

Some Observations on Electric Eels

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I gave this speech at the Kindling Words writers' conference in February 2012. The book I refer to below that has a character with lobster-claw arms is the extraordinary *Above*, by Leah Bobet.

- I know from talking to a few people already that my title has caused some puzzlement:
 - “Some Observations on Electric Eels.”
- And I'll give away the mystery now:
- It comes from a quote, one of my very favorites ever, by Dame Edith Sitwell:
 - “I am not eccentric. It is just that I am more alive than most people. I am an unpopular electric eel set in a pond of goldfish.”
- And the reason this is one of my favorite quotes ever is that it gets at a dynamic I find endlessly fascinating in both fiction and life:
- The tension between who you are and who the world wants you to be,
- Or rather, what the world regards as successful, in all the ways it measures and rewards success:
 - Beauty, at any age
 - Popularity, when you're a kid or a teenager
 - Fame and Money, when you're an adult
 - Sales, when you're a writer, illustrator, or editor
- Now perhaps you're a person who has always had all of these measures of success—
 - Or better still, you're a person who's been able to disregard those measures completely, and live entirely according to your own standards.
- If this is you, I salute you.
- But as all of us are artists and readers,
- I'm guessing most of us have probably gone without those rewards at times,
 - And felt some angst about it.
- In fact, I'll speculate further and guess that each of you probably felt like an outsider of some kind when you were a child.
- Or, if you didn't start out as an outsider,
 - You found yourself unusually devoted to writing, observing, drawing
 - And that slowly set you apart over time.
- Then, as a grown-up, you've continued those activities,
 - And turned them into strengths:
 - The way you make your living
 - The way you connect.
 - The way you express your sense of being in the world
- But even once you have that satisfaction,
 - It is often still easy to feel like the eel among the goldfish.
- It can happen when you produce a book out of deep personal need, really ripping your veins open on the page, working for years and years to shape something that reflects your soul—
 - and then you see six paranormal romances on the bestseller list.
- Or for editors, when we find that one manuscript where every word is just right, where the emotions sweep us away like a river, where we put the last page down with that deep internal knowledge: “This is *mine*, I *will* publish this.”

- And all the media attention goes to a celebrity book.
- I don't mean to imply that all paranormal romances or celebrity books are bad,
 - Because lord knows *I've* edited them,
- Or to introduce bad karma by talking sales here at Kindling Words.
- Rather, I want to think about the situation of the electric eel in the goldfish pond, in both literature and life:
 - The way we tell stories of outsiders facing a seemingly monolithic Other
 - And the ways we deal with those situations ourselves.
- I'm going to start with some definition of terms here.
- The outsider—the figure I'm analogizing to the electric eel—
 - Is not so much a creature that *is* necessarily different from the people around it—though it often is,
 - As that it's *conscious* of some difference from the people around it
 - And it lets that consciousness influence its attitude and behavior.
- It sees the goldfish as a group, and itself as not a member of it, and that exclusion becomes a defining characteristic of its identity.
 - Sometimes in a positive way—remember Edith Sitwell defines herself as “more alive than most people,”
 - That she really finds her strength and energy in that.
 - And sometimes in a negative way—the eel wants to be like the goldfish, to have those measures of worldly success,
 - But it's unable to get past that sense of difference,
 - And that perceived not-good-enough can make the eel turn on itself,
 - Loathe itself, in a way that's destructive both to the eel and to any chances of its making a connection with others.
- I also think it's important to note that the goldfish—also known as insiders, the cool kids, bullies, or the Man—
 - are not necessarily consciously, actively evil,
 - Not automatically out to pressure the outsider into conformity.
- Groups form for all sorts of reasons—personalities and pleasures, as well as politics and protection.
 - And they're often simply unaware of any outsiders,
 - or would even be open to their joining the group,
 - If they'd step up and say hello.
- But still the eel can perceive the group as exclusionary or evil, because the goldfish seem so omnipresent, and the sense of difference, or failure, so great.
- Quite often these goldfish *are* actively evil, of course,
 - In ways we can all recognize or remember: nasty remarks, physical violence, loud exclusion, whispers behind hands.
- And just as the outsider is aware of its difference,
 - These goldfish, with their numbers, are aware of their power, and intent on maintaining it.
- As I understand it, once you're a member of the actively evil type of fish,
 - It becomes a self-reinforcing system:
- Since every fish among the goldfish is an individual as well,
 - Potential difference—eeliness—could break out at any time,
 - And it must be squashed in others, the better to squash it in yourself.

