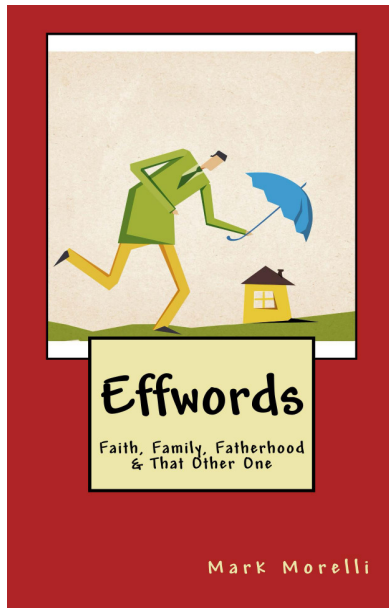


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Kimberly Willardson
Editor, *The Vincent Brothers Review*
www.vincentbrothersreview.org

Effwords

essays of

faith, family, fatherhood

& that one, too



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Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

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DEDICATION

For everyone who appears in these essays, anyone who ever encouraged me to write about moments like these, and all who believe that life is lived best as an ongoing conversation, especially William K. Zinnser and the late Sam Cucchiara.

Other books & writing by Mark Morelli at

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“Going Places, Who Knows Where,” *Vincent Brothers Review*, #20, Vol. VIII, No. 3, 2002

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Introduction

These pieces all began as notes impulsively written on scraps of paper. In bank lines. Stop lights. In the margins of grocery lists. Anywhere. They evolved into conversations with myself that grew till they took shape into essays that editors liked enough to publish.

Years passed. I now see that what I explored then are ideas even more important to me today.

Yes, it's gimmicky to entitle this collection *Effwords*, but I believe words count. In thinking about one big word that has lost its value in overuse, I look at the other effwords that represent life's biggest joys, sorrows and conflicts.

When we grapple with these words and the concepts behind them, we experience the challenges of life and its fullness.

This is me and the pen, wrestling with the profane and the sacred, and trying to figure out which is which.

And the discussion questions I offer you at the end of each essay for further discussion is not to pay tribute to me as a writer but to encourage you as a thinker. The ideas are bigger than me and you. In my writing and in your discussions, we are just the temporary stewards.

EFFWORDS

“They had not seen him as we
last did, gathering up every
last bit of energy he had left to
give his wife a small kiss.”

Uncle Tom's Kiss

My wife and I went to visit my Aunt Amy to keep her company because she lived alone. She was a widow of the worst kind. Her husband still lived. She was 85 and he was a few years younger. He lived in a nearby nursing home. The man who had stood tall and handsome, with curly snowy hair, a Clark Gable mustache and a zest for living, was now in bed, twisted and sick, his mind far away.

Uncle Tom had suffered successive strokes, each one stripping away bit by bit his power to speak, but none strong enough to overcome his will to live.

Aunt Amy never complained. She found rides twice a day to see him, bringing cookies and cups of pudding. Perhaps in the quiet of her privacy she grieved, but in public, she kept her chin up and even boasted that Uncle Tom still had

his legendary appetite.

At the nursing home, she fed Uncle Tom from his tray of soft vegetables and tiny bits of meat. She wiped his chin but never talked to him like he was a baby. After more than fifty years of marriage you don't baby talk your husband. You yell like a wife.

"Tom, eat this! Don't make such a mess Look who came to visit you," she said with volume, but love.

I'd heard that voice all my life. Before, it was "Take off your boots" or "Shut off the mower and have lunch" or "Get those tools off the table." Back then, Uncle Tom would comply but laugh.

But Aunt Amy never stopped trying to make him respond. Month after month, after two years, her sturdy carpenter husband didn't say anything back, but she never gave up.

I was puzzled. Were my uncle's thought

sealed inside him and unable to get out? Or had they, like a raft on a gushing river, been cut free and left to float away forever? Was he trapped, constantly and tirelessly treading water in his own pool of thought, or just there, a heartbeat wrapped in skin?

