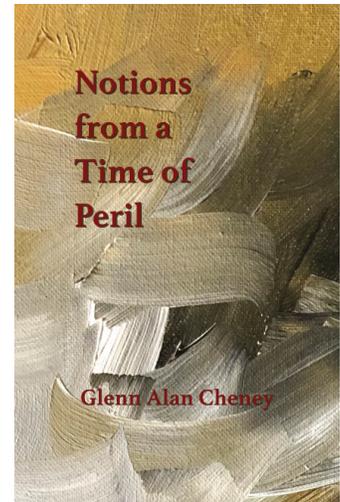


Excerpts from Notions from a Time of Peril, by Glenn Alan Cheney

The book is a collection of brief essays published in The [New London, Conn.] Day and its *Times* subsidiaries between January 2020 and August 2021.



From “The Joys of Meadow”

Every lawn longs to be a meadow. That’s why we mow them—to crush their dream, to cut them down to size, to flagellate them to conformity.

And we dump poison on them to kill their uppity dandelions. We cast chemicals upon them to make them grow faster so we can mow them more. We wage war on the moles and voles.

Why? Mainly to prove ourselves superior to nature and neighbors, as if we are what we mow.

I don’t want to be what I mow. I want to be what I don’t mow. I want to be the unmowed—a meadow.

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From “Moby Skunk”

One of my favorite neurologists has a skunk problem. At least she says she does. I haven’t seen it, but she says it lives under a rock near her swimming pool.

She wants me to trap it, so I will. She scanned my brain once for free. I owe her.

I’ve trapped her skunks before. I don’t know why she has so many. They don’t know she’s a neurologist. Maybe it’s the swimming pool or the little vegetable garden.

I trap them alive, of course. I tempt them with an irresistible delicacy, peanut butter on a jaundiced stalk of fridge-wilted celery. They waddle into my trap—a cage-like thing with door at each end—incredulous of their luck, and BAM: their lives are changed forever.

They’re never in a good mood when I arrive. They’re already putting up a stink so bad it makes my eyes water. I throw a blanket over the trap and hustle it to the back of my pick-up. Then I drive it far away and let it go.

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From “The Future: All or Nothing

A young friend recently asked me if today's world is as I had imagined it would be when I was her age.

She meant 45 years ago.

My reflections first tended toward what I didn't see coming—the internet, desktop computers, climate change, gay marriage, a thousand TV channels, or China sending rockets to Mars.

Then I reflected on what I foresaw that never happened: the flying cars, the Hilton on the moon, the humanoid robots, the end of toil, the Age of Aquarius.

Mostly I expected catastrophes. Nuclear war seemed inevitable. The sea would become a lifeless cesspool. Everyone in Africa was going to die of one thing or another. Urbanization would pave the planet and replace nature with a giant machine. Everyone would love some kind of Big Brother. The world would become Hell itself.

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From "So Much to See in Flies and Weeds"

I've gotten to the point where I'm reluctant to swat a fly. It isn't fear of guilt that stays my hand, nor fear of failure. I know how to do it, I'm pretty good at it, and I've slaughtered flies in my past with a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

My success was palpable. Countable. And, yes, justifiable. Synecdochically speaking, flies are airborne bits of excrement and the dead. They pick it up in the great outdoors and bring it to me on their feet, their snouts, their hairy little bellies, their ankles and elbows.

To call these creeps houseflies is like calling Visigoths tourists. I don't think they come in to get out of the heat. They come for the canapés. They head for the kitchen, a veritable smorgasbord after what they were eating in the green, green grass of the back yard.

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From "Dog Be with You"

In ancient Greece, dogs were trained to lick wounds. In around 1320, St. Roch was cured of plague after his dog licked his festering buboes. In 1970, the medical journal "Lancet" published an article, "Dog Licks Man," that reported dog saliva healing a wound.

As they say in France, "Langue de chien, langue de médecin." (A dog's tongue is a doctor's tongue.)

(On the other hand, it depends on what was last in Dr. Dog's mouth. It probably wasn't Listerine. Dog licks have resulted in sepsis, necrosis, spinal infections, meningitis, and in rare cases, rabies. Other side effects may occur. Ask your doctor if dog spit is right for you.)

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From “Just for Hics and Giggles”

Actually, there’s been only one confirmed case of someone coming down with hiccups while weighing a hog. This was in 1922, when it was delightfully normal for a man to be lifting up 350 pounds of unprocessed pork.

But something went wrong. The man, Charles Osborne, fell, pig in hand, banging his head on the way down and breaking a tiny blood vessel in his brain. He didn’t feel a thing, but the hog was executed, hung on a hook, cut into pieces and eaten by scores of American consumers.

Osborne wasn’t so lucky. As soon as he hit his head, he began to hiccup 40 times per minute. This went on for years. His wife divorced him, but he married a second, who didn’t seem to mind. They had eight children.

Over the years, he managed to slow his hics to 20 per minute, but it was still hard to eat. He had to blend his food into a liquid to be able to swallow during brief opportunities.

It is estimated that Osborne hiccuped 438 million times in 68 years. Then one day he simply stopped. A year later, he died. He was 97.

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From “Webs We Weave”

Lying. We all do it, and it’s done to us all.

We have a lot of words for it: Fibs. Shams. Whoppers. Yarns. Red herrings. Myths. Fairy tales. Propaganda. Trumped-up terminological inexactitude.

