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THE CONVERGENCE OF THE TWAIN: A PERSONAL DISQUISITION ON CONTINGENCY, WITH ADUMBRATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF FOLKLORE STUDY ON PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

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Life, said Soren Kierkegaard (I can't remember just where), must be lived forward, but it can only be understood backward. Always we must begin at some end; then we work back to beginnings, and when we realize that every moment of the past was just as complex and confusing as this present moment plunging by, we must also realize what tremendous simplifications even autobiography is doomed to. Prufrock, after all, was right: the taking or not taking of a toast and tea, forgotten or not forgotten, *can* disturb the universe. Worse yet, whatever we construct in the present out of the available fragments of the past — that is, what we call history — is bound to be both fiction and myth, whatever relation it may bear to that abstract entity Truth, von Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, how it actually was. Yet I ask your indulgence as I try to tell a part of my own history.

I do not intend to mount a full-scale *apologia pro vita mea*, but perhaps some notes on how I took to doing what I do — and why I persist in doing it after forty years — won't be entirely out of place. Lord knows I've often enough been asked, "How did you ever get into *folklore*?" (frequently in the incredulous tone of the Late George Apley's wife asking how Mr. Freud could write a whole book just on sex). Besides, that story is fretted with contingencies, which in their combined happenstances have vectored me to a position from which I can speak with some small authority on the state of folklore study on Prince Edward Island, a grand and pleasant convergence if there ever was one. To work then, and, not to overtax your patience, I'll speak only of my interest in folksong, from which all else flowed.

It all began in the early thirties with a not-so-well-known cowboy singer by the name of Tex Fletcher, to whose fifteen-minute Saturday-morning radio show on WABC I listened religiously. I knew there were other cowboy singers — Bradley Kincaid and Montana Slim, for instance, and movie actors like Ken Maynard and Tex Ritter — but I measured them all against my hero and found them wanting. What I didn't know — and had anyone told me I wouldn't have believed them — was that Tex's real name was Johnny Bisceglia and he came

from Harrison, just a few miles from my home in White Plains, New York, and he very likely at that time had never been west of East Orange, New Jersey. Anything Tex sang I loved, and since I was gifted with a quick memory for the useless and inconsequential things of this world I soon had a headful of songs and fragments of songs from his very catholic repertoire, which ran from “Abdul the Bulbul Ameer” to “The Gay Caballero” by way of “Git Along Little Dogies”. I wanted nothing so much as to be a yodeling lonesome cowboy with a guitar, though I never learned to yodel and hadn’t the discipline early on for the guitar. Nevertheless, the damage had been done, and whatever I’ve become over the years, back of it all stands John Bisceglia (a.k.a. Tex Fletcher) from Harrison, New York.

My sister Ruth, eight years my senior, was a singer, and while she was scornful of Tex, she was interested in something called folksongs, which were hot stuff at Bennington, where she was a student in the late thirties. One summer she brought home a copy of Carl Sandburg’s *The American Songbag*, and when I found that it contained many of Tex’s songs it is no overstatement to say that I simply absorbed that book, or, to put it the other way round, that book absorbed Tex Fletcher. Now I was into folksong.

Given my quick memory, I had always been the kid who knew more verses to “The Baptist Sunday School” or “Waltz Me Around Again, Willie” or whatever than anyone else, which was fine and dandy, but fired with my new interest in “folksongs” and armed with Sandburg’s *Songbag* and (soon after that) the Lomaxes’ big book I became a perfect pest at parties and gatherings, not seemingly being able to understand that what is acceptable in short bursts may be offensive as a steady drone. Three years in the Marines taught me moderation in that, if not in other aspects of my life, and the whole interest lay dormant until I entered graduate school in medieval literature at Columbia. As some few of you present will remember, ballads at that time were slotted into the middle ages — if they were slotted at all! — not only in all the textbooks but in the graduate programs as well, which meant that at Columbia I came under the tutelage of that good old Arthurian scholar Roger Sherman Loomis. Loomis was not really all that interested in ballads unless, like “Sir Aldingar” or “The Queen of Scotland”, they contained some glancing Arthurian theme, but evidently even that small interest was enough to rekindle mine, and soon I was plowing through the whole immense bibliography of British and American ballad collectanea and scholarship and writing a vasty thesis on one ballad, “The Two Sisters”, and its tradition. As a by-blow of the whole process, I learned a bunch of neat new songs and picked up the guitar, and there I was back again at parties, the difference being that now people were asking me to sing rather than suggesting I shut up. I found it a pleasant change.

