

Discombobulated

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Saturday

Halloween was cold and rainy and we even had some wet snow, so we didn't try to take any of the kids trick-or-treating. I'm happy that they got to go to a "trunk or treat" indoor Halloween party last weekend. There is no denying it — the year is waning. I never did get any kind of summer vacation, but if I can avoid having to take any more sick days, I will have a decent block of days off at Christmas.

I'm writing this on Saturday. We were up late last night and so slept late, but when I finally dragged myself out of bed and got a bath, Grace ran errands while I made a batch of blueberry pancakes. I didn't get caffeine into my bloodstream until somewhat late in the day; by the time Grace got back, I was actually nodding off. But she brought me a coffee, and so got my corpse reanimated again. Then I took our ten-year-old to the Urgent Care in Saline.

A few weeks ago, he tripped and landed on his hand, and hurt it. It did not seem broken, so I told him we would look at it again the next morning. It hadn't swelled up much and didn't seem to hurt him very much when I pressed on it, so I concluded that it probably wasn't broken, or if it was, it was a tiny fracture that probably didn't require the inconvenience of a splint or cast. But then, last week he was playing a little violently and whacked it on something, and so last night he was complaining again that it hurt. So I took him to get it examined and x-rayed. They could not find a fracture. We would give him a cold gel pack, but the kids have ruined all the cold gel packs over the last year. So he'll have to rest his hand on a package of frozen ground bison, or something.

While we were there, Joshua and I both got flu shots. I am hoping to avoid having to take any more sick days before Christmas. Maybe this will help, and maybe it won't.

We got our heat turned on! I tried to get it going last night, but I couldn't get it to start. I knew of a little reset switch on the underside of one of several boxes attached to the boiler, but that wouldn't get it going. But this afternoon Grace went down and found a different reset switch that seemed to do the trick. So I will not be shivering when I get out from under a warm blanket.

Our old Tahoe with the blown engine has been sitting in the driveway for almost a year, but today we finally got a towtruck driver out to take it away. The plan had been to send it to a junkyard, but after he looked it over, the driver sounded like he was going to try to keep it and try to get it running.

Later in the afternoon, Grace ran some errands. She stopped in at the Saline farmer's market and found some fresh Shiitake mushrooms. We rarely see them fresh, so I'm excited about these!

Work has been demoralizing this week. The short and cloudy and rainy days haven't helped any. Last week, after working lots of long days, I got a prototype device ready to ship out to our office in China, so the team in China can work on software to control it, while I continue to work on the device. But a week later, the prototype still hadn't left the office. Apparently our administrative and shipping folks were still trying to figure out how to ship it in such a way that it doesn't get stuck in customs for weeks or months, which apparently can happen if we're not careful.

We were also supposed to have a final circuit board design ready; my prototype board design was only supposed to be a temporary solution so I could make progress on the programming, while one of our other engineers finished the design. But that engineer has been swamped with other work for weeks, so the delivery date for the circuit boards keep getting pushed back further and further. My manager knows about all this and doesn't blame me, but this all means that we will probably not get the product officially launched until 2020.

Last night our friend Joy was here and she offered to watch the kids for a few hours, so Grace and I got out for a date. She's been wanting to see the new movie *Harriet*, a biographical movie about Harriet Tubman, since she first heard it was in production. So we went to a showing on opening night, which is something we almost never do.

Harriet (2019 Film)

I was predisposed to like this film, since Harriet Tubman is one of my wife Grace's heroes. I could only recall a few facts about her life, remembered dimly from school: she freed a lot of slaves; she was an important part of the Underground Railroad; they called her "Moses." Oh, and she was a bad-ass. I also remember reading that moss grows on the north side of trees, so that escaping slaves could find their way north on moonless nights by feeling for the moss. (I don't think that's actually true, unfortunately).

Harriet the movie seems to take a while to find its way, and so initially feels a little frustrating and disappointing. There are dramatic interactions between characters right away, but they happen between characters we haven't really gotten to know or care about yet, and so so we the audience feel that we are in the dark. But right from the start, Cynthia Erivo is captivating as Tubman. She plays Tubman as a *damaged* person — particularly, a person who has suffered a

head injury. From Wikipedia:

Early in life, she suffered a traumatic head wound when an irate slave owner threw a heavy metal weight intending to hit another slave, but hitting her instead. The injury caused dizziness, pain, and spells of hypersomnia, which occurred throughout her life. After her injury, Tubman began experiencing strange visions and vivid dreams, which she ascribed to premonitions from God.

