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PEACE ADDICTION

by Frederick Feirstein

Most historians have emphasized the Vietnam War as a turning point in American history of the 1960's. It was, and yet another war that I was personally involved in seems perhaps more relevant for this century than it was for the last. It was the Nigerian Civil War, a tribal war fought over oil in which politicians seemed mere puppets to a twenty-seven-year old like me. It was a Muslim-Christian war, the Christians being Ibos or Igbos as they are called in the historical novel *Half A Yellow Sun* by a young woman who learned of it from her grandparents and believes nothing happened here on behalf of the Igbos. But from what follows, you'll see that wasn't so.

One day in late Spring 1967 my wife Linda was reading the *New York Times* when she came across a plea for donations with a full-page picture of an Igbo child stricken by *kwashikor* which turns the hair red, swells the belly, and ends in death by starvation. The ad was taken out by a humanitarian group made up mostly of returned Peace Corps volunteers who had worked with the Igbo tribe, who not long before were the heads of the Nigerian government. The Igbos are Catholic, were taught by Christian missionaries, and are called "The black Jews of Africa" for their business acumen and cultural interests. After massacres by the Muslim Hausa tribes and Muslim dominated Yoruba tribes they seceded from the government had formed their own country called "Biafra." The nascent country was under siege and thousands of Igbos were dying

by the day. The American Committee To Keep Biafra Alive,” the ad said, was formed to bring food and medical supplies to that breakaway state.

My wife said we have to go over there, to a store front on the now gentrified Upper West Side. The night before the ad came out the group had organized the first candlelight vigil at Dag Hammershold Plaza in front of the U.N. This day was the second meeting. Linda was in tears. I was depressed from a director ruining my second play production in New York at the Provincetown Playhouse. We took a cross town bus and walked into a makeshift office, wall to wall with kids in their late teens and twenties. The playwright Robert Patrick would call such activists Kennedy’s Children. We were born during or right after World War II and prided ourselves on being individualists in the Emersonian/ Eric Hoffer tradition.

The volunteers in the store front we entered were almost all white, casually dressed in jeans and t-shirts and bubbling with anxiety and anger. The speaker was a Brit named Paul Connett who was the chairman of the committee. He was asking for kids with special skills to take roles. When he asked if anyone could write. I looked around, saw no one raise a hand, and so I raised mine. “You’re our publicity director,” Paul announced. I shrugged. All I wanted to direct was my absurdist play *The Family Circle* properly. But Linda urged me to take the job, and so the next day I found myself at a desk wondering how to accomplish what the group asked me to do first: get the Catholic Church involved. The desk was a piece of unfinished furniture with a swivel chair and what looked like someone’s mother’s discarded dining room chair beside it. On it were flyers with information about the siege and a black telephone with white dials, like the other phones on other desks that crammed the narrow room. Everyone was industriously on them, making liaisons with the U.S. government, the news media, the U.N., and other organizations we thought might be helpful -- especially those groups protesting the Vietnam

War. Sitting beside me was a young man whose desk was cluttered with large coffee cups and miniatures of the ad's dying child. He was gathering volunteers to go into the streets and ask for pocket change and even dollar bills. In front of me was the only black woman who dared join us, named Geri. She was the office administrator and pregnant with a baby she would later name Uhuru for "Freedom." While we were busying ourselves, blindly trying to find our way to people with influence, in walked four men in sharkskin suits. Most of us knew they were C.I.A. infiltrates. Some of us were frightened, some cautious, some like me curious. After a few minutes one of them, carrying a book, came up and introduced himself to me. "I hear you're Frederick Feirstein, the poet and playwright." That was suspicious information-gathering I thought as he sat himself down and shook my hand. "I'm a poet too."

"Here's my new book," the agent said and pushed it toward me. If he was about to offer some dangerous help, I felt obliged to scan it. But more than scan it I did. The work was terrific and absorbed me. It was written in meter and rhyme which I was beginning to use and had a range of action I only could strive for. I looked at him quizzically. He looked back at me and smiled.

"What can I do to help?"

"I believe in going to the top," I half-joked. "I want to ask the Pope for help. I'd like to write a letter and have a little girl from Harlem give it to him, asking him to intervene."

"Write it. I'll get the girl and an audience with him."

"How?"