- If the dream of the outsider is to be accepted, or at least to be left alone
- Then the dream of the goldfish is actually to accept, to have everyone get along and go with the flow,
 - Which isn't possible so long as that outsider separates itself from the rest.
- So this conflict between insiders and outsiders can start at a very early age—
- There are numerous sociological studies demonstrating that young children consistently value the groups they're a part of and devalue others,
 - even when the composition of the groups are entirely random.
 - Who's wearing red shirts, say, vs. who's wearing blue.
- So if you're unlucky enough to be one of the blue shirts when there are more red shirts,
 - Or worse still, the *only* blue shirt, at a time when the red shirts are feeling their power,
- You can do the hard work of making peace with them, or making war,
- But the easiest solution is to hide.
- First to hide that which makes you an outsider, if possible,
 - In hopes that the goldfish won't notice your difference.
 - You can change your shirt,
 - But if you're an eel, three feet long and squarefaced among all these beautiful shiny things,
 - Your odds of successful hiding are not good.
- So a better solution is to hide your mind away, to escape,
 - To take your mind off the bullies or misery by going into another world.
- And the easiest, most empowering form of escape has always been reading.
- Reading puts all kinds of power into a child's hands.
 - First there's literal, physical power, as reading is a totally user-driven and user-powered activity.
 - There's no "on" switch or battery or power cord.
 - The reader controls how it happens, where it happens.
 - How fast it happens, when to begin, when to stop.
 - And there's the power of making your own choice,
 - As many parents trust books, and so turn their kids free to run amok in them.
- These days, outsider kids might also hide themselves in TV or videogames,
 - But TV is constantly interrupted, constantly in the shallows.
 - And while games might provide the satisfaction of power as you conquer a level or explore a world,
 - They make *you* the protagonist, so the experience continues to be solipsistic, with you all by yourself.
- Books do something else. You're still conquering a villain or exploring a world—
 - But you're doing it through the lens of another person,
 - Who's often an outsider, a weirdo, just like you.
- And thus you have companionship in outsiderdom in a very real and direct way
 - That no other medium can replicate,
 - Because no other medium takes the time to explore the weirdness in such detail,
 - or shows so many *varieties* of weirdness across the whole span of its stories.
- I think there are three levels at which readers connect with characters—

- And because each reader is different, each reader-character interaction is different;
 - And the examples I offer here are specific to my reading experience—
 - You may feel differently.
- The first level of connection is interest:
 - You find this person interesting, you're willing to spend time with him, to know more.
 - You do not *like* him; in fact, you may find him morally or emotionally repellent.
 - But there's something about him that's compelling:
 - He takes action,
 - Or he's caught up in some grand action.
 - You're entertained by him.
 - His personality is a mystery you want to understand.
 - Or even if he *is* repellent, even if you actively dislike him, you see the humanity and truth of that repellentness,
 - How real the author has made him,
 - And intense reality is always compelling.
 - I think of Humbert Humbert here, Artemis Fowl, Paul Giamatti's character in *Sideways*, Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*
 - These guys are all outsiders, and often proud of it,
 - Because it proves their superiority to the normal run of humanity in their own minds.
 - And they're all people I would probably find difficult in real life,
 - But for the two to five hours I'll spend with them, safely trapped in the bounds of fiction, it's all right.
- The second level at which readers connect with characters is endearment:
 - A level up in warmth of feeling.
 - You're not only interested in this person,
 - You like them. You root for them. You want to be their friend.
 - You may even want to be them yourself.
 - Sometimes a person you found merely Interesting at the beginning of their book can become endearing as you begin to recognize his patterns or learn his story or vulnerabilities.
 - But generally Endearing characters you like from right upfront.
 - The compelling things here can be all the same things that were compelling in the Interesting characters
 - Action, a mysterious backstory or personality, humanity
 - But endearing people have added virtues:
 - They're often fighting for a just cause.
 - They're morally good: They do not kick puppies or whine,
 - Or act arrogant or entitled,
 - Even though they're also often funny, or smart, or good-looking, or strong.
 - They have friends.
 - I heard Caroline Cooney say at a writers' conference once that there are few things more frightening or off-putting to novel-age readers than a character without friends,
 - And I think that's really true.
 - But they're only rarely unkind to outsiders.
 - And despite all this, they're not perfect.

