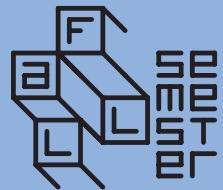


Lewis  
Warsh

Guiding  
Principle





“no more sensations; nothing but memories”

E.M. Cioran

I make copies on the English Department xerox machine and pass them out to my students. “Civil Disobedience” by Thoreau, “Self-Reliance” by Emerson. Of course, the students can find the same texts on the internet, but I prefer not to allow cellphones in class. I prefer not to. I can see you texting in the back of the room, under your desk, while pretending to pay attention, and sometimes, even though it says “cellphones are forbidden during class” on the syllabus, you take out your phone, right in front of me, in broad daylight, so to speak, and check your messages. I have no idea what you might be doing that’s more important than what’s happening in class, but the concept of “rudeness” is no longer in play, not in this lifetime, and I’m the only one in the room who cares.

The shadows are everywhere, and the Republican Convention begins in a few hours, and the headlines are several inches high, almost every day. The first headline I remember brought the news that Stalin had died. **STALIN DEAD**, in bold letters, filled the entire front page of the New York Post, once the most liberal newspaper in the city, and now the ugliest. Out of the corner of my eye, I remember my father watching the McCarthy hearings on our new 21-inch black and white television. My parents were teachers in the elementary schools of the Bronx and many of their friends had been blacklisted and lost their jobs.

My father's last name was Warshafsky, but he changed it before I was born, the better to assimilate into this new world where his own parents had come at the turn of the century.

For fifteen years, I was an adjunct in the English Departments of numerous schools--New England College (in Henniker, New Hampshire), Queens College, Pace University, LaGuardia Community College, Yeshiva University, SUNY Albany and Fairleigh Dickinson University (the Rutherford campus, in New Jersey, now closed, not far from the house where William Carlos Williams practiced as a poet and doctor)--before Long Island University, in downtown Brooklyn, hired me full time. And now I'm a full tenured professor, for what it's worth. People are retiring early and are not being replaced. The new president of the university approaches education from a business point of view and is intent on eliminating the required courses in the humanities, and cutting the budgets for programs that once seemed important. Every student, regardless of major, is required to take two composition courses and two literature courses, as well as philosophy courses, and it's up to us--the faculty in question--to justify the importance of such fields of knowledge, and how reading Descartes or Wittgenstein or Kate Chopin might have some kind of practical relevance when the students graduate and begin to look for jobs in fields like pharmacy, one major for which the school is well-known. We must justify the importance of reading books written centuries before, or why the history of the world is of any importance. The operating costs of non-existence, one might say, have never been higher, nor the stakes so irrelevant.

More than once, every day, I look around and say to myself, almost as a reminder: "I'm alive. This is what it feels like, this is what I'm seeing, this is how my life has turned out, these are the people I love, these are my friends, this is the nature of beauty. This is how I want to spend my time." Two close friends, Bill Berkson and Ted Greenwald, died within twenty-four hours of one another this last summer. I'd be fooling myself to believe that one can embrace frivolity

indefinitely, and ignore the truth, the mortal truth, the shadows of night falling, but no doubt frivolity is the key to a long life.

If you aren't happy where you are, at a given moment in your life, it might make sense to ask yourself how you arrived there, and what you can do to change. Fifty summers ago I was sitting on a bench on an outdoor subway platform in the depths of Brooklyn and for a moment I was confused about all the events that led up to this moment. I was a caseworker for the Welfare Department, and I had been visiting my many clients. It meant going to their apartments and asking to see their rent receipts and their electricity bills and encouraging them to tell me what they needed: a new bed, perhaps, or an essential article of clothing. I carried a black looseleaf notebook to identify myself as I wandered the mean streets of Bushwick. I can still remember the faces of the people whom I visited, my so-called "clients." I was just a shy person, interested in poetry, not particularly socially conscious, and here I was sitting in their living rooms ("can I bring you some coffee?"), asking them questions about child support, among other things, topics that were really none of my business, not realizing my own life was changing as well.

I used to be the youngest person in the room, and now I'm the oldest.

There's always something in front of you and that means there is always content in your life. You can stop at any moment and look around and see what's in front of you. Camus, in *The Stranger*, famously says that all you need is the memory of a single day to survive a life sentence in prison. You can live on those memories. Of course, you can close your eyes and be somewhere else as well, and the place you go when your eyes are wide open, and when they're shut, adds up to an approximate idea of what it means to be alive. There's always a present time where something is happening if you pay attention. I want to exist in real time--staring at a screen in the palm of your hand is too limiting. But railing against technology is one way of showing my age--though not hard to wonder, bleary-eyed, whether we are in a better world because of it.

Here are the people at the Republican Convention shouting “Lock Her Up.”

