Book II - Filling the Mind

Clever

When my brother Neil and I were kids, it was our utmost fantasy, strangely enough, to be bus or train drivers. We attached glamour to these jobs made only partially comprehensible by our family never having had a car. We particularly delighted in imitating the “diddlee-dum” sound of the train wheels rattling between rail-joints, and the braying of the breaks of an Atlantean double-decker bus as it pulled up to a bus-shelter. I suppose we – or at least I – thought it was something magnificent. (It was to be many years before we first went to an airport to be awed by such things as escalators and sliding doors.)

At nights, after lights out, we role-played in an elaborate fantasy world called “The Baby Mousies”. Both of us were girl mice: I was Pat, and my brother was Mary. Neil was older than me, so necessarily Mary was the leader of the mousies; however, to make up for it, Pat was generously allowed to have the larger flagship, the HMS Great Britain. Both mousies spoke in a very high-pitched voice. The most dramatic episode was when the basement flooded and all was in danger of being lost were it not for the last minute heroics of Kelvin, the train driver (a name taken from our corner street “Kelvin Grove”.)

You know, although neither Neil nor I were ever effeminate, we did display a lot of “gay signals. It wasn’t just the “The Baby Mousies”: we both knitted and baked cakes; I think Neil even played around with my sister’s dolls. Thinking back, I’m surprised my dad didn’t shame us out of such things.

I was destined to live in my head once I discovered the wretchedness of my body, so it's fortunate that I found out that my mind was a relatively large and interesting space before the incident where my dad told me I had skinny wrists. The first clue that I had a decent mind came when a teacher told me how shocked she was to see me reading *The Railway Children* at the age of six.

When I was nine, I was pulled out of a class by Haggy Aggy (Mrs Agar, the stern, screechy school principal – whenever she was unhappy with some particular piece of boyish behavior, she'd prod the lectern several times during the morning assembly, saying "It stops!") She very portentously, told me that I was graduating top of the class. From then on, the most important periods in my life were end-of-term, when we were given our precious school reports, containing grades and comments from all of our teachers. I'd carry it home as an offering to my parents, in particular to my dad, and prepare to bask in their approbation.

In my first year of high-school, Mr. Clarke, a brilliant but rather wicked mathematics teacher with an oily Clarke Gable moustache, told my Dad that there was nothing he could throw at me that I couldn't handle. The fact that my Dad had told me about this – and was so obviously proud – meant a lot more to me than what Mr. Clarke thought.

Naturally, my ambitions had risen somewhat from wanting to be a bus driver. Both Neil and I were allowed to stay up late once a week to watch *Horizon*, the BBC science program. I'd watch bespectacled scientists expounding exciting results, knowing that was the life I wanted. I never doubted, from my first years in high-school, that I would eventually get a PhD. (The problem would be in deciding the field of study.) I

even thought, in the most hidden, secret pocket of my mind, that I might reach for the Nobel Prize.

I decided to write to Sir Patrick Moore, one of those strange eccentrics that only seem to flourish in England: I can't think of another country where an astronomer could become a famous television personality featured on celebrity game shows, wearing a monocle, and speaking in the strangest, flutter of excited, fruity tones. In my letter, I asked him what I'd need to do to work for NASA (making it clear I wanted to be involved in astrophysics). He must have, in his hasty way, misread my letter, because he wrote back and said that they're very choosy for astronaut training. (I wonder what happened to that letter.)

In my sophomore year in high school, I fell into the intellectual clique when Douglas Cromby, a handsome, slightly effeminate boy who sat right in front of me, turned round and grinned at one of my jokes (for despite being a loner I was compelled to be the class joker). Douglas wasn't, strictly speaking, an intellectual student: he achieved his good school results more by perseverance and highly artistic school projects. (As I grew into my older teens, I became increasingly sure Douglas was gay, but was never able to bring it up.)

Douglas was best friends with John Buglass, who, in turn, was friends with Richard Batchelor, the most picked upon nerd in school, with his expensive school-blazer, and leather brief-case. Both John and Richard were eventually bound for "Oxbridge" to do Ph.D.s in chemistry.

Actually, none of us ever talked about girls, now I think about it. Perhaps we were all gay: I've lost touch with all of them. The last time I heard from Douglas was about ten

years ago. I visited his mother in South Shields to see if she could put me back in touch with him. The poor woman warned me that Douglas had gotten very fat, and even showed me a photograph. It was the same Douglas, with his fine features expanded to unexpected proportions. When I called him, it turned out he was still unmarried; I flat out asked him if he was gay, at which point there was a terribly awkward silence. I don't know why I even asked him.

Getting straight A's in my "O-levels" (taken at the age of sixteen) left me with an embarrassment of riches. I hedged by taking physics, mathematics and German for the two years of "A-levels" needed to qualify for university. Once again, though, I got straight "A's" and rather flailed around before settling desperately on moving to London to study physics and astronomy at University College.

