

## 2023 Posts

Now established with a good blog service provider, posts will become more frequent. And a new wrinkle is added; a short story provided roughly once a month. They are not archived as are the posts. Some may appear in published anthologies some time in the future. Here are the year's past posts.

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## Mind Over Matter

February

What does this phrase mean? The person who thinks thing through will beat the one who tries to bull his way through? Quick wit beats dumb brawn? Always thought it meant that sort of thing. Now it means something different to me.

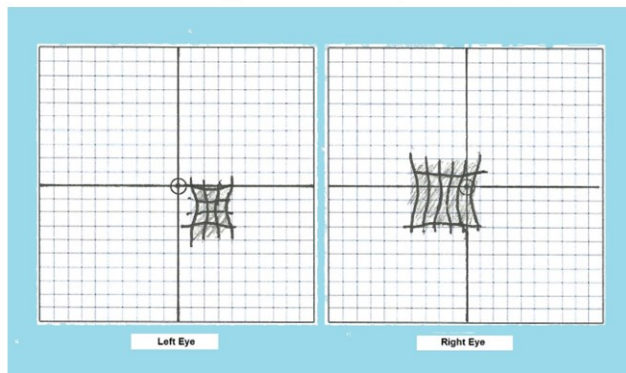
The encroaching vision loss resulting from dry macular degeneration has opened my eyes to wonders of the human brain. Sure, a high school science teacher demonstrated how our brain makes an orange look orange under all light conditions. You've probably seen the photographs taken of one in broad daylight and then under incandescent lights. While the daylight ones shows it to be the orange we know, under artificial light it looks a pasty yellowish color. Our subconscious mind knows it should look orange so that's the image it sends up to the conscious mind.

Subconscious...conscious mind? Medical researchers tend to say things like this part of the brain handles vision, that part of the brain handles speech, That part does this, this part does that. I prefer to think of the brain as two very different computing systems; a conscious mind and a subconscious one. An ocean liner or an aircraft carrier provides the best analogy. The conscious mind is like the captain on the bridge while the subconscious mind is controlling everything else on the ship. It feeds the information the captain needs to him and he provides the guidance and direction it needs.

Researchers say the conscious mind can process up to 40 events per second. Pretty impressive, don't you think? But wait a minute, they say the subconscious one processes 40 **million** events per second! It uses thousands, maybe millions, of minute computers, each communicating over nerves to every muscle and sensor in the body. Higher level processors integrate the data coming in, decide what and how information should be presented to the captain, and then translating the instructions coming down into the myriad of signals needed to carry them out. Just like on a large ship, almost everything happens out of view of the captain. For example, if the subconscious mind detects something on a course to strike an eye, it instructs the appropriate muscles to close the eyelid without waiting to run it by the captain.

When we talk of reading body language, that is actually the subconscious mind at work collecting information on its own and putting together a synopsis of what it learns for us in the form of a feeling. It may tell us we can trust this person or perhaps warn us to be skeptical, that we should like this person or hate him or her, etc. When we follow our heart, we really mean we accept the subconscious mind's recommendation. But all this merely scratches the surface of how the human brain functions.

### How Macular Degeneration Impacts My Vision



It's intriguing. Fascinating to discover new features, new capabilities previously taken for granted. That's where my declining vision comes in. Each eye has a blind spot that unfortunately is gradually expanding. If I close one eye, I can see the blind spot in the other. But with both eyes open, I see a full field of vision free of blind spots. The subconscious mind is taking signals from both eyes to fill in the gaps and present a complete image. When you look at the chart, notice that the blind spot is off center on the left eye. That allows the brain to find missing data. They are now beginning to overlap and as a

result, my ability to read is declining. In fact, small print is unreadable. If I try to focus directly on an object, it becomes blurred. But if I look slightly away from it or scan across it, a clear image is presented. The brain is using my good peripheral vision to construct the image.

How it handles color is more complex than the orange experiment indicates. The yellow sensors seem to degenerate first. Now if I'm reading a page with a word highlighted in yellow, I don't see it. Buttons on a computer screen that are turned yellow to attract attention do not attract mine. So when I look at a yellow counter or wall, why don't I see a white spot in the middle? The whole thing looks flawlessly yellow. My subconscious mind decides that's a yellow counter so it makes the whole image yellow. In summary, our brain is interpreting the data fed by our sensors and deciding what should be shared with the conscious mind. Guess the philosophers who suggest the world may simply be a figment of our imagination may have a point. at least until we walk into a wall.

Mind over matter!