- They make mistakes, which keep them human and relateable.
 - When I was thinking of examples of endearing characters here, my brain immediately went to Percy Jackson and Harry Potter
 - Both fantasy heroes, both people I'd love to have as friends
 - And at the outset of their journeys, both a little bit blank slates, too—
 - Nice Guys who will Do The Right Thing for their friends,
 - With little interior conflict, and few flaws the reader doesn't share.
 - That slight blankness is partly what lets the reader slip into their skins and stories so easily.
 - And it's partly this: They start out their story as outsiders of some kind
 - Percy has ADD, Harry sleeps in a cupboard under the shed
 - Which is useful for helping a reader to connect with them.
 - We pity them, if nothing else.
 - But once they get to the place where their worth is recognized,
 - They become insiders, accepted, heroes to the community
 - So the reader gets double the pleasure:
 - The independence of being an eel
 - The acceptance of being a goldfish.
- So from interest, we moved on to liking,
- And now the third level at which readers can connect with characters is identification.
 - This character is like me as I am right now.
 - The emotional situations they face are situations I face.
 - The questions they're trying to answer are the questions that haunt me.
 - Qualities that they possess are ones I recognize in myself as well.
 - And these are the characters who inspire the most passion in readers,
 - Because they're the ones we know, we *are*, deep down inside.
- The characters with whom I identified most when I was a kid were Sara Crewe, of *A Little Princess*; Anne Shirley, of *Green Gables*; and Aerin, of Robin McKinley's *The Hero and the Crown*.
 - All girls, all a bit strange, all passionate readers who got into awkward situations because of their imaginations.
- Indeed, unlike endearing characters, who by definition are easily relateable
 - Identifying characters are frequently very specific people, often somewhat odd, often *knowingly* odd
 - Which is partly why we outsiders take to them so much: They are like us in their difference, and sometimes in their suffering over it.
- Writers have some control over a reader's Interest or Endearment level in a character.
 - If you make him the point of view character, the reader automatically has to cling to him.
 - If you want him to be likeable, you can make him friendly or funny.
 - And there are plenty of other techniques.
- But I don't know how much writers can control Identification,
- Other than being very specific and real about who this character is
 - And what his challenges are,
 - Giving those challenges a good basis in human psychology,
 - And letting the book find its right readers.
- Recently, the character about whom I've had the most strong feelings is Rachel Berry, of the television show *Glee*.

- I am a big fan of *Glee*,
 - And you should pity me for this, because to be a fan of *Glee*,
 - and also a fan of narrative consistency and character development, is to live in despair.
- If you don't watch the show, Rachel is a self-involved musical theatre diva with an *amazing* voice
 - Very much an outsider, largely because of that self-involvement
- And in the very first episode, she decided that she should get together with Finn Hudson,
 - the cute, dumb jock with a heart of gold who's the male lead in the club.
- The main thing these characters have in common is that they sing well together,
 - Which, in the way of all musicals, equals true love.
- And now they've gotten together and broken up,
 - gotten together and broken up twice,
 - largely because of the writers' unwillingness to give her any character development.
- Still, I've been invested in this relationship since the beginning,
- Partly for narrative theory reasons: A relationship offers a great opportunity for both of them to learn to be better people by being involved with each other.
- But just recently I realized I identify with Rachel because she wants one of the things I wanted when I was a teenager:
 - for the hot football player to fall in love with me, become my white knight,
 - and leave his hot cheerleader girlfriend behind for me.
 - This did not happen for me, which, you know, I'm fine with altogether;
 - I think I wanted the victory over the social structure of high school more than I wanted the football player himself.
 - But I still want to see the perfectionist dork girl triumph.
- Rachel in essence isn't actually all that different from the characters I listed as merely Interesting earlier
 - Her talent and drive are compelling, but she's deeply annoying in her sense of entitlement and superiority.
- But because she's a girl, I suppose, and because she wants what I once wanted,
 - I identify with her. I root for her.
- She's my outsider avatar who might make good at last.