But at no time did I consider it possible that I might write about, let alone collect, folksongs. I believed that had all been done years ago. The only use I saw

for my scholarship was to better inform my singing, which became an avocation just one step short of a mission. What I wanted to do, I told myself, was show these songs off as beautifully as possible to make others — my students in class, my friends at parties — appreciate them for their true worth. To that end I also took up classical guitar and had a few voice lessons as Tex Fletcher, “The Lonesome Cowboy”, was even further replaced by Richard Dyer-Bennet, the “20th Century Minstrel”.

And that’s the way it pretty much was for some time. On the one hand I taught English; on the other I sang folksongs to anyone who would listen, and a surprising number of people did. Then when I came to Maine in 1955, I saw right away I’d have to do something to bring my income up to the poverty level, so I ran a tidy little sideline as a folksinger for a while.

But it wasn’t enough, and I soon decided I’d had it with genteel academic poverty and keeping my family in places where the Board of Trustees wouldn’t have kenneled their dogs, all for the privilege of reading a hundred or so freshman papers a week for the rest of my life. In a word, I was discouraged and wanted out of Academia. Then three things happened.

First, I was drinking a cup of coffee alone in the Union one morning. The place was even more jammed than usual, and before long a stranger — a man I judged to be in his sixties — asked to share my table. It turned out he was Professor of Forestry Gregory Baker, and since I had recently learned “The Jam on Gerry’s Rock” but knew nothing about river-driving I asked him to enlighten me. He did, suggesting a whole pile of books and adding that I really ought to catch the drive on the Machias in about a month — the last long-log drive east of Idaho’s Potlatch River. I read all the books and shivered on the banks of the Machias for a couple of days, and, needless to say, I was hooked. I learned every song I could find on the lumberwoods, and I got so I could deliver pretty good between songs spiels — you know, sincere, smiling, arms folded atop the guitar — and I couldn’t imagine myself ever leaving Maine, even if I had to read a hundred themes a week through deserts of vast eternity, which *was* the way it was for quite a while.

Second, one of my composition students, Dolores Robbins, brought me a couple of songs she’d typed out from her grandmother’s singing. Gram loved to sing, she said, but she’d had a stroke and now was afraid she’d die and all her songs would go with her. Would I come out some time and take some of them down? Yes, I said, and, borrowing a university tape-recorder, I did. Of course, I added some of her songs to my repertoire, setting them to tastefully simple guitar accompaniments (with just enough flourish to let you know that a real expert was at work here). Richard Dyer-Bennet was still in there, to be sure, but old Lidelle Willey Robbins — no great singer herself — not only opened my eyes and ears to something new, something integral and fine, she allowed me the privilege of starting in the footsteps of such pioneers as Fannie Hardy Eckstorm and Phillips Barry. That was heady stuff for a rootless young suburbanite, and I thank her for it.

Third, at about this same time my wife Bobby, who had been reading William Doerflinger's *Shantymen and Shantyboys*, started telling me enthusiastically about someone named Larry Gorman, a woodsman who made up funny and biting satirical songs about the men he worked for and lived among. I was grateful for her enthusiasm, but I wasn't particularly interested, since all the graduate school and book wisdom I had absorbed made it clear that true folksongs were either authorless, created by *das Volk* — a "singing, dancing throng" — or, in the later doctrine of "communal re-creation", the author counted for nothing and "the tradition" was all that mattered. It was even a standard matter of definition: if the author was known, it wasn't a folksong. So thanks, Bobby, but no thanks. Still, as more and more references to this Gorman chap turned up I condescendingly decided maybe a few of his songs in my repertoire would make good showpieces, especially if I could say something *about* him in my little pre-song headnotes. Unfortunately, none of the books could tell me much, but one of them did say that he spent his last years in Brewer, just across the river from Bangor, and it couldn't have been that long ago. Surely, I reasoned, there must still be people around who remembered him, but how to reach them? Knowing no better way, I put a letter in the *Bangor Daily News*, and, shortly after that, I had a chance to sing a few Gorman songs and make a request for information about him over local TV.