There are bald-based and bold-faced lies, white lies and blue lies. We bluff. We puff up and cover up. We deceive, defame, and disinform. We weasel and wax ironic. We fake, falsify, fabricate, prevaricate, confabulate, defraud and dissimulate. We speak with forked tongue in cheek. We con, twist, omit, and spin. We pile it on. We call it bull, B.S. and baloney and shovel it into crocks.

I know one such crock. It calls itself Country Crock. It isn’t a crock. It’s a plastic tub of congealed vegetable oil from the friendly farmers at Unilever. The fake crock bears a picture of a nonexistent barn on a fake and frilly placard faked with woodgrain. Above, it says, “Shedd’s Spread,” but Shedd does not exist. Below, a fake scroll says, “Country Fresh Taste.”

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From “It’s About Time”

Got stuff?

I've sure got stuff. I've got stuff hanging on me like barnacles. Books I love but will never read again. Exotic crafts from faraway lands. Knickknacks and doodads from friends. Antiques passed down from ancestors. Assets worth money if anybody wanted to buy them.

Somehow I have come to need two refrigerators. I have a top-end lawnmower that won't start. Two giant televisions. Antiquated phones. Artwork. A funny sweater that flowed from my mother's fingers. More furniture than I need.

My stuff holds me prisoner. I can't free myself from it. It should be easy, but it's impossible. I don't know if it clings to me or I to it.

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From "Penmanship"

I'm trying to improve my penmanship, I really am. It's an embarrassment to me, a burden on recipients of my letters, and a bad sign of the drift of civilization.

I want to abandon my urgent squiggles that stumble forward trying to keep up with my urgent, squiggling thoughts. The proverbial "chicken scratches" describes my squiggles only if the chicken is lost, desperate, terrified and drunk.

My plan: to emulate the wide, looping, almost joyful style of my father's gentle hand. It takes a little longer, but it seems to allow for more thought between the words. I think he enjoyed the craft of it, embellishing his thoughts with flourishes that took their sweet time and enjoyed the journey as much as the destination.

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From "Paean to Pawnshops"

Pawnshops are the last safety net for 55 million people classified as—rather coldly, I think— the "underbanked." In fact, almost eight percent of Americans are utterly unbanked. No checking account, no savings, and all they can get out of a loan officer is a muffled guffaw. Mississippi ranks first in unbankedness; Connecticut ranks 21st.

I don't like to think of myself as "banked," but I guess that's one of many words for me. (Thank you, Chelsea-Groton, for your patience and understanding.) So a pawnshop, to me, is more of a cross between a museum and a yard sale. This is where I'm going to get an unparalleled peek at a side of the world that's

pretty much inaccessible to the banked. I might also find that certain something special that can't be found at Walmart or a mall.

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From "Consider the Couch"

I am the only person I know who's too lazy to sit on the couch and watch TV. I lack the requisite energy. By the time I figure out how to work the remote, I'm ready for a nap.

But that doesn't mean I don't respect the sofa. In these times of quarantined boredom, the living room couch is a lifeboat in a sea of contagion. It's a good reason to stay home.

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From "Take the Corporate out of Christmas"

I am a pathological penny-pincher. My parents were depression babies, and they made sure I was, too. They handed off the tightwad baton. I turn off lights when I leave a room. I hang my laundry. I turn down the heat. I warm up my leftovers and clean my plate. I get my money's worth out of a paper towel.

And on Black Friday, I fail to do my patriotic duty. This year, while others shopped the internet in desperate consumerism, I boiled the carcass of a turkey and added the leftover onions, green beans, carrots and potatoes. I made dumplings from the stuffing.

"Black Friday" sounds ominous, like a date night with Darth Vader. I prefer an alternative: Buy Nothing Day.

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From "Once Upon a T"

Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Herb Savage, I realize that driving a Model T is a lot like riding a horse. It depends more on feel and persuasion than on gauges and control.

It's also a lot like knitting while doing the foxtrot. You shift from low to high with a pedal on the left, brake with a pedal on the right, throw it into reverse with the pedal in the middle, accelerate with the fingers of your right hand while tending to the timing with the fingers of your left while your hands in the middle keep the car dancing in a pretty straight line.

Thirty miles an hour is plenty fast in a car like this. You can exchange words with bicyclists as you pull around them. You can notice the color of a falling leaf. You can give a squirrel a chance to change its

mind. You can honk to people raking in the yard, and the people have time to take a hand off their rakes and wave.

People love to wave at a Model T, and Savage loves to honk. It's a good honk, a honk that goes way back.

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From "Listen to Your Mother Goose"

Back when I was a camp counselor, I used to thrill my little campers with stories around a campfire, just as in Paleolithic times. I was good at it. Too good. I could set up a horror story so real that, at a climactic moment, kids would scream as they lurched toward the fire. Some wet their pants. Some ran off to find their mothers. Some did both.

One kid's hair caught on fire, and he fled into the woods, where he was caught by the double-headed Hemlock Hurdler. The next day, all we found were some bloody bones in the bushes and tuft of scorched hair on a raspberry thorn.

I was so good at telling stories that I was told to stop. But sometimes stories just happen.

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From "Wake Up, America!"

Buried alive in a coffin? You've got a real problem and not much time to solve it. If you've been embalmed, of course, your problems are over. You are more than dead. Not even a worm would eat you. You're going to be more than dead for a long, long time.

But if you should find yourself in the situation of awakening in a coffin, first ask yourself how you know you're in a coffin and not just some dark, horizontal refrigerator box. Do you remember being at a party where a lot of tequila was involved? Do you remember dying? If so, odds are you aren't in a coffin. You're in bed and you're asleep and having a bad dream. Try waking up.

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There's plenty more where this came from. Read it all in [Notions from a Time of Peril](#).