

Rearview

Looking back at what that was all about.
Taking a wild guess at what's next.



Mark Morelli

Back Cover

Copyrighted material

WHY THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU!

You accept that the only one excited when you come home is the dog.

You panic at the thought of being hugged by an amusement park mascot.

You believe that loud leaf blowers might be signs of midlife crisis for men who can't afford Harleys.

You wonder what's more plentiful, sand pebbles on all the world's beaches or ways to spell the name Caitlin.

You've given more money to workplace candy bar fundraisers than to all other charities combined.

You believe that inflatable lawn decorations mark the end of America as a great nation.

You acknowledge that whoever in the family owns the grocery list possesses all the power.

You make it your civic duty as a loyal American to overspend at Christmas.

You know that the only way forward is by knowing where you've been, which is the tongue-in-cheek approach to life Mark Morelli writes about in this collection featuring "Giftmas," the essay that all civilized people agree ended the "War on Christmas."

Mark Morelli wrote the column "Rearview" for Halfsquare.com from 2005-2008. Learn more about his wordsmithery at www.markmorelli.net.

REARVIEW

by Mark Morelli

Tales of Zoalmont and the Melancholy Fringe

*Effwords: Essays of Faith, Family, Fatherhood &
That Other One*

Rearview: Columns from Halfsquare, 2005-2008
including "Giftmas" the essay that ended the War on
Christmas

free downloads
and other information at
www.markmorelli.net

Rearview

columns from

Halfsquare

2005-2008

including
“Giftmas”

the essay that ended the War on Christmas



Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

Copyright 2015 by Mark Morelli.

All rights reserved. No part of this book (except small portions for review purposes) may be reproduced in any form without the written permission from Mark Morelli or the publisher.

www.markmorelli.net
markmorelli@gmail.com
@markmorelli

First Edition, August 2015

ISBN-13: 978-0692410820 (Burtenshaw Media)

ISBN-10: 0692410821

Cover photo copyright by Yulia | Dreamstime.com. All rights reserved.

Chris Graff, Editor/Proofreader | ChrisGraffEditor@gmail.com

Burtenshaw Media • 830 Taylor Avenue
Cuyahoga Falls, OH 44221

Burtenshaw Media logo by
Abie McLaughlin Design & Illustration

Introduction

This collection of columns exists because Eric Hancsak turned his dream of an online magazine into a reality.

It was no easy task. He was already busy enough with his own business, About350, a forward-thinking visual communications firm that he founded in 2001 and operates with his talented wife and partner, Julie Ann.

See what they are all about at **www.about350.com**.

Busy as he was, he still launched *Halfsquare*, the online publication about that stage of life when one is no longer hip but far from square. Here's how Eric described it:

HalfSquare.net is a group of professionals coming together to share our knowledge and experiences about issues pertaining to the "halfsquare" stage of life. We are writers, designers, fitness experts, pop culture lovers, athletes, parents, gardeners, investors, musicians, soccer coaches, internet users, concerned citizens, executives, health nuts, beer drinkers, travelers, and most importantly, we are friends.



Eric wrote reviews and essays about many things, including pop culture and music. I was honored that Eric published me with these creative people:

- Kenneth J. Weiss, a talented painter and author of two e-commerce books who also gave me priceless guidance in my first two books and my career.
- Jean Marie Moffa, a teacher and artist, whose zest for life led her to write essays about everything. Watch her wonderful cake decorating videos on Youtube.
- Jon Fiume wrote columns that shared his vast knowledge of wine in a witty and informative way.
- Chris Savage continues to write about civic and political issues in his insightful *Electablog* which covers progressive government in Michigan. In 2014, he was elected chairman of the Washtenaw County Democratic Party, a further demonstration of his commitment to community.
- Anne Savage's photography was also featured in *Time* magazine and many other publications. Her candid, striking pictures tell the personal story of people involved in politics at all levels.
- In addition to writing humor for *Halfsquare*, Paul Giglia wrote for Jay Leno, Bill Maher, Joan Rivers

and other comics. His humor books are on Amazon.

The list goes on: John Mizer, Larry Seben, John Doan, Greg Robb and others contributed to a very intelligent, lively online lifestyle and entertainment magazine that gave me an opportunity to share the ideas in these columns.

Of course, Eric's biggest success is his family. This book is dedicated to them – Eric, Julie Ann and my godson Luc Hancsak. I am grateful for the opportunity to write about whatever I wanted for almost four years, and for their love and friendship through all our days.