Soon the word began to come in. A cleaning lady from one of Bangor's old fleabag hotels told me to get down there and see Herby Rice before he drank himself to death. I did. Old Ralph Cushman wrote from Ellsworth: "I knew Larry Gorman. He worked for my father", and I was off to Ellsworth. John O'Connor, Gorman's nephew, sent me two broadsides of his Uncle Lawrence's poems, and I went down to Portland to see him a week later.

It soon became clear that since neither the printed nor the documentary record was going to turn me up much about this man (who had never been much more than a sporadic and common laborer), most of what I might be able to learn would have to come from interviews. I was a lousy note-taker — and, of course, there was no way I could take down music accurately — so I bought a portable tape-recorder, "portable" meaning that though it weighed over forty pounds it did have a handle on it, and I lugged that around with me all through the late fifties as I interviewed this person and that person and recorded all the Gorman songs I could find.

As an amusing aside, I should mention that I'd never heard of oral history at that time, partly because oral history had hardly been invented as a technique, partly because its practitioners had not begun to think of it as a "field" or "discipline" (the O. H. A. for instance was not founded until the early sixties). My ultimate discovery of it surprised me, though. I felt like Molière's *Bourgeois Gentleman* who suddenly discovered that all his life he'd been speaking prose. But when I came out of the closet and attended my first O. H. A. meeting, I found

that real oral historians didn't know quite what to make of me, since I was not interviewing either superannuated senators or out-to-pasture generals. So it goes. But that's all ancient history. Back to work now

Inevitably, my search took me beyond Maine. For instance, Gorman had worked for many years along New Brunswick's Miramichi River and not only had Doerflinger called attention to him there but Louise Manny had collected some of his songs and already published an article on him. Both Doerflinger and Manny were extremely helpful to me in ways that go well beyond their published works. In fact, the long evenings I spent on Louise's back porch talking with her and listening to her recordings of Wilmot MacDonald and Fred MacMahon and watching the great Miramichi slide by below the bluff are among those few and treasured moments when all falls together and all manner of thing is well — and Mrs. MacLean, her housekeeper of blessed memory, bringing tea or letting me know where the rum was (she wouldn't bring it herself, of course), always adding her own special and peppery wisdom to the ongoing talk. A beautiful time. Forgive me for lingering over it.

As I said, in Miramichi others had gone before, and I had their guidance. When it came to Prince Edward Island — where Gorman had been born and spent the first third and more of his life — I searched for folkloristic predecessors in vain. Well, that's not quite true. There had been some collecting done amongst the Island Acadians. As far back as 1904, Cyrus Macmillan had done some collecting around Rustico for his Harvard master's thesis. Around 1923 the Fathers Arsenault and Gallant from Mont Carmel made a collection of some six-score songs, which they deposited in the National Museum, and Luc Lacourcière had recently made a couple of trips here, but — save for one brief visit by Helen Creighton — no-one, it seemed, had done any documentation of the Island's English-language traditions. I was strictly on my own, and, as it worked out, that made me a pioneer, a mantle that — while it fell strangely then on my young suburbanite shoulders — I couldn't shrug off now, even if I wanted to. And I don't want to.

Be all that as it may, the great convergence — perhaps my own personal and petty counterpoint to *la grande dérangement* — began on a gorgeous day in mid-June 1957 as the old *Abegweit* set me ashore to the sight of that great "Welcome to P. E. I." painted in huge block letters on a nearby shed roof (what ever happened to that, I wonder? I still miss it). And before the pioneer seduces himself once more into misty-eyed reminiscence about all the fun and wonderful times there have been — and there *have* been — perhaps he should cast a coldish eye on what it was he actually did.

