

Introduction

Somewhere between nostalgia and neuralgia
everything old becomes new again.

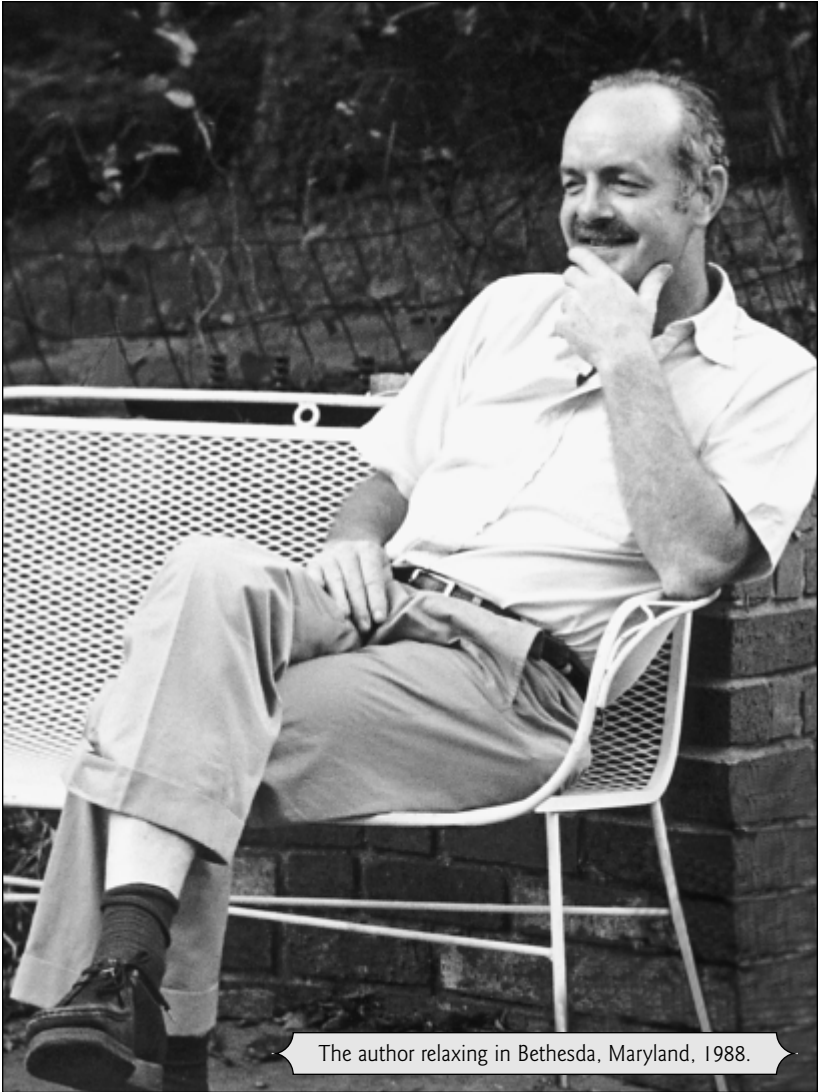
– Robert Lipsyte

I came down to the Smoky Mountains in 1989 to recreate myself. I'd spent fifty or more years learning and teaching the martial arts, not to mention the infinitely more important achievement of staying with the same marvelous wife (Alice) and helping rear a family of three girls (Susan, Annette, and Christine), a boy (David), and assorted dogs (Missy, Cobber, Muffin, Trampas, and Charlie). Along the way I had put head, hands, and no little heart into carving out a career in intelligence, and managed never to be indicted.

Dorothy Parker, the New York wit, had it right: old age ain't for sissies. But still, as the Thirties tune put it, "I'm in good shape for the shape I'm in." Which is sort of stiff and a little crumbly. A good day for me is one when nothing hurts very much. I've licked the age problem by adjusting humorist James Thurber's methodology. He simply used fifteen instead of twelve months to a year. With his deflator, I've been able to reduce my age from 72 to 56.

All of us, if we are lucky, have happiness of a sort. Too often it is a cheap or shallow thing attached to some everyday occurrence. Or, if more than that, so ephemeral that we hardly notice it. So much so that in the 1960's, we had the Law of the Happy Moment, "This is wonderful, wasn't it?" To round it into something fuller, we must – as taiji teaches us – become more aware when the bluebird comes by. *It is wonderful to know when you are happy.* Memorize that line, for it is key. But that's only the first step. After you recognize and savor happiness, how are you going to keep it?

All things considered, these are the happiest days of my life – the present always has been. I've been poorer and more ignorant, but that never mattered. Infused with all this joy and juice, I've always thought that now was best. Sometimes I didn't have or get things to delight in, so I became delighted with delight. Often I couldn't do or go where I wanted – particularly in the martial arts realm – so I tried to make the lure of the thing as good as the doing or going itself. W.B. Yeats, unarguably the greatest poet of this century, once wrote that he was one of



“the last romantics.” Not so. There are still romantics around, people whom the ancient Greeks wouldn’t address with such nonsense as, “Nothing matters very much and very little matters at all.” I am one. So was H.L. Mencken. Indeed, a romantic can be defined as someone who knows Mencken was funning when he said, “We are here and it is now; all the rest is moonshine.” He meant it as a needed put-down of intellectualism and science, but knew well the endless possibilities of Beauty and the wild probabilities of Truth.

Critics have called me outspoken and controversial. But someone has to be, otherwise who would tell the emperor that he is naked? I protest against things I think are wrong: evil, hatred, hunger, and war. I'm for goodness, love, full bellies, and peace.