Erivo's portrayal seems, to me, spot-on. People with this kind of injury seem a little "off" to others; lacking in the usual social skills and interests. Even her family members find Erivo's Tubman a bit hard to understand. Her "brokenness" may be connected to her fearlessness, but her family members are afraid *for* her. The movie crafts a back-story for Tubman to try to explain just why she was so passionate about freeing not just herself, but as many other slaves as possible:

Tubman contacted a white attorney and paid him five dollars to investigate her mother's legal status. The lawyer discovered that a former owner had issued instructions that Tubman's mother, Rit, like her husband, would be manumitted at the age of 45. The record showed that a similar provision would apply to Rit's children, and that any children born after she reached 45 years of age were legally free, but the Pattison and Brodess families ignored this stipulation when they inherited the slaves.

The film seems to considerably simplify Tubman's complicated life story, but that story element is there: her owners did not honor her former owner's written instructions. It doesn't really feel, though, like this is a compelling part of the story, because it isn't well linked-in to later dialogue and events; the written agreement isn't brought up again. The same is true of Tubman's visions: we see in the opening scene her vision of sunlight sparkling on waves. This vision comes true as Tubman leaves Philadelphia by ship, after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, and stares out across the water. The visions, some of which seem to be premonitions, are a nice artistic element of the film, but one that could have been used to much stronger effect.

After Tubman's escape, when she approaches to Philadelphia, we leave behind the drab and dim Virginia farm, and the film really opens up and becomes beautiful, showing us visually how Tubman feels about her approaching freedom. Not being literate, Tubman did not leave an autobiography, but there was an authorized biography, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* published during Tubman's lifetime by Sarah Hopkins Bradford. In it, Tubman is quoted (unfortunately, Bradford presents her words in dialect):

"When I found I had crossed dat line," she said, "I looked at my hands to see if I was de same pusson. There was such a glory ober ebery ting; de sun came like gold through the trees, and ober the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaben."

The cinematography really does this scene justice, and the film's score starts to show us that it, too can be beautiful.

Once Tubman has freed herself, and spent a year in Philadelphia working a paying job and getting adjusted to a very different way of living, the film really starts moving. She takes on the task of rescuing her whole family, her raids becoming ever more daring, as she gains skill navigating through the woods and demonstrates less and less fear and concern for her own safety. And so Tubman starts to turn into the fearless legend, "Moses."

She's a great subject for a film, and the film is *almost* worthy of her. But unfortunately, it's only a good film, and not a great film. The film constantly makes choices that just seem a little bit too safe. There are beautiful and effective storytelling elements here and there: Tubman's visions, her father's sculpted head, the woods themselves. But again and again, it seems like the film doesn't *lean into* these elements enough. It seems like there was a lack of trust all around, here: perhaps the producers didn't trust the screenwriters, or the directors, or the audience, and so many bits seem wasted. Imagery, bits of dialogue, props, sets, and actions just don't reinforce each other and call back to each other and fit together as well as they could.

Here's a simple example: when Tubman is introduced to the members of the Underground Railroad, at a meeting, the film shows us a chalkboard upon which the "conductors" keep track of the number of slaves freed and the number lost (that is, those killed). Tubman's nine is written on the chalkboard alongside a big, beautiful zero — everyone in her party survived. Over the next years Tubman freed approximately 70 people. I expected to see that chalkboard again, as she brought more and more freed slaves into Philadelphia, but the film never shows it to us again. It's one of many details in the film that just weren't used as effectively as they could have been. Details from her escape and rescues show up now and then — we see her stuff some sweet potatoes into a bag, we see her urinate in the woods, and we see dogs used to track fugitive slaves in her party, at one point finding what seems to be a scrap of cloth used as a menstrual rag. But these concrete details are few and far between: we never see Tubman or any of the people she is conducting to freedom eat, or drink, or sleep. Most of the scenes of people in the woods feel altogether too simple and literal. Tubman is, later in the film, a crack shot, but we never get any indication that she ever practiced with a firearm. These and many other missing details leave me hoping that there might be a better cut of the film available one day on Blu-ray.