First of all, you might say I worked with tunnel vision. I was looking very specifically for local songs and information about their makers — especially at first Larry Gorman and Joe Scott — under the remarkable delusion that looking at how newness came to be here and now might shed light on the old problem of

ballad origins, and — would you believe it, with Parry/Lord sailing so briskly before the wind these days? — I *still* labor under that delusion. I never had any intention of doing general fieldwork or of exploring in any comprehensive way the folksong traditions of Prince Edward Island. Thus, my little *Twenty-One Folksongs from Prince Edward Island*, which was published in 1963 and could rightly claim to be “the first collection of songs to be devoted entirely to Prince Edward Island”, was made up entirely of by-blows — “songs people sang me while I was looking for something else”. Even in *Lawrence Doyle* I was far more interested in a problem than in an area. After all, that book is subtitled “A Study in Local Songmaking”. Yet — tunnel vision and all — what I did was make a start that others have gone on from. More about that in due time.

But it was through my grand convergence with P. E. I. that I began to understand and explore another sort of convergence — that between a geographic area and an occupation, or more specifically between the local traditions of Maine and the Maritimes and the occupational traditions of the lumberwoods. For the work I was doing the International Border simply did not exist, because in the last half of the nineteenth century thousands of young Maritimers came to work in the Maine woods, and while some of them stayed most of them returned home, and many made the trip over and over again before settling down in one place or the other. Songs created and nurtured in the lumbercamps entered local tradition all through Maine and the Maritimes, while songs created in a local tradition — Lawrence Doyle’s, for instance — seldom moved the other way. But in both traditions newness did emerge to be measured against the existent old, and everywhere well-known makers worked at their craft, and I saw the stately old concept of communal composition and the authorless folksong being swept down the vast stream that seaward creeps.

Let me say here as an aside that it is not always pleasant to see an old theory die, especially a theory that seemed to provide exciting answers to what we thought were profound questions. Unilinear cultural evolution and its chef d’œuvre, Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, were hard to beat for pure armchair intellectual excitement, and it’s a pity that a bird so elegant should come to be pecked to death by anything so chicken as observed ethnographic facts. Yet so it was, and so it also was with Francis Barton Gummere’s doctrine that ballads were created by a Folk (with a capital F) rather than by an individual poet, a Tyloorean offshoot that fit folksong in at the foot of a vast evolutionary curve that clambered ultimately to the heights of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Even its less grand successor, “communal re-creation”, which claimed that folksongs achieved their whatness by being re-created through the process of oral transmission, maintained that what mattered was that capital-F Folk as a series of individuals. Both theories furnished a rather comfortable folk-song/art-song dichotomy that seemed to work pretty well. Unfortunately, none of this theorizing squared with my field experience. And, as I say, that was a little sad.

But only a little sad, because I was finding something infinitely more satisfactory: that there was no dichotomy — it was all one — and I was able to work that unity out on two levels. First of all, on the level of the creative act, folk-song/art-song was a hoax cleavage that obscured more than it revealed. What the woodsman songmaker Joe Scott did and what W. B. Yeats or Samuel Barber did were not different in kind, however different we might find their end products to be. All artists worked within or around the constraints of the particular tradition they had chosen, be it the tradition of oral balladry or the literary tradition of Chaucer, Donne, Browning, etc. Having made that choice, they all worked in consciousness of what had gone before, and they would be measured within and against their chosen tradition's accumulated body of work. All artists, then, had to resolve the tension of newness and continuity, innovation and conservatism, individualism and tradition. Looked at in this way, I could see Yeats' innovations growing out of his debt to, say, Shelley and Blake, and I could show Joe Scott being innovative in his ballads in the same way that Joyce or Charles Ives were innovative in their works. I closed my book on Joe Scott with the vision of Scott and Yeats drinking beer together in Heaven "in quiet and understanding". Some readers have found that a pleasant fantasy. Good, but I was never more serious about anything in my life. It is not that I refuse to admit the differences between Joe Scott ballads and Schubert lieder. They are considerable, but it is an egregious mistake to let those differences stand as definitive and dichotomizing. It is far more important first and foremost to see both forms as springing from a common desire to bring words and music into apposite form through the resolution of common problems.

Having settled one dichotomy to my satisfaction, I find we are faced with a new one these days: that between the true oral ballad nurtured in the tradition of oral composition à la Parry/Lord and what we may describe as "all the rest". My first reaction is to say shucks, but instead I'll render on it that fine old Scottish verdict of "not proven", and let it go at that for now. It's getting late.

