

The Safeguards Letter

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TINY BITS OF SPRUCE

We went to Cape Breton Island in September. I fell in--I guess I'd have to call it infatuation with the island. We weren't there long enough for me to call it love. We listened to local music and heard or read local stories. I'm an easy mark for stories about loneliness or loss. And, it seemed that every Cape Breton story or song ended with someone looking back, over his shoulder, at the Cape Breton hills as he crossed the Canso Causeway, heading south, heading away.

I bought a small book of stories by Alistair Macleod. The first story in the book is titled: "The Closing Down of Summer." It's about a team of Cape Breton miners who earn their living developing deep mines in places far away, like South Africa. The miners' summer at home is ending. They wait, sunning themselves on a beach on the Gulf of St. Lawrence for the sign that it's time to go again. The sign comes. Then...

...in the legal sense there is no public road that leads to the cliff where our cars now stand. Only vague paths and sheep trails through the burnt-out grass and around the clumps of alders and blueberry bushes and protruding stones and rotted stumps. The resilient young spruce trees scrape against the mufflers and oilpans of our cars and scratch against the doors. Hundreds of miles hence when we stop by the roadsides in Quebec and Ontario we will find small sprigs of this same spruce still wedged within the grillwork of our cars or stuck beneath the headlight bulbs. We will remove them and take them with us to Africa as mementos or talismans or symbols of identity. Much as our Highland ancestors, for centuries, fashioned crude badges of heather or of whortleberries to accompany them on the battlefields of the world.

They took small sprigs of spruce—small bits of home—with them on their hard trip halfway around the world.

I shared this image from Macleod's story with the folks who come to Sebago Lake in Maine every October. I asked people there to consider the small sprigs from home that they carried with them, as mementos, as talismans, perhaps as charms to bring them safely home again. In October I didn't answer my own question very well. I'll try to do better now.

When I open my wallet I find both customary and unusual things. The customary ones are a driver's license, other identity cards, a couple of credit cards, and (usually) a small amount of money. The non-customary things are my sprigs of spruce. Here, among the photos, is a picture of my grandmother. She died 25 years ago. When I was very young she taught me the Lord's Prayer, repeating it with me every night before sleep until I knew it well. She expected a lot of me, and her picture reminds me of that. I hope she's not disappointed.

There, underneath my health insurance card, is a clipping with a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson (not my favorite writer):

“Write it on your heart that every day is the best day in the year. He only is rich who owns the day, and no one owns the day who allows it to be invaded with worry, fret, and anxiety. Finish every day and be done with it. You have done what you could.”

I don't carry Emerson's advice because it's especially effective for me. I worry and fret all the time. I need the advice but can't seem to follow it. I carry the quote because my mother clipped it from a newspaper and gave it to me more than 35 years ago. I think now that she expected I would need this kind of guidance, noticed the clipping, and made a point of giving it to me. I've never been without it since then. When I see the quote, it reminds me of her. That's why I keep it with me.

And, just behind the Emerson clipping is a ticket for the Paris Metro. I've had this ticket since my first visit in Paris in 1987. I think I kept it, in the first place, as a kind of charm—a sign that I'd get to go back again. But now the ticket is simply a reminder of how much my wife Renate loves Paris. So, it's a reminder, as surely as a photo, about her. It's an odd reminder. Unusual, yes, to have a token for transportation thousands of miles away call out about connection and home.

These are my small bits of spruce: a photo, a clipping, a ticket. These are things I'd want with me if I had to go into deep mines in Africa.

At the end of the novel, *No Great Mischiefs*, Alistair Macleod's narrator reminds both himself and the reader: “All of us are better when we're loved.” I hope you will take a minute to pull out and look again at the tiny bits of spruce that you carry always. I hope that you all feel loved. I expect that you are. Happy 2005.

Jack Pealer

SCOTT'S STORY: "I NEED YOU TO KNOW THAT IT'S WORTH IT" MOVING OUT, MOVING ON

"Can you come over and meet with us sometime next week? There's somebody we want to talk to you about." This was a bit of an unusual call. We didn't often hear from the social worker at the local children's institution.

