



The Best of

MATTHEW LEWIS



2012 - 2016

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Introduction

Political columnists—particularly those of us whose writing primarily exists online—must grapple with a reality: Our work is ephemeral.

Book authors often work arduous hours, but they eventually produce something tangible and tactile. Regardless of how few copies they sell, the author produces a physical book that can be placed on a shelf or passed down to a loved one.

Online columnists have no such pretense of literary immortality. We live for the moment, hoping to (in the words of Tom Stoppard) “nudge the world a little.” We still work hard, but we also realize that today’s column won’t even be lining birdcages tomorrow. The harsh reality is that one good electromagnetic pulse could wipe out our entire oeuvre.

They say “the internet is written in ink,” but you couldn’t prove it by me. My columns survive, but my blog posts have died a mysterious death. I worked at Townhall.com for two years, yet most of my blog posts have disappeared. Likewise, I spent another two years writing columns at AOL’s Politics Daily. The outlet died around the time that AOL acquired The Huffington Post (now HuffPost) for \$315 million. Even some of the things I know I wrote at The Daily Caller have seemingly evaporated. Perhaps some savvy internet sleuth could retrieve the hundreds of lost pieces I wrote during those four years, but I can’t find them. (Let’s just say you can’t google them.)

In fairness, most of these “takes” deserved to die. In some cases, my analysis was bad. Others times, I obsessed on fleeting issues. Does the world really need my take on whether Sue Lowden or Danny Tarkanian would’ve made a better Senate challenger to Harry Reid? I think not. This is not a criticism. I don’t want to see old videos of Cal Ripken fielding routine ground balls, either. Now, show me a highlight reel of the moments that mattered, and you’ll have my attention.

This eBook is my highlight reel. I have combed my column archives from 2012 to 2016 and compiled (what I believe to be) the most interesting, diverse, and enduring columns from that time. These greatest hits, if you will, represent the columns I am most proud (beginning with the Republican Party’s nomination of Mitt Romney and ending with their nomination of Donald Trump).

Those years were interesting, but few of these columns overtly discussed the politics of the day. The backdrop of these columns included GOP soul-searching and the rise of populism. However, my most enduring columns discuss topics that are both bigger and smaller than horse race journalism.

My hope is that people who forgot or missed these columns will now (re)discover them and glean some new insight or wisdom. This is all a columnist can hope for. To nudge.

Of course, this eBook wouldn't be possible without the permission of the original outlets in which these columns appeared. Personally, I would like to thank Ed Timms of Roll Call, Neil Patel of The Daily Caller, and Ben Frumin of The Week for generously granting me permission to repurpose my past columns in the pages that follow.

Lastly, a special thanks to my family for putting up with me; to Kristi Speights, who edited this eBook (and helped edit many of the columns that appear in these pages); and to Kokko Tso and his team at Jabberwocky Studios for helping put this together.

From a personal standpoint, I take solace in knowing this eBook exists as a bulwark against these columns disappearing down a memory hole. I still can't put this eBook on my bookshelf, but at least now these pieces are preserved. Perhaps someday my children will email them to each other.

PART 1: POLITICS AND OPINIONS



I Won't Meet You at CPAC

The Daily Caller
February 2, 2012

The annual gathering of conservatives is about to kick off in DC, and I'm already exhausted.

Before you send me hate Tweets, let me say I'm a fan of the concept of The Conservative Political Action Conference — CPAC. Despite never actually having paid to attend one, I've managed to attend all but a handful of the 21st century CPACs. They are the best gathering of conservative activists each year. The speakers are rock stars. And the ACU (who conducts the conference) has been nothing but kind to me.

They do a great job. This year's conference will, no doubt, be the best ever.

Having said that, there is much for a middle-aged (I suppose that's what I now am — depending on how long I plan to live), journalist living in the DC-area to hate about such an event.

I know it's all fun and games for you. But that's because you waltz into town from Topeka — or San Diego — or Chicago — or wherever you live — and turn CPAC into a semi-vacation. You hole up in your fancy hotel room at the Marriott Wardman Park during the day, and go out boozing with your pals at night. And since you met me once a couple years ago — you want to meet up with me — me! — at 11:30 ... at night.

That's how you roll. It's different for me. To quote Spinal Tap: "There's no sex and drugs for Ian, David."

I can't walk two feet without being stopped by someone. (Note: This is rarely a foxy coed wanting me to sign her copy of *The Quotable Rogue*; it is typically instead someone who wants to know why I'm not following him on Twitter — or someone who wants to correct my take on the repeal of Glass-Steagall — or both!)

A lot of people sure seem to know me at CPAC, and I try hard to remember who they are. Occasionally, they bust me. I'm pretty sure this makes me a jerk. There are also the gadflies

— the people who attend every conservative event. This person is almost always a dude. You try to avoid this guy. But you can't. He is a "time burglar."

And because I'm highly-recognizable (at CPAC), it's important I keep my "fun" to a minimum. (This is why I go to insurance conventions in Poughkeepsie when I really want to party.)

There's also this: While this may be your vacation, I've still got familial obligations. I live here — and that's a major disadvantage. I've got like chores and stuff to do.

Do you think my pug walks himself?

Additionally, I sort of have to keep, you know, writing about politics. Now, you might think that CPAC provides a lot of content for a writer. The truth is that if you want to write about the substance of the speeches, you're better off watching it on CSPAN. (If you're looking to write an Stephen Glass-esque expose about debauchery, well that's another story; Robert Stacy McCain deserves mad props for dubbing it the "Mardis Gras of the Right").

Some bloggers — I'm thinking of Philip Klein and Dave Weigel here — are what I call "MacGyver" bloggers. These are the guys who can attend a conference, bang out 5-7 blog posts a day, and still manage to go out with you for a drink or five.

I'm not sure how they do it — the lugging around of the equipment — the avoiding people — the getting online. Frankly, I can't usually seem to even get on the WiFi at these things. I'm much better at my desk with my TV and computer and coffee. I'm more efficient that way. Maybe that's just me?

So no, I probably won't hang with you at CPAC. The odds are not good.

Note: When I say I won't meet with you, I'm assuming you realize I don't literally mean...*you*. (This is for those other annoying people.)

Reagan Helped Invent the Electric Car

The Daily Caller
February 21, 2012

With five dollar a gallon gas prices looming on the horizon, and Tehran threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz, Americans are looking for alternative ways to limit our dependency on foreign oil. One possible solution might be the electric car. But there are longstanding questions; electric cars are expensive, and for that reason (and others), they haven't exactly been flying off showroom floors.

There are political problems, too. Conservatives — the largest ideological bloc in the U.S. — seem to harbor an especially strong disdain for the electric car.

This is perhaps, ironic.

According to Nobel Prize-winning author Daniel Yergin's new book, *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World*, though some may see it as a rather dubious distinction, more than any other president, Ronald Reagan probably deserves credit for the invention of the modern electric car.

He certainly has as good a claim to that as Al Gore has to inventing the internet.

Some history: Electric cars have been around since the late-19th century. Woodrow Wilson even drove an electric car in the early 1920s. But cheap domestic oil — and the arrival of Henry Ford's Model T in 1908 — eventually made the internal combustion engine *de rigueur* — and the electric car, nearly extinct.

All that began to change, however, when a Caltech chemistry professor named Arie Haagen-Smit took a break from his research on the pineapple to seek a breath of fresh air. He stepped outside only to be promptly assailed by smog.

Nobody at the time really knew what caused it, and Haagen-Smit, then and there, resolved to discover the cause. Very quickly, he was able to determine that the culprit was emissions from the tailpipes of cars.

The story might have ended there, had the smog problem not continue to increase. In 1954, for example, Yergin writes, “a dense blue-gray haze ... settled over and suffocated the Los Angeles Basin.” The problem was serious enough that LAX had to close — and that phys-ed and recess periods were canceled for kids.

The smog problem persisted to the point that in 1967, California Gov. Reagan signed legislation creating the California Air Resources Board (a.k.a. CARB). In 1968, Reagan appointed Arie Haagen-Smit — the “The Father of Smog” — to be its first chairman.