Contents

of complete book

* = included in this FREE sample

Looking Back from the Stampede...	1
*Other Ways to Spell Caitlin...	6
Ambient Sounds Relaxation CDs of the Future...	11
How to Talk Like Paula Abdul and Why...	17
Bible-Land...	21
Giftmas...	26
* The Nagasaki Slice...	33
Just Because...	38
Lessons from Christmas Decorations...	41
I Am Not Even One-Fourth Square...	46
Etiquette as Power...	49
Unleashing My Inner Grouch...	53
* Why I Assume That Mickey Mouse Sneers Condescendingly At Me...	58
The Right Way to Help Others...	62
Advertising Schemes I Jotted in the Margins of My Notebooks During My Day Job Meetings...	65

Autumn Leaves: War or Diplomacy...68

Goodbye to Ten Years as a Bloated Goldfish, Hello
to Becoming an Old Lady in the Window of a
Brooklyn Tenement, or, How I Learned to Think
Inside the Box Again...72

What Station is the Telethon On? Why, It's the
Coffee Station!...76

* We All Turned Out Just Fine...79

* Choreographing Confidence...83

The Annotated Grocery List...86

Rearview

*Looking back at what that was all about.
Taking a wild guess at what's next.*

columns from
Halfsquare

2005-2008

including

“Giftmas”

the essay that ended the War on Christmas

Other Ways to Spell Caitlin

May 16, 2005

So you want to name your daughter Caitlin?

Excellent choice! It's a very popular name and for a good reason: At any event in which children demonstrate skills and talent, there is some Caitlin or another who is a superior pianist, mathlete, champion diver or Olympics-destined gymnast.

The name Caitlin ranks high on every Honor Roll, every list of girls' fast-pitch softball MVP candidates, and in the title role of extraordinary productions of "Annie." Additionally, parents are delighted that there is no record of any prostitute named Caitlin.

So it isn't a surprise that you want to give your daughter the advantage of being named Caitlin.

But you ask, how can *your* Caitlin stand out when so many other parents share your vision and have named *their* daughters Caitlin, too.

Don't panic. First of all, know that you came up with the idea first. You recognize that a popular name is the equivalent of good looks and connections in the right places. This progressive parenting philosophy is one great reason why your Caitlin will be the reason they come up with new categories of ribbons and trophies at whatever (multiple) activities she excels in.

Other parents, well meaning as they may be, are simply copycats. They are followers. They are in the herd. Their daughters will be, too. Don't hate them. Appreciate them for their role in the big picture, filling the feeder pools of mediocrity over which your Caitlin will rise and rule.

In the meantime, you will have to come up with new ways to spell Caitlin, different from the masses, which will reflect your daughter's unique-as-a-snowflake personality and talent.

Here's How It's Done

American birth records since 1998 reveal that 1.9 million young American girls respond to the name commonly spelled C-A-I-T-L-I-N. But many of their forward-thinking parents have opted for alternate spellings, such as:

Cynthia

"Her name is Cynthia, after her grandmother, but we pronounce it Caitlin," said mother Dorothy (pronounced Jessica) who was named for her

grandmother.

TV Land: Kaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyytlin

When it came time to name their kid, big "Happy Days" fans Tony and Julie Sparlini, simply thought, "WWFD...what would Fonzie do?"

Caitlinm

A nameless Louisiana couple opted to make the "m" silent. When asked if their kid would spend too much time explaining this, they said, "That's nothing compared to all the time we spend explaining why we're nameless."

Skatelin

The "s" is silent but what won't be is her superior demeanor in condescendgly correcting kids and adults alike who mispronounce her name. Great for building self-esteem, not friendship (which is overrated.) Besides, Olympic skaters don't time have time for friends.

Cialtin

The alternate spelling is all the rage among the vast, rapidly growing segment of young parents who strongly believe that people read words as hieroglyphics and – as long as the first and last letters are correct – it really doesn't matter. Caution: the odds are strong that this spelling also doubles for the brand name of some medication for a children's medical, behavioral or emotional disorder.

K8LN

California parents hit the Trifecta: A name for their kid, a vanity license plate and a log-in password.

Ctlñ

Created by New Jersey parents who knew their daughter's calendar would be chock full of practices, rehearsals and lessons. They said, "By eliminating 3 letters, we've saved enough time filling in her name on calendars and permission slips that she can squeeze in competitive jump roping."

Cgheighdtlyenmne

A Vermont family pays tribute to its Welsh roots, but they say they'll call her Cgheighdtie for short.

KKKaitlin

A Georgia couple with a poor knowledge of history – but a passion for kittens, kaleidoscopes and kites – came up with this one.

