

A Soliloquy by the Sea

Barely nine o'clock on a Saturday morning in late May and the Crane Beach parking lot already nearly full. Certainly not like the old days. I wonder what it must be like now on a Sunday afternoon in mid-summer. I notice a few other changes too. I had a notion to follow a trail I thought I remembered, leading inland and away from the crowds, but I find that whole area now posted off-limits. Evidently it's to save what little vegetation remains from being trampled to death. Farther along, a path that used to meander among the dunes is now roped off, with another sign of the times warning that piping plovers are nesting nearby. So instead I reverse direction, away from the public beach and past Castle Hill, where I intended to eventually go anyway.

I habitually glance at those I pass by, hoping I suppose to chance upon at least one familiar face among the throng, but as usual they are all complete strangers. And no wonder, for they're all a generation or more younger.

*Each time I see a crowd of people
Just like a fool I stop and stare
I know it's not the proper thing to do
But maybe you'll be there*

Funny how those old songs have a way of coming back, especially when in a pensive mood and doing something repetitive and mindless like walking "in all the old familiar places, that this heart of mine embraces."

I follow the shoreline, where the damp sand's firmer and easier to walk on. It's also less crowded because no one's in the water or even close to it. Too cold this early in the season I suppose. So what do they come for? Apparently just to recline on the sand and do nothing but bask in the sun all day. I tried that once on a date with a friend—her idea, not mine. But things didn't work out so well. I can do something like that for only about five minutes, and then I have the urge to get moving, which in that instance I did by myself. And that was pretty much the end of that. I guess it's just part of my impetuous nature to be restless with any situation that involves remaining riveted in one place for more than a few minutes, be it a lecture, concert, memorial service, or whatever. I'll steal glances at my watch, counting how many minutes left and wondering why time seems to be stuck in one place, all the while trying to conceal my boredom but not always successfully.

Gradually the crowds thin out, and after a mile or so I find the shoreline practically deserted. As I'm inclined to do when alone, especially when engaged in some monotonous activity like walking, I become absorbed in what I like to think of as creative mental composition. This often takes the form of a conversation with myself. You see, of late I fancy myself to be writer of sorts. The idea is to later type some of my more inspired thoughts into my computer and expand on them, although for whatever ultimate purpose I am not always sure. Alas, by the time I get home many of them are already forgotten. Should try to remember to bring along a writing pad.

But there is your problem in a nutshell, Stewart—trying to remember to remember!

Last time I strolled along this beach was many years ago, and oh such pleasant memories that brings back. As much as I miss having company this time, I suppose being alone does have at least one advantage. What activity other than a solitary beach walk can possibly be so free of distractions? You need not give a thought to where you are going or even where to place your feet. The vast expanse of ocean, the slowly drifting puffy white clouds, and the soothing sound of the surf are all conducive to daydreaming....

Aha! As I scan the view ahead, could that far off bluish object be someone headed my way? Can't tell from this distance if it's a man or woman, as if that should make any difference.

But of course it does, Stewart. Which would you rather meet strolling along a lonely beach in such a romantic setting? Just human nature.

Reminds me of a comment my taciturn partner Norm Wight once made on an all male summer-long canoe trip in the wilds of northern Canada. One evening the ritual campfire chat had degenerated into a discussion of recent dreams, which of course led in turn to talk about women and their lamentable absence in the Barren Grounds. Norm's theory of world history was that most of our troubles began when mankind first became cursed with what he termed our "year-round rutting season." We all chuckled over it at the time, but the fact that I still remember it forty years later suggests that perhaps it contained a germ of truth, as usually was the case when Norm came out with these pearls of wisdom. Wish now I could remember more.

Anyhow, still too far away to tell. Now a little closer, looks to be a woman. Still closer, definitely a woman, and I'm sure she must be nice.

But what makes you so sure of that, Stewart?