The second level was that of performance and presentation. I spoke a ways back of my one-step-short-of-a-mission wanting to polish and present as beautifully as possible these diamonds-in-the-rough I had collected for the edification of friends and students. It seemed a harmless activity, but it was hard to carry it on without the rather smug feeling that I was somehow doing a favor not only to the people who originally sang the songs for me but to the songs themselves. I tended to go about my fieldwork like an antique collector, looking on people as repositories of valuables they could not truly appreciate but I of course could, and that tended to insensitize me to what was really going on. It took me some time past Grammy Robbins to realize that what I was hearing was not people who couldn't sing very well doing the best they could but a tradition of singing with its own aesthetic, its own standards of excellence, its own star performers. The more I learned that, the less I wanted to sing these songs in any style but their own,

which meant no guitar, no banjo, no dulcimer, nothing but a straightforward undramatic head voice that let the song do its own thing. And the more I sang in that way the less I was in demand for parties, classes, festivals, and the like, which was probably not a bad thing, all told. I now sing only in my cups, but that's not all that hard to arrange.

So much for convergences, disquisitions, dichotomies, and all such abstract and quadrisyllabic entities. I have, with asides, set forth the multiple contingencies that caromed me onto P. E. I., and I have said something about the state of folklore study here as it was to be found then. Well, what has happened since? Given that the impetus to study Island folklore came from someone from away, it is interesting to see that the follow-up has been carried out chiefly by Islanders, which, so far as I am concerned, is how it should be. Let's look at a few examples.

In 1973 two collections of folksongs were published, one by Randall and Dorothy Dibblee, another by Christopher Gledhill, and in that same year Sterling Ramsay brought out a little volume called *Folklore Prince Edward Island*. From the folklorist's point of view, all of these were rather amateur productions, lacking any real critical apparatus or comparative notes, and the same could be said for James and Gertrude Pendergast's marvelously unpretentious little volume, *A Good Time Was Had By All*, but there they are, and they have considerable value. So does Clinton Morrison's *Along the North Shore*, a vast compendium (over six hundred small-print pages!) of materials relevant to Lot Eleven. Georges Arsenault has done splendid and truly professional work in Acadian tradition, especially in his *Complaintes acadiennes de L'Île-du-Prince-Édouard*, and James Hornby has published *Black Islanders*, an account of the Afro-Island experience. In addition, graduate students in folklore from three off-Island universities have made or are making valuable contributions, inevitably Memorial accounting for two of them: Jim Hornby's study of Island fiddling, and John Cousins' "Horses in the Folklife of Western Prince Edward Island" (*Northeast Folklore* has already agreed to publish Cousins' work, by the way). The third is Michael Kennedy's work-in-progress among the Gaelic-speaking Scots of eastern P. E. I. for his thesis at the School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh University.

Other relevant work is going on, much of it under the aegis of the Institute for Island Studies at the University of P. E. I., which plans to bring out three publications this year, all of them based on extensive oral history interviews with rural Islanders. In 1987 the Institute sponsored Dr. John Shaw's major study of Island Gaelic tradition in which he conducted taped interviews with over thirty people. Further oral history interviews (some forty-four hours worth) were conducted with farmers in connection with a report on sustainable agriculture. How much of this work is directly folkloric is hard to say. Some of it certainly will be, and a great deal of it *may* be, but under any circumstances Director Harry Baglole's statement that Institute policy is "to use every convenient opportunity

to add to the store of taped information about Prince Edward Island" speaks to a genuine concern for creating a repository for those raw documentary materials so necessary for successful folklore study. So does a recent initiative undertaken by Wendell Ellis of a local cable channel — a year-long project in which trained volunteers will videotape interviews with senior citizens in their communities on local history and folklore. It is my understanding that the tapes of these interviews will be given over to the Institute.