As an adult, now, I'm truly fascinated by cosmology; both Ben and I consume the latest theories as they come out. But as an eighteen-year-old, physics just became the drudge-work of learning equations in order to pass exams. And my first, long, cold evening at the university's Mill Hill observatory cured me of any active interest in pursuing astronomy.

I don't know what I'd have chosen for grad school had "The Lord" not reached out his hands and grabbed me. In my second year of college, I had a conversion experience and became a fundamentalist Christian. "God told me" to put my undergraduate degree to some socially conscious use. (He didn't, of course, tell me to give up my dream of getting a PhD and go work for the peace-corps.) Perhaps God also wanted to give me the freedom of living in a new country (so that I could discover my

sexuality), because my chosen subject, alternative-energy, was really only studied in depth in the United States.

I had a resounding lack of interest and knowledge in the field, and, conveniently, by the time I arrived in Philadelphia to start my degree at the University of Pennsylvania, I'd lost my Christian faith; but at least it seemed I was still on track to get the Ph.D. I'd always coveted. If I'd never have fallen for that God stuff, I have no idea what or where I'd have ended up. Perhaps God really was speaking to me, and, once the job was done, cast me loose?

But neither God nor I had anticipated the devastation that would be unleashed when I finally started to wrestle with my sexuality. In my first year in grad school I had been shocked at the ease with which you could game the course-grades. Once I lost respect for my department, I basically cheated the system by using a memorization routine. I even quoted an event in an essay as occurring in 2086 instead of 1986 just to check if my professor was reading my essays. Despite all my machinations, I got straight-A's. In my second year, however, fraught with the nagging agony over whether and how to come out of the closet, I failed to complete the work for three of my four courses.

Once I'd dealt with my sexuality – coming out was, in a way, an anti-climax, so easy did it prove – I had to face reality: that I was pursuing an advanced degree in something for which I had no interest. There had been one course, in the economic modeling of electric utility pricing, which I'd felt particularly badly about. It was taught by Dr. Ari Schinnar, a severe-looking, intellectual professor with a steely voice, and a bushy black beard, all of which, I was later to realize, belied a gentle, witty, fatherly

nature. I'd been given, as my course paper, the task of applying some sort of integration calculus (or something like that – twenty years later my strength in mathematics is a dim memory) to Schinnar's model for PECO, the local utility. I really didn't have a clue what I was doing, but I concealed my lack of understanding by doggedly filling page after page with sufficiently dense (but probably meaningless) calculation, and Schinnar had no choice but to either plough through it himself, or just give me an "A" without reading it. I'm sure he chose the latter.

When he offered me a part-time job at the public-policy-modeling research group he ran in the Wharton School of Business, I felt like a swindler. In fact, I really was: I persuaded another professor to give me "A"'s, for my three incompletes so that I could graduate with a Masters degree. (I promised, and eventually fulfilled my promise, to do the missing work over the summer. By the way, not only do I have a Masters in something I have no interest in, I now have a Masters in a degree program that no longer exists: the department folded a decade ago.)

By the time I was out of school, Schinnar took me on full-time, departing the education system with as little knowledge about what I wanted to do with it as when I'd entered. I'd certainly never intended to have a plain old ordinary nine-to-five job; yet that's exactly what I had. I consoled myself with the thought that it was a temporary safe haven until I found out what I really wanted to do. (I sheltered a vague notion that I might someday become a writer.)

But I turned out to be naturally drawn towards making order out of chaos. Was this what God had been trying to tell me? Software development found me, just as surely as he had in London. I loved to build those airy little constructs called computer

programs, and had a natural bent for seeing opportunities to systemize solutions to problems people didn't even know existed.

I got a taste of being a high-flying academic when I got my name attached to a paper on public mental-health policy, by Dr. Schinnar and his co-principal-investigator, the immensely charismatic, hook-nosed Dr. Aileen Rothbard. Thrillingly, the paper was featured on the front cover of a journal and illustrated by a Jasper Johns painting of a map of the United States. I accompanied Schinnar and Rothbard to the conference in Baltimore where their paper was presented. (I just got Ben to look up the paper in Pub. Med, and there it is in all its glory: *Crossing state lines of chronic mental illness.*) I started to imagine, once more, that public life of the mind I'd desired when watching Horizon on BBC television as a kid.

I wanted back into the game; but here was the rub: without a PhD, I couldn't be a Principal Investigator. So I was accepted into the U Penn program in City Planning, on a part-time basis. I was so arrogant in my application for the program, that I scribbled the form in one sitting in pencil. It took no more than a couple of classes, however, to bring me to my senses: what was the point of starting a graduate degree in yet another subject I had no interest in? (Oh, if only I could live my life over again: go to film-school, young Keith.)