Because all women are nice, at least all the ones I've known intimately. Just some more so than others. Even from this distance I can tell she's probably attractive, and furthermore I'm picking up some positive clues from the spirited way she walks. Reminds me of someone I once knew. Have you ever noticed the amazing variety of ways in which a person can simply put one foot in front of the other? For as long as I can remember, I've been in the habit of observing how a person walks, and placing some importance on what it might indicate, starting of course with gender. Then the next most obvious is physical well-being or lack of it (or age!). But I think there is even more if one observes closely, having to do with such things as personality and state of mind. Who could fail to notice the way our Commander-in-Chief strutted on stage immediately after 9/11, as if to say, "Behold, I am here to save you," with arms bowed out and hands cupped like a pugilistic wrestler taunting his imagined adversaries with "Bring 'em on!"

But doesn't this raise the question of whether we are apt to cavort in a manner that reflects what we really are, or rather what we wish others to think we are?

Of course, and furthermore whether we do it unconsciously or with cultivated effort. And this raises yet another question of whether it also works in reverse, and if by developing proper bodily movement, one can actually change one's outlook on life. After all, isn't that the main idea behind Yoga and many other similar practices? (Or even military drill!) When I see a man shuffling along all hunched over in a manner that shows his advanced age, I immediately try to stand straighter, and it actually makes me feel better, perhaps even younger. That reminds me of my father scolding me in my childhood for sitting slouched. He would say: "If you want to think straight, *then sit straight.*"

Perhaps had a point, although I still slouch and it doesn't seem to have been that much of a problem.

So much for that. Now she's close enough for a body check. Judging from the tabloid photos, the only parts of a woman we men are supposed to be much interested in is their pair of you-know-whats, overexposed of course, and the bigger the better. Just another example (if any more were needed) of uncouth taste carried to gross excess. I have to admit, though, that even I can't help stealing a brief glance at that region of her well clothed body, and they appear to be of exquisitely normal proportion.

Which brings up the matter of dress. On that summer-long canoe trip with Norm and two others, one day we came to a remote Canadian government weather station where five men lived for a year or more in complete isolation. Perhaps to be expected, plastered all over the walls of their station were what struck us as tasteless pictures of naked women. During the fireside chat that evening, Norm remarked that some things are best left to the imagination, and that women actually have more sex appeal when fully clothed, to which we all heartedly agreed. And I would add, not only fully but tastefully. (But now that I reflect on it years later, I may be misquoting Norm. It was probably just *appeal*, not *sex appeal*.)

As she draws closer, all indications are still positive. But now, naturally my glance shifts upward to her face, which in my dream world of fantasy I have already assumed must be attractive.

Ever wonder what's so especially important about a person's face?

Now there is a real puzzler. How much can you really tell just from a person's face, especially of the opposite sex? One woman may look caring and motherly, while another looks heartless and flinty. One looks simple minded and uneducated, but another, intelligent and scholarly. The few mug shots of women seen on the TV program "America's Most Wanted" certainly look the part, while those gals singing Christmas carols or hawking some brand of yogurt on TV always look so sweet. Some artists and illustrators are quite adept at reinforcing these facial stereotypes, especially cartoonists. Small wonder, then, that we tend to think that the face matches the person.

But how closely in actuality?

Probably to some extent, but maybe not as much as we like to think. At the very least, I do believe that as a person ages, their countenance does tend to reveal ever more the path of life they have led, fortune or misfortune, easy or hard. I notice it at high school class reunions, especially in the wrinkles and facial muscles around the mouth.

Of course, the one aspect of appearance that demands our attention far in excess of all others is sexual attraction. The fact that mankind has been preoccupied with it at least since the beginning of recorded history suggests it's probably deeply imbedded in our nature, which further suggests that it must be there for a reason. But what the face has to do with sex is a complete mystery to me. We place so much importance in a person's face that we even tend to identify the face with the person, almost as if they were one and the same. Even in an article about, say, a famous sculptor or marathon runner, it will focus on his face rather than his hands or legs.