CARB would eventually become, Yergin notes, the “de facto national authority” on national emissions. And after Reagan left the governorship, CARB created the ZEV (“zero emissions vehicle”) the regulatory spur to today’s electric car. (This is why Reagan could arguably be considered the father of the modern electric car.)

This, of course, would surprise many of his admirers and detractors. (Note: As is often the case, Reagan serves as a sort of Rorschach test. He has also been cast as a villain in the documentary, “Who Killed The Electric Car.”)

But “[Reagan] was definitely strong on environmental protection as governor of California in ways that are often forgotten,” says James Strock, the first Secretary of the California EPA, and a former Reagan Administration official, who is also the author of *Reagan on Leadership*.

And while some argue Reagan’s policies shifted when he entered the White House, Strock notes that Reagan “was always protective — as president — of [CARB’s] right to set stricter standards than the federal standards.”

“The automakers had hoped they could get [Reagan] to override California authority on [CARB],” he said. They were out of luck.

Today, the electric car is still an unknown quantity to most consumers, yet nearly all the major automakers see the future value of this technology and are rushing into production of models that will compete with GM’s Volt and Nissan’s Leaf. Soon, wireless electrical charging might even be an option. But there are lingering concerns.

Dan Kish, a former chief of staff for Republicans on the House Resources Committee and

on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, who now serves as the Institute for Energy Research's senior vice president for policy, likes to call electric cars pet rocks.

“They’re also damned expensive, have serious demands of their own on limited resources upon which we are more dependent than oil, and are impractical except for some people whose uses are always the same,” Kish says.

“The challenge is the battery,” says Strock. “For a city car, it can be great. But for longer drives...it still has not totally come into its own. It’s not clear how the technology is going to sort out.”

The problem is that city denizens — people who might only drive a few miles each day — still harbor that very romantic, American notion that they could theoretically decide to spontaneously hop in their car and drive from coast to coast. They may never actually do it, mind you, but the thought that they could serves as a deterrent to purchasing an electric car.

There’s also the question over whether they really are more environmentally friendly than traditional cars. In some cases, they aren’t. “California gets its electricity from clean sources,” Strock explains, “[but] for areas that get their electricity from less clean sources, electric vehicles have less environmental soundness.”

But while there are very real reasons to be skeptical of the electric car, I can’t help thinking that much of the animosity has little to do with the car, itself.

Many conservatives now reflexively oppose the electric car — not based on its merits — but instead, based on auto bailouts and government subsidies. Rather than raising this specific concern, however, the electric car has been cast as the enemy — a notion which also seems to also cast (fairly or not) conservatives as being opposed to technological innovation.

This needn’t necessarily be the case, advises Kish: “As for a conservative, libertarian or free marketer, there’s no reason to be for or against [electric cars],” he says. “The real issue is whether the government should be pouring billions into them,” he says. “They should be chosen by consumers, based upon markets and their own needs ... not by some ivory tower green industrial policy nitwits in Washington using others’ money.”

Strock agrees, noting that Ronald Reagan, “would be very skeptical of having the government subsidizing making a car — and then subsidizing buying it.”

Ultimately, my guess is those who see the electric car as a panacea are wrong — but so are those who see it as inherently evil. Electric cars won’t work everywhere or for everyone.

But they might just be a part of the solution for some people — while others will continue driving cars with the internal combustion engine — a “hybrid” solution, so to speak.

By the way, I’m currently test driving the Chevy Volt. I took it for a spin last night, and found it to be a pleasurable experience. My main takeaway was that it’s very quiet. This weekend, I’m planning to drive it to dinner in Frederick, Maryland — so I can experience what it’s like when the battery dies and the extended-range gasoline engine kicks in.

Why Conservatives See Rural America as Real America

The Week
April 24, 2014

In a recent column, my colleague Ryan Cooper raised a good point on the myth of rural powerlessness: While rural areas may posture themselves as noble victims, they enjoy outsized political influence in Washington.

There are many reasons for this rural favoritism — some dating back to compromises made during America’s founding. But one explanation surely has to do with the myth of rural superiority — the idea in many conservative circles that rural America is somehow the real America. This is a phenomenon that has immense political consequences, especially for Republicans facing a demographic time bomb when it comes to minorities, single women, and the college-educated — you know, urbanites and cosmopolitan Americans.

So where did this traditional deification of rural areas come from? Among other things, credit (or blame) the influence of religion (think the Garden of Eden versus the Tower of Babel), philosophy (Rousseau’s notion about noble savages), and various ideas during the time of America’s founding (Thomas Jefferson’s agrarianism, for example).

But it’s hard to deny that Americans — particularly traditional or conservative Americans — have internalized a worldview that lionizes rural areas and comes close to demonizing urban ones. This becomes obvious in the rhetoric about “the real America,” and we’ve seen it play out a little bit during the Cliven Bundy saga.

The problem? The entire concept of rural superiority is built on a questionable premise.

Let’s begin with Christianity. Yes, sometimes the Bible holds up desolate areas as ideal (Jesus would often withdraw to the wilderness or desert to pray and rest — probably good advice for us all). But there are plenty of other examples where cities come off looking pretty good.

Tim Keller, pastor of New York City’s Redeemer Presbyterian church, notes that “when God sends the people of Israel from Egypt into Canaan, he will not let them be exclusively

agrarian. He commands them to build cities in the book of Numbers.”

“When God has the world in the condition he wants it in,” Keller explains, “when he finally has the world exactly the way he wants it, it looks a lot like New York, without the graffiti and a few other things. It’s a city!”

“The reason [the Bible is] positive about cities,” continues Keller, “is that when God made Adam and Eve creative ... it was inevitable that they would build cities. Cities are places of creativity. Cities are places where culture is forged. That’s the reason why culture does not begin to happen until there’s a city.”

This brings us to a contradiction within conservatism. Much of conservatism — free markets, for instance — is premised on the notion that more people equals more ideas. (This, of course, is inconsistent with a more traditional, populist strain of conservatism.)

This more optimistic brand of conservatism gained a foothold when economists like Julian Simon and Ester Boserup took on the Malthusian catastrophe argument (which erroneously predicted that global overpopulation would lead to mass starvation), and instead argued that more people equals more ideas, innovation, and yes, prosperity.

When you think about it, it makes sense. Rural societies tend to work on subsistence (you eat what you grow), but cities lead to things like cooperation, specialization, and trade. These things make us rich. Cities are the areas where these things are magnified. More people — constantly bumping into each other — leads to all sorts of inventions and human flourishing. Cities are where “ideas have sex.”

Some optimistic cosmopolitan conservatives (think Jack Kemp, Paul Ryan, et al.) have embraced this philosophy in a consistent manner, which can be reflected in their affinity (or at least, their lack of animus) toward cities.

* * *

Perhaps the most ironic thing about other conservatives adopting an anti-city worldview is that it is partly based on a pernicious lie advanced by the high priest of romanticism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau essentially invented his own creation myth out of whole cloth. It differed greatly with the Christian understanding of creation, inasmuch as instead of viewing man as a fallen creature (due to original sin), Rousseau envisioned early man as a sort of noble savage.

It wasn't until man recognized the concept of property and ownership, Rousseau argued, that he became greedy and corrupted. In that view, a simple life is good and pure. A modern urban life is dirty and wrong.

“Many scholars have pointed out the romanticists' idea that somehow cities are breeders of sinful behavior and people who live in the country are more virtuous is actually something that's been passed into the American psyche and actually into the American Christian psyche so that we have a tendency to have a very negative view of cities,” says Keller.

As a boy growing up in rural western Maryland (seriously, this was physically and stylistically closer to West Virginia than Baltimore), it was instilled in me that country folks were God-fearing, salt-of-the-earth types and that big city folks weren't.

The sense wasn't just that cities were different, but that they were somehow morally inferior.

In fairness, during this time rural areas probably were more utopian — and inner-cities probably were more dangerous (think of New York City pre-Rudy Giuliani.)

But as I became an adult, and started seeing things for myself, I started to discover that this conventional wisdom wasn't really true.

Meanwhile, I started noticing an emerging dichotomy. Rural areas seemed to be divided between two groups of people: Devout old-timers and their meth-addicted children — between patriotic Joe six-packs and white supremacists. I'm exaggerating, but only slightly.

