*Killer Joe* was staged at 29th Street Rep in 1994 and created a lot of buzz for Mogentale, who played Joe. Casting director Bonnie Timmerman came in from LA to see a performance and met with Mogentale and *Heat*’s director, Michael Mann, about the actor playing opposite Al Pacino and Robert DeNiro in the iconic heist film. Although Mogentale didn’t get the part, the aura of *Killer Joe* hung around the actor. Broadway producer David Richenthal and director

Robert Falls approached Mogentale about understudying Kevin Anderson in the role of Biff in the Brian Dennehy production of *Death of a Salesman*. Mogentale wasn't interested in understudying, but the casting director called Mogentale three different times at his home, insisting he do it, and finally Mogentale agreed.

During every show, Mogentale brooded backstage; he would do anything to get on. But in six months of performances, Kevin Anderson, who would go on to win a Tony for the role, didn't miss a single show. Mogentale says Richenthal promised him a real shot at playing Biff after Anderson's departure. But Ron Eldard was brought on to replace Anderson, and Mogentale didn't even get an audition. While Eldard prepared for the role, Mogentale was asked to star opposite Dennehy for two weeks of performances. "I wouldn't do it," said Mogentale. "I didn't *just* want the two weeks. I wanted the part. And then I hadn't even been given an audition after I had been told I would. It wasn't right. So I walked away."

The following year, Mogentale was cast as Philip Seymour Hoffman's and John C. Reilly's understudy in the revival of Sam Shepard's *True West*. Mogentale had to be able to do both actors' parts, Lee and Austin. He read for director Matthew Warchus and was hired. "I had just understudied in *Death of a Salesman*," Mogentale said. "You get a reputation, having also done *Killer Joe*, and they think you're good, even though you never even went on."

To negotiate the role, Mogentale told his agent he wanted more money than anyone in the production save for the two stars, and he was given what he asked for, at \$2,700 a week. But in early rehearsals, Warchus asked Mogentale to stay away from the theater altogether until the show was up. Mogentale believes Hoffman and Reilly didn't want him around—maybe they were intimidated by him, or thought that he would be judging them. On a day before opening night, he was getting fitted for his costume. According to Mogentale, Reilly approached him and said, "Dude, what are you doing? You don't need a wardrobe. You'll never go on. We'll

**"One day Mogentale decided he would sneak out, still in his pajamas, his face yellow and gaunt, rolling the metal pole on which his IV drip hung, and head uptown to his favorite brunch spot."**

never let you." Mogentale said, "Oh really, what happens if you break your rib?" "We'll still go on," Reilly said, in Mogentale's telling.

Indeed, Hoffman would break a rib and still not miss a show.

The *True West* job lasted eight months. Meanwhile, Mogentale was waiting tables at Barney Greengrass and working over at the theater on 29th Street producing plays. He landed a small part as Coach Goodwin in two episodes of *The Sopranos*. (Fans of the show will remember him making AJ captain of the football team.) Then, one day in February 2001, Mogentale was prepping for Sam Shepard's *Fool for Love* at 29th Street Rep—it would be the play's first revival, and the production was getting a lot of good press—and he couldn't breathe. He had a severe cough, and worried it was pneumonia. He got a chest X-ray, and the doctors told him he had a 10-centimeter mass on his chest, growths in his abdomen and his lymph nodes. It was stage 3 leukemia.

Mogentale's Sloan Kettering doctors urged him to do a bone marrow transplant, but he said no and took his chances with chemo. Living at Sloan Kettering for four of the next six months because

of the intensity of the chemo—"more chemo than I've ever seen a patient get," said one of his doctors—Mogentale was restless. From his hospital room window, he would look down on York Avenue at people riding their bicycles and wonder if he would get to ride his own bike ever again. Desperate to get out of the hospital, one day Mogentale decided he would sneak out, still in his pajamas, his face yellow and gaunt, rolling the metal pole on which his IV drip hung, and head uptown to his favorite brunch spot, the Vinegar Factory. Mogentale referred to this as one of the best meals of his life.

The chemotherapy continued for four years. Every so often, Mogentale would get a two-month break from the chemo and feel well enough to do a play. During this time, he did *Fool for Love* (2002), *High Priest of California* (2003), and *In the Belly of the Beast Revisited* (2004), about Jack Henry Abbot and Norman Mailer. Mogentale would beat the cancer, which stayed in remission after the four years of chemotherapy.