There are many other minor flaws in the film, and they become distracting. Erivo's makeup is inconsistent; Tubman speaks of a scar, where she was struck in the head, but we don't really see it until later in the film, because it wasn't there in the earlier scenes. Tubman's party makes a daring river crossing, wading up to their shoulders, but on the other side Tubman's clothing is wet and their clothing is dry. Occasionally one of Tubman's monologues goes a bit off the rails, and the film comes perilously close to self-parody. We see Frederick Douglass in several scenes, but we don't hear him speak a word; he just scowls. This

becomes almost comical, and it shouldn't be. The directorial style changes from one section of the film to another; I think this may be due, in part, to the use of several assistant directors. The film's IMDB page lists *thirteen* producers; one can imagine that with two many cooks weighing in, the result was less savory than it could have been. And the film also isn't edited as well as it should have been.

The theater, on opening night, was mostly empty. The day after Halloween honestly seems like a poor choice of opening date. I haven't seen a single trailer online, or in another film, for this film. If they marketed this film, it doesn't seem like they marketed it very effectively. In general, I don't think white folks will go see this film, but it didn't seem like younger black folks were turning out, either.

On Twitter, I noticed a lot of negative posts about the film: people say it demonizes its black characters while valorizing the slave owners (this isn't true at all, in my opinion). There is a scene where a black bounty hunter points a gun at Tubman, but is killed by her former owner. Apparently some viewers are angered at this scene because they think it portrays her former owner as her "white savior." That interpretation is absolutely baffling to me, because in context, we know that the former owner wants to avoid paying the bounty hunter, and likely wants to rape and torture Tubman, and perhaps kill her himself. It's discomfoting to watch, and he's certainly no "savior."

Apparently, as well, some people are angry because the producers cast a British actor in the lead role, instead of an American actor. I can see some value in casting an American actor, but it seems to me that they simply cast a good actor. Given the recent history of Hollywood casting decisions, we should probably feel relieved that they didn't cast Angelina Jolie.

Sunday

I'm feeling a little defeated today. The time change always leave me feeling discombobulated. In the fall we get an "extra" hour, although really we're just getting back the hour that was taken away from us in the spring. Grace got up and took Veronica to an all-day church group retreat. When she got back we needed to get ready for Mass, but things became confused because the babies were awake and demanding attention early (according to the clock), which made it difficult. I got up and made a couple of bulletproof coffees (cold brew concentrate made with Ethiopian Yirgacheffe beans from Milan Coffee Works, butter, coconut oil, and a little honey, blended up with a stick blender), and wound up taking the four older boys to Mass without Grace and the babies.

After Mass I tried to get in touch with Grace because we had a plan to coordinate and maybe go to the Bomber diner in Ypsilanti. That didn't go well. I had been sending her text messages, but she hadn't responded. Finally she called me from our home phone to tell me that she had run her cell phone through the washing machine. It already has a shattered screen, although she got a screen protector

stuck onto it which held the shattered glass together and allowed her to keep using it. But now the screen protector is also shattered. My phone pops apart to access the battery and SIM card, but I can't even get her phone apart to attempt to dry out the insides. I don't think a day or two in rice is going to do it. It's probably not worth putting any more money into, so I think this may be the end for her cell phone.

Anyway, I agreed to meet her at the Bomber, but things didn't go well. I don't really know my way around Ypsilanti that well; the city has a confusing layout involving curving streets that merge and get renamed, and there are several different "downtown" areas that are separate from each other. I couldn't find the Bomber. I drove down Cross street three times looking for it, and also drove down Michigan Avenue past Haab's twice, asking the kids to carefully watch out the window and help me find it. Despite my best efforts, I could not find it. And I couldn't call Grace to ask her where it was.

There were several additional complications. The flu shot was making my brain a little bit sluggish, to go along with an aching arm and painful joints. I was trying to get there by 2:30, because I knew that they closed at 2:45. When the clock in my car showed 2:30, I decided to give up and go home, but of course it was actually 1:30; I had actually forgotten the damned time change because I hadn't changed the clock in my car yet. And the kids were berating me: "Dad, are you lost?" The last straw was when one of my sons, the Potts child whose autistic behaviors are the most noticeable, abruptly started screaming. His siblings tried to calm him down — he was beet red and bellowing with rage, and no one could figure out why. But it was time to go; it had been an hour, and there wasn't really much point in trying to meet Grace there any longer.