My identity is a function of my roles, at least on the surface. A number of times, every year, I stand in front of an audience and read my poems, trying to project the words outwards in a way that’s different from when I read them to myself. Even though I get totally lost in the role of the person reading poetry, I’m also outside the experience, and the one thing that breaks the spell is when people laugh at something I say. Laughter, during a poetry reading, makes me aware that people are really listening. I sometimes have to remember I’m the person who wrote these poems. How often, in an audience listening to someone else read, I drift off into my own thoughts, as I used to do in a classroom when I was a student, sitting in the back of the room, without even a cellphone to distract me. Sometimes the audience applauds after a poem, and always at the end of the reading, and I always know whether the applause is simply out of politeness, or whether something special happened--some kind of connection--that makes them want to applaud. No one bursts into tears during a reading, not audibly, and when I complain to someone I know, afterwards, about why people weren’t laughing, she says, “we were laughing to ourselves.” I learned long ago not to talk between poems, or try to contextualize, or explain, as if the audience is incapable of getting it on their own. Once you start explaining your poems at a reading, which many poets do, you are simply calling attention to your own insecurity, following the misguided idea that by talking you can divert the audience’s attention away from the poems, as if they weren’t worth hearing. You think you are engaging the audience but in fact we have all stopped listening. You might as well be in the bathroom, talking to yourself. No one cares what you think about your own poems.

### ***1000 Poetry Readings***

***I’m going to begin with a series of poems, selections really, from a book I began the winter before last around Summer ’73 actually when I was staying with friends, friends***

*of friends, in Seattle, the series itself dividing into three sections so I'm just going to read a few poems from each of the sections dealing with asceticism as I see it and then try to bridge the sections. . . you know, bridges . . . the last time I read having read the entire series but since then I've written these other two parts, books really, so the second half of the reading will connect with the first by some sort of suspension or key with the continuity being that everything follows. . . please smoke. . . alphabetically and chronologically as well, though in part three, which I'll read last, with the quote by Wills, just something I got off the TV really, and part of which was published recently, I hope you'll see how I've tried to tie everything together, with life in Seattle which was really an exciting time for me connecting with the other less exciting to me intellectually if nothing else period in my life when I was working drudgery really like I'm sure you know I'll try to end on an up note with my most recent stuff which fits into the series or written on my last trip to New York stand on its own as being central to the hideous grief I feel.\**

I once boarded a plane, non-stop, New York to Athens, Greece, and my life completely changed. At the time it seemed like I had made a mistake, and almost everything that happened to me afterwards hinged on that decision: suffering, joy, heartbreak--the ledger never adds up. As soon as the plane was in the air and there was no turning back, I realized what I had done. It took five years, literally, to recover from that moment.

It's important, I must say, to improve your rebounding skills, to find a way out when everything feels wrong, and the sooner you learn how to do this the better everyone will be, though easier said, and sometimes you don't make it, or only go half-way, and then backtrack, make the same mistake again, and then you recover one more time ("stupid me!") if it's not too late.

Someone is always at the controls, but part of the artfulness of doing anything is the give and take between freedom and control, like two contrary voices in your head deciding to join hands rather than bicker, and somehow create

a third term, the elusive third team philosophers have talked about forever, what happens when opposites join together and create something different, not freedom v. control, but both at the same time. The part of you in control allows the part of you that's going on nerve to take over, but the control part is always "in charge," invisible, omnipresent, a bit dictatorial but soon the revolution will come and everything moves forward, a few inches at a time, until you can't even recognize the person you were before.

One of my favorite writers is Anna Kavan, who lived mostly in England from 1901 to 1968. She wrote seventeen books, novels and collections of stories, and most of them are available. Her most notable books are a short novel called *Ice*, which she wrote towards the end of her life, and a book of stories, *Julia and the Bazooka*. There's also a biography, *A Stranger on Earth*, written by the British poet Jeremy Reed. Anna Kavan, one learns, is not her real name, but the name of a character in one of her novels. Her real name is Helen Woods and she took the name of her first husband and published her first novels under the name Helen Ferguson. After that marriage ended, she changed her name to Helen Edmunds, the name of her second husband, and finally, after that marriage ended, she became Anna Kavan, Anna from Anna Karenina, Kavan from Franz Kafka. There's a lot of mystery surrounding her life: she was a heroin addict, she was in and out of mental hospitals, her fear of going crazy led to numerous suicide attempts, she wanted to live independent of men, and it was only through writing that she explored her relation to the world and other people, in a way that made sense to her and preserved her sanity. She was a ghost-like presence when she was alive, and as a person in the history of literature she is practically invisible. Yet when people do discuss her work, they often compare her to Virginia Woolf, and to Anais Nin, a writer of the same period known mostly for her journals, and as a champion of sexual freedom. Nin was a big fan of Anna Kavan as well. Most of Kavan's fiction takes on the world of dysfunctional relationships in a dreamlike atmosphere, but much of her own life passed in obscurity, composing one neglected masterpiece after another. "I must get a room somewhere very cheaply in London," she



writes in her journal, age twenty-four, “go somewhere to draw, and really work hard all, all, all the time.” Somehow, despite much adversity, she manages to follow her own advice.