"In a few weeks, we'd like you to meet Scott. He'll be coming home for summer vacation from the School for the Blind in Ontario. Scott's turning twenty-one, so this is his last year at the school, and there's really nothing for him to do here during the day. If he stays here, he'll just end up doing crafts.

"We know you folks have been involved in starting housing cooperatives and other services. Do you think we could work together? Create a way for him to start a new life in the community?"

A couple of weeks later, we met Scott. He'd lived in the children's institution from the time he was a baby. When he was about seven years old, a visitor from a neighbouring Province who worked at the School for the Blind met Scott, and said, "I don't think this kid is retarded - he's just blind. Why don't you let him come with us, and we'll see how his learning progresses."

You've got to meet Scott to understand why he ended up in the children's institution. He's a pretty unique young man, and he must have been a pretty unusual-looking

baby. For one thing, Scott is short. One night, he was listening to a stand-up comedienne talk about what a hick town we lived in: "I come out of my hotel room and across the street there's a store called Mr. Big and Tall. Now who would ever shop at a store called Mr. Big and Tall?" Scott stood up, which meant that he got about four inches shorter, put his hands on his hips, and declared, "I sure as hell wouldn't!"

Scott's arms and legs are short, even for a short guy, and somehow he arrived with no thumbs and some other rather unusual features. He has a little bit of vision in one eye. When Scott was born in the late 60's, the wisdom of the day was to tell his family, "It's not reasonable for you to try to raise this child. We have a place that will give him the care and protection he needs."

I Need You to Know That It's Worth It!

We met Scott and had a series of conversations with him over the next several months. We invited him to tell us about his life, and to tell us how he envisioned his life outside of the institution. We talked about a lot of possibilities - finding an apartment, renting a small house - and talked about the kind of support he would need to make a 'go' of it.

One of the things we had in mind was finding a place where there might be a bit of 'instant community', so we looked at some small downtown housing cooperatives. Scott had told us that he wanted to live downtown, where he could walk to lots of places: "My legs are really short, and I have a hard time getting on buses. I don't want to get stuck inside all the time."

We found a small cooperative apartment building and did some creative 'bridge building' with the manager and a handful of co-op members well before Scott moved in.

Scott figured out that he needed a roommate

to help him on a day-to-day basis: "Somebody tall enough to reach inside the cupboards." So we recruited a good candidate from a local human service worker training program. Scott did all the interviewing, and a couple of us 'rode shotgun' on the interviews, helping Scott recognize the places where one can get fooled.

He moved out of the institution in the middle of January, in 30-below weather. On his last night in the institution, he went to the cafeteria for supper with a couple of staff. A few days later, the members of the co-op held a welcoming party, and Scott started in on his new life.

About a month after he moved (it had warmed up to 20-below), Scott was having dinner with Neil, the government community service coordinator who had done a wonderful job of arranging funding and opening doors. Neil asked, "How's it going, Scott?"

Scott said, "Neil, I need to tell you that I'm scared all the time. I'm scared that I'll slip down a snow bank into the street. And when I'm walking across the park that's in front of the co-op I'm scared that a dog might come up behind me and run me down.

"But Neil, I need you to know that it's worth it!"

How About That Job in Radio?

About a year after Scott moved out of the institution, he became a member of our board of directors. One evening, a new member who happened to be a corporate lawyer was attending his first meeting. Alan walked into the lobby of the building where we had an office on the seventeenth floor, and saw Scott standing by the elevators. Scott was waiting for someone who could see well enough and reach high enough to hit the 17th floor button. Alan took one look at this unusual young man

and thought, "I'm not sure I can handle this. I sure hope he isn't getting off at the same floor that I am."

Scott asked Alan to hit the button for 17, and they rode about halfway up in silence. Scott looked up at Alan, waving his small hands in front of his eyes, and said, "Well, what do you think of me so far?" Alan remembers that the ice-cold shell around his heart *cracked*.

Later, during a break in the meeting, Alan and Scott were making small talk and Alan asked Scott what kind of work he did. Scott said, "Well, Alan, I go to this pre-employment training program every day - it's kind of a workshop. I clean and repackage the headphones for one of the airlines. But it's not really what I want to be doing. I don't have any thumbs, and it's hard to do it with just fingers. And my arms are short, so I have to hold the work close to my face, and the cleaning fluid gets in my nose. It's not a good high."