It was an area coping with modernity, and struggling mightily. They were clinging to their God and guns, yes — things I generally endorse — but also to their Marlboro reds.

Making matters worse, it was devoid of the kind of excitement that can keep a kid filled with wanderlust off the streets. (Hal Ketchum's "Small Town Saturday Night" captures this sentiment with the line "Gotta be bad just to have a good time.")

My parents were afraid the city would chew me up and spit me out, but it's here where I was free to pursue my dreams in the hustle and bustle of activity — a thriving city full of young, ambitious people who are (mostly) pretty well behaved.

Deep down, I suppose I'm still a country boy at heart. But I haven't been bored or depressed since leaving "God's country." Maybe Patrick Somerville's *This Bright River* gets it right?: "It's darker and stranger in small towns than almost anywhere."

This is not to say that cities are all good. As Keller likes to note, they are intense reflections of the culture. But it does seem true that many of the preconceived notions about the virtues of an Arcadian existence — and the horrors of urban life — are based on faulty or misleading assumptions. We have simplified things in an effort to glorify a simple life.

People have a way of knowing whether you like or respect them. And if conservatives want to have a chance to influence the culture in the 21st century, it's important to at least not be hostile to cities — or the denizens who inhabit them.

Just remember, it was a shining city on a hill that Reagan was referring.

A Confession

The Daily Caller
July 8, 2016

In the era of Facebook Live and smart phones, it's hard to come to any conclusion other than the fact that police brutality toward African-Americans is a pervasive problem that has been going on for generations. Seriously, absent video proof, how many innocent African-Americans have been beaten or killed over the last hundred years by the police—with little or no media coverage or scrutiny?

There's no telling the damage this has done to us collectively, not to mention the specific families and individuals who were victimized. And, of course, the long-term psychic damage transcends the physical. All sorts of negative externalities can be expected of someone who rightly feels he's living under an occupying army.

I was brought up to reflexively believe the police. To give them the benefit of the doubt. This was before everyone had a camera—and before my own personal experience would demonstrate to me that not all cops are heroes (though some certainly are). It was also before I became a dad and could appreciate the fear that many African-American parents have regarding their children's interactions with police. (Note: I'm writing this the morning after five innocent police officers were murdered in Dallas. It goes without saying that this violence should be vigorously condemned.)

This default assumption that the police officer was always right is, I'm sure, what a lot of well-meaning and decent "middle class" white people were raised to believe. Sure, there were incidents of police abuse, we were told, but those were very rare—and mostly happened in the Deep South. If you had to take someone's word, you would always go with a police officer over the word of some random citizen (and, let's be honest, for many Americans, this was especially true if that citizen was a minority).

It's important to note that I'm not talking about overt racists here. Many of the white Americans who reflexively trusted police officer would never personally discriminate against someone, nor would they use a racist slur. But they have outsourced their concerns

about crime to the authorities, and part of the deal is that you don't micromanage this work. It is understood that you may have to crack some eggs to make an omelette. And this was fine so long as they had plausible deniability.

Those days are gone. Decent Americans cannot turn a blind eye to police abuse; they just didn't really believe it was happening. Or maybe they didn't want to believe. Today, there is literally no excuse to be ignorant of the problem.

It would be hard to overestimate the impact that smart phone cameras have had on forcing us to grapple with the fact that this is, in fact, a very real (and all-too-common) problem. The streaming video of the aftermath of the killing of Philando Castile appears to be the latest tragic example. (Note: We still don't know exactly what happened, so I'm going to withhold judgment on this specific incident—but the video evidence we've all seen does not look good for the police.)

And if there's any good to come from this horrible trend, it may be that the scales are coming off the eyes of a lot of "well meaning," if naive, white Americans. My hope is that this will change public opinion to the point that we can change public policy.

This is why—though it's not a panacea—if there's one action item that we can probably all agree on, it's mandatory police body cameras that monitor and record all interactions with the public. It's in the best interest of our many responsible and professional police officers, as well as the public interest. This needs to happen.

Will July 19th Live on in GOP Infamy?

Roll Call
July 20, 2016

CLEVELAND — Tuesday, July 19, 2016, will go down in history as an inflection point for the Republican Party. Little liberal children will solemnize it with “pomp and parade,” and not just because casino magnate Donald Trump became the official (no longer presumptive) Republican nominee. It was also the day news broke that Roger Ailes’ days as Fox News head honcho are numbered.

As recently as a year ago, both events would have been utterly unthinkable. Ailes was firmly ensconced on his journalistic throne, seemingly untouchable thanks to years of success in politics and media while Trump was still viewed as a joke by the vast majority of political observers.

In these tumultuous times, perhaps it is appropriate that both men have connections to Richard Nixon, the famous political pugilist who experienced the extremes of both the “highest mountain” that Trump is currently on, and the “deepest valley.” Ailes started his political career helping make “Tricky Dick” look good on TV, and Donald Trump (who has connections with some of Nixon’s former aides) is seeking to replicate Nixon’s “law and order” message in 2016.

It’s 1968 all over again.

But neither the Nixon analogies, nor the unlikely odds that these two events would happen at all, much less simultaneously, are the primary reason this day is remarkable. The truth is that these events are also likely to be incredibly consequential for the future of conservatism.

Since 1980, the Republican Party has generally stood for policies like free trade and a belief that we can grow the pie, rather than fighting over who gets which slice. Donald Trump’s Republican Party, to the extent that “Trumpism” is coherent, is a much more pessimistic, populist, and protectionist departure from that more optimistic worldview.

But if Trump's ascendancy as standard-bearer signals a radical shift in tone and policy on the right, so too could the exodus of Ailes. It would be hard to overestimate the network's impact on the GOP or the possibility that things could change with Ailes' ouster. For years now, Fox News has dominated television news ratings, a phenomenon that ironically coincided with the electoral collapse of the GOP and, ultimately, with the rise of Donald Trump. If it ends up changing, the GOP presumably changes, too.

The amazing thing is that the events of July 19 are self-inflicted. Ailes' travails are the result not of poor performance (the public loved his product) or of his enemies finally obtaining revenge, but of sexual harassment allegations in the workplace. And Donald Trump, who had his own (different) problems with women during the 2016 race, got more votes than any Republican nominee in history.

Having said that, if Barack Obama had set a sinister goal seven years ago to bring about the destruction of the Republican Party by the end of his tenure, it's hard to imagine he could have executed the plan any more shrewdly. While the notion that Obama could have sabotaged Fox News is about as laughable as suggesting that the controversy over Melania Trump's speech was due to Hillary Clinton's penchant for destroying women, I have long suspected that the president was more than happy to egg on the destruction of the Republican Party — no matter the collateral damage for our nation.

There's an argument that his roasting at the 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner goaded Donald Trump into running for president. That might be paranoid to suspect, but during the primary campaign, there truly was a sense that Obama publicly criticized Trump, at least partly, because he knew this would only boost Trump among primary voters.

Ultimately, you can't blame any bogeymen for this. Some might even go so far as to speculate that Trump's coronation the same day as the (reported) beginning of the end of Ailes' tenure is some sort of karmic justice. Along with talk radio, the network helped create a populist political environment that coupled right-wing politics with a sexy tabloid culture and ultimately led to the rise of Trump.

They let the genie out of the bottle. It has been suggested that Trump might remake the Republican Party in his image. But some of this shift began with the rise of conservative talk radio and cable news. This might have started as a slow evolution more than a decade ago, but things came to a head on July 19. We finally reached the tipping point.

Will July 19th Live in Infamy?

Consider the case of Ann Coulter, the provocative political commentator who helped boost Donald Trump, and who spent years selling books by appearing on the network. On July 19, Coulter publicly suggested that “every woman who has ever been employed by Fox” has stories about Ailes.

Some people are ahead of the curve. They find out what’s happening and are for that.

Coulter doesn’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing.

Donald Trump Is Wrong About DC Restaurants

Roll Call
August 17, 2016

One week after *Bon Appétit* magazine named Washington the “Restaurant City of The Year” and just days after the death of pioneering chef Michel Richard — whose “Central” is literally across the street from Donald Trump’s new hotel — the Republican presidential nominee is dissing D.C.’s culinary scene.