- And that example shows one of the ways all readers, not just outsiders, use literature:
- As case studies for lives we want to or might one day lead.
 - Hero--or failure? Outcast--or superstar?
 - Stories implicitly ask readers, "What sort of choices would *you* make in the protagonist's position?"
 - And they promise, "If you act like this, in these circumstances, these are the results that will follow"--including, even, a happy ending.
 - Of course, that's a false promise, because the circumstances of the readers will never be the circumstances of the characters
 - But the promise is immensely comforting: Do this, act as the hero does, within your own circumstances, and you'll create a narrative you know, you've *read*, in the tangle of real life. And that will help you survive.
- I have a friend my age who has never finished reading *Harriet the Spy*
 - Because she got about a third of the way into it, and she was so inspired by Harriet,
 - that she started spying herself

- And then she got in trouble.
 - She believed the false promise,
 - And she hadn't yet read enough of it to know that Harriet got in trouble too.
 - And so she put the book away, as if it was *its* fault that she was punished.
- In general, reading for escape, hiding in books, is a double-edged sword, as I imagine many of you know,
- Because it disconnects you from the people around you.
 - You enter your own world, where the voice on the page drowns out the real voices in the room.
 - The reality of the book will almost always be richer and more interesting than the reality you're living.
 - It will almost certainly be better shaped, for one thing, because it has a conscious and all-powerful shaper.
 - And the mere fact that you can close the book and turn off that reality gives an appealing illusion of control—
 - all the more appealing if you're a kid, and control is still something you don't have much of.
- So you read more and more, and separate more and more from the lives other people are living.
- This is something we forget, when we praise kids for reading and reading and reading
 - That reading can be as addictive and isolating as video games, or the Internet, or TV, or any other intense, focused interaction with people who aren't there.
- And when you spend so much time reading about, and *loving*, imaginary people's social lives—
 - You don't always have one of your own.
- And thus your outsiderdom gets reinforced by the very thing you were using to escape it.
- Now, the standard adult advice for kids in the eel's situation is to "Be yourself! Let other people see the real you!"
- Where the adults don't get that it's the real you that's the problem.
- There is a whole genre of books, mostly picture books, that I think of as "Be Yourself" books.
- They're always directed at the kid who's suffering, not at the popular kids or bullies
 - Which maybe is a mistake--maybe we should have more "Don't Be a Jerk" books.
 - But writers are rarely the bullies when they're kids, and writers tend to write the emotional experience they know.
- Anyway. These "Be Yourself" books always have outsiders as protagonists,
- And because of the clothes they wear or their love of dance or whatever it might be,
 - The insiders torment or ignore them, until . . .
- I'm now going to theorize that such stories, in picture books or novels, can resolve themselves in one of seven ways:
- Going from the least positive for the eel to the most positive:
- 1. The goldfish crush the eel's will or unique strength.
 - I call this one the McMurphy, after the character in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*
 - For YA readers, we can call it the Chocolate War.
 - And if the eel gets crushed willingly, we can call it the Rainbow Fish.