Alan asked Scott what he really wanted to do. "I've always wanted to be in radio. I worked in the school station when I was at the School for the Blind in Ontario, and did the same thing at Red River Community College after I moved out of the institution. But the rehab people say that I can't see well enough to cue records, and that no thumbs makes it even harder, so I have to do headphones."

Alan said, "You know, Scott, I have a friend who's in the radio business. Maybe I could talk to him and we could see about getting you a job at his station."

"Alan that would be great!"

A month later, at the next board meeting, Scott came up to Alan during one of the breaks and asked, "How about that job in radio?"

Alan realized that he'd dropped the ball, and also realized that his conversation with Scott was a *commitment*. [We had coffee with

Scott and Alan last week, and Alan told us that he ducked out of the meeting and called the station manager on the spot!] So the following week, Scott and Alan met with the station manager. The station manager told Scott that people hadn't cued records in his business for years - it was all tapes, CDs and computers now. And he invited Scott to come down to the station the following Monday.

The crew at the radio station taught Scott to record interviews on a portable tape recorder (one of the engineers adapted the microphone so Scott could hang onto it without thumbs). They taught him to edit tape, and Scott's interviews started popping up at four o'clock on Sunday mornings - which, when you think of it, is where everyone starts. On Tuesday and Wednesday mornings, Scott did pre-production work for the program Sunday Report.

Ten years later, Scott is still working part time at the radio station, mostly in customer relations. He's definitely one of the gang, and has done a whole variety of jobs there since he started. It was a great lesson for us in finding someone with connections *in the community*, as opposed to looking to the service system for all the answers.

Evergreen Place

About four years after he moved to the cooperative, Scott told us that he wanted to move closer to Osborne Village, where he'd found one of those places 'where everybody knows your name'. Any Friday night, you could be sure to find Scott at a small Irish pub called The Toad in the Hole. One of the wonderful things about Scott is that he has a great, rough-around-the-edges singing voice and a passion for the music of Stan Rogers and the Irish Rovers.

Scott gave notice at the cooperative, and moved into Evergreen Place, a high-rise apartment with an indoor swimming pool and a weight room. Scott started swimming *every* afternoon, worked out a new route to

the radio station, and began making friends in the building.

By this time, Scott had hired his third roommate - a fellow who played semi-professional football for the local team. Scott had learned (and taught us) a great deal about finding roommates with whom he shared interests, and getting the relationship to move quickly beyond 'taking care of Scott'. The football player brought other football players (and their girlfriends) into Scott's life, and life moved on.

The fourth roommate turned out to be pretty cranky. Scott's words were, "He wasn't there for me." He and Scott got along alright, but he had a pretty strong pattern of keeping other people away. That lasted a bit less than a year, and Scott decided that he wanted to try living 'on his own' - without a roommate.

He waited until it was time to renew his lease, and negotiated for a one-bedroom apartment in the same building. Everything else stayed in place - the Toad in the Hole, swimming every morning, the job at the radio station. Scott traded the support contract with a roommate for some occasional heavy cleaning, made arrangements for some of his meals with Home Care and Meals on Wheels, and got on with the next phase of his life.

We've thought many times about the difficulty that a traditional 'residential service' would have had in keeping up with the changes that Scott wanted to create in his life - three apartments, four sets of roommates, finally working out a way to live alone but not in isolation. Separating the provision of services from housing was one key. *Listening* was another. And

working harder on bridge-building than on 'life skills' was a third - it gave us all confidence.

Rise Again

It hasn't always been easy. Scott had some hard work to do with his family, in terms of getting them to accept his independent lifestyle and also in coming to terms with the question that had been haunting him ever since he was a child: "Why didn't you take me home when I was a baby?"

One of Scott's 'standards' at the King's Head, where he now sings with a band called The Tarry Trousers, is a song by Stan Rogers' called The Mary Ellen Carter. He brings the place to its feet at least once every Friday evening when he raises his arms and sings:

Rise again, rise again

Though your heart may be broken

and life about to end.

No matter what you've lost,

be it a home, a love, a friend,

Like the Mary Ellen Carter,

Rise again!