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## **Fringe View**

March

About forty years ago when my ophthalmologist, friend and soccer team-mate, Bob Glaze, discovered the start of my dry macular degeneration, there was no cure or even medication to control its spread. All one could do is take pills that contain what is referred to as the ARED II formula of vitamins. I've taken two Visivites Gold Formula capsules a day ever since. They should have given me a little stock in the company by now.

The good news is that they work to a degree and any of you who have light sensitive eyes or a parent with dry MD should be taking them now. In my case, it held significant loss of vision in check until about five years ago when the very slow spread began to have more impact, Each year when a retina specialist looks at it, I ask him if anyone has come up with a cure and each year he says no. He says if it transitions from dry to wet (meaning there is some internal bleeding), he can give me a monthly injection to control that. Given my ultra-squeamish nature, the cure sounds worse than the bite.

Last Fall the string of denials was broken. A company called Apellis has developed an injection that slows the spread of dry MD by up to thirty percent. It received FDA approval in February and is now available under the name Syfovre. It's no surprise that spellchecker underlined that name. They could have called it something like HaltMD but pharmaceutical companies true to their name have resorted to the use of random letter generators. Anyway, I became faced with tradeoff of fighting vision loss versus injection horror.

The tradeoff also involves benefit versus side effects. Actually, only one possible side effect is serious. There's a one percent chance of what the doctor called a retina stroke. Have you ever heard of that medical secret before? I hadn't. It renders the eye completely blind permanently. A visual form of Russian roulette. Although there's no way to identify the one percent, there is a suspected factor and since I don't have it, I decided to pull the trigger.

So after they dropped numbing fluid into my left eye, the doctor said he would be back to give the injection when it took effect. On his way out the door, I told him to bring a sledge hammer and heard him laughing all the way down the corridor. Making doctors laugh has

always been a goal since they need a break from the incessant stream of complaints they hear. The first time, my dermatologist ordered a “blue light” treatment on my face, I wore a light blue shirt and told her it was in honor of the blue light treatment. She snickered. But in the two occasions since, she has broken out in laughter when I show up in my light blue shirt.

One’s first eye injection is a real test of character. One has to steel oneself, stare straight ahead, and resist the almost overwhelming urge to jump and run. In reality, it’s painless. There was a feeling of pressure being exerted on my eye but my now friend the doctor explained that was caused by the fairly thick medicine entering the eye. His main concern was to monitor the pressure in the eye. It shot up from 14 to 70 and if it didn’t come down within a few minutes, he would extract some fluid. It only dropped from 70 to 65 so a second injection was needed. By now I was an old hand at this and it went smoothly, terror-free.

If a stroke is going to occur, it apparently happens in the first three weeks. Two have now passed. What is amazing is that while the medicine won’t reduce the size of the blind spot, it has definitely clarified the region around it. That, working with the power of the brain, has improved my vision! Improving the fringe view has promoted Dr. Birnbach to join the other two in my medical Hall of Fame.

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## **A Matter of Integrity**

April

When I joined The Boeing Company in 1961, within months it was make clear that there was nothing more sacred than airplane safety. After that came quality, performance, and finally cost efficiency. A prioritized list of desirable personal attributes started with integrity, innovation, and industriousness. Of these, integrity was demanded. It was made clear that a lack of integrity would end one’s career with the company.

This was the culture that built a world leader and made airline travel so safe people used it without concern. As an engineer and manager, I always felt that I could and should raise any safety concern, no matter how trivial, to the level of management needed to resolve it. In fact, the surest way to introduce a new feature was to identify any positive effect it might have on flight safety. And the cost to eliminate a suspected safety issue was immaterial.

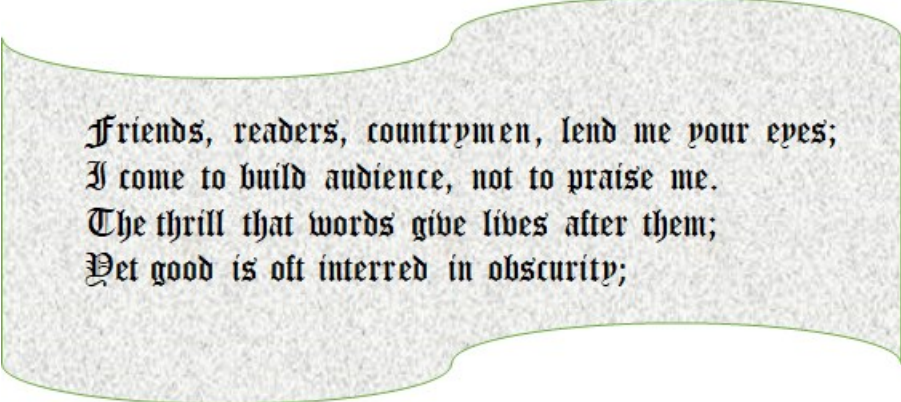
Many companies back then had variations on this theme. In general, the goal was to build better products, knowing this would be ultimately rewarding financially. In the 1990’s General Electric leadership changed the company culture from creating and building better products to building stock value. Investor progress became its most important product. For a number of years, the reward to investors was enormous. Seeing that success prompted other companies to trend in the same direction. Then the bubble burst. General Electric found many of their products had been scrapped and many remaining were no longer competitive. In the end, a company that had been an industry leader for a century was unceremoniously dumped from the Dow Jones Index.