Asked whether liberals would frequent his establishment, the billionaire reasoned, “They want to go to a great restaurant. ... There aren’t that many in Washington, believe me. There aren’t that many in Washington, as you know.”

In fairness, Trump’s comments were actually made during a taped deposition regarding his hotel project. But the timing of the publication of these comments (his criticism of D.C. restaurants in the deposition transcript was first noticed by the *Washingtonian*) couldn’t be worse.

Since June, Trump’s campaign has collapsed due to off-message comments — namely, his penchant for publicly criticizing others. What’s more, Trump’s condemnation looks much sillier than it might have appeared, even a couple of months ago. According to the most recent *Bon Appétit* magazine, the D.C. food scene is “blowing up” and “bubbling with momentum.”

I’m just a humble political writer, which might be why I see a political lesson in all of this. Trump’s criticism of the local food scene is really a microcosm of larger problems having to do with: (a) a penchant for cheap and gaudy things over quality (see Trump’s love for well-done steaks and fast food), (b) his braggadocio that always requires putting others down to build himself up, and (c) his incessant desire for revenge and the settling of scores (see the much-publicized dispute with D.C. food legend Jose Andres).

Of course, taking cheap shots at Washington is a proud tradition. Trump would hardly be

the first populist to take a swipe at the nation's capital. Then again, how many outsiders open huge hotels in the District?

It turns out that Trump's political rhetoric isn't the only thing that suggests he's a vulgarian. President Obama might be wrong about a lot of things, but one big thing he's right about is food. The first lady (who has a bit more time on her hands) seems to have an even more impressive palate. As Eater recently noted, "This year, she's visited critical darling Rose's Luxury and Georgetown newcomer Chez Billy Sud (twice)."

Now, you might think that this is all just proof that Trump is a man of the people, while the Obamas are elitists. But there are governing implications. In his excellent book *Hardball*, Chris Matthews writes that "the first thing Reagan did after being elected was attend a series of well-planned gatherings in the homes of the capital's most prominent journalists, lawyers and business people."

Matthews continues: "I decided it was time to serve notice that we're residents,' Reagan told The Washington Post's Elisabeth Bumiller. 'We wanted to get to know some people in Washington.' They went to dinner at the home of conservative columnist George Will, where they met Katharine Graham, publisher of the Post and bete noire of recent Republican administrations. Next, they attended a party thrown by Mrs. Graham at her home in Georgetown. All this sent a clear signal: The Reagans and their people had come to join Washington society, not scorn it."

In the unlikely event that a President Trump decides to take a page from the Reagan-Obama playbook (both ran as outsiders!), the following are a few places he should visit:

- Central, the James Beard Award-winning restaurant, is Michel Richard's "American bistro, with a French accent." Executive chef David Deshaies' creations are terrific, and they are famous for their take on fried chicken. Make sure to get the soft-shell crab while you still can. Ask for Frank.
- Georgetown's Chez Billy Sud is Parisian elegant, without being stuffy. Get the truite Grenobloise or the confit de canard.

Donald Trump Is Wrong About DC Restaurants

- Oyamel is Jose Andres' bustling Mexican street-food restaurant. It's a great lunch spot, and you can't go wrong with anything on the menu. Wash it all down with my favorite drink, the Sagrado Corazon ("Chinaco 'Verde' Blanco Tequila with cilantro and toasted coriander, served over hibiscus ice.")

- Located in the now trendy Shaw neighborhood, All Purpose is a spin on New Jersey pizza joints. Order the stracciatella bruschetta (blistered sweet corn, fresno chili cilantro, bread and butter pickles), the eggplant parm, and the Cossimo pizza (roasted mushrooms, taleggio, scallions, preserved truffle sauce, grana). Make sure to try sommelier Sebastian's rosé this summer.

- I dined at Tail Up Goat last week and liked it so much that I made a reservation before departing. (Make sure to try the cucumber + melon and the corn ravioli.)

You can thank me later, Mr. Trump.

Creative Thinking Could Prevent the Next 9/11

Roll Call
September 7, 2016

Fifteen years after the Sept. 11 attacks, could creative thinking possibly prevent the next one? The 9/11 Commission Report condemned a “failure of imagination.” Likewise, Donald Rumsfeld, in the documentary “The Unknown Known,” suggested that the failure of the United States to anticipate the attack on Pearl Harbor was a failure of imagination. This supposition rings true, although it is far from a consensus position.

It has long been noted that Tom Clancy’s 1994 thriller *Debt of Honor* featured a pilot flying his plane into the U.S. Capitol. But there are numerous other examples where writers’ imaginations seemed to predict 9/11. Stephen King’s *The Running Man* (1982) — the novel, not the film — concludes with a pilot intentionally slamming a passenger jet into a skyscraper.

Don DeLillo’s *Players* (1977) and “Mao II” (1991) focused heavily on terrorism, but it was his novel *White Noise* (1985) where the protagonist reads from a tabloid story, in which psychics predicted the coming year’s events, that gave me chills: “Members of an air-crash cult will hijack a jumbo jet and crash it into the White House ...”

In *Infinite Jest* (1996), David Foster Wallace uses an interesting metaphor for how a depressed person feels: “Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. Their terror of falling from a great height is still just as great as it would be for you or me,” he wrote. “When the flames get close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors.”

This reads more like a vague Bible prophesy than a warning we could prepare for. But the other examples suggest we should be doing more than just writing about our apocalyptic intuition.

At least one creative thinker did more than just write about his premonitions. A retired Army officer named Rick Rescorla prepared for the attacks. As *The New Yorker* noted, “Drawing on his research for [a] novel on the air-cavalry unit, Rescorla [then working as head of security for Morgan Stanley at the World Trade Center] envisioned an air attack

on the twin towers, probably an air-cargo plane ...” Sadly, Rescorla died during the attacks while helping lead people to safety.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the accumulation of evidence that writers had envisioned something similar dovetailed with laments about a failure of imagination. There were enough eerie omens to support a modern cottage industry for prophetic novelists.

But more important than book sales was the notion that we might tap this creative talent to prevent the next attack. One of the voices calling for this was legendary blogger Rob Neppell, who then went by the nom de plume N.Z. Bear.

Noting that “during WWII, [science fiction writers] Issac Asimov, L. Sprague de Camp, and yes, [Robert] Heinlein, were recruited to work at the Materials Laboratory of the Naval Air Material Center at the Philadelphia Navy Yard,” Neppell argued in 2002 that we should do it again. “Put the right 20 people in a conference room for a day, supply sufficient quantities of caffeine and alcohol, and I guarantee you’ll walk out of there with ideas that haven’t yet occurred to the CIA or FBI,” he insisted.

Someone was paying attention to voices like Neppell’s. In 2004, The Washington Post published a story headlined: “Homeland Security Employs Imagination.” Thriller writer Brad Meltzer was involved in what was called the Analytic Red Cell program after 9/11, and so was author Brad Thor, who told The Daily Caller’s Jamie Weinstein that this project was “easily the most aggressive, forward-thinking program I have ever seen the federal government stand up. They bring in creative thinkers from outside the Beltway to sit down with a range of government, military and intelligence people to create possible scenarios.” Others, like “The Alienist” author and historian Caleb Carr, have also offered insight to the government.

Will it matter? It’s obviously difficult to predict and avoid the next 9/11. We have to bat 1.000; the bad guys just need to be successful once. But the more we listen to offbeat creative types, writers and futurists, the better our odds of doing so will be. Not all heroes wear capes, (or even badges or camouflage). The nerds who grew up reading sci-fi books might turn out to be our last, best hope.

Understanding the Friction Between Trump and Journalists

Roll Call
October 26, 2016

If you've been paying attention, it's pretty clear that Donald Trump supporters don't care much for members of the media, and the feeling is mutual. While charges of liberal media bias go back further than I can remember, something else is at play here. Why do so many journalists disdain this man? After some deep reflection, I've identified some compelling reasons that have little to do with his political philosophy, lack of experience or in some cases, even his temperament.

First, I suspect that writers — trained to be pedantic — have a particular problem with Trump. If I ever thought of saying, “Many, many people” told me this or that, I would stop and self-edit. Likewise, I would also never say, as Trump so often does, that “a lot of people are saying” such and such, because the obvious rejoinder from an editor would be: “Prove it.” I suspect that Trump's rhetorical style is especially annoying to writers, who also just happen to be essential when it comes to covering politics.