Apropos here is the old story of a rabbi who stood in the market place each week and rebuked the rabble for their sins. No one listened. A small boy watched and grew bigger. Finally, when the boy had become a man, he felt sympathy for the now antique rabbi still harassing the crowds to care and love more. So he said to the rabbi, "Father, it is a holy thing you're doing, but these people don't care. They wouldn't live if they couldn't sin. They're worse than when you started preaching to them twenty years ago. Can't you see that they're not listening?" The rabbi looked at him and said softly, "But young man, you're mistaken. I'm not doing it for them: I'm doing it for me!"

Generally, I incline toward the Daoist view of life, believing that if we all followed nature we'd find that less is better and that small is, indeed, beautiful. Key here is the notion of nothing in excess. We exercise or fail to exercise too much. We eat too much, compete too much, have sex too much, win too much. We sleep too much, think too much, do too much, and talk too much. (Confucius warned that we mustn't talk while eating or in bed.) Perhaps we even write too much. Mad William Blake's words catch us well: "Too much/enough." If there is anything to the theory that there is only a certain amount of pleasure allotted to each of us, then perhaps we should spread it thinner so it will last longer. This would let us burn always with Walter Pater's hard, gemlike flame rather than bouncing along from conflagration to ashes and back again.

Unfortunately, Daoism doesn't appear overly interested in love. That's not good, because the one thing none of us does too much is love. Professor Zheng Manqing, the most remarkable man I met in my life, in his book on Laozi commended Confucius for embodying an ethical dimension – loving and doing good – and lambasted Laozi for lacking one. For me then, I like Laozi for his nature and the Buddha, Christ, and Confucius for their love.

Looking back, my love for the martial arts always took second place (properly) to my love for family and friends. Early on, we had little and my family and school left little time for concerted vigorous practice. Later, I had more money, but work took all my time. The martial arts, nevertheless, were never far from my mind. I can remember doing countless repetitions of throws (*uchikomi* or *butsukari*) against walls,

with Western boxers, and even (Lord forgive me!) a willing pregnant wife (but only once, for twenty minutes). I sometimes wished I could go full-bore on practice and contests, confident that I could gain skill fairly quickly, but responsibilities prevented it. But mustn't complain, as the old British gardener said, "We've had our innings." So I don't dwell on it, especially when I see that better competitors often were not as happy as I: their skills improved but their lives sometimes didn't.

When I came south for the bluebirds and the mountains, I had no desire to write further on the martial arts. But old friends carped at me, urging that I do so. Canadian judoka Paul Nurse among them, learning that I had a title (if no book), wrote: "I hope *Martial Musings* will cover some background on your own life-path. If Homer is right and we all become like Odysseus, the sum of all we come into contact with, then I believe your particular progress could be of interest and instructive to readers. Not in any egocentric manner, but as a record of an uncommon life."

My recent series of articles for the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* (JAMA) was done as much to protect the name and teaching of Professor Zheng Manqing against detractors among his students and others as to explicate and inform. Knowledgeable students used this motivation, urging me to protect my own poor ideas in the future by publishing a clearer statement of my position.

And so, when James Grady, long-time student and crackerjack novelist (*Six Days of the Condor*, 1974), asked to interview me for JAMA, I relented. In the past, I would have said no, but now as the candle gutters, I decided to let him try. Not for ego, God knows, but for the opportunity to get my view on the martial arts out in public so that someday when I'm strewing arbutus in Heavenly glades, someone doesn't misrepresent my ideas.

In readying myself for that interview, I began dredging my brain and writing notes. The almost feverish recall quickly became a book. Jim will be along with the interview shortly.

As a result of the discipline of the fighting arts, my garbage detector has improved over time. "The cheaper the crook, the gaudier the patter," warned writer Dashiell Hammett. The garbage detector identifies the sleaze through the patter. The detector goes to tilt more often now than in the past.

Still, memory is no mean thing. It warms and stimulates so much that sometimes I feel more alive with the memories of the past than I

do with the perception of the present. I am not alone in this. In his autobiography, the esteemed author V. Nabokov sees memory as a “robust reality” that makes a ghost of the present. “To know how to change the past into a few saddened smiles,” Maurice Maeterlinck said, “is this not to master the future?” So recollection has its reward. But one has to beware lest he recalls pigeons as swans. The writer has to exercise the same rigor and restraint examining the past as he does in viewing the present. I’ve tried to do it so that I could say (with Mark Twain), “Not that it matters, but most of what follows is true.”

Writing about the martial arts can’t compete with watching bluebirds. But it has its virtues. A retrospective view lets me amend, correct, and update previous work. It also permits me to go in new directions and develop ideas I’ve not expressed before. Its main virtue, however, is that it lets me revisit some of the many exponents of these arts whom I’ve met down the years.

I would be happier if I’d used fewer “I’s” (I thought of using the third person, but that seemed artificial and a little precious). There was simply no way around it. I asked myself why should anyone want to know about me? As politicians never say, I’m modest and have every right to be. I wrote to inform readers of these arts and those who grace them, not to celebrate myself. Also, I ask readers forbearance for my opinions on society and politics that they may not share.

I hope that readers enjoy and learn a bit from this scribbling. My thanks go to the many good people who helped me. High praise goes to Joe Svinth, Seattle area karate teacher, one of the first to encourage me in the enterprise. He eased the writing by insightful suggestions, and typed the manuscript. I salute also Mike DeMarco, publisher of by far the best martial arts journal in the world, for asking me to do it. Additionally, Warren Conner and Russ Mason did heroic editing through several drafts of the manuscript. Some who helped me are mentioned in the body of the text and others are listed in the acknowledgement. It goes without saying that any defects in the book are my responsibility, not theirs. Invoking poet Hilaire Belloc, I say to all the good people who figure in this saga as actors or helpers:

From quiet homes and first beginning,
Out to the undiscovered ends,
There’s nothing worth the wear of winning,
But laughter and the love of friends.