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Community Works

About THE SAFEGUARDS LETTER

The Safeguards Letter is an occasional publication of OHIO SAFEGUARDS. The *Letter* exists to promote affiliation among people who are interested in and thoughtful about those who live outside the sphere of respected community membership--those who are the usual receivers of human services. All material in *The Safeguards Letter* is under OHIO SAFEGUARDS' copyright (©) unless otherwise attributed. Letters, ideas, and items for publication in the *Letter* can be sent to: Editor, *The Safeguards Letter*, 3421 Dawn Drive, Hamilton, OH 45011. We welcome our readers' ideas and reactions.

WE GET LETTERS

Jack, I was pleased to get the latest issue of the Safeguards Letter. I was not at all put off by your sobering piece on the possible return to some form of neo-institutionalization in America. I suspect that we are seeing almost the end of the moral impetus of the baby boom generation of leadership on this question, with a great deal of ambiguity about who, (if anyone), will take up the issue subsequently. Reversals and collapses of reforms such as occurred with the Moral Treatment era ought not to surprise even reflexively optimistic Americans. A good friend in Holland just sent me the recent Soros report on institutionalization in Europe. See <http://www.inclusion-europe.org/institutions/MenuTemplateText.asp?lang=EN&level=D&PosMenu=6>. They most certainly face an even more strengthened institutional sector than we do. Perhaps the gloom of BUSH 2 is being unduly influential, but it may help awaken people to the fact that we are poised over an abyss if we are not careful. Thanks again.

Michael Kendrick
Holyoke, MA & Halifax, NS

Good morning Jack. Just finished reading your article about being worried in your latest newsletter. All I have to say about it is "Amen!" There's plenty of worrying to be done it seems.

Linda Higgs
Charleston, WV

I fear you are correct. The quote from Porter made the hair stand up on the back of my neck (if I had hair on my neck it could have happened)... "It was too personal to be permanent". I was talking to George Durner last year sometime about L'Arche and he said he could see it at some point either "winding-down" or being perverted. Why? It is too personal!!! It calls for something that is so counter to the sweep of the larger culture (or worse human nature).

Bob Jones
Winnipeg, MB

JUST QUOTES

I am tired of going to the mall following behind Cindy (support worker), watching her try on clothes I can't afford, watching her buy make-up I can't afford and eating pizza because that's what she wants to eat. But I go because I want to get out.

Unidentified woman living in "supported living"
B.W. Leroy, et al. "Retreat and Resilience." *American Journal on Mental Retardation*, Vol. 109, Number 5, September 2004.

A glacier is time incarnate. When we lose a glacier – and we are losing most of them – we lose history, an eye into the past; we lose stories of how living beings evolved, how weather vacillated, why plants and animals died. The retreat and disappearance of glaciers – there are only 160,000 left – means we're burning libraries and damaging the planet, possibly beyond repair. Bit by bit, glacier by glacier, rib by rib, we're living the Fall.

Gretel Erlich, "Chronicles of Ice"
Orion, November/December 2004

When we accept that there are sets of problems for which there are no answers, and that there never will be answers, we create room for mystery and imperfection in life. Mystery and imperfection restore our humanity.... There needs to be space for wonder, gratitude, surrender, grief, and compassion in our institutional lives as well as our personal lives. It transforms what we thought were "problems" into the human condition.

Peter Block
The Answer to How is Yes

A VIEW FROM THE BACK WINDOW

"Belated Thanks to Stephen Jay Gould"

Stephen Jay Gould died suddenly in May 2002. I always wanted to thank him for his teaching and what I learned from it, but I didn't do so then or earlier. So, I'm offering this belated "thank-you" now.

In 1981 the Quality Paperback Book Club offered Gould's then new book *The Mismeasure of Man*. I must have been intrigued by the book's description because I ordered it and, when it came, devoured most of it in just a few hours. Toward the book's end the math--statistics--wore me down, but most of *The Mismeasure of Man* was as exciting as any detective story. Years later, through a happy accident, my wife was able to get me an autographed copy, which I consider the second most valuable book I possess. *The Mismeasure of Man* is a book I've pressed on others since the early 1980's.