This helps explain the disconnect between journalists and average Americans. When Trump speaks, he sounds more like a regular (non-writer) person. The public rewards him for this, and we punish him because we find it so reflexively discordant (and secretly suspect his vagueness conceals his dissembling). This differs from his refusal to bow to our cosmopolitan shibboleths (something that might also be a source of subconscious bias). To most writers, precision and documentation take on an almost moral status.

Second, Trump's shoddy campaign bothers the hell out of me. Why should I care how he runs his campaign? Unlike many Trump fans who view the process as inherently corrupt, I grew up respecting the game of politics. Over the years, I have read and studied hundreds of books on politics — Chris Matthews' *Hardball*, John Brady's *Bad Boy: The Life and Politics of Lee Atwater*, James Carville and Paul Begala's *Buck Up, Suck Up ... And Come Back When You Foul Up* (to name a few) — as well as countless leadership books by the likes of Peter Drucker, John Maxwell, and Stephen Covey, and volumes on

the leadership lessons of great men like Ronald Reagan, Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln.

These books have ingrained in me indelible maxims about politics and leadership — lessons that Trump constantly flouts. Now, when Trump ignored all the traditional rules and won, I was introspective enough to at least consider the possibility that everything I had learned about campaign politics — not my values or ideology — might have become outdated. But it turns out that, in the long run, the old rules still matter; he's not winning. Hillary Clinton has created a superior campaign operation, and Trump's lack of discipline and lack of a campaign has contributed to his blowing what was an eminently winnable race.

Lastly, there is admittedly a yawning chasm between the ways elites actually live versus most working-class whites in America today. Political scientist and think tank scholar Charles Murray has a theory that goes like this. Once upon a time, working-class whites were basically the salt of the earth who worked hard and played by the rules. But, for a variety of reasons — economic and moral — they are coming apart at the seams. Today, working-class whites are less likely than are elites to be married, attend regular church services, etc.

The two classes have switched places. Once thought of as bohemians, today's elites actually live rather bourgeois lives. We (despite being the son of a prison guard, based on my chosen profession, I'm counting myself as "elite" here) generally live very conservative and moral lives, even if we don't, in Murray's words, "preach what we practice."

This, I hypothesize, has led to an interesting phenomenon, whereby Trump's vulgarity is actually celebrated by the formerly salt-of-the-earth working class and rejected by the so-called elites who view it not only as aesthetically Philistine but also as morally repugnant.

Why am I telling you this? In the interest of greater understanding and disclosure — but not as a confession or apology. As Joan Didion's dictum suggests, "Style is character." And Donald Trump's style — the way he talks, the way he decided to "wing" his campaign instead of running a smart one — says something about him as a man — and possibly the way he would govern. Something that should be ignored at your own peril.

PART 2:

LESSONS I'VE LEARNED AND SHARED



My Advice to the Class of 2013

The Week
May 13, 2013

Congratulations, graduates. At commencements like this one all across the nation this spring, former students just like you can expect to hear dignitaries of all stripes offer some quixotic advice. For example: Every commencement speaker is required (by law, I think) to summon the trite old saying that you should “do what you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life.”

This piece of advice is not exactly true. I’m a writer, and I consider it to be work, even if I do love it. It’s work because you do it when you don’t feel like doing it. Of course, it’s not the same kind of work I experienced at Anders 40 West Amoco or at Watson’s Restaurant, two now-defunct places I labored at in my Frederick, Md., youth.

And of course, working as a writer is easy compared to other jobs. My dad was a prison guard, for instance. He literally went to jail for decades so that his son could complain about having worked at a gas station. Still, because I experienced this sort of job, I now respect it more — which means I also avoid it like the plague.

Especially early in my career, fear of returning to a real job drove me to be more successful. It should drive you, too. If you haven’t had this sort of work, I feel sorry for you. The best you can do is try to imagine what it’s like.

This quote, from Studs Terkel’s book *Working* might help:

“This book, being about work, is, by its very nature, about violence — to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.”

So how do you avoid the sort of fate that Terkel describes? How do you leave college today and spend your life doing work — yes, it is work — but work that has meaning and

purpose and is rewarding to you?

First, realize you are blessed to be in America — and to have a college degree. If you are smart — and keep your expenses low! — you have a real chance to pursue your dreams. But even with all your blessings, you can still screw it up.

Psychologist Angela Duckworth has a maxim that was unfortunately popularized by Jonah Lehrer but is true nonetheless, which says you should “choose easy” but “work hard.”

Duckworth discovered this truism in the process of doing research on why some people stick with things, and others quit.

Her point is simple: Being successful is hard enough even if you’re doing something you’re naturally good at. The demands of success — the hours of time spent mastering a career — mean that you probably won’t stick with something you don’t enjoy doing long enough to achieve anything meaningful. Even if you do stick with it, your heart won’t be in it.

But life is holistic, and while Duckworth’s advice is really about choosing a career, the “choose easy, work hard” axiom is just as true when it comes to relationships. You can have a good career, but be miserable at home. And often your home life can infect your work life. (As Seinfeld predicted, if “independent George meets relationship George he will kill relationship George!”)

If you’re in need of “counseling” during the courting phase of your relationship (before kids and mortgages, etc.), then you’re not really choosing easy. You’re choosing hard. And that’s stupid. It should be, as the song says, “easy like Sunday morning.”

Choosing easy in your personal and work life is important because you really can’t compartmentalize your life.

Now, if you’re brilliant enough, this might not matter. A certain amount of drama might even be good for you. Going through a messy divorce (or two) might even make you a more colorful character.

But if you’re like the rest of us, you can’t afford too many distractions. Most of us aren’t

brilliant. In fact, most successful people aren't geniuses; they have what Dr. Duckworth calls "grit."

"A successful writer," the saying goes, "is an amateur who didn't quit." Woody Allen put it another way: "Eighty percent of life is just showing up." This is true. But it's hard to show up day in and day out — year in and year out — if you're miserable.

And so, a successful career demands the absence of personal superfluous distractions (there will always be distractions, but you don't need to invite them). You need peace and harmony at home, precisely so you can fight battles at your job.

Or as Gustave Flaubert put it: "Be regular and ordinary in your life, like a bourgeois, so that you may be violent and original in your work."

Of course, even if you do all these things, you'll never really finish learning. The people who become lifelong learners have a huge advantage in the marathon that is life. Most people think that breaking into a business is the hard part, but my experience has been that sustaining success is even more difficult.

The more you learn, the more you realize that you don't know very much. Dipping toes in the water leads one to discover there is a big ocean out there. And if you become a parent, this becomes even more startlingly obvious.

George Santayana observed that Americans don't solve their problems; they leave them behind. As I became a father, this really hit me hard. Naively, I had believed that I had mastered things that I had merely outgrown. But when you have kids, you rediscover (and relive) your weaknesses.

Here's a trivial example. For at least fifteen years of my life, I went to a building every day that had some sort of basketball court attached to it. Despite the fact that my dad had been a high school star, I've always been a lousy player. But there was no escaping this game, which seemed inexorably tied to my life. And then one day, I graduated. Since I didn't become a P.E. teacher or something, I have never had another occasion to play basketball. Until now.

Now I have a son. He will surely play basketball. I may have found a years-long respite

from my hardcourt weakness, but in the form of my children, I will have to confront again the weakness I never mastered.

Joan Didion wrote, “I think we are well-advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind’s door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends.”

I am a work in progress. So are you. Many of the quotes I’ve referenced here were unfamiliar to me when I was at my college graduation ceremony. In the intervening years, I have discovered them. In some cases, it was a painful discovery, because their profundity didn’t mean anything to me until after I could relate to them.

Mentors can be people you know, or they can be people you read about in books. We learn from mistakes and mentors. Here’s hoping you’ll mostly avoid the former, and cleave dearly to the latter.

The Problem With Worshipping Romance

The Week
February 14, 2014

It's time once again for that day of obligation foisted on us each year by the commercial racket known as the greeting card industry. Happy Valentine's Day!