Mogentale gives a lot of credit to his wife, Carol. "She was an angel," he said. "She took care of me. I doubt I would have survived if not for her." After meeting at Memphis Restaurant in the late 1980s, Mogentale and Carol lived together for years before finally marrying in 2002. In framed photos hung throughout his one-bedroom apartment on West 75th Street, Carol is a striking figure, with long brown hair, a feline quality to her soft brown eyes, a lithe dancer's body—she was a core member of the American Ballet Theater for over 10 years. "I always tried to figure out why she wasn't a principal or a soloist," said Mogentale. "People would talk about how good she was and how strong she was."

In 2015, Carol, at 69, discovered that the breast cancer that she had fought

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off on three previous occasions had returned. When she got the news, Carol was also in the early stages of Parkinson's disease. Physically and emotionally depleted, she did chemo for a few months and then decided to stop the treatment. According to Mogentale, she was in a lot of pain—more than she would ever tell him—and she just wanted to go. “There are certain things you want to ask somebody, things you don't get to ask them. But then again, you don't think the person is going to die the next day.”

The afternoon after Carol's death, in 2016, Mogentale had a dental visit scheduled. He kept the appointment and got his teeth cleaned. Though Gary Greengrass would tell him to take as much time off as he needed, Mogentale didn't miss a shift. “A lot of time, work grounds you, in that place especially,” he said. “We're like a family at Barney Greengrass—a dysfunctional one, but a family nonetheless.”

Mogentale is still grieving. “After almost 30 years together,” he said, “I didn't understand how difficult life was going to be all alone, without my wife. Every day when I walked in the door, no

matter what, she would light up. Now I don't have that smile. It is the absolute worst.”

The 29th Street Rep, Mogentale's longtime theatrical home, closed in 2008, and he doesn't have much acting work coming in. These days he is, more or less, *just* a waiter. For some 30 years he would only work weekends at Barney Greengrass, but he recently took on Thursday and Friday shifts, doubling his workload. Despite the toll on his body, Mogentale said he was happy to make the extra money. “And what else am I going to do? This is my only stage now.”

“Hey, Big Boy!”

A longtime regular, middle-aged, with a receding hairline, an oversize Jets sweatshirt and loose blue jeans, has walked in and seated himself at a table in the rear. It is 8:10 on a Sunday morning and the first rush is still 20 minutes off. The store has a kind of eerie calm about it, like an airport in the middle of the night. Without having to be asked, Mogentale has already written the regular's usual order—Nova, eggs, and onions with egg whites

only and a toasted, buttered bialy—on a white slip of paper and passed it through to the kitchen. Mogentale and the regular trade a few words about an upcoming football game, who would win, what were the Vegas odds, had either of them seen the last time the teams had played. Then Mogentale walks from table to table, straightening the cutlery, toweling off chairs, shining the salt and pepper shakers. When the food comes up, Mogentale serves it.

“Hey, Big Boy, can I get a *real* half-sour pickle? This one looks like a shriveled finger.”

“You know where it is—get it yourself!” snaps Mogentale, grinning.

Without hesitation, the regular stands up and goes over to the counter, doing as Mogentale has instructed. At the end of his meal, he leaves his usual \$20 tip on the table.

“What can I say, they love the brutality,” Mogentale says with a laugh. “It's why they love the Big Boy ... *he's* brutal.” ■

*This article was originally published on May 8, 2023.*

FOOD

# The Ancient Wonders of Fennel

The plant has been part of Jewish cooking since biblical times

BY PAOLA GAVIN

Jews have been eating fennel—a member of the carrot family with a similar texture to celery, and a mild aniseed or licorice flavor—since biblical times. Native to the Mediterranean, it was known to the ancient Israelites, who liked to use the shoots and feathery fronds in

salads, while fennel seeds were often used as a spice, a medicine, and an insect repellent. In the Mishnah, fennel was referred to as *gufnan*, but in the Jerusalem Talmud and in modern-day Hebrew it is called *shumar*. It is also thought that fennel was the *ketzach* that is mentioned in Isaiah.

The Israelites were not the only ones

who made use of the plant. The juice of giant fennel or *Silphium* (now extinct) was used by the ancient Egyptians as a form of contraception. Fennel was also much enjoyed by the Greeks and the Romans. (According to Greek mythology, Prometheus carried a burning ember, which he stole from the Chariot of the Sun, in the hollow stalk of giant fennel and so brought fire to mankind.) The Greeks believed fennel was a symbol of courage, victory, and success. Greek physician and botanist Dioscorides recommended fennel for all kinds of maladies, especially heartburn, nausea, menstrual disorders, and bladder and kidney problems; he further claimed that fennel increased the flow of milk in lactating mothers. Fennel seeds were also used as a remedy for snake bites.

The Romans also used fennel as a medicine, especially to improve eyesight and calm the nerves. Fennel tea

was often given to Roman soldiers before battle, as they believed it gave courage and strength. Cato recommended seasoning olives with olive oil, vinegar, salt, fennel seed, and mastic.