Aitlinkay

Parents Roger and Maria Farnthasar love the idea that their daughter will be born bi-lingual.

Keightlun

One Nebraska couple wondered, "Why should only girls have this advantage?" and named their son Caitlin, spelling it in what they deem this more masculine way. Their son took it one big step further and enthusiastically spells it S-P-I-K-E.

Why I Assume That Mickey Mouse Sneers Condescendingly At Me

June 23, 2006

One of the most troubling moments of adult life is coming face to face with another human being who is dressed as Mickey Mouse at Disney World.

Note: It doesn't have to be Mickey. It can be any character at any amusement park, the mascot at a ball game, or some big fuzzy marsupial at the grand opening of a store.

If He's So Uncomfortable Then Why Am I the Schmuck?

Whoever is inside that stuffy, cumbersome and confining costume – forced by need of wages to dance and wave and hug strangers – is surely melting like a candle both from the heat and the humiliation.

Then why is it me who feels truly trapped and stifled?

Because I assume the worker beneath the costume is mocking me and making faces while pretending to lovingly hug me and my wife and kids.

I can't see their faces, so they get the last laugh, and it

is at me. Think about it. They don't get paid much to perform in that costume. But at least they're making some money on the deal. My exhausting afternoon at the amusement park costs me bushels of money just for two lemonades and a year's reserve of patience squandered standing on concrete in the sun waiting for a 90-second roller coaster ride.

Store Mascot as Indicted Mobster

In New York, we visited the big Times Square Toys R Us store. Geoffrey the Giraffe greeted us with a hug. My wife pulled out the camera. Geoffrey recoiled like a pedophile on a perp walk. From out of nowhere, like a Federal agent, a Toys R Us Team Member wearing what I imagined to be a bulletproof polo, stood between us and Geoffrey. "No pictures, please. We have our own photographers if you'd like your picture taken with Geoffrey."

The same thing happened at the Disney store. We were approached by an enchanting young woman – in a costume – no mask, thank God – who was a dead ringer for Snow White.

"Would you girls like a picture with Snow White?" she asked delicately.

I glanced at the sign promoting the photo packages. Cheapest, \$40. Yeah, right, some day when *my* prince comes.

You Can't Hug Anything That Won't Look You

in the Eye

Okay, so that's just business. But even when it's free, I have trouble hugging these big costumed mascots. I can't play along. Of course I'm open-minded enough to hug a giraffe, or a mouse, or a grouch that lives in a garbage can.

But I just can't forget that there's a person inside the costume who is being paid to hug me. For that same reason, I've never enjoyed strip clubs.

Nevertheless, the mascot is being paid to hug me, pat me on the head, which is fine, but when I can't see their faces, I can't make eye contact, I'm certain they're sneering at me.

Then again, it's not a church meeting. It's a social interaction. Like at a function – funeral, reunion, business meeting – you shake hands with people you don't have to like.

You applaud at community theater musicals when the performance is off-key. Have you ever nodded at someone telling a story that you're not paying attention to? It's part of the social contract.

So why is it important to me to have the person in the big giraffe costume love me back?

We All Turned Out Just Fine

August 2007

I grew up back in the days before kids had to be strapped into car seats. On vacation, we would lie in the back of the station wagon, read Archie comics, play games, stretch out and sleep. No seat belts. No problems.

And we all grew up just fine.

When I was a kid, adults used to smoke in the house and no one made a big deal about it. We kids loved to fetch ashtrays and matches for our elders. We squealed with delight as they blew thick white smoke rings for us from their Camels and Winstons and Salems.

If you look closely at the photos, you'll even see that our pregnant mothers puffed away while they drank coffee and served meat loaf and sodium-thickened gravy.

And we all grew up just fine.

Today, worry is an industry. We're afraid of life.

There's a movement in England to ban smoking even in private homes where children live. That's too intrusive. Back when I was a kid – in fact, *before* I was a kid – we actually smoked in the womb. My mother swallowed a pack of Kents and a Zippo lighter, just like her mother before her swallowed a pack of Lucky Strikes and a box of wooden matches. And guess what: We all turned out just fine, thank you very much.

Back then, we didn't have play dates. We just played. Kids today have their own calendars. Back then, no one supervised us, which allowed us to learn how to solve our own problems. And if one guy had to twist another guy's arm till he cried uncle, or somebody got a bloody nose, or lost an eye, then so be it, it was just part of growing up. All in good fun. And if you look at us now, we all turned out pretty good.