The heavy focus on making an immediate profit adversely affected product quality and occasionally safe use of the product. As the 737 MAX tragedies revealed, the culture shift even infected a company one would expect to be most immune. It certainly provided a wake-up call and hopefully it has reinstated integrity at the top of the list of company attributes. The current short story, *A Matter of Integrity*, was written years before the 737 MAX saga unfolded. It was inspired by the industry shift I could see happening at that time.

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## Lend Me Your Eyes

May



**F**riends, readers, countrymen, lend me your eyes;  
**I** come to build audience, not to praise me.  
**T**he thrill that words give lives after them;  
**B**ut good is oft interred in obscurity;

My friends, lend me your eyes. Not physically, though I could sure use them. (For those of you who read about my eye injection, three weeks have gone by now and all is well.) I need your help with some books stalled by a lack of initial purchases. It seems like one of two things are needed: the pull of a celebrity or a perception that others are buying the book. For four key books, I have neither.

I hope those of you who have read any of my novels will agree they are entertaining. Feedback and reviews are usually very positive. A larger audience needs to be enticed into discovering that. You can help make it happen if you have not already read some of these books. Please take a look at them on [www.SandysPen.com](http://www.SandysPen.com) and spend a few dollars on one from Barnes & Noble or Amazon. Better still, if you frequent a nearby Barnes & Noble bookstore, ask them to get you a copy. Either way, please rate the book and if you include a review, however short, that would be wonderful.

Perhaps the most important of these, and most entertaining, is *You Speak for Me Now* because it has a strong bearing on society today. While it is set in America, its message could apply to a number of nations in the world. Readers find it a captivating novel, an emotional rollercoaster that sets you down on the last page with a feeling of having lived with the characters.

The other three books form the Pillage trilogy. You may well be a member of the modest audience who read them as *Two Loves Lost*, *Sought*, and *Challenged*. For a questionable reason, I retitled them *Life Shattered*, *Rescued*, and *Threatened*. Questionable because they have not received a kick start under their new titles. Of course you shouldn't invest in a story already read but if you've missed any of the trilogy, perhaps you might consider trying one.

This plea for help goes against my grain. I love to create and am quietly proud of these novels. Yet, I shy away from the effort of marketing them, generally satisfied to let them wallow in obscurity. They deserve better.

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## Will the Real Bloomin' Fothergilla Please Step Forward?

May



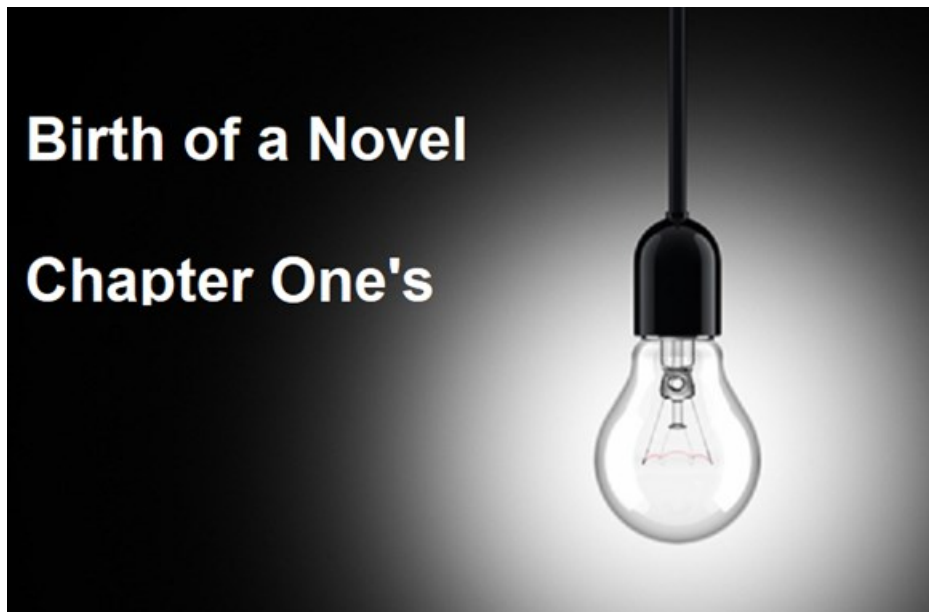
A horticulturist might choose the one on the right after careful inspection. But the more brilliant display on the left is compelling, perhaps even what one would wish from one of our favorite shrubs. It was actually created by a snowfall last winter and while visually superior, it lacks the endearing aroma that fills the air each Spring.