It was time to leave the nursing home. My wife and I said goodbye to my uncle in his wheelchair. We were uncertain whether he even recognized us or understood our words.

A moment later our uncertainty was gone. My aunt leaned over him. "Goodbye," she said. "Give me a kiss."

His eyes were still vacant and distant, his body motionless, but he stretched his weak neck forward and puckered his lips.

A few weeks later he died. At his funeral, people who hadn't seen him in years were shocked at what had become of the strong, tireless man

they once knew. They had not seen him as we last did, gathering up every last bit of energy he had left to give his wife a small kiss.

What an amazing moment. I learned that the barriers made by strokes and heart attacks, things that can afflict a mind and body, are still no match for the power of love and the promises we make in its name.

The Conversation Continues

over coffee and in posts, journals, books clubs and classrooms.

Whose positive spirit do you admire?

If love is disposable, is it really love?

Write or talk about the deeper meaning of these phrases: Thick or thin. Better or worse. Rain or shine. Cut your losses. Good money after bad. Know when to quit. A promise is a promise.

“Reminding us that children
are deeper than we think was
Charles Schulz's best quality.”

Remembrance of Charles Schulz

Just two weeks ago, my six-year-old daughter Olivia and I were reading from an old Peanuts cartoon book.

In it, Lucy asked Schroeder:: "You know what my best quality is?"

"What's quality mean?" Olivia asked me.

"It's a characteristic. Like, what's the best thing you like about me?"

"I like how you take me to the library," she said.

"That's my good quality. Now, tell me a bad quality."

"That's easy," my daughter said. "When you play that annoying song." She was referring to an old song, recorded way before both of our times, Mike Douglas singing the most saccharine of sentimental numbers, "The Men in My Little Girl's Life." It's so syrupy she hates it, mainly because I

ham it up and sing along. "You know it makes me so mad that I cry," she said. "And you still play it."

"Oh yeah," I said.

Then she got furious. "Don't you know you're not supposed to make little girls cry!" I felt like Schroeder sitting at the piano, getting hollered at by Lucy. That's one of Olivia's best qualities. She shares it with most first-graders. Extreme passion. This is the same little girl who grew sadly solemn one early morning listening to a CD of Mozart flute concertos.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The music is making me teary-eyed," she replied.

Reminding us that children are deeper than we think was Charles Schulz's best quality.

In the strip that Olivia and I read, Lucy asked: "You know what my best quality is?" Lucy answered herself. "I think I'm nice to be around."

She paused and added, "I'd hate it if I weren't around."

Well, I'm sure we'll get by, but for awhile I am going to hate it not having Charles Schulz around.

The Conversation Continues

over coffee and in posts, journals, books clubs and classrooms.

Describe a moment with a child that you will always remember.

When has the death of someone famous triggered a personal memory?

What do you think is your best quality? What do people say is your best quality?

“The communicative nature of jazz requires musicians to respond to each other musically on the spot. It is the perfect model for the family dinner. Each one digging what the other has to say, nodding in affirmation. Each one getting his turn.”

Give a Little Whistle

In 1992, Bill Clinton told MTV journalist Tabitha Soren that his favorite musician was Thelonius Monk.

“Who’s the loneliest monk?” she asked.

I knew just enough about jazz to laugh smugly. I was haughtier than I oughta be. I didn’t, for instance, know Monk played piano, let alone play it like no other with splayed finger pecking. I knew that Cannonball Adderly was not one of Gorgeous George’s wrestling opponents, but was he a jazz guy or blues guy?

Name recognition is not music appreciation.

My friends thought that Bird played for the Celtics. I knew Bird played a frantic tenor saxophone. Everyone said Charlie Parker was a genius, which I bought, but couldn’t say why.