"Through the Knights of Malta. Do you want me to talk to Gleason, the head of the Longshores men union and block the New York City ports?"

“No,” I said, as if we were delivering lines in my own absurdist comedy, “Please, just try to get the audience.”

“Done.”

To my astonishment two days later the girl with my letter was on her way to The Vatican. Two days after that a picture of her sitting on the Pope’s lap made the front page of *The Daily News*. And in two more days The Holy Ghost Fathers walked into the office and asked what they could do to help. And help us they certainly, unselfishly did.

My next task was to ask other, more public and powerful political organizations to lend us the strength of their considerable publicity arms. The first groups I spoke to were antiwar people. I found that most of the leaders were interested only in their cause and worse -- that the dedication of quite a few of them came not from sheer altruism but from self-interest and a need to be fashionable. As the years went by and I reflected on this, I wondered how many protestors would have been involved if they weren’t subjected to the draft. After all, the antiwar fervor died down when the war ended. There were no mass protests about the genocide in Cambodia; the more outrageous leaders of “the movement” seemed to have retreated into their own narcissism or worse, the rank capitalism they vehemently opposed -- like Jerry Rubin who became a stockbroker.

At the same time I would come to question my own involvement with the Committee. If I hadn’t been depressed, would I have looked for the extrovertish release I found here? What symbolically was involved with my trying to rescue starving children -- besides a need to rescue which usually is built on a need to be rescued oneself. I’d come to answer some of these questions for myself later and will write about them shortly. But for now I was twenty-seven, half-naïve, and dangerously idealistic, a patsy for the peace addiction I was to encounter. I’d not

only talk to leaders of the antiwar movement and find myself a member of an unfashionable fringe group, but go to events and try to approach celebrities whose “clout” was helpful in attracting the attention of a media even then too involved with star worship.

One night I went to an event starring George Plimpton who was speaking out against the Vietnam War. His response to my request for a hearing reminded me of being twelve and asking for the autograph of a backup Yankee outfielder named Johnny Lindell. Eagerly I stretched out a pad and a pen to Lindell. Almost without looking down, he swatted me aside and almost spiked me. Plimpton was very tall and I was very earnest. He looked down at me, said nothing, and moved onto the next handshake. I had a similar experience with Pearl Bailey who berated me a few months later.

Most of us in the group couldn't understand why people asserting African allegiances were not joining forces with us. Some of us knew that radical Black Muslims had infiltrated Harlem and people there and in other inner cities were scared or contemptuous of us to get involved. For instance, I had had a meeting with Father Orange in Philadelphia who was the head of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I sat across from him feeling like a supplicant while he loomed large in his Poor People's overalls. He lectured me on how the Africans simply were the puppets of white people pulling their strings over oil. I partly agreed with him and partly argued with him that it was Africans pulling the triggers of guns. But Orange would have none of it. Neither did Pearl Bailey who read me the riot act in front of her fans, “Why don't you help the poor blacks living on the streets here, white boy. Why are you messing with these people in Africa?”

When I would spell out such encounters to my Nigerian friends who worked only behind the scenes with us out of concern for the safety of their families, they spoke with contempt for

the hypocrisy of those American blacks who claimed a relationship with them but ignored their plight, not only in Nigeria but in other countries where black dictators committed their own acts of genocide as in would happen in Uganda, or in other new countries where old tribal animosities and religious hatreds belied the guilt-ridden rhetoric of university professors -- who though they rightly railed against the injustice and consequences of European colonialism, at the same time refused to see what Africans were doing to Africans. Being an assistant professor then I found that none of the professors I spoke to, white or black, had ever met an African and hadn't a clue about the genocide going on in Biafra. None had read the Igbo Chinua Achebe's novel, now the classic *Things Fall Apart*, or knew that the Nobel Prize winning playwright the Yoruba Wole Soyinka was jailed for his support of the Biafrans.