Amongst the roughly 300 plants beginning to emerge from under the weed blocking chip layer of our current landscaping project, is a miniature Fothergilla. I choose to call him "Sonagilla". Okay, it's corny but so am I. Always wanting to create new words to fit the occasion. It's a quirk that makes me George Carlin's most devoted fan, even after he left us. While at times he could have used fewer F-bombs, he struck gold with so many of his monologs. Here's Sonagilla, still in his crib designed to keep away deer predators.



**Chapter One's**

June



First chapters often measure the worth of a potential novel. Many lay out the theme or premise of what follows. If so, will it engage readers? Will it have a broad appeal? Most important: Does it generate a flood of ideas, characters, events, and emotions for the author to draw upon? Once written, will it hook readers and compel them to read on?

Reflecting on my published novels, I can't claim they all started with a clear view of their premise, yet their first chapters do set the tone, if not the theme, of the story. "Life Shattered" introduces a tormented child who is hiding a genius mentality. "Life Rescued" establishes the challenge of overcoming a spirit destroying injury. "Life Threatened" begins with a brutal murder which hints at a psychopathic character. They set the tone but the real premise is not revealed until well into the stories. Like most mysteries, "Murder – On Salt Spring" starts with the murder, but also introduces the character conflict which follows. "The Pizza Dough King" is a love story from the first chapter on. "You Speak for Me Now" introduces two themes in the first chapter; namely, strength and challenges of an introvert/extrovert relationship and, on a societal level, the struggle between the rich and everyone else. Both are clearly laid out up front.

I find writing either a chapter or a short story a useful way to assess the merit of a possible novel. In fact, "The Pizza Dough King" sprung from a short story which in effect became its final chapter. In an author workshop once, the leader asked us to write a chapter one and later read it to the group. I read what is now the first chapter of "From Revolution Born". The group response was so enthusiastic, I've kept the novel growing ever since even though it's hard to identify a climactic ending. A number of possible novels have been tested in this way. Today's short story, "Sam Adams", is one of them.

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## In My Father's Day` June





My wife and I belong to the One Percent Generation, people born in the 1930-1946 time period. The name comes from the fact that only one percent of us are still alive. We are the last generation to be raised without television, to learn first hand of the horrors of World War II, and to benefit from the long period of economic growth with peace at home. We played outside, learned to entertain ourselves, free of the worries and stress of modern day life. A generation that enjoyed the lull between world war, poverty, economic depression and artificial entertainment, stress, mass murders, drug addiction.

Father's Day yesterday took my thoughts back to his earlier generation. Growing up, I thought of him as a hardworking taskmaster, determined to see that we were not subjected to the hard life he endured. He wanted his four sons to benefit from the education he was denied and he wanted us to be trained carpenters in case a better profession didn't materialize from that education.

While I always respected him, it often seemed we lived different lives under the same roof. Our age difference was partly responsible for that. However, the work ethic instilled in him by poverty and the Great Depression played a significant role also. Throughout the years since he died, reflection and incidental recollections have altered my view of him as a human being and father. I'm grateful for the sacrifices he made, for patiently instilling moral values and a strong work ethic based on integrity but not obsession. And I've come to realize he found pleasure and satisfaction in spite of the hardships life dealt him. That may not be apparent reading the sparse sketch of his life which is my current short story.

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## Self-Driving Pipe-Dream

July



Roughly eight years ago, Tesla introduced the concept of building an electric self-driving car. It became a holy grail and others joined the craze. Before being critical of that, let me say that Tesla cars are superbly designed (with one exception) and built. Tesla deserves credit for starting the revolution from gas to electric transportation.

Wait a minute, what was that one exception? It shows itself in the computer display formatting and it results from a mindset bent on producing a self-driving car instead of one bent on assisting the driver get ultimate satisfaction out of an otherwise exhilarating experience. Rather than vent a litany of emotional criticism, let me just claim the display belongs in the nerd hall of fame, not on the road.