Perhaps the guiding principle is that there isn’t any. In 1963 I flew to San Francisco to spend the summer with friends and on my first night in the city they took me to a bar in North Beach, Gino & Carlo, where a coterie of poets gathered in a back room around a long table. When I arrived, most of the poets were sitting at the bar waiting for Jack Spicer to arrive, and when he did they all followed him into the back room. Spicer was the center of attention, and everyone waited for him to speak. I was eighteen years old; he was thirty-eight, but looked much older (he died two years later). He wore loafers with white socks, his hairline receding over a wide mottled forehead, and his skin took on a reddish alcoholic tint in the dim overhead light.

I had read Spicer’s poems before: he had been included in the great anthology, *The New American Poetry, 1945-60*, edited by Donald Allen, which changed my life and my ideas about poetry. His book *Heads of the Town up to the Aether* had been published that summer, and everyone I knew was reading it. I could say Spicer was a “hero” but I hate that word. I don’t think it’s a good idea to think of people as heroes. Somehow I knew, even as the youngest person in the back of the bar, that putting people on a pedestal was a bad idea. The young men around the table looked depressed, guilt-ridden, and stared sadly into their drinks, while Spicer held forth. There were no women. I was eighteen. No one was having fun. At one point, Spicer turned to me and asked: “What do *you* do?” It was time to offer my credentials: what was I doing there anyway? “I’m a writer,” I said, stupidly, and someone kicked me under the table. It was the wrong answer, and I felt like crawling away. There was one right answer: “I’m a poet.” I had failed my first test.

I returned to the bar all summer, night after night, and sat at that table. Possibly the guiding principle is to learn something new, no matter what.

\*"1000 Poetry Readings" by Lewis Warsh first appeared in *Blue Heaven* (The Kulchur Foundation, 1977).

**Lewis Warsh** is co-founder, with Anne Waldman, of *Angel Hair Magazine and Books*, and co-editor, with Bernadette Mayer, of *United Artists Magazine and Books*. He is the author of over twenty-five books of poetry, fiction and autobiography, most recently

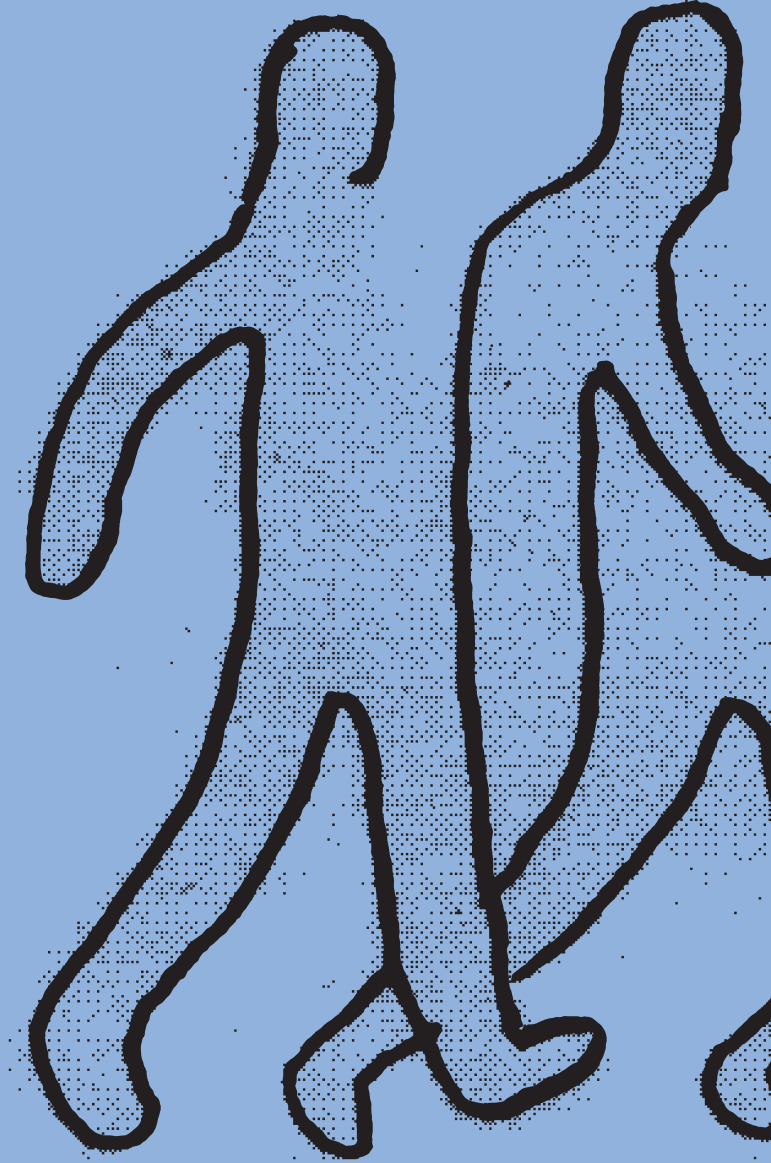
*Inseparable: Poems 1995-2005* (Granary Books), *A Place in the Sun* (Spuyten Duyvil), and *Alien Abduction* (Ugly Duckling Presse). He teaches in the MFA program in creative writing at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York.



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