I recently shored up what little I knew by watching every second of *Jazz*, Ken Burns' PBS documentary. It gave me a linear history of the names and their eras, what led to what, who passed torches to whom. I had always recognized the big names and had the good sense to see Wynton Marsalis and Dave Brubeck and others when they came to town. But the jazz documentary helped take my understanding to the next step and I am now, courtesy of the extensive CD collection at the Akron Public Library, exploring more jazz.

And paying it forward.

I showed my seven-year-old daughter Olivia the Benny Goodman portion of the documentary and she loved the fantastic footage of hepcats jitterbugging in zoot suits.

Then we read *Once Upon A Time in Chicago*,

Jonah Winter's fantastic children's book about Benny Goodman. Olivia's storybook concept of royalty now includes a bespectacled King of Swing, and we snapped our fingers to his jumping hits like "Flying Home" and "Clarinet A La King." Later, we watched the portion of the Burns' film examining Miles Davis.

"He plays smooth, cool jazz trumpet," I said.

The next day, I put on the *Kind of Blue* CD and tested my daughter.

"Who is this?"

"Miles Davis," she said.

"What makes you say that?"

"It's quiet and simple. Not fancy like Benny Goodman."

Scotch over, Britney Spears. There's plenty room for all.

In Burns' film, Wynton Marsalis points out

that jazz couldn't be effectively recorded by overdubbing. The communicative nature of jazz requires musicians to respond to each other musically on the spot. It is the perfect model for the family dinner. Each one digging what the other has to say, nodding in affirmation. Each one getting his turn.

Look at the face of someone listening to jazz. That person is *eavesdropping*.

It is a live, in-the-moment form of music, never played the same way twice, lasting as long as it hangs in the air and remains in the memory. The life span of an improvisational riff makes the Monarch butterfly seem like Methuselah.

The writer and philosopher Salvatore Cucchiara says being present – to enjoy jazz riffs, conversations, prayer or even a slice of pizza – allows you to “thrive in the shining now.”

That reminds me of my Wright State University literature professor, James Hughes, who taught his students to simply love beautiful things. In a Herman Melville seminar, Hughes opened his copy of *Moby Dick* and read an ornate passage. I wish I could remember which. We English majors, wide-eyed and pale as 60s pop art waifs, hungrily awaited our professor's instruction on what notes to write and why this particular passage gurgled with literary importance. Hughes gently shut the book and smiled.

"Isn't that just wonderful?" he said, leading his factory-farmed sheep to open grazing.

We've all heard that classical music strengthens children's intellects, improves their math abilities. These are fine things, but peripheral benefits to the richest dividend: Music waters the soul.

One early morning before school, my second grade daughter sat on the couch, slowly waking for the day. Softly in the background a CD of Mozart flute concertos played.

“Dad,” she said drowsily, “This is making me teary-eyed. It is so beautiful.”

That she found it so beautiful moved me too, and she belatedly returned the favor not long after.

We sat idly in the car waiting for a train. While I could not hear above the din, in the rear-view mirror I could see my daughter moving her lips in song. The caboose whizzed by and in the quiet aftermath I listened to her singing “Agnus Dei,” *lamb of God* in Latin.

“Beautiful,” I said, unaware that she'd even learned it in school. “Would you sing it again?”

In a moment devoid of the self-consciousness that seeps into our media-savvy children like

poison, that makes them roll their eyes or mug
goofy or shake their booties when all eyes are on
them, she sang it again with her eyes closed.

The Conversation Continues

over coffee and in posts, journals, books clubs and classrooms.

What have you learned from a child while he or she was not aware you were observing?

Who could you listen to all day?

What thing of beauty – a place, book, song, art, moment, etc. – do you treasure?

Uncle Pete's bushes jutted out
raggedly, like big gangly
green nuclear centipedes.
When the wind blew and the
branches bristled, Uncle Pete's
hedges looked like some
foliage cast of *Hair*
performing “Aquarius.”