When I finally took delivery of my Model 3 in 2019, I purchased the autopilot option to take advantage of its excellent cruise control. Out of curiosity, I tried the self-driving feature on a two-lane road. It departed the lane twice. The second time I had to haul it back to avoid a head-on crash. It also took a wrong fork and put me on a dead-end road. It performed better on a freeway though it was rude at times and occasionally braked rapidly for no apparent reason when approaching an overpass. My experiment ended quickly.

Admittedly, Tesla has probably fixed many of these shortcomings. However, it's doubtful that all the conceivable and unconceivable situations will ever be safely handled. The real question is why try? Driving these cars is so enjoyable and if anything more relaxing than constant monitoring and nudging the steering wheel to keep the autopilot engaged. And as self-driving taxi's in San Francisco are discovering, safety is still a real issue. Today's story pokes a little fun at the concept.

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## Drunk Man Walking

August



Off and on over the years, golfing friends have suggested I write about the many memorable people and events from our golfing adventures. Certainly it's a rich source of humor and

anecdotes, however, I've resisted it on the basis they involve people still alive and often recognizable in the stories. More often than not the humor is at their expense

This story violates that policy, partly because the inspiration is long gone along with many who knew him, and partly because he would laugh the loudest when reading it. He enjoyed the give and take of good-natured ribbing, always able to hold his own and then some.

Often stories of this ilk benefit from a little embellishment. This one needed none. It's a true story. Only the name is changed to protect the guilty.

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## The Wannabe Vowel

September

"AEIOU" – five vowels, no more, no less. Why can't "y" make peace with that. You've just seen wh"y". Pretending to be a vowel with a lon"I" sound. He does it all the time: Thyme, rhyme, shy, thy. He loves to hide behind an "h" and often forces the "h" to be silent, as in rhyme. Oddly enough, if he is followed by a consonant, he seems to need a trailing "e" to give him the strength to be long: Without it, he weakens into a soft little short "i". Rhyme becomes rhythm. And when psyche turns into physique, the usurped "i" shrieks in anguish while the "e" shrinks into silence.

It's not all long and short. There's a middle sound like sink in synch. Furthermore, he doesn't just pretend to be an "i". The "e" is fair game as well, especially one dangling at the end of a word, such as ferry and merry. He turns a stare into starry and a store into story. He attacks the "o" as well, turning bow into boy and tow into toy. There's no end to his villainy. Only the "a" and "u" appear immune to it. Or are they? Can you uncover inroads there as well?

It all seems to stem from an inferiority complex caused when he was given the ungainly "yuh" sound, which he shamefully provides in his proper place, like in yawl, yacht, you, young,

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## Legacy

October

Once upon a time, an aging man said to himself, "I want to write a novel. I know my mother always hoped I would do that." As the days passed, he pondered this often, creating in his mind a skeleton of what it might contain. The two main characters came unbidden and gradually a plot emerged. But could he build a credible novel around them? Only one way to find out – start writing.

The process of drafting, editing, incorporating constructive criticism, and re-writing took months. Finally, a novel was born and published. Friends and even some relatives bought the

book. Reviews were positive, ratings mostly high. Sales not so high. That didn't matter since the man found he loved writing.

In fact, he enjoyed it so much he wrote seven more novels. Because his goal was not to make money, though a wider audience of readers would have been gratefully received, each novel was very different from those that came before. When he foresaw the political nightmare descending on many democracies, he wrote two political stories. They cost support of some friends and lack of public awareness rendered them ineffective. One was obsoleted by events and withdrawn from the market. He felt the other sufficiently important to spend quite a few thousand dollars in advertising. All to no avail. Despite great reviews, sales were miniscule.

Somewhat discouraged, the now old man who still enjoyed writing, found himself less motivated to persevere through completion of a full length novel. Partial stories and fragments lay strewn in his computer. Other pursuits invaded his days. He realized the stories he hoped to leave for readers would die with him.

One might think it would leave him a bitter old relic but no, he was a realistic dreamer. Obviously marketing success required media coverage, either through expensive advertising or the support of a celebrity. He had neither. He wondered if satisfaction of creating them could fill the void left by lack of public awareness. Only one way to find out – Keep writing.

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I The Betrayed

November



A new short story from the growing Migration Milestones series. This one is a view of the Rebirth story from the eyes of the pursuers' wounded leader. It may seem disjointed if you didn't read Rebirth, which was told from the view of the young couple hunted by members of a marauding clan. The wounded pack leader is left to die by a fellow warrior who wants to take over his place as next in line to be chief.

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