- Whatever the name, in this situation, the goldfish just can't take the eel's independence, the threat it presents to their superiority, the way it causes self-doubt deep inside their flat little golden skulls.
 - And thus they destroy it.
 - And it's a little soul-destroying as well,
 - Which is why we're still talking about the Chocolate War all these years later.
 - We don't use this one very often in children's literature,
 - Which perhaps is a little cowardly of us, as it's as likely to occur in reality as any of the rest of these. More likely, maybe.
 - But we want to offer children hope, so far more often we write:
- 2. The goldfish let the eel keep its will or unique strength, but they also absorb those strengths for their own good.
 - This one is the Rudolph, as in the reindeer.
 - Someone who is different is scorned, reviled, made an outsider. "They wouldn't let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games."
 - But the outsider sticks to whatever makes him different--usually because he has no choice—
 - and eventually that difference ends up saving the entire community.
 - "Then how the reindeer loved him, and they shouted out with glee--Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, you'll go down in history!"
 - This is also a Christ story, you'll notice, someone suffering at the hands of the community and yet redeeming them all.
 - And at the same time a story about Darwinistic evolution--the community at first resisting an odd mutation, and then adapting to and benefiting from it.
 - If the goldfish were being threatened by, say, an evil angelfish,
 - And the electric eel stepped up and volunteered to take the angelfish out, as it could,
 - that would be pulling a Rudolph.
- (One supercool thing I learned in my research for this talk:
 - Electric eels have electrocytes in their bodies that basically work like the plates in a battery,
 - And when they have prey in sight, their brains send a signal to these electrocytes, which in turn generate an electric charge in the water,
 - Shocking and sometimes killing their prey.
 - In other words, they really can kill things *with their minds*.
 - Do not mess with the electric eel.)
- On a less lethal note,
- In 3. The goldfish yield to the superiority of the eel, who has been right all along
 - This is the reverse of the McMurphy—the Ayn Rand,
 - And it really only works in fiction if you're Ayn Rand
 - And magnificently unconcerned with real human psychology and relationships.
 - You also see it a lot in fanfiction—Mary Sue characters are often the sign of an Ayn Rand plot,
 - Where the Mary Sue will get everything they want,
 - Never mind how people would act in real life.
 - How many of you went through an Ayn Rand phase as a teenager?
 - I did—I loved *Anthem* and *The Fountainhead*.
 - She is actually a great writer for questing teenagers, I think,

- Because she is wonderfully *rigorous*
 - And her outsiders are *always right*
 - And that sort of certainty, that moral fundamentalism and the community that can come with it
 - Can be a great boon when you're feeling a little lost in the fog,
 - However much it annoys the non-converted people around you.
 - The Ayn Rand also usually doesn't last, because while the eel can indeed be brilliant—
 - Truly, it isn't always right,
 - And if it insists upon its rightness, then it just becomes the new goldfish.
- Another version of an eel-wins story:
- 4. The eel manages to make itself unconcerned about the goldfish, and just accepts itself as an eel, alone in all its eely awesomeness.
 - This is the Buddha,
 - And again, it really only works if you're writing about a Buddha-like figure,
 - And creating a character who can exist outside relationships with other human beings
 - (Assuming there are no other eel figures around).
 - This is not only extraordinarily difficult in life,
 - It makes for rather boring fiction, as fiction relies on figures in relationship and conflict, and so not many writers use it.
- If you can escape from the goldfish, then you have the option of
- 5. the Ugly Duckling, where the eel leaves the goldfish and finds a new school of eels
 - In this case, again, the outsider is scorned, reviled, tormented inside and out.
 - But rather than saving his community, he leaves it, to find another group that truly understands him and appreciates his talents.
 - This one leaves the Action Plot of eels vs. goldfish unresolved, a bit, as neither one wins or even comes to a *détente*;
 - But the Emotional Plot is resolved, as the eel achieves acceptance at last.
- If you stay home, then you might still experience
- 6. The Wizard, where the eel discovers the goldfish have actually been eels all along,
 - That the mass of insiders is composed of outsiders just like him.
 - As Margaret Mead says: “Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else.”
 - I named this one after the Wizard of Oz—the idea that there's just a human being behind the curtain of this almighty figure—
 - And just as in that movie, this isn't always a happy resolution—
 - As taking away an enemy can be disorienting rather than satisfying.
 - On the other hand, it offers opportunities for all the eels to connect in their individuality, which is a beautiful thing.
- Much like
- 7. The goldfish and the eel, after some initial distrust, look past their differences and come together in equality and harmony—or at least tolerance.
 - I call this the Johnny Castle, from *Dirty Dancing*
 - Based on that fabulous last scene where the dancers and the establishment come together to party