Styles in folklore study come and go. I, for example, was a young scholar when folksong was hot stuff, albeit its day was westering faster than I ever imagined it would, and that general enthusiasm inevitably shaped what I saw and sought in my fieldwork. Over the past decade there has been a veritable explosion of interest everywhere in traditional fiddling, and it is not surprising to see *that* reflected in what is getting attention on P. E. I. I have already mentioned Jim Hornby's Master's thesis, and that is our first case in point. Then, too, Dr. Shaw's Gaelic explorations mentioned above included much material on fiddling, and last year the Island Institute's lecture series was entitled "The Island Fiddle". Several years ago Marian Bruce produced a five-part series for CBC Radio on "The Power of the Fiddle", based on twenty-five to thirty taped interviews with local fiddlers. But without any question the most ambitious fiddling project is being carried out under the direction of Ken Perlman, an American ethnomusicologist. Sponsored by Earth Watch, the program began last summer and will continue this summer. So far about forty fiddlers, step-dancers, and others have been videotaped, as well as several festivals and events. There is nothing particularly "wrong" with this trend, and even if there were it wouldn't matter, because that's the way things go. So long as the raw materials are carefully documented and well preserved, such shifting temporal enthusiasms can ultimately assure good coverage. Besides, there's always someone out there looking for something else. I need only mention Estelle Reddin's ongoing work on Island foodways.

Fieldwork is one thing, but there also should be outlets available where good folkloric materials can be published. On P. E. I., while there is no publication devoted specifically to folklore, articles of folklore interest do appear from time to time in *The Island*, an attractive semi-annual publication of the Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation, and the same can be said of another semi-annual, *The Abegweit Review*, published by the University. In fact, three special issues (1983, 1985, and 1988, edited by Brendan O'Grady) were devoted entirely to articles on the Island's Irish, many of them of interest to folklorists. Beyond that, there is talk in at least one quarter of starting a P. E. I. version of *Cape Breton's Magazine*. Needless to say, I wish this proposal well.

And wishing things well brings me to the last of my quadrisyllabics: adumbrations. Come to think of it, it's probably no more than halfway the right word for what I want, but since I've never used it before and since my

opportunities to employ it in public are diminishing rapidly, I ask you as friends to forgive me its present semimisemployment. Adumbrations, then. Not so much what I see coming down the pike, but what I'd like to see happen and believe *could* happen, even in tough times.

For over twenty years now, U. P. E. I. has shown a continuing interest in folklore, and people both within and without it have been working to turn that interest into some sort of action. In 1982 I was invited to lecture to the faculty on "Island Folklore and the Island University", at which time I suggested two things: an academic presence and an archives. Then in 1988 Jim Hornby and John Shaw presented the University with "A Report on a Sound and Film Archives for Prince Edward Island" based on a study they had been commissioned to carry out. That report eloquently and completely made the case for an archives, but so far as I can see nothing substantial has happened as a result of it. There is very little if anything I can add to what it had to say. Such an archive's first task should be to seek out all that has already been done and bring it together under one roof. For example, copies of my own collectanea, now in the University of Maine's Northeast Archives, should be here, and I will bend every effort to make it easily available (and, as W. C. Fields said, I come from a long line of effort-benders). Gledhill's and the Dibblees' raw materials should be found, if that is possible, and carefully preserved. And so on. Its second task should be to encourage new and continued fieldwork by suggesting directions it should take.

But that second task can be aided considerably by giving folklore an academic place within the University, that is to say by hiring a full-time fully accredited folklorist with a mandate both to teach folklore and carry out folklore research here on the Island. Such a person, through his or her own work and the carefully directed work of students, can do more toward creating a coherent folklore presence than anything else I can think of. Naturally, after more than forty years in Academia, I recognize the complex and even explosive turf problems involved in such an appointment — if it's a new slot is it an independent entity or does some present department get it; if some department has to sacrifice an existing slot, who bites the bullet? — but if there is going to be any serious commitment to folklore study here, I still see that position as a *sine qua non*. And the materials it would generate would be the best argument imaginable for the establishment of an archives.

To sum up, Prince Edward Island has offered fertile ground for folklorists to work for a long time, but its potential is only beginning to be realized. Interesting things are happening. The Institute for Island Studies is doing an excellent job as an interim center and supplier of energy, but what is needed now is that secure academic base. And if the convergence of my particular twain has helped to create a climate conducive to such a flowering, I couldn't be more pleased. Thank you one and all for your attention, and thanks too to the ancestor figures I have evoked today: Tex Fletcher, Richard Dyer-Bennet, Roger Sherman

Loomis, Gregory Baker, Lidelle Willey Robbins and her granddaughter Dolores. Without the help of any one of them I probably would have been somewhere else today doing something quite different. I leave to each of you the decision of whether such altered contingencies would or would not have improved the quality of this particular afternoon for you. Again, thanks.