In March 1989 Stephen Jay Gould came to Columbus to offer the first in a series of "Distinguished Research Lectures" at The Ohio State University. Perhaps the biological sciences faculty required or strongly encouraged student attendance. Whatever the reason, Mershon Auditorium (then the largest venue for such lectures at Ohio State) was filled to the back row of the balcony, which was where I found a seat. Gould's topic was: "Human Equality As a Contingent Fact of History," and he argued for equality not as a moral/ethical preference, but as a fact resulting from the working-out of evolutionary history.

In that lecture and through his books and essays, Gould taught me about both the strengths and weakness of science, about the idea of "contingency" as an explanation of how history works, and about evolution.

Science. Gould was interviewed for the TV program *Nova* in 1984. The producers visited the classroom at Harvard where he taught a very popular course about the history of the earth and of life. In an early lecture he said:

Science is a fascinating dialectic. It creates cultures by instigating change through its discoveries. But it also reflects cultures, because it's done by human beings who are enmeshed in the biases and thoughts of their age. They're no different from anybody else. Scientists aren't special. That's one of the main themes of this course. Science leads and provokes change, but science is also embedded in culture, and often reflects the largely unconscious biases of those who do the work.

He went on to identify four such biases in particular. First is the notion of progress – the idea that the world is somehow moving in a way that's favorable to us. Second is the bias of determinism – that things that happen have causes, which are rationally arranged. The third bias is gradualism, which is the notion that change always occurs through slow, almost undetectable steps. And the fourth bias is what Gould calls adaptationism, which is the view that everything somehow fits or works – is logical or well ordered – is there for a reason. Holding these points-of-view, even unconsciously Gould argues, prevents knowledge of possibilities that we had never before considered because we could not even think of them. It's a humbling but liberating view of the role of science.

"Contingency" in history. One of Stephen Jay Gould's frequent invitations to thinking was: "...wind the tape backward." He encouraged us to consider the outcomes of a history that might have flowed from small changes in earlier events. He argued that "history" is the furthest possible thing from our usual notion of a record of planned or influenced activity. In his 1989 book, *Wonderful Life*, Gould wrote:

A historical explanation does not rest on direct deductions from laws of nature, but on an unpredictable sequence of antecedent states, where any major change in any step of the sequence would have altered the final result. This final result is therefore dependent, or contingent, upon everything that came before – the unerasable and determining signature of history.... When we realize that the actual outcome did not have to be, that any alteration in any step along the way would have unleashed a cascade down a different channel, we grasp the causal power of individual events.... Contingency is the affirmation of control by immediate events over destiny, the kingdom lost for want of a horseshoe nail.

Gould reminds us of the example of George Bailey in Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life." When George gets a chance to wind the tape backward, he grasps the influence of seemingly small events on the life of his family, his town, even his world. When, like George Bailey, my wife Renate and I speculate on the chance events that led to our meeting each other and the perhaps-long odds of those events' occurrence, we're thankful that contingency worked out the way it did. As Gould observes in the quote above, this view of how history works frees us to consider and hope for better results from even the smallest of human actions.

Evolution. Gould was the most articulate spokesman for evolution whom I have read. Evolution is an "imaginative vision" that has proven since Darwin's time to be extremely useful at revealing

how biology affects and is affected by surroundings. Gould warned repeatedly about the mistake of some early and not-so-early Darwinists of equating evolution with progress (bias number one). Evolution is just a theory--a remarkably persuasive one--about how organisms change or adapt to the conditions surrounding them. Sometimes these changes occur quite slowly, through long stretches of time; at other times (see *Wonderful Life*) adaptation seems to happen all of a sudden. Evolutionists do not see progress in this. As a matter of fact, *The Mismeasure of Man* (which, in my judgment, should be required reading for folks involved with people who have been accused of "retardation") is a careful historical argument against biological determinism (bias number two), which might be summarized as the view that all of life is a pyramid with humanity (especially often male Caucasian humanity) at its peak. Evolution, as described by Darwin and utilized by most scientists, makes no such claim.

These seem like important things to know or think about. I'm grateful for Stephen Jay Gould and his clear writing and faithful teaching. I just wish I'd had a chance to tell him so.

Jack Pealer

OHIO SAFEGUARDS
3421 Dawn Drive
Hamilton, OH 45011