- I always wondered what happened after *Dirty Dancing* was over, after that mirror ball stopped spinning.
 - Did Baby go to the Peace Corps like she planned? Or did she hang around the Catskills with Johnny every summer?
 - Did Johnny maybe come with her to the Peace Corps?
 - I admit I have a hard time seeing those two together anywhere besides that resort.
 - And that’s because the Johnny Castle only works if the seeds of real and sustained change are laid in both sides in the course of the story,
 - That the goldfish and the eel can truly find common ground between their essential differences,
 - Something deeper than just a shared interest in dancing.
 - That feels a little bit like a fairy tale to me, always
 - But when it works, while it works, well, you know—you’ll have the time of your life.
- I’m a bit skeptical about the Johnny Castle partly because it’s premised on change,
 - And the other six story structures here do not offer that option.
 - In those stories, no one ever says to the eel, “Well, can’t you just become a goldfish?”
 - And any attempts at trying to do so are greeted with ridicule.
 - In the cartoon, Rudolph paints his nose black—but it washes off in a storm,
 - And the other reindeer make fun of him again.
 - In the McMurphy, the change is imposed with brute force, and against his will, and with eventually lethal consequences.
 - In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the loss of self really is worse than death.
 - These stories say, You can only be who you are.
 - And as a result, if you want to survive and have relationships,
 - Here is what you can do:
 - Make your peace with being different, as in the Buddha and Ayn Rand.
 - Work with the goldfish as much as you’re capable, as in the Wizard and Johnny Castle.
 - Try to get them to work with you too, like in the Rudolph—
 - And if that doesn’t happen, go for the Ugly Duckling, and leave for a different pond.
 - I thought of this over and over again watching the “It Gets Better” campaign last year,
 - Because that’s what the adults involved were all saying to the gay teenagers, and rightly too:
 - Love yourself, be kind to yourself.
 - Negotiate whatever peace you can where you live now,
 - And then when you can—get out of there.
 - This is very hard wisdom at every age, and even harder to practice,
 - Because it involves letting go of the dream of becoming a goldfish
 - And all the perceived benefits that come with being a goldfish:
 - Popularity, fame, money, quote-unquote normalcy
 - Again for our business, sales.
 - And what you get in return can feel a bit dodgy:
 - The fullness of being yourself,
 - As tetchy and limited and imperfect as you are.
 - Some days, I would rather have the popularity.

- But good work comes out of that fullness, that kindness,
 - Getting all that energy back that you put into wanting to be something else.
- And real relationships come out of it too, when you find another eel,
 - Built on mutual Identification of inmost truths.
- And with those two things, you might still get the benefits of goldfishdom anyway,
- And in a way that's true to your whole self.

- The idea of “working with the goldfish” is important here too.
- The electric eel who holds herself too far apart from anyone else, who prizes her own special nature too highly, does everyone a disservice
 - Because no one can get to know her
 - Or see what gifts she has to share with the world.
- Nor is there any shame in being a Rudolph or an Ugly Duckling in the right circumstances:
 - Helping a good community, or seeking out the right one for you.
- There's even a great pleasure in taking the goldfish's expectations and tastes
 - And turning them to your own eely ends.
- I love it when writers take their unique voices or fascinations
 - And apply them to plots that readers already know and love
 - I'd love to see a multicultural Jane Austen retelling, for instance
 - Or a vampire romance written by a literary writer, from the male point of view.
- Or—we editors do this all the time—you take a book that's an eel down to the ground,
 - Totally and completely and wonderfully itself,
 - And you put it in goldfish packaging, to help eels and goldfish alike connect with it.
- I'm editing an amazing novel coming out next year that involves shapeshifters, dying young, a man with lobster-claw arms, the mental barriers created by reservation life—
 - And I am totally going to sell it as a paranormal romance!
 - Goldfish readers will pick it up for its dark cover with a pretty girl on it, and have their minds *blown*.
 - I can't wait.

- To close here, I admit that I formed a lot of my opinions about being an outsider back in the 1980s, when I was one myself,
 - And when I didn't have the Internet to connect with other people like me.
- If I had had a book club, or a blogosphere,
 - Or Nerdfighteria, or a Harry Potter fan community
 - My middle-school life might have been very different.
- And because outsiders now have all those ways to connect,
- It's easier for eels to find each other—and goldfish, and angelfish, and seahorses, and sponges.
 - And even creatures of different species who have something else in common—
 - A taste for fine plankton, maybe.
- Anyway. A lot of these old dichotomies are being broken down
 - And that is a good, good thing—
 - Helping us let go of the boxes and differences we wall ourselves up in,
 - Or wall others up in,
 - So we can explore all the possibilities we have inside,

- Or that we might discover with each other.
- Kindling Words here is a pond full of eels,
 - Correction: *A party* full of eels,
 - Dedicated to helping each of us find what makes us most alive in our work and connections.
- I wish all of you a wonderful, productive weekend here,
And thank you for your kind attention here tonight.