As the first activist spring moved on to summer and into the school year, I would spend three days a week doing publicity and, when the chairman burned out, I took over running the Committee myself. The other two days I commuted by train with another assistant professor named Miriam Reik who was finishing a dissertation that Wayne State University Press would publish. On our rides back and forth she frequently would tease out of me what I was doing politically and tease me for it, sometimes giving psychoanalytically-tinged explanations for my often futile efforts. They seemed masochistic to her -- her father was an eminent psychoanalyst who was an expert at masochism. But the more I talked the more fascinated she became until, using the jargon of the time, I "radicalized" her, although I was an old-fashioned New York liberal, far from the radicals I had seen operate,

After months of conversation, Miriam Reik not only joined us but became one of the most daring of our members. To get publicity she would fly in top writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Herb Gold under the strafing of MIG fire, so that they could write helpful articles for the

New York Times magazine section about what was becoming a horrendous situation there with tens of thousands dying every day and our humanitarian aid often being stolen by corrupt soldiers and politicians. Finally Miriam would be the last person to flee Lagos with Ojukwu, the Biafran leader when his army was forced to surrender.

And though none of us sought it out, Danger became the middle name not only of Miriam but of many of us. One winter night it became my own and my wife's. Linda by that time was running the Committee with me, putting in long hours well into the night in what then was a scary neighborhood. Not only was the storefront fully exposed, but open so people could come in at will and put their donations to Biafra in a large cardboard box at the back of the office.

It was close to midnight when a menacing Black Muslim, six feet two and with a shaved head, walked into the office with something behind his back. Thinking he might have a gun, I asked him what he cared to donate. Silently he pulled out pair of ice skates. Linda and I looked at each other, fearfully sensing he wanted to whack both of us in the head with them. Instead he plunked them in the box, to "donate them" to a country well over 100 degrees. When he left I said to Linda, "Let's get out of here, fast."

We ran to our Chevy parked a block away. We saw the ice man behind us get into a Buick with three of his cronies. Should we go down Broadway or east to Park Avenue where the lights were staggered? These were the days where there were no cell phones, and none of the graffiti-ridden phone booths were functional. So we couldn't call the police. On an impulse we decided to race through Central Park and into Linda's mother's garage. But I could see in the side mirror that the Buick was pulling up right next to us. I pressed and held the horn, hoping that a cop car would pick up on my speed but I heard no siren. I saw nothing except the window of the Buick roll down. Mine was up but it was no protection against the ice man's gun pointed

at my head. I floored the pedal and in a minute we were ahead of them. I kept it floored till we came to the transverse. We went through it at 100 m.p.h. Once out of it I raced down Central Park South. For the first time I looked back. But the Buick wasn't behind me. Had a cop car stopped him? Had we lost him, though that didn't seem possible? I didn't care. Soon we were at my mother-in-law's building way on the East Side. We pulled into her deep garage, left the car for the attendant and took the elevator up.

At that point it we had been working for eight months, cerebrally understanding that we could be in danger but like most post-adolescents not truly feeling it. That night we did. That night my mother-in-law tried to talk us out of our work. She said we not only were in danger from the Black Muslims but from the government. She knew that not only our phone was tapped but hers too, that not only did they know our every move but even knew that she had been visiting her sister-in-law in New Hampshire the week before.

So we began to question our motives in continuing what seemingly was unrelated to the rest of our lives. The next day at the office passed with deceptively secure regularity. No one seemingly was fazed by our encounter with the gunman. Were we all drugged by what I've called "peace addiction" akin to what, in his book, Christopher Hedges called a "war addiction" among journalists.

That next day was a false Spring. It must have been seventy degrees in Manhattan. As if a relentless winter really had disappeared, kids like us were sitting in the rocks in Central Park sunning themselves, visiting the zoo where danger was behind bars, playing frisbee, playing Dylan songs on guitars and flutes. Life, as I walked through the park, seemed stronger than death. But still I wrestled with myself over what lay in store for me and Linda. The night before we almost got shot, not by a camera like the one Linda was using to take pictures of the ice

skaters in a city where ice skates were innocuous. Our actions suddenly foreign to me, I took a pad and paper out of my jacketless shirt and wrote down what I was seeing externally and internally:

“GRANDFATHER IN WINTER”