Valentine's Day somehow manages to turn voluntary acts of kindness and warmth into perfunctory gestures, and romantic candlelight dinners into onerous burdens — all in the name of “love” (read: commercialism).

Now, if those were the only things I didn't like about Valentine's Day, I'd probably keep my grumpiness to myself. But this holiday also perpetuates bogus, unattainable notions about romance, love, marriage, and sex that has probably contributed more to our unhappiness (not to mention our divorce rates) than anything else.

One such message goes like this: You need somebody else's approval and acceptance to be a complete, fulfilled person.

If Valentine's Day isn't the cause of this worldview, it most certainly has profited from peddling it. And while it's hard to pinpoint exactly where this notion came from, the rise of popular music catering to teenagers is a fair, if surprising, place to assign the blame.

Just as Valentine's Day seems utterly harmless, much of the “wholesome” music we grew up listening to fostered this pernicious worldview.

The Righteous Brothers, for example, sang: “Without you baby, what good am I?”

(The answer, I suppose, is ... not much.)

“I could try to be big in the eyes of the world / what matters to me is what I could be to just one girl,” declared The Beach Boys.

Anyone vaguely familiar with Christian theology and rhetoric will recognize the religious overtones. (We are advised to be in this world, but not of this world.) It's not the “world”

that Mike Love (no pun intended) needs the approval of. His salvation is found in “just one girl.”

She completes him. Until she leaves. And then his world crumbles?

Many people have an emotional longing. They feel empty. And the desire for affirmation from other people gives them hope. This sounds good, but it’s a trap.

In his 1973 book *The Denial of Death*, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker explained why we developed this modern notion, which he calls “the romantic solution.”

In short, he argues it’s because we no longer look to God for our personal fulfillment. Instead, he says, “Modern man fulfills his urge to self expansion in the love object just as it was once fulfilled in God.”

To be sure, compared to today’s coarse culture and music, it sounds absurd to criticize the sappy songs of the ‘50s and ‘60s. But the perpetuation of this romantic notion has arguably done more to pervert our understanding of the proper role of romantic relationships than almost anything else.

As much as we complain about Miley’s twerking, the selling of sex is, at least, more obvious, and thus less insidious, than the selling of the romantic solution. The fact that it seems so harmless — so wholesome and winsome — is perhaps why it’s so seductive.

Of course, it’s not just the music industry. Almost every romantic comedy is at least partially involved in advancing this trope.

It is so clichéd that we’ve begun seeing some pushback in other genres. “Too many guys think I’m a concept,” says Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, “or I complete them, or I’m gonna make them alive. But I’m just a fucked-up girl who’s lookin’ for my own peace of mind; don’t assign me yours.”

She’s right. The notion that if I can just get her to date me, everything’ll be fine has gotten a lot of free publicity in movies and music. But it’s utterly destructive.

If you don’t get the girl (or guy), you can’t be fulfilled. If you do get her, you’ll soon

learn that she can't live up to your impossibly high expectations — or you can't live up to hers. This will cause her to leave you — or you to leave her. Or you'll both be chronically unhappy.

Of course, the worst time to have the epiphany that you have wrongfully elevated your partner is after a few years of marriage and kids.

“The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy,” wrote C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. “I am not now speaking of what would ordinarily be called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job: but something has evaded us.”

Or, as Tim Keller, pastor of Christ Redeemer in New York City, has said regarding the Old Testament story of Jacob: “You go to bed with Rachel; in the morning it will always be Leah.”

To some degree, this is about narcissism. “When people put themselves at the center of their relationship or their spiritual life — always asking what can you/God do for me? — it will end in heartache,” says Lisa De Pasquale, author of the forthcoming book *Finding Mr. Righteous*. (Listen to my interview with De Pasquale [here](#).)

It's also procrastination. Buying into the notion that your salvation is right around the corner means postponing any sort of self-discovery or self-improvement work that might actually make you a happy individual capable of actually attracting — and sustaining — a long-term romantic relationship.

If our value comes from having that special other person, then what about the people who don't have a date on Valentine's Day? Is it totally unacceptable to live a fulfilling life alone?

Here's the truth: You don't need someone else in your life for you to become the person

you're supposed to be. You must first become that self-realized person, and then you will find that special him or her.

Don't count on someone else to make you happy or fulfilled.

And if you do marry, forget about all that love at first sight nonsense. Find someone you'd be willing to go into battle with — or, at least, go into business with. That's not romantic, but it's wise. Because — no matter what pop songs or rom-coms tell you — raising kids, paying a mortgage...all the stuff you do in life, is more like a business partnership than a date. It really is.

You wouldn't go into business with someone you didn't trust and respect; yet a lot of people put less thought and time (and vetting) into their marriage than into their business relationships.

Or at least try to find someone who will at least concede that Valentine's Day is an empty, engineered holiday that has little to do with true love and happy marriages. You'll still have to celebrate it, mind you. But at least you'll have someone worth celebrating with.

What Being a Father Taught Me About God

The Week
June 15th, 2014

Did you know babies don't drink water? Neither did I, until I became a dad. How about the fact that their fingernails are a real problem; you've got to file them or cover them with socks or something, so they don't scratch their little faces. This was a shock to me.

Today is my fourth Father's Day as a dad. And yes, I've learned a lot of unexpected things over those four years. But while these practical things exposed my ignorance, it is an altogether different and more spiritual series of fatherhood-related epiphanies that truly astound me.

Since the Christian God is presented in a paternal role (in Western culture, at least), it stands to reason that one's perception of God is often seen through a prism of one's own father. This is by design. The Lord's Prayer begins "Our Father" — and Romans 8:15 says, "[T]he Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"

I always understood that my experience as a son might inform my view of God. But I never guessed that being a father would help me see things a little bit better from His perspective.

It's an imperfect analogy, of course. I am not God — far from it! I'm not omnipotent or omniscient, either — though compared to a 3 year old, I'm pretty wise. But it's not as if the Christian Bible doesn't encourage us to draw this analogy. The book of Matthew asks, "[W]hich of you, if his son makes a request for bread, will give him a stone?" It then concludes: "If you, then, being evil, are able to give good things to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who make requests to him?"

This verse encourages us to compare our love for our own children to God's love of us. And along those lines, the first thing I discovered when I had my first boy was the profound love I had for him. This sounds clichéd, of course, but you really can't explain it. Before I had kids, I could intellectually understand the concept, but not fully appreciate

it. Similarly, I thought people who put pictures of their kids on Facebook were lame. And then I became a dad.

That's when it hit me: What if the love I have for my children is merely a microcosm of the love God has for me? After all, even when they disobey me, as they sometimes do, my love for them doesn't decline in the slightest. And I'm just flesh and blood.

Another thing I discovered is that G.K. Chesterton was right when he asserted that original sin was the only part of Christian theology that could be proved.

Sure, we love our kids, but they can be bad and annoying. And sometimes they can do or say downright mean things. I remember watching my kids fight over some petty little toy — watching them be selfish and refuse to share with others — and thinking how inherently human this was (they didn't learn this from anyone) — but also how meaningless and pathetic it is for any of us to try to hold on to something so temporal and superficial — something that could be easily snatched away from them at any moment, just as I could snatch up that silly toy.

Another related point: When my boys hurt each other, or take things from each other, whether they realize it or not, they are hurting me, since I love them both. Likewise, God loves all his children, and when we hurt one another, well, why wouldn't God find it to be a personal affront? This principle works in reverse, too, when we are kind to one another. I'm reminded of this: "I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me."

But maybe the most important thing I learned about God from having kids was this: Even when they don't believe it, dad (and mom) knows best. Again, this isn't a perfect analogy, since I'm not omniscient. But it's a safe bet that I know what's better for my 3 year old than he does. And of course, God knows better than me what's best for me. After all, if my understanding of the physical world is dramatically more advanced than my children's, then how much more does the creator of the universe understand about anything than me?

Understanding this concept is the essence of humbly surrendering to Christ, that "not my will, but thine, be done." And teaching me this is probably the best Father's Day gift my kids could ever give me. Certainly, it's better than a necktie.

How to Become a Cable News Pundit

The Week
July 16, 2014

“I never miss a chance to have sex or appear on television,” Gore Vidal once declared. This is terrific advice. Of course, not everyone has the chance — particularly with the latter endeavor. So let me help shed a little light on the secret society of TV pundits — and how to get into it.

