

## *Welcome to the Real World*

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**T**he first time it happened, it was a slip of the tongue, perhaps a Freudian slip. I told someone that this was my graduation year. I meant to say that this was my retirement year. I liked the sound of it, though, and so I began to purposefully telling folks that this was my year to graduate. I know you didn't invite me, and I hope that you are not offended, but I will always think of myself as a member of the class of '08.

Retiring and graduating, after all, do have some things in common.

Like some of you, I'm not sure what life holds beyond Juniata. I have things pretty well planned out until about the middle of this coming September. If all goes well, in a couple of years, my home might be slipping through the Bahamas at nine-and-a-half knots on a beam reach. Or, I could drift slowly into a life of gin and daytime TV.

Not only are life plans unsure, but there is also a certain amount of financial insecurity in my future. For thirty-seven years, every month, mom and dad JC have sent me a check (well actually they sort of passed it on from your moms and dads) but that relationship is coming to an abrupt end. The big difference between you and me is that your income will most likely go up. Mine will certainly go down.

A third similarity will be that relationships will change. Some friendships will grow, some will fade. That possibility is faced with some expectation and some sadness. A fourth similarity between this great life passage for you and this great life passage for me is that the time went by way faster than we thought it would.

This is the first thing that brought me to these remarks: the life passage that we are making together. The second was an honors thesis written by a member of your class, Ashley Hileman, from which I have shamelessly lifted my title. The thesis explored the ways in which we both perceive and shape our world through the language that we use. In this particular case, the language centered on the concept of the “real world.” It is a concept that has intrigued, baffled, and even irritated me for most of my working life.

Hileman’s study used focus groups, guided interviews, and qualitative research methods to explore what Juniata College students think and say about the “real world.” Please keep in mind that she had a far more sophisticated and elegant summary than the one that I am giving you, but here is what I learned from reading the thesis and a lot of the transcripts from the interviews:

1. The real world is a very attractive place.
2. The real world is not a bubble. A bubble is where you are before you go into the real world.
3. No one’s younger brother or sister does now, or ever will, live in the real world.
4. It is old people who tell young people what the real world really is. (Your classmate did not use the stark word “old,” she used the kinder, gentler, “experienced other” which clearly referred primarily to parents and teachers.)

Over the years I have developed my own three-part classification of real world paradigms. The first is what I call the Grim Reaper paradigm. If life involves pain, suffering, betrayal, weakness, greed, self-interest, maliciousness, brutality, inhumanity, intolerance, or bigotry, it somehow qualifies as “real.” If it involves generosity, trust, loyalty, forgiveness, courtesy, kindness, then it is not so real.

My first real introduction to the Grim Reaper view of the world came in the late Sixties. As a member of the police community relations board of Portland, Oregon, I spent time riding in a squad car. With the current litigious nature of our world, I’m sure this kind of thing would not be possible now, but back then the police were happy to have us accompany them, even into dangerous situations. We were leaving the scene of a domestic disturbance where the wife had clearly been beaten, but typically, refused to press charges. I remarked to the officer that earlier in the day I had performed a wedding. The response I got was predictable. “Well, pastor” the officer said, “welcome to the real world.”

I noted that it was a rather curious view of the world that somehow assumed that one human beating another was more real than two people vowing to love and care for each other for life. I wondered by what authority this Grim Reaper outlook presumes to name reality?

By those criteria the world that I'm going to is a lot more real than the world that you're going to. Think about it. Of all the major passages of life: graduation, career, marriage, children, children's graduations, children's marriage, grandchildren, retirement — you have nearly all ahead of you. And as for me, after retirement, there's just one more big life passage. And it's the biggest. You would think that the Grim Reaper people would love that stuff. "Hey Reverend, hear you're retiring. Your time's getting short. Welcome to the 'real world.'"

The second category of real world paradigms I call the "Bottom Line Paradigm." If it makes more money, if it attracts more people, it is more real. CFO for Exxon Mobil—real job, Treasurer for PAX-O—not so real. Add things up and the high score gets the reality crown, a kind of Nielson metaphysics. Here is some interesting data for people who ascribe to the Bottom Line view of the real world. It would take a thousand years of Super Bowls to get as many people together as are in church on any given Sunday in the United States. Add the synagogue, the mosque, the temple and consider the world rather than one country and those numbers get to be pretty impressive. Last year the tiny Church of the Brethren took in over \$90 million. In a quick, cursory glance at the Fortune 500, I counted more than twenty companies that did not do as well in net profits. Of course those of you who are actually interested in bottom lines and know immediately that the Fortune 500 is not a NASCAR race, will object that I am comparing gross receipts to net profits. A fair objection. (I did warn you that my church is tiny and we must take our statistics in the best way we can take them.) But let's take a large main line Protestant denomination that has supposedly been in decline for approximately thirty years. If we look at gross revenues, the Methodist Church would rank ahead of at least fifty companies in the Fortune 500.