The overcoats are gone from Central Park
 --In the sudden Spring.
 A clump of leaves, that lay in a white crypt
 Of roots for months, loosens, looking for life.
 Bare feet of hippies on the sunny walks,
 Rock heaps of pigeons bursting like corn, food
 From brown bags, from white hands, from black hands,
 Black and white kids, kissing in the high rocks,
 In the Rodin laps, in the hands of God
 Above. Below, an old man, in a rough coat,
 Wearing my grandfather's frown, lifts his face
 Up to the sun and smiles smacking his lips.
 His sky-blue Buchenwald tattoo has healed.
 Below him, in the skating-rink, a small
 Girl, Jewish, repeats the rings of the park:
 The ring of her father skating around her,
 The guard around him, the border of the rink
 Around him, the rings of the pigeon-walks,
 The rings of clouds, of jets, of the young
 Sun around it. Me on the parapet,
 The blood of the false Spring ringing my heart.
 My wife beside me aims her camera at
 The girl. The girl falls. The rope jerks. Nine
 Iraqi Jews are falling through the air,
 The Arab horde around them cheers. *Shema.*
 The feet clump like leaves. The eyes turn up: white
 Rocks. Israel in winter prepares again
 For war. Around the gas house are the guards,
 Around the guards, pogroms. Deserts of dead,
 Miles wide and miles thick. The rings around
 Her border is of time. Grandfather knows.
 His dead eyes scrutinize my eyes. He knows
 Tomorrow snow will fall like lead, the news
 Will be obituaries, Kaddish will
 Be sung. It is the eve of war again:
Shema.

There's a curative power to art, and in the act of writing this poem I came to understand that this need to save the children had a secret source in me, a secret my mother more or less kept hidden from me, to protect me. I vaguely knew she had survived two pogroms, one by hiding with her mother and sisters behind tombstones in a cemetery above the town. The next she fled by the Jewish underground railway to Rotterdam where they used the money my tailor grandfather sent them to sail here. In a sense she and her sisters were the starving children I was trying to save. One of the traits of young Jews is to ignore the possibility of their own persecution, even in this time of dire anti-Semitism, and get involved in other causes.

My mother was fortunate that her mother ran a tea shop for young revolutionaries, and so they had the information to escape murderous Cossacks and become Americans. All but two of her large extended family were not so lucky. They stayed, were trapped, and perished in the Big Pogrom, the Holocaust. And I in my grandiosity was going to ask the Pope to pay attention?

That epiphany led me to understand what Miriam was trying to get me to see: that there were unconscious forces in me that led to my actions. What, I wondered, were hers?

Besides what our conscious and unconscious motivations are that lead us to take action, much of what we accomplish depends on luck, good luck or dumb luck. I can think of several instances of how this happened during our grass roots political actions which in turn led me to wonder if the same things happen in larger political situations that we think are determined mostly by character focused planning. A few years ago I had a discussion with my late friend Edith Kurzweil (the *Partisan Review* editor who had written three books on Freud) and who had survived the Holocaust by making an extraordinary escape across Europe at fourteen with her younger brother. She in turn had discussed with her friend the historian Walter Lacquer what

enabled him and others he knew to survive. Both of them came up with the same simple excruciating answer: Luck.

After a few months of day-to-day labor trying to get a hearing from the governmental powers-that-be, these same powers wanted a hearing from us: we and them saw though the macro picture of Egyptian pilots using the chaos in Nigerian to test Russian MIGS for use against the Israelis, the French testing the effectiveness of new tanks, oil companies treating the nearly dead like the fossils they were exploiting. Sadly but pathetically; we came to realize that not only was the general public ignorant of what was going on in Nigeria but that our government was making major decisions based on little knowledge not only of the present but on fantasized implications for the future. Though we knew little, we found that often the government was taking actions on not much more information. So Richard Nixon's office and Teddy Kennedy himself would call us for advice on what to do in situations that required careful study and deliberate planning. After many such calls we began to feel that lives were being lost, Biafran infrastructures decimated, while those in power in Washington and elsewhere often were fumbling in the dark. And when we made plans some of the results seemed dependent on luck.