Let’s say you’re an aspiring journalist or strategist and want to make a name for yourself. How do you do it? Of course, the most obvious way — still! — is to get on TV. There is something magical about TV. The medium itself bestows upon the pundit a sense of expertise, earned or not. God bless America.

So how do you get on TV? The first step is to establish some sort of credibility in the eyes of the bookers. They need to tell their bosses that they scored an important person associated with an important organization. It is very difficult for them to sell an appearance by an unimportant person associated with an unimportant organization. (The important-versus-unimportant distinction, of course, could hardly be more subjective.) Plus, they need to put something on the chyron, such as: “Matt Lewis is a contributing editor at TheWeek.com.”

If you already have a relationship with a well-known media outlet or firm, congratulations! But if you’re just breaking in, you can cobble together some quasi-respectable credentials by doing freelance work (possibly even for free!). Or maybe even start your own website or company. As is true with many things on cable television, the substance matters very little — it just has to sound legit.

So let’s say you now seem like a somewhat important person affiliated with a somewhat important website or organization. To whom do you now pitch yourself? It’s not as if you can go to CNN.com and fill out a contact form that says: “I WANT TO BE ON TEE-VEE!”

TV bookers don’t want unsolicited pitches from people they’ve never heard of. (A Catch-22: You can’t break into the business if you’re not in the business.) And the PR and

consultant types who want you to pay them to help get you on TV often have little else to sell beyond email lists of producers (which they have either paid handsomely for — or cobbled together through years of networking).

You also can't ask anyone for help. Seriously, don't even think about asking someone for a producer's contact info. If you know someone who is doing TV commentary, do not ask him or her to help you get on. It's the kind of thing that skeezy people do. I would sooner ask someone to help me move or pick me up at the airport than to give me the contact information for a TV producer.

Why? For one, it feels rude to bombard bookers with unsolicited pitches, or to put a friend in a position where he's facilitating such behavior. But it's also because, at some level, we are all in competition. If you're a conservative pundit asking me to share a booker's contact information, you might as well ask if you can dance with my wife. Stay out of my lane.

Now let's say that somehow you end up getting ahold of a producer. (Maybe you kept emailing random firstnames@cnn.com until someone responded?) Assuming they are even mildly interested in you, the first thing they will ask is if you've been on cable news before. They want to see a clip of you on TV to see if you're worthy of going on TV (another Catch-22).

Haven't been on TV? No problem. Here's the secret: Pitch yourself during holidays. Their requirement for having previous TV appearances will magically disappear. Be available when all the "A-list" guests and paid "contributors" are out of town for Christmas or July 4 or Memorial Day. This is especially good if you're looking to get your foot in the door and prove yourself. I haven't taken a vacation during a holiday for years. I was once on MSNBC for like four hours straight. And you want to know why? It was all because Sarah Palin decided to quit her job on July 3, 2009 — you know, right about the time Pat Buchanan and Michael Steele were crossing the Bay Bridge, headed toward Ocean City, Maryland.

At this point, it might be worth asking if you really want to do this — or if you're ready to do this. The life of a TV pundit can be costly and humiliating. If you go on unprepared, you might make a fool of yourself. Plus, even if you're great, it's not really as fun as it seems. There's a lot of prep and make-up and logistics for a four-minute spot

that only a tiny percentage of the country sees. I have traveled 10 hours in a day to be on TV for 10 minutes. I was once bumped from a spot — I'm talking about being in the chair and in make-up — because there was a mountain lion loose in a San Diego neighborhood.

Sometimes you're sitting in a dark room all alone with an earpiece in and bright lights shining in your face as you talk into a camera and pretend you see someone. "It's good to see you too, Contessa!" you'll lie. That pretty much sums up the authenticity of the cable news experience.

Sometimes you're asked to talk about things you don't know all that much about. Seriously, I once did a TV hit based on the question "Is shy bladder syndrome a disability?" Thankfully, I'm not an expert. Still, every school child in America should have to watch this video with the ironic words "Punditry is Glamorous" emblazoned on my forehead.

And — unlike the quiet confines of a writer's studio — sometimes people yell at you. A lot. Like the time Michael Eric Dyson accused me of exerting "white privilege."

And does it even pay the career dividends you hope for? It used to be that if you were a stand-up comedian and you got on Johnny Carson, your career was made. The next day your agent would get a million calls and you'd have all sorts of choices. That was when there were like three channels.

If you go on cable news today, almost no one will notice. This isn't like an '80s movie montage scene where you'll be recognized on the street, cars will pull up to you and the drivers will wave, construction workers will give you a thumbs-up, and so on. The odds are you won't be recognized except in #ThisTown.

There's also this: TV has a way of making you crazy. I've seen well-adjusted people become incredibly insecure when they stop getting called by bookers. And that's particularly unnerving when you factor in the sheer unpredictability of getting booked. It may have nothing to do with your performance. Sometimes, it's as simple as the industry changing. I was once a regular on Dylan Ratigan, a show that no longer exists. I was becoming a regular on Lou Dobbs' CNN show, just as he was exiting. And for years, I was on CNN's Reliable Sources with Howard Kurtz, who is no longer there. (I still go on the show with Brian Stelter.) The point is that you will have little control over your own fate.

And yet, so many people are dying for the chance. That's because Gore Vidal was right. And he wasn't alone. In the mostly forgotten Nicole Kidman movie *To Die For*, the protagonist declares, "You aren't really anybody in America if you're not on TV." This isn't even close to true, of course, but it sometimes feels that way for the aspirational.

So how can you get on TV and still remain a happy and decent person? By becoming the sort of person who a cable news booker will perceive as being worthy of listening to in the first place. Be the kind of person the bookers want to woo, not the kind of person who wants to woo the bookers.

But here's the bigger question: Why would you want to be a TV pundit in the first place?

Life Advice for My Sons

The Week
September 12, 2014

There's an episode of *30 Rock* where aging new father Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin), fearing he will be "senile or dead for the better part of [his] child's life," decides to record a video for his unborn child. "I must find a way to speak to — and guide — my son, even from the grave," he declares. He then goes through the process of recording his thoughts, ending the tape with these words: "In the unlikely event that you find something that is not covered here, find a woman named Liz Lemon, get her advice, and then do the opposite."

It's funny. But it's also sweet and sad and serious. And since seeing this episode, I've quietly been accumulating advice for my own sons. I've long hesitated to put it down in writing, since doing so would be a tacit admission of my own mortality. But there is no escaping our finitude.

So for my two sons — and maybe for your own sons and daughter, too — here is some life advice.

- Get plenty of sleep. Some people think it's a waste of time. I'd like to think of it more as a "competitive advantage."
- Wear moisturizer and sunscreen. You get only one set of skin.
- Stretch. Stay flexible. Walk a lot. When you get old and stiff, you'll be glad you did.
- Two words: Low carbs.
- Keep expenses low. It will maximize your freedom, especially when you're young. Opportunities sometimes arise out of nowhere, but you can't follow your dreams to New York or Paris or Hollywood if you have a huge mortgage and credit card debt.
- Be a little underpaid. People who are overpaid are resented and often fired. When budgets need to be cut, it's easier to lop off one huge salary than two or three little ones. And it doesn't mean you have to be a pauper; some millionaires are underpaid.

- To paraphrase Mike Myers, don't worry about being "discovered"; worry about discovering what you want to do.
- Don't worry too much about being cool. There is often an inverse relationship between being a cool teen and a successful adult. Weird kids make cool adults, and cool kids sometimes make bad adults.
- Think ahead. It is incredibly important that your big decisions today are geared toward the next 80 years of your life, and not just the next two or three.
- Never quit learning. There will always be so much you don't know.
- The best way to be attractive to someone is to work on yourself. People like confidence, passion, and competence. Focus on being a really interesting and successful person, and you will automatically become more appealing to others, too.
- Take your choice of a spouse seriously. It's the most important decision of your life. Most people wouldn't go into business with someone unless he or she were fully vetted and trusted, yet they would marry someone they met a few weeks ago at a bar. This is insane. Marriage should be a loving, lifelong partnership. Choose carefully.
- Believe you have a purpose in life, and work to discover it. This one thing is the cure for almost every problem. To quote the Bible: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."
- Love people. Don't fake it. You should really love people. If you do, you'll never objectify or mistreat them.
- Be gracious. Be nice. I live by something I call the "Patrick Swayze Rule." It's based on his so-bad-it's-good movie *Road House*. In the 1989 film, Swayze attempts to clean up a seedy bar. In a speech to the bar's bouncers, he offers this advice: "Be nice. If somebody gets in your face... I want you to be nice... I want you to be nice until it's time to not be nice."
- Go to bed early. Almost nothing good happens after 10 p.m. Seriously, a lot of problems can be avoided by not putting yourself in a position to be around those problems.