But why is that, Stewart?

Perhaps because hands and legs tend to look more nearly alike. Faces not only differ more, but they can be more expressive than, say, hands. You never saw hands cry or smile. No, there is surely something special about the face, even if we're not exactly sure

what it is. Of course the first question for both parties is: do we recognize each other? Or she me but I not her, or vice versa? It all takes place in a flash. It has always amazed me that we can distinguish between many thousands of faces at a glance, even those we've seen only in photos. In most cases, I would be hopelessly unable to say exactly what all those minute distinguishing features are and would be altogether at loss to sketch them accurately. Yet we recognize them instantly and usually unerringly.

Sometimes I imagine myself having witnessed a crime and being asked by the police artist to describe the perpetrator. *The eyes?* Oh, just ordinary. *The nose?* Oh, nothing unusual there either. *The mouth?* Sorry, didn't happen to notice. *Anything else?* Oh yes, rather dark skinned (always the easy part). *Think you could you pick the sucker out of a lineup?* Perhaps, but I am well aware of how many have been falsely imprisoned (or worse) by that unreliable method, which tends to contradict what I just said about our uncanny ability to recognize faces. There must be other complicating factors involved at a crime scene and in a police lineup.

I must have been taught at an early age by my parents not to stare at others. Or perhaps it's just being respectful and comes naturally. By the same token, I dislike being stared at by strangers, except in certain *special situations*. But I consider it staring only when the other person knows they are being stared at. If she is no one I recognize, I may glance at her only until she does likewise at me, at which time my automatic reaction is to shift my gaze away. I have noticed that just about everyone does likewise, but I don't know why.

But do I look away so instantaneously that she will not know I was looking at her (if that is even possible), or pause for just an instant so that she will know I have glanced at her? And then by how much should I look away?

Ah, now we're really getting cagy. Far enough away that she will realize she is not being stared at, yet close enough that I can tell with my good peripheral vision if she is still looking at me (this being one of those *special situations*), yet not so close that she could tell if I could tell if she was still looking at me!

But she looks to be an intelligent woman. Suppose she is onto that silly game and plays it too, perhaps even better. Then what?

Oh yes, I've considered that too. So many fascinating possibilities. But the problem here is that she is wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat and dark glasses, so I am left somewhat in the dark, so to speak. As we draw closer things get even more complicated. I realize I should not continue to walk directly toward her. Not like me to be that forward. Some might even consider it threatening. But just how far off to the side? It all depends on so many factors. In this situation, a few yards of separation should be about right.

I am reminded of that awkward situation where you both move to the same side at the same time, then back the other way together, and so on. Freud somehow saw sexual undercurrents lurking there—just one more example of where he was woefully mistaken. At one time in my brief engineering career I became an expert in problems of dynamic instability in close loop feedback systems, of which that is a good example. The solution is to immediately break the closed loop by looking away and completely ignoring the other person. It works every time. But then, I suppose in some situations it might be seen as rude.

As we pass each other, should I smile, or nod, or even say hi? Ah, that too depends on so many things—her age (nearly the same as mine I would guess), her own reactions,

the setting, and a whole host of other positive or negative visual cues. We totally ignore strangers passed by on city sidewalks, whereas meeting someone on a hiking trail in the woods might call for at least some sort of recognition.

But this is neither of those two extreme, so what is proper in this situation?

Our amazing brains process all this and much more, mostly without even any conscious effort. In this instance, some recognition seems appropriate. I nod with just a trace of a smile. Even simple things like that can have all sorts of subtle variations. It is all so delightfully complicated. With a pleasant smile, she responds with “Good morning.” Even just those two words can send many different signals depending on how accented, ranging from perfunctory to flirtatious. Hers nicely convey polite but reserved cordiality.

Hmm—or might there have been something more?