Somehow, I forgot my aversion to the rat-race, and, a couple of years after getting my green-card, I marketed myself as a programmer to a financial-software company in Berkeley, California. I was hired, to my surprise, as a guru (somebody I pictured as having a very large, bald head), and offered a salary almost twice what I was making at Penn.

I felt extremely green when I started my new job. Beyond being a guru – a source of general programming expertise in a particular language – something I was capable of accepting as a reasonable description of my abilities; I knew nothing at all about finance. I was given piles of manuals about their systems, and the financial models, none of which made any coherent sense to me. I was a nervous wreck expecting to be discovered washed up on the shores of incompetence any day now. And for the first month, while I waited for the arrival of my furniture, I stayed in a hotel in Berkeley, where it rained every single day, breaking a seven-year drought. I experienced my first earth-quake: a middle-of-the-night tremor of 4.0 which saw me leaping out of bed, my heart thudding; I had to drink a glass of Harveys Bristol Cream to get back to sleep.

There was one particularly sane and frighteningly efficient man in charge of a whole department. He'd interviewed me months earlier, when I'd spent a week in the Bay Area looking for a job. I'd been scared by the sure strength of his personality then, and I was scared of it now. I assumed that he was my superior; it was only after I'd been there several weeks, when I was called into a meeting with him by my boss, a vice-president, that I suddenly realized that he and I were peers. That was when it began to dawn upon me that I must have done something to impress both him and my boss.

I grew to love my job. In the year leading up to the millennium, after six years in which my responsibilities increased year-by-year, all of us were, of course, scared of what might go wrong at the end of the year, particularly since we were, at our core, a company which depended on longitudinal financial data. We'd been restructured, and I had several people reporting to me in a crucial group that supported one of our most lucrative pieces of software. I took advantage of the situation to get a rather large salary

increase, and then, feeling very bad at the coincidence, was offered a job by the only company that could really tempt me: the company that made the software in which I was an expert. I accepted the bait, at an even larger salary – it was the dot-com boom after all – and switched to working for them as a consultant in an office near Union Square, in San Francisco.

Personal history repeated itself – will I ever learn? My work was project based, which meant that if my work-group had no projects, I had to show up to the office despite having nothing to do except self-training. When I finally got an office with a floor-to-ceiling window at that, I'd do nothing, some days, except stare out at the city, thirty-four floors beneath me, and imagine leaping. (Oh, I wasn't anywhere near suicidal; but I was extremely bored and unfulfilled.) I'd bring my webcam to work, and even ran my chat-room sometimes during work hours in order to have something to do. I was interviewed by a man in a kilt in a start-up in nearby Silicon Gulch: the company offered morning yoga classes.

I was scared to jump from well-paid but tedious security, to an exciting, but risky challenge, and I'm glad I never took that chance: that man's kilt was no doubt folded along with his start-up a few months later. As for my job, given time, the projects appeared and were even challenging: I was given, once again, the opportunity to excel at my job. Six years later, still in the same job, I met and fell in love with Ben.

As a brilliant medical doctor running a research lab at UCLA, Ben was a man living my childhood dream (of being a scientist, not a train-driver). I used to tell people that it was the first time I'd had a boyfriend smarter than me. But in my heart, I knew that wasn't true; Ben wasn't smarter than me: he'd just chosen better. While it was true that I

was extremely competent in my job, I also knew that all I was doing was enabling companies to send out bulk mail, or spy on web-surfers. How had I allowed my dreams to drift from the head of a bespectacled scientist into the more confined bounds of a nine-to-five consultant? (Ironically, I never needed spectacles, scientist or not, until I started writing this book.)

My company had an office near UCLA, so it was easy for me to move down to Los Angeles. But I found myself feeling envious of Ben. We car-pooled often, and while we drove home through the flats of Beverly Hills, he'd tell me about his grant proposals, and ideas, and part of me felt embittered. At this time I was a technical lead on a very high-profile project for a major bank in New York, and regarded by both my peers and our customer as a strong leader and problem-solver. In response to Ben's excitement about his work, I'd try to explain to him the complexities of what we were doing in New York. I knew full well that he knew that I was very smart, and that he respected my intelligence; but there was a chip on my shoulder about having an occupation that didn't match what I saw as my intellectual potential.

The problem was that I still, after all this time, didn't know I wanted to be when I grew up. And I was already grown up: I was hitting forty. I'd reached the highest technical position a consultant could reach in my company; to move higher I'd have to relocate to the East Coast (and a particularly Republican corner of the East Coast at that.) I effectively didn't have a career path with this company. Moreover, I was very well paid; probably in the top two percent (that is, disregarding those lucky bastards who had made it rich in stock options by being no better than me, I thought, but having had the good luck to work for Netscape or Yahoo).

By now we’d bought a four-bedroom house in the Hollywood Hills, and were leasing two cars. Even if I’d wanted to, I couldn’t afford to change my job, and take a lower salary. I was wearing golden hand-cuffs, not the gold of the Nobel medal I'd fantasized about growing up.