A couple of hours later, back at home, Grace was finally able to get the story out of our screaming child. He had started screaming because he had *seen* the restaurant, ahead of us. I just needed to stay on Michigan another couple of blocks. But I hadn't seen it, and so I turned around. He thought I was deliberately refusing to take him to the restaurant, and this interpretation of events sent him into a rage. But no one else in the car could understand *why* he was screaming. Screaming child might need a little more help with his communication skill than he's been getting.

Anyway.

It's Sunday evening and Grace made a delicious broccoli stir-fry with brown rice, ginger, and shiitake mushrooms. We didn't sit down for a formal meal tonight; the kids are watching a video. I just got up to get myself a second helping, but it was gone. So I guess they liked it.

I had intended to have more material in this week's newsletter, but it isn't happening — I'm still discombobulated. But before I send this out, I want to mention...

Two Interesting Things

It's Time to Retire the Term "Middle Class"

I recently listened to Episode 91 of the Citations Needed podcast. I'll let the episode summary describe it:

The term "middle class" is used so much by pundits and politicians, it could easily be the Free Space in any political rhetoric Bingo card. After all, who's opposed to strengthening, widening, and protecting the "middle class?" Like "democracy," "freedom," and "human rights," "middle class" is an unimpeachable, unassailable label that evokes warm feelings and a sense of collective morality.

But the term itself, always slippery and changing based on context, has evolved from a vague aspiration marked by safety, a nice home, and a white picket fence into something more sinister, racially-coded, and deliberately obscuring. The middle class isn't about concrete, material positive rights of good housing and economic security — it's a capitalist carrot hovering over our heads telling us such things are possible if we Only Work Harder. More than anything, it's a way for politicians to gesture towards populism without the messiness of mentioning — much less centering — the poor and poverty.

This puts into words several vague ideas that have been kicking around in my head for years, but which I've never managed to properly argue. Speech about the "middle class" is a watered down, co-opted version of actual class talk, in the same way that centrists weaponize "identity politics" not to use it as originally intended — to push for policies that center and aid *people* that partake of the most vulnerable identities — but to argue that we should elect *politicians* with politically popular identities. It's good stuff, well worth a listen. I'll also refer you to the book *White Working Class* which, while it has some good thinking in it, does something similar in the way it broadens the term "working class." Grace and I discussed this book in one of our podcasts from 2018.

And also...

A Colony in a Nation by Chris Hayes

I've had this book for some time, but hadn't gotten around to reading it. Hayes does a show on MSNBC, and like Rachel Maddow, is a millionaire liberal who has been on the Russiagate bandwagon. So I'm not inclined to give him much credit for having class consciousness. But like Maddow, it seems that his books and his television show are aimed at quite different audiences, and so both of them seem to be willing and able to make arguments in print — for example, Maddow's unease about the unchecked growth of mercenaries and military contractors in her book *Drift* — that wouldn't pass muster on their network.

I'm about halfway through this short book (it's a quick read, really), but so far

I'm moderately impressed with this argument. Early in the book Hayes talks about what life was like for a colonized people — early Americans. There's a chapter on the conditions that led to the Revolutionary war, and it's pretty fascinating. In particular, Hayes examines the causes of the Boston Tea Party. This event has been politicized, by the so-called "Tea Party," Republicans in funny hats participating in astroturf protests against taxes. But it's actually quite a bit more complicated than that; the colonists actually destroyed the tea because of *lowered* taxes. To understand that, you have to understand the role of the black market in Colonial America, and also the intrusive and intolerable ways in which Crown enforced its power:

... the America colonists were subject to British invasions of their carriages, ships, and home without the safeguards enjoyed by their English cousins. Widely used "writs of assistance" allowed British officials to invade their homes willy-nilly, as part of a broader scheme to squeeze American pocketbooks.

And so there was a thriving black market. When the Crown decided to *lower* taxes on tea, suddenly authorized shipments of cheap tea were a threat to those colonists earning a living selling black-market tea.

That's an interesting bit of history, but Hayes uses it to start building his argument that blacks in modern America are a colony, exploited and restricted in many of the same ways that people living in colonies have always been treated. He proceeds to bring in "stop and frisk" police tactics, the abuses of police power in Ferguson, Missouri, and the widely publicized police killings of black people as threads reinforcing this argument.

So far, he makes a pretty compelling case. This book might be a good introduction to this sort of writing on social justice, for people who haven't read books like *The New Jim Crow* or Ta-Nehisi Coates' article "The Case for Reparations." And even if you are familiar with this subject, you might find that Hayes makes an interesting (and occasionally moving) argument.

Have a great week!