I almost forgot to mention the situation in which you think you remember her from somewhere in the distant past, even though her hairdo is different now and with streaks of gray, as one might expect. Oh what fun it would be to chat about old times and catch up on news and mutual friends. But you’re not sure. You are tempted to ask, “Don’t I remember you?” I tend to shy away on the side of caution. It could be misinterpreted as a crude attempt at introduction or even, heaven forbid, solicitation, especially if directed at a stranger of the opposite sex (although I suppose these days that distinction no longer applies so much). Yet think how many opportunities are missed by not asking. Sometimes when chatting with a presumed stranger, we will both be surprised to discover that we knew each other long ago, and enjoy exchanging reminiscences. Furthermore, in settings like this, if you chat for a while, even with a stranger, sooner or later you will likely discover you have some common acquaintances and other connections.

And then there is always the possibility of recognizing someone just by their voice, which I find often more reliable than the visual. I seem to have developed a special knack for it through constant practice, such as with voices heard only on radio. A person’s voice may change over the years, even being an indicator of age, yet there are certain subtle aspects that remain unchanged. Sometimes when calling a friend on the phone, just for fun I will try to disguise my voice, but it seldom works. Perhaps mine is more easily recognized than some others. This whole business of keen discrimination (in the original meaning of the term) between individuals by sight, sound, or whatever must be deeply imbedded in our genes, for it is found highly refined throughout the animal kingdom, even down to the level of insects.

The upshot of this seaside encounter is that, sadly, the attractive woman in blue appears to be yet another complete stranger. At least I think so. Ah, but then I start to wonder. As we pass, just to make sure, I steal a sideways glance to check her profile, especially of her nose, which I could not tell from the front view.

Now what on earth can be so important about the shape of this woman’s nose, Stewart?

Frankly, that too has always puzzled me. All I know is, for me the nose is the central feature of a person’s appearance, and who knows, it might even have some real importance. I wonder if there could even be some racial undercurrents lurking there. Aha, now I can see that hers is well sculpted. Legs are nice too. (They rank second in importance right after the nose.)

So then what's so special about the legs? If you were considering the purchase of a car, would you direct your attention to the tires?

Yes, I know, I've always wondered about that too. After we pass, I try to resist the temptation to look back. It would not be like me to do that. All you get anyway is a rear view, for whatever that's worth. Reminds me of that song:

*I was looking back to see if you were looking back to see
If I was looking back to see if you were looking back at me
You were cute as you could be standing looking back at me
And it was plain to see that I'd enjoy your company*

Catchy words perhaps, but as a practical matter I don't think they make much sense. If she's not looking back, it's all for nothing. On the other hand, if she is, I would say a bit too flirtatious for my tastes. Treat with caution! Ah, but then those legs. Now I know why they command so much attention. You see, all I needed was some time to reflect on the matter while walking. It works nearly every time. We men zero in on a woman's legs simply because they are often the largest area of exposed skin, or at least used to be. It probably goes way back to boyhood, when there really wasn't much else that revealing for us to stare at.

But now, finally, my balky memory is beginning to make some connections, first to that walk, but even more to that that voice! Where have I heard it before? Perhaps it would be OK to steal just a quick glance backward. I can make like I'm just picking up a seashell. As I do so, I see she too has stopped to turn around to look back, and is smiling! "Stewart?"

Alas, after my yearning heart skips a few beats and resumes beating, I see that my wandering has brought me to an abrupt halt at the mouth of the Ipswich River. And wouldn't you know it, just as we were getting to the really good part of my seaside fantasy. It happens every time.

Here I face the choice of either trying to wade across to Little Neck or reversing direction and retracing my steps. But with the river discharging into Plum Island Sound at a pretty good clip, the choice has already been made for me by the outgoing tide, and I wend my weary way back toward Castle Hill. And that's how it all went on my solitary walk along the lonely beach.

Or I suppose perhaps it wasn't so lonely after all—depending.

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