The Apostledom of Leaves

My neighbors think I'm lazy because I refuse to rake my leaves. I tell them this: It has nothing to do with laziness. It has to do with my spirituality.

I learned from a very wise and frugal man that by leaving your autumn leaves on the ground, you are expressing the greatest reverence to God. I won't try to control what God has wrought. I won't pretend that I can keep orderly and controlled the perennial fall of His leaves. Let them lie on the ground for a long winter's rest. Let my rakes rust. Thy will be done.

My Uncle Pete taught me this when I was a kid, in the late sixties. Uncle Pete lived across the street, next to Lonnie, who was a whirling dervish of energy who kept busy with his day job in a factory, volunteer fire department, community

theater and doing Irish jigs wherever and whenever he could.

When he wasn't working, singing, jigging, acting or fighting fires, Lonnie still had the energy for fastidious yard work. His hedges were carefully contoured, as shapely as a soda bottle. They were in better shape than most American enlistees, which is how Uncle Pete described Lonnie's bushes.

"Look at them, crisp and straight, standing tall at attention. Now look at my bushes, nobody's fools." Uncle Pete's bushes jutted out raggedly, like big gangly green nuclear centipedes. When the wind blew and the branches bristled, Uncle Pete's hedges looked like some foliage cast of *Hair* performing "Aquarius."

"My bushes are expressive. They reach for the sun, they're relaxed, they're letting it all hang out."

Uncle Pete and Lonnie each resembled his own shrubbery. Lonnie stood erect and useful as a shovel. His smile gleamed, like a polished gate. He worked on his yard as if its precision kept us free from Communism. In his military haircut and tucked-in Dickey work shirt, he trimmed and pruned. He scissored his bushes like a surgeon removing a mole.

Uncle Pete was Papa Hemingway in his long white beard and squint-eyed leer with the posture of Groucho. Loose as a goose, he wore jeans with frayed bottoms, swinging and swaying with every step, every little breeze whispering Louise.

He was a tailgunner over China in World War II. He was a little 1950s and a little 1960s. He played scratchy Four Freshmen records in the garage and wore Nehru jackets from Penney's. He let his bushes go so they could find themselves.

"It's respect for God," he said. "You're not trying to put His nature under your thumb, because if you do, it's a losing battle. Everything grows back – grass, beards, leaves – and we're fools to think we control nature." That's when Aunt Lu would pipe in. "He's been saying that since 1953 when we bought this property. Before that we rented and he never had yard work to do. Back then, he talked about the Cleveland Indians and what he wanted on his hamburger. Now every time the leaves turn or the bushes grow, he's the Maharishi."

"Forgive her, Lord," Uncle Pete said groovily. So while the bushes expressed themselves and Aunt Lu raked the leaves, Uncle Pete and I drank root beer in his garage, snapping our fingers to the Four Freshmen, praying for her soul and the soul of Lonnie the Fireman.

The Conversation Continues

over coffee and in posts, journals,
books clubs and classrooms.

*Letting the bushes “express themselves” – is that
lazy or wise?*

*What characters in your life did you think of when
you read this essay?*

*Was there a relative or neighbor of a different
generation who you would comfortably hang
around with?*

The Conversation Continues

over coffee and in posts, journals, books clubs and classrooms.

Describe a moment in nature when you realized you were part of something vaster?

Think of times when you introduced someone else, especially a child, to what you consider a natural wonder.

What body of water – or city skyline or mountain range or other natural or man-made wonder – stops you in your tracks?

Mark Morelli is also the author of the short story collection *Tales from Zoalmont and The Melancholy Fringe*, wrote and published the humor 'zine *PAH!* from 1988-2008, and contributed the column “Rearview” to the web magazine *Halfsquare* from 2005-2008. He has been a college teacher, copywriter, reporter, deejay and quiz game writer. He believes even bad coffee can be salvaged by good conversation.

Learn more & view other work at
www.markmorelli.net



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