For instance, about a year into our work Joan Baez decided to lend her support as she did to so many causes. With her help we were able to organize the first rock concert for food relief in Africa. Judy Collins (who I found had come into the storefront anonymously to address envelopes), luckily joined in as did such bands as Country Joe and The Fish. But more importantly, one of Joan's friend's fathers was an eminent law professor at Yale. For months he worked hard preparing a legal brief calling for U Thant, the Secretary General of the U.N. to intervene unilaterally in Nigeria to stop the genocide. There had never been a test of genocide at the U.N. It was to be presented by Joan's friends to the U.S. Representative to the U.N. I was

wary of a couple of their leaders. They seemed to be on what we used to call an “ego trip,” more involved in their own narcissistic gratification than in the seriousness of their mission. I led a sit-in and the press said to Linda they would not cover this important event unless there was violence in the sit-in I was leading. This now was 1968 and street theater had taken over from real theater, and the press was becoming now only yellow but jaundiced. All that happened inside the Representative’s office was that the self-congratulatory presenters of our case came out of the meeting defeated but greatly flattered that the ambassador was taking them out to lunch.

Several members of the group went wild. Not there, not for the cameras. But when we got back to the office all hell broke loose. Carefully planned efforts had failed before, though this seemed the best, most certain of them. Worse, Biafra was losing the war quickly and the death tolls were becoming staggering. Some of the group began to talk about the taking the kind of violent dramatic action that the new radical element of American life wanted, the kind at the 1968 Democratic National Committee meeting in Chicago, the kind where inner cities were burning and wild-eyed looting was going on.

What was their idea? They wanted to go out to the oil fields of New Jersey and blow them up. It was difficult to talk them down from this. They were rightly frustrated and furious. I had to remind them that we were a humanitarian organization, not a pro-Biafran group trying to get attention by sensationalism. What good would it serve? Get them arrested, and then what? Thanks to the efforts of people like Miriam we now had the publicity we wanted and food and medicine, despite theft, were getting through.

After a couple of hours of talking they calmed down. They were in despair that such a

perfect plan for a solution had failed over the vanity of a few. I seriously began to doubt, as I had been for a while, the efficacy of political activism. The world was too immovable to change unless through mass action like a revolution. And what did that accomplish, usually? While working with the group I had begun writing my musical drama *The Children's Revolt* about the French Revolution and had the insight that though content changes, structure doesn't because people don't. Despite our best ideals one tyranny leads to another, as in France and in Russia. What began to interest me more than the intricacies of political interactions were those inside the psyche such as the vain sabotaging of our case before the U.N. And if I couldn't help bring about change in a 1968 storefront, I could on one a one-to one basis in a psychoanalyst's office. Being an analyst was my first ambition in college before I went got waylaid by the theater. Ironically, the leading nonmedical psychoanalytic analytic institute was founded by Miriam's father where I was to begin training. As I tried to sound reasonable amidst the craziness of the group wanting to blow up oil fields, of people setting themselves on fire as they did in the antiwar protests, I thought that maybe working with craziness would be the one effective contribution I could make to peace.

After more than two years of hard work, my last act as chairman was an act that threw into relief the conclusions I had been coming to about luck, dumb luck, and ignorance:

I was sitting alone in the office one night when one of the CIA infiltrates, whose cover was being a journalist, walked in with another burly operative who I didn't know and looked menacing. That's what his greasy hair and suspicious squint told me as did his throaty request that I go with them for a ride. "Where?" "Nowhere. Just to talk."

So I sat, thin and narrow, between two slabs of beef slightly fearful, fantasizing that I

slipped up somewhere and was being taken on a Mafia-style ride. Nah, that was the kind of drama that was beginning to “turn me off,” that was leading me to believe reality was beginning to overtake art, and that it was impossible to write plays about contemporary life which was making whatever anyone put down quickly dated.

Without any fanfare, the stranger informed me that all throughout the war the CIA had been split, that one side wanted to back the Muslim tribes because they felt the Igbos were too smart to negotiate with over oil. The other side, in the minority until now, wanted to back the Biafrans. But now the Firm decided to back the Igbos.

“Great,” I said sarcastically at this idiocy. “What do you want from me?”

“We want you to use the Committee as a front to run guns,” my journalist friend told me.

“Go fuck yourselves,” I said. “We’re a humanitarian organization. Besides, don’t you know the Biafrans are about to surrender!” I added and stormed out of the car. It took me months to get over my frustrations -- and despair -- that the fate of thousands had been decided by political in-fighting. It took me months to fully realize that much of politics was random, inhuman, and a game for the only *seemingly* knowledgeable. It took me months but once I slammed that car door, I quit.