Does this mean that the world of choirs and confession is, after all, just as real or perhaps more real than the world of management and marketing? Of course not. To draw that conclusion would be to miss the point. What it does mean is that we need to rethink the criteria on which we so glibly make judgments about the real world. What it does mean is that theologians, poets, painters, philosophers and composers must reassert their claim to a legitimate place at the table with scientists, economists and politicians where the "real" world is discussed.

The final paradigm of the real world that I want to explore is: “It’s all real, it’s all unreal, it’s all relative, who cares?” I call this the “(Expletive Deleted) Happens” paradigm. In this paradigm, we need make no choices, no commitments because it’s all relative, or chaotic, or chemically predetermined, or it just doesn’t matter. I want to finish with two stories which have been important in terms of helping me think about this paradigm of the real world.

I have no personal knowledge of the first story. I remember it from notes I took from an NPR report during the tragic Rwandan holocaust. The reporter told of a deeply scarred and disfigured woman who had made her way to the safety of South Africa. This is her story: a minority in her village, when she heard that enemy soldiers were coming to cleanse the village, she went with her children to hide at a friend’s house. Her friend, a member of the majority group, panicked and betrayed her presence. The soldiers took her outside to a small garden where she watched as her three children were put to death with machetes. When the soldiers turned their machetes on her, she fell on the bodies of her three children and she was left there for dead. She lay motionless for three days while bands of marauders went back and forth through the village. Then soldiers from her tribe came into the village. They gave her some water and took her to a shed where she would be out of the sun. Her hands and arms had been cut too badly to hold a tool, or to dig, so she dug for potatoes with her teeth in a nearby garden where she had dragged herself. Gradually, she gained enough strength to join one of the many groups of broken refugees struggling away from the slaughtering ground.

The second story: In the late 1990s, I was part of a United Nations team invited to Mali in West Africa to help build peace after the end of a small, but vicious, civil war that had plagued the country for ten years. A part of my job was to help plan the first annual celebration of the Flame of Peace. The celebration was in Timbuktu and, I must confess, before I went there I didn’t know for sure that Timbuktu was a real place. I always assumed that it was a metaphor for remoteness.

The celebration was a great occasion. More than 20,000 people gathered. The crowd included heads of State, ambassadors and at least 2,000 Tuareg nomads who had come in from the desert on gaily decorated camels. They came to celebrate the Fire of Peace. This is the story of that fire.

After a tentative peace had been established in Mali, many of the Tuareg rebels began to turn in their weapons, willing to trust the government’s promise that in so doing they would be given chances for education and help in starting a livelihood.

Three thousand modern weapons were collected including automatic rifles and small rocket launchers. These weapons were stored in a makeshift armory in Timbuktu. The question then arose: what was to be done with these weapons? The government's response was, "since we are the government and these are the weapons of war, they naturally belong to the government." The rebels' response was, "we did not turn in these weapons so that they could go into the hands of our former enemies."

A young UN officer floated the idea of burning the weapons, which brought people together because it was an idea that everyone hated. The government was desperately poor. Burning more than \$1,000,000 of weapons that many perceived to be desperately needed to arm the country could almost be interpreted as treason. The rebels, on the other hand, were a fiercely proud people who saw the guns as a way of marking the passage from boyhood to manhood. Turning them in was difficult enough, but to watch them burn was unthinkable.

The young UN officer, in a quiet, humble, and persistent manner, negotiated, talked, and compromised until finally everyone agreed to the idea. On March 27, 1996, three thousand instruments of war were piled high on a cement platform made for the occasion. They were covered with straw, wood, gasoline, and diesel fuel. In the ancient, almost mythological, city of Timbuktu, a fire was lit that many hoped would become a national symbol for the young, struggling democratic nation of Mali. There is an image from that fire that has become deeply etched in my mind. It shares a place alongside the image of a young mother digging with her face to find enough food to survive another hour. This is an image of hope: two soldiers—one black, one Arab—one a government soldier, one a rebel—one Bambara, one Tuareg—standing with their arms around each other, gazing almost wistfully into that magnificent fire. Two young enemies who probably had known nothing in life other than carrying a rifle, cleansed of their hatred, freed from their desperate and violent future by a Fire of Peace.

For me, both stories are a part of the real world. But I would go further. I would say that the reality of the second story is the one that I want to affirm. I want to confess, and profess, that in the second story there is something more true, more beautiful, more universal, more Godly, more real than in the first story. I do not know the universal truths that make me want to choose the second story. Neither do you. If you think at some point in your life that you do know them, you should probably check yourself into a good hospital. On the other hand, if in your life you begin to think that there is no fundamental, "real" difference between the stories perhaps you should check yourself into a good synagogue, or Sunday school, or mosque or temple. Whether we choose peace and love as our real world or whether

we choose the dark side or whether we simply throw up our arms and refuse to choose (even that is a choice)...we all have to choose. And it's a choice we have to make without