For centuries, Sicilian Jews were great lovers of fennel. When they were expelled from Sicily after the Spanish Inquisition, they introduced fennel to the Italian mainland, where it was dubbed a Jewish food—so much so that fennel simmered in olive oil with garlic was named *finocchi alla giudia*, or “fennel, Jewish style.” Another favorite Italian Jewish dish was *finocchi alla parmigiana*—steamed fennel topped with melted butter and grated Parmesan. In Tuscany, raw fennel was often served at the end of a meal to freshen the breath and aid digestion. Fennel was also said to make bad wine taste good; according to Giacomo Castelvetro, the 17th-century gastronome, Venetian innkeepers would offer fennel and nuts free to their customers before serving them inferior wine. It’s worth pointing out that *finocchio*—which means fennel in Italian—is also a derogatory name for “homosexual.” Legend has it that when homosexuals were burned at the stake during the Inquisition, fennel was often employed to disguise the smell of burning flesh.

Fennel—called *besbes* in Arabic—is

also enjoyed by North African Jews, especially in salads and tajines. Ground fennel seeds are often used to flavor Tunisian Jewish meatballs, which are often served in tomato sauce with rice or pasta.

Although not native to India, fennel seeds are widely used today to flavor Indian curries, rice dishes, breads, and desserts. They are also prescribed in ayurvedic medicine for digestive upsets—especially cramps, nausea, and flatulence—and to boost the metabolism and tone the nervous system.

There are two main varieties of fennel: common fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), which is an upright herb with feathery fronds and yellow flowers, and Florence fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare var. azoricum*), which was first cultivated in Italy in the 17th century. Florence fennel is bulbous and can be male or female. The female bulb is rounder and slightly sweeter than the male bulb, and is generally used raw in salads, while the male bulb is elongated and used more in cooking. The feathery fronds of common fennel are mainly utilized to flavor soups, sauces, and fish dishes. In Italy, wild fennel often appears in breads, salami, sausages, and marinades—especially for olives. A traditional Sardinian soupy casserole called *zuppa di finocchetti selvatici* is made with layers of boiled wild

fennel, fresh pecorino cheese, and day-old bread, which is moistened with vegetable stock and baked in the oven until the top is golden brown. Florence fennel is also one of the main herbs used to flavor absinthe—a highly alcoholic spirit that was very popular in Paris in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially with many well-known artists and writers of the time, like Vincent van Gogh, James Joyce, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Oscar Wilde.

Today, fennel is known to have many health benefits. It is rich in calcium, vitamin A, vitamin C, and antioxidants that are important for tissue repair and the health of your skin, and may reduce the risk of cancer. Fennel is also rich in anethole, which gives it its distinctive flavor and aroma and is said to block inflammation in the body. It is also a good source of fiber, potassium, and folate, which may benefit the health of your heart. Fennel seeds are thought to help with weight management, as they are diuretic and may help boost your metabolism. One teaspoon of raw or lightly toasted fennel seeds taken after meals is said to greatly aid digestion. And fennel seeds are still used to sweeten the breath. ■

*This article was originally published on May 10, 2023.*

## STONE COLD TRUTH

## Tablet

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# Fennel, Tomato, and Green Olive Tajine

BY PAOLA GAVIN

## INGREDIENTS

- 2 or 3** medium fennel bulbs, about 1 lb.
- 4** tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 3 or 4** shallots, finely chopped
- 1 or 2** garlic cloves, finely chopped
- ½** teaspoon finely grated fresh ginger
- a pinch of saffron threads**
- ¾** cup peeled, seeded, and chopped ripe tomatoes
- ½** cup pitted and halved green olives
- salt**
- freshly ground black pepper**
- 1 or 2** tbsp lemon juice, to taste
- crusty bread, to serve**

## PREPARATION

### Step 1

Wash the fennel bulbs and remove the outer leaves and stalks. Trim the bases, then cut lengthwise into thin wedges. Steam the fennel slices for 7 or 8 minutes or until they start to soften. Heat half the olive oil in a large frying pan and add the steamed fennel. Cook over a moderate heat until it is tender and golden on both sides.

### Step 2

Meanwhile, heat the remaining olive oil in another frying pan and add the shallots, garlic, ginger, and saffron. Cook over a moderate heat for 3 minutes or until they start to color. Add the tomatoes and season with salt and black pepper. Cook over a moderate heat for 5 to 7 minutes or until the sauce is reduced. Add the fennel, green olives, lemon juice, and a few tablespoons hot water and simmer, covered for 5 more minutes to blend the flavors, adding a little more water if necessary. Sprinkle with parsley and serve hot or at room temperature with crusty bread on the side.

**Yield:** 4 servings

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