Afterwards the group, feeling variations of what I was going through, disbanded. Some went to law school, medical school, rabbinical school -- anywhere where they could find an intellectual discipline that would explain to them what they had been engaged in, that many young people of our generation had been engaged in, and a discipline that would lead them to take smaller but more effective actions which, like mine, would bring about change.

Lately it strikes me that there is a parallel between the Nigerian Civil War “and the war on terror today . We’re a Judeo-Christian civilization with Islamist Fundamentalists besieging us,

terrorizing us, murdering many of us, especially in 9/11. They derive much of their power over their possession of oil. Our leaders are confused, have made atrocious mistakes like invading the wrong country but this time we have no concerted activist activity, no mass truth-telling about Islamist persecution of women and gays, no mass outcry from the Jewish young about a new virulent form of anti-Semitism. Instead we have public timidity, very far removed from the 60's that ended a war and brought about Civil Rights. Why? Partly because we no longer have enough conviction about our cultural values to fight back effectively.

Another answer that I've come up after years of psychoanalytic practice runs parallel and in contrast to the radical Muslims' slogan that we love life and they love death . In my ninth book of poems *Dark Energy* one of my basic themes is that we're in a constant struggle between the life instinct and the death instinct. The struggle is in our biochemistry and plays itself out not only individually but also in social actions and politics.

GRAVITY OF THE BLACK HOLE

Blind at first to his self-destructive drive,
The First World War would terrify and thrill him.
Likewise Freud chain-smoked cigars, although
His worried doctors told him they would kill him.

He heard the Nazi Wolf banging down doors
But closed his eyes with smoke to keep alive
Mentally, though he elegantly described
The gravity of the Black Hole -- The Death drive.

Like Christ, Oedipus, Dionysus,
Freud played the role Fate cast him in.
Biology, not intellect or art
Can counteract destructiveness within.

Otto Rank who is now anonymous
Called it The Birth Trauma, where we put to sleep

Unconscious meaning in the rhyme tomb/womb.
So the pull toward Mommy brings us six feet deep.

The mystic quest for light inside the dark
Witch's woods always is doomed to fail.
Heroic in our search for mother's milk,
We find poison in the Holy Grail.

So we must cherish every nanosecond
And not turn Paradise into a hell --
Public in war private in neurosis --
But live in every nonmalignant cell.

A few months after finishing *Dark Energy* I was asked to come at a national conference of psychoanalysts in Nashville and read from the book centered around "Gravity Of The Black Hole. One night Linda and I went to the Grand Ole Opry. We stayed out way past bedtime and came back not to a party of psychoanalysts but people dressed in colorful Igbo garb. I went up to one of the men and introduced myself with my friend's name "Ifaenyi Menkiti," also a friend of the Igbo novelist Chinua Achebe and the publisher of *Dark Energy*. When they found out who Linda and I were they invited us into an incredible party of great music and dancing. We were introduced to people a few or several years younger, as Americans who probably saved their lives. At the end I met the apparent organizer of the party. I asked him what he had done during the war. He was dour and I immediately knew from our conversation that he had been one of the second lieutenants who had stolen some of our supplies and money that was meant for the people, as military men of all persuasions do whenever we try to help. I looked him hard in the eyes and he knew that I knew what he had been up to. Then Linda and I mingled and danced and sang with the life-loving crowd among flags that were *Half A Yellow Star* and *Red, White and Blue*. The music of time leading us all in a circular dance half a century later.

CODA: It's starting all over again. The Muslim government are killing Igbos right now, acting like Isis and cutting off their heads, burying them in trenches, dead or alive. Nigerians themselves are getting involved here and in Boston. Ifeanyi is involved with them. I'm going to speak to an audience of 200 to advise them on what my experience was. I already suggested to one of their leaders what they need, as in theater and film here, is a star or stars to front for them. I said why not talk to the actor who played the lead in 12 years a slave. And I can get to Harry Belafonte who is a strong Civil Rights leader here. Friends have urged me to turn this memoir into a film – memoirs are what they want in Hollywood now. I'm working on it. So far I've twenty pages cross-cutting between 1967-8 and 2017-8 It's a feature or a pilot for a TV series. I know how to do both since I used to make a living writing film and TV.

I know also as a psychoanalyst that once an addict, always an addict. I spend 30 hours a week writing musical dramas, a three character play now, and psychoanalytic essays for the general public. That isn't hard because I write as easily as I talk.