

Staying Alive

Resting in space and time

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The thumbnail description of an anesthesiologist's day is boredom punctuated by panic, occupational problems increasingly common in a declining American economy. Today people toil at two or three jobs trying to pay for unaffordable mortgages plus the gasoline necessary to get to far flung work-sites. Creating balance in your life under such conditions is not simple.



During periods of hardship we can learn from others who endured difficult times. Lin Yutang is almost forgotten now, though he was once the best known Chinese writer in the West. Born in 1896, Lin watched China pass from imperial lassitude to civil war to a vicious Japanese invasion engendering further fratricidal civil war, eventually escaping to spend much of his adult life in America. Particularly despised by Mao's Communist Party, his attempts to fuse classical Chinese thought with Western ideas led to his international best seller of 1937, "The Art of Living."

The vicissitudes of historical forgetfulness are such that at a recent exhibition of his art collection at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, virtually nothing was noted of who Lin was or what he wrote. An effective aphorist, his quotes were once wildly popular. One example: "Besides the noble art of getting things done, there is the noble art of leaving things undone. The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials."

It is hard to rest while under stress. Many patients now tell me they feel "too tight," that their work has become overwhelming, as with employee cuts they

find themselves doing their own and a former colleague's job. As too much anxiety can rapidly diminish performance, following are two techniques that may give one perspective.

Resting in space

The paper on which this newspaper column appears comes from treated cellulose. That wood fiber itself originates from trees grown in our southern forests or from Quebec, even Finland or South America. Huge chemical plants filter out the pulp while adding hundreds of industrial molecules derived from sources as varied as corn and petroleum, the latter itself formed from long dead plants.

Now, let your eyes magnify the image. Your paper is revealed to be a series of different overlapping plant fibrils placed in a ragged, endless polymer. Go down one layer. Now you'll see dozens of different twining molecules, primarily carbon based, but containing complex, exotic chemicals that twist, turn, spiral and invert.

Further down at the atomic level, your "solid" paper is revealed as nearly empty space, with massive yet miniscule shells of protons and electrons sitting in vast fields of nothing, as electrons spin like invisible dervishes round them. At the next level, neutrons, protons and electrons are revealed as quantum mechanical fables, higher order mathematical functions.

They may sit in small bits of space or, like electrons, periodically orbit the other side of the moon, all existing as probability functions that can operate perfectly both forwards and backwards in time, though in our particular worldview we can only know the past.

Go further, and the mathematical probability haze converts into the multidimensional shapes of string theory, where the paltry three dimensions of our sensual world are tiny pieces of 10-, 12- and 14-dimensional

universes, infinite in number and both infinitely great and small, bending and nesting within each other until some crevices push and pull themselves into the peculiar forms of information we call our reality.

Even when you don't like what you're reading, newsprint may be more interesting than you think. And so it is for an equally complex matrix, if viewing this on a computer screen.

Resting in time

Perspective also exists in time. How about the place where you're reading now. What was it like 10 years ago? Many office buildings or homes in our region did not exist 10 years ago. Was the land lined with asphalt, or was it an empty lot of sand and saw palmetto?

Now go back 50 years. Where you sit may have not been earth but seafront, eventually replaced by developers' landfill, the stuff that makes up Bird Key and much of our island homes. Go back 100 years and chances are no one lived on the spot where you sit.

Go back 300 or 400 years to the place where you are now. If indeed it was land, it may have been traversed by Indians, crisscrossing the mudflats for edible mollusks or useful herbs. Look 1,000 years before today, and the land may have been thick mangrove with hordes of manatees cavorting in the shallows. Return back 10,000 years, and almost everywhere you look may have been covered by the seas of the Gulf.

One can go backward or forward in space and time. Visualizing one's place in the world can provide perspective and rest. It may also give what Lin described as a sense of wonder at the universe and at human life, respites for difficult times.

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KeyTravel

Reims rhymes with France

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Imagine that happy day around 1700 when the monk Dom Perignon, after much fiddling with the double fermentation of his grape juice, stumbled onto a bubbly delight. Having tasted the very first glass of champagne, he ran through the abbey shouting, "Brothers, come quickly ... I'm drinking stars!"

The drink he invented ultimately put the region of Champagne in northeastern France on the map. And thanks to a new TGV bullet train that lets you connect nearly hourly from Paris (in 45 minutes), the region and its delightful capital Reims (pronounced "rance") are more accessible than ever.

You can tour a handful of interesting Champagne caves right in Reims. Most include a walk through the caulked cellars, where literally millions of bottles are stored; a tour of a museum featuring old Champagne-making contraptions; and, of course, a ritual tasting. Guided visits cost 12 euros and take about an hour.

But there's far more to Reims than bubbly. Reims has a turbulent history. It was one of many cities essentially destroyed in World War I — by 1918, there was barely a building standing. Reims was rebuilt in the next decade during the Art Deco age. Today this lively workaday town boasts a fun Art Deco flair without the glamour of tourism, while its sights give you an interesting peek at its past.

The fountain, which hasn't functioned since World War I, stands dry on the main square. Everything around it was rebuilt — mostly in the 1920s. All around you'll see stylized Art Deco features — geometric reliefs, motifs in ironwork, rounded corners, and simple concrete elegance. The only hint of the Middle Ages are

the narrow lots upon which they're built. In a patisserie a lady hands out samples of Biscuits Roses, the favorite local munchie — light, rose-colored egg and sugar cookies dating from 1756 — to accompany a glass of Champagne.

At the Museum of the Surrender, World War II buffs can visit the actual room where the Armistice was signed by British, American, French, German, and Soviet leaders. In this building, Gen. Eisenhower received the unconditional surrender of all German forces in the early morning of May 7, 1945. The surrender was announced the next day, turning May 8 into Victory in Europe (V-E), or Armistice, Day. Anyone interested in World War II will be fascinated by the extensive collection of artifacts (like the ticker tape with the happy news), photos, and video. The signing room still has the maps with troop positions on the walls and the 13 chairs with nametags in their original spots.

The cathedral of Reims is a glorious example of Gothic architecture, and one of Europe's greatest churches. Clovis, the first king of the Franks, was baptized at a church on this site in A.D. 496, establishing France's Christian roots that hold firm today. Since Clovis' baptism, Reims' cathedral has served as the place for the coronation of 25 French kings and queens — allowing it to play a more important role in France's political history than Paris' Notre-Dame cathedral. Severe bombing during World War I devastated the church, which was later restored (just in time for the start of World War II), thanks in large part to John D. Rockefeller.

Flying buttresses soar from the sides of the church. These massive "beams" are critical to supporting this structure. The pointed arches inside the church push



DAVID HOERLEIN/Longboat Key News

At the Reims Cathedral, tourists become human columns, buttresses, and spires as they demonstrate how to build a Gothic cathedral.

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