There were no video games. And our folks wouldn't let us just lie around and watch TV. So we went outside and played, and if it was cold, we bundled up in coats and hats and gloves and went outside to play. And if you broke a bone that pierced through your skin, you popped it back in, walked it off, then got back into position and played shortstop or built snowmen, and that's how we learned teamwork and determination, and we're all better off today because of it.

If you misbehaved in school, you not only got punished at school but even worse at home.

At my school, if they caught you cheating, the teachers whacked your knuckles with a pointer. Then when you got home, your mother chopped off a fingertip, down to a knuckle if necessary. Too severe, you think? Well, there is no generation that loves its mothers more than mine, and we're all just doing just fine.

That's why there's so much trouble in schools today. Bad kids are mollycoddled and never face the consequences of their behavior.

In my day, they laid down the law. I'll never forget in 6th grade, a kid named Kenny Stucco shot a spitball across the room. Mrs. Lundy had just finished our history lesson about the end of the Civil War. She didn't send Kenny to a counselor or have a conference with the Stucco parents.

Before Kenny could get the straw out of his mouth, Mrs. Lundy yanked him out into the hallway and summarily executed him with a .44 caliber Derringer, an exact replica of the one John Wilkes Booth used to assassinate Lincoln.

The kids near the hallway door suffered temporary loss of hearing. All of us experienced a permanent fear of Mrs. Lundy.

From then on, every class was orderly. And we all turned out just fine.

Choreographing Confidence

July 1, 2008

When I see kids behind a lemonade stand on a hot summer day...or knocking on doors with snow shovels on their shoulders as the blizzard lets up...or trudging in the pre-dawn street tossing newspapers onto stoops, I think: "*There's* the future of business!"

I often see my 15-year-old daughter Olivia demonstrating dance steps in front of a mirror on the basement wall, our dance-studio-on-a-dime. Behind her, anywhere from one to five younger girls and sometimes a boy, follow her like baby ducks.

"Okay, from the top!" she says, resets the music, and again demonstrates the dance steps, gymnastics technique, or cheerleading move, repeatedly glancing back to see if the kids behind her are keeping up and getting it right. They're having fun, but it's also hard work, and she can be a slave driver.

"I love being bossy," she admits, the quintessential oldest child.

I am hoping that what comes true is that the bossiness gets tempered by maturity and becomes a driven, satisfied life with a sure hand at the helm.

Where the lemonade stand and snow shovel hints at tomorrow's entrepreneurs, the basement mirror gives us a glimpse of a choreographer, dance teacher, coach – an encourager of expression. Which, come to think it, is as entrepreneurial as anything.

People already pegged me for a writer by the time I was in 4th grade. But it wasn't only because I filled notebooks. It was how I watched life. The way I asked questions and listened to stories that I turned into my own stories on paper. Writers capture such stories with a pen like a painter does with a brush or a musician with a horn or guitar.

Olivia sees life from the angle where the story is in human movement. She sees graceful movement after graceful movement come together into the dance and cheer routines.

I string together words. She combines spins and steps, twirls and leaps, using arrows and circles in a notebook that looks like a basketball playbook. That is her joy and her joy deepens when someone wants to be taught what she knows.

There's a difference in the faces of neighborhood kids who come over just to play versus their wide-eyed anticipation when they specifically want Olivia to

teach them to tumble, dance and cheer.

Last summer, three younger neighborhood girls came to our house every day for two weeks so Olivia could teach them gymnastics. Olivia employed every safety technique she had been taught as she carefully choreographed their cheerleading and gymnastics routines.

When Olivia thought they were ready, she invited all the neighborhood girls' mothers to our backyard for the show. They were delighted and raised a few brows, impressed and surprised. When it was over, Olivia gave each kid a certificate for "Most Improved" "Best Spirit" "Best Tumbler" and other personalized recognition.

True, it's bossy, but not selfish. It's affirmation of others. She starts them from scratch and encourages them through their initial failures. Next, they continue to practice till they are astonished at their own achievement. Finally comes the satisfaction of nailing it. Olivia choreographs confidence.

Mark Morelli is also the author of the short story collection *Tales from Zoalmont and The Melancholy Fringe*, the essay collection *Effwords*, and wrote and published the humor 'zine *PAH!* From 1988-2008. This column "Rearview" was originally published in the online magazine *Halfsquare* from 2005-2008.

He has been a college teacher, copywriter, reporter, deejay and quiz game writer. He believes that seeing where you've been helps you know where you are headed. While you're at it, look side to side, too. And if you get tired, just pull over and take a nap.

Learn more, contact the author &
view other work at
www.markmorelli.net