Life Advice for My Sons

- Develop habits. Eventually, you are what you do every day.
- Be a regular. Pick a really good restaurant and go there often. It pays to be part of a community.
- Tip well.
- If you start reading a book and it doesn't hook you, don't feel compelled to power through. People waste a lot of time feeling obligated to finish what they started.
- Don't hire anyone who comes to you. If a lawyer calls you, don't hire her. If a plumber knocks on your door and is advertising a special offer, don't hire him. If you're a political candidate, don't hire the consultant who contacts you and tells you how great you are. Instead, you seek out the best people.
- Sometimes your parents are wrong. So take this list with a grain of salt.

(Note: This list is not meant to be exhaustive. If you want more, I offered a whole bunch of life advice in my 2013 "commencement address" to new graduates.)

To Discover Your Purpose, Revisit Your Childhood

The Daily Caller
November 11, 2016

With less than a week to go before this election season is mercifully over, I thought I would provide some counter programming and talk about something more hopeful. As regular readers know, I'm a fan of podcasts, and I recently stumbled across a simple (yet profound) way to help discover your life's calling.

Many of us struggle with discovering our professional purpose, but it seems likely that secrets about our future purpose might be hidden in our past childhood interests and successes. Recently on The James Altucher Show podcast, Chip Conley, Head of Global Hospitality & Strategy for Airbnb and founder and former CEO of Joie de Vivre, talked about how he retroactively discovered his purpose.

"I had a really beautiful conversation once with a high school friend of mine," he said, "He helped me see myself at age 6, 8, 10, or 12 like I couldn't remember myself."

"He said, 'Chip, you don't even remember that you started a restaurant in your family dining room.'"

"This was literally when I was creating my second restaurant in one of my hotels. I was like, 'Oh, I guess I have a restaurateur in me from way back then.'"

I had a similar experience. As I recently discussed on The Jamie Weinstein Show podcast, I had no idea that I was meant to do what I'm doing. If you had told me that I could get paid to write or talk about politics, I would have laughed at you. The odds of that happening were about as good as the odds I would be starting shortstop for the Baltimore Orioles.

But here's the crazy thing: in hindsight, it is obvious to me that I'm doing exactly what I was meant to be doing. When I was a little kid, I wrote my own "book" that was both politically and grammatically incorrect ("about dogs, Indians, woor, and river.")

And in high school, I received a pretty good response to this paper that I wrote about Ronald Reagan.

Again, despite what might now look like obvious clues, I want to stress that the thought literally never occurred to me that I wanted to be a writer or journalist—or that I could plausibly become one. What is more, like Chip Conley, I had forgotten about these childhood projects and papers (he was reminded of the restaurant story by a friend; I (re)discovered my past as a writer while rifling through a dusty box of keepsakes).

Our memories (and our ability to recall them) age along with us. And this, of course, is a good argument for keeping a notebook. In the immortal words of Joan Didion, “I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind’s door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends.”

Who knows what the future may hold for any of us. In 1 Corinthians 13:12 (Amplified Bible), it says:

“For now [in this time of imperfection] we see in a mirror dimly [a blurred reflection, a riddle, an enigma], but then [when the time of perfection comes we will see reality] face to face. Now I know in part [just in fragments], but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known [by God].”

If you are “seeing through a glass darkly” and struggling to discover your calling, it might be worthwhile to spend some time reflecting and talking to people about your past. Their memories and insights may help you see clearly what has been hiding in plain sight right in front of you all along.

What Music Taught Me About Journalism

The Daily Caller
November 22, 2016

There's nothing more emotionally exhausting, but also rewarding, than wading through old keepsakes. A few weeks ago, I wrote about rummaging through some old boxes and finding the first "book" I ever authored.

Along with my "book," I also uncovered some video and cassette tapes that I've long had every intention of digitizing. Some of the music was my dad and his family performing gospel songs, and some of it was from a band I played in back in the mid-90s called The Backyard Apples. (That's me playing the faux-pedal steel guitar licks on this song, written by my bandmate George Spiegel.)

And just as my first "book" helped predict my future career in journalism, much of what I learned as a musician in a band has helped me as a journalist. I know it sounds crazy, so here are a few relevant lessons:

1. Having an audience of "followers" is vital.

This wasn't obvious to me when I started out as a musician. I figured things would work chronologically: (A) Write good songs and practice them, (B) record a "demo" tape or cd, (C) book gigs at a popular clubs or taverns based on the quality of your music, and (D) accumulate fans who would see you at said gigs, buy your music, and obsessively follow you to future gigs.

But you see, I had it all backwards. You didn't gain fans by playing at the popular bars. Instead, a Catch-22 existed. The way you got booked at the best clubs was by virtue of having a huge fan base. So your selling point was your band's ability to turn out a fan base (who would, presumably, purchase drinks). There may have been a corollary between having good songs and having a fan base, but there was not a direct relationship.

How does this translate to journalism? Bands used to have mailing lists; journalists now have Twitter feeds. To some extent, you are a brand, and your ability to generate buzz or clicks—not just your ability to write or report well—can help you get hired at a given outlet.

2. Music, like TV commentary, involves performing.

Getting on stage in front of friends and strangers can be nerve wracking; so can going on TV. My way of coping was to adopt what might be described as a “zen” or jazz philosophy, which basically said that the bad notes were the good news. In other words, perfection wasn’t the goal; authenticity was. This mental switch helped me overcome stage fright, and it continues to be my guiding philosophy for performing.

3. Playing music (and being a political commentator) isn’t nearly as glamorous as people think.

People see you on stage (the end product), but they don’t see you practicing, loading up the van, showing up hours early, and unpacking equipment. (We didn’t have “groupies,” let alone “roadies.”) And half the time, you’d have an arduous time squeezing your paycheck out of the bar owner. (Trust me, negotiating and collecting was a lot harder in that line of work.) Whether it’s music or political journalism, anyone who suffers from delusions of grandeur will likely quit as soon as they recognize the required sacrifices.

4. Not every song (or blog post or column) is a hit.

Dealing with rejection and failure is a crucial skill learned by both musicians and journalists. Sometimes you don’t get the gig. Sometimes nobody shows up (or reads your blog posts) but your family. Sometimes nobody likes your new song. Like any other endeavor, you are a work in progress. This is an obvious point, but I think it’s important for people to endure failure on a small stage—where the stakes aren’t quite so big.

5. Collaboration is key.

Songwriting and performing required a sort of teamwork that is similar to what I needed while writing my book (where I had several people intimately involved in helping me). You’re always learning and improving, accumulating and pruning. Honestly, I think being a musician was probably a better training ground for what I do now than, say, playing a team sport.

I guess we never really know what experiences are going to teach us. I’m sure my parents thought that all that time I spent playing guitar was a waste of time that would only result in broken dreams and debt. It turns out, my band experience was actually preparing me for my current career. If you’ve had an orthodox background, don’t dismiss it as wasted time. Something you learned way back when might have taught you some valuable lessons you can use tomorrow.

Matt Lewis

Matt Lewis is a senior columnist at The Daily Beast, a CNN political commentator, and the author of the book *Too Dumb to Fail: How the GOP Betrayed the Reagan Revolution to Win Elections (And How It Can Reclaim Its Conservative Roots)*.



He also hosts the popular podcast *Matt Lewis & The News*, and co-hosts *The DMZ* show on Bloggingheads.TV.

Matt's work has appeared in outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *GQ*, and *The Washington Post*—and he has been quoted or cited by major media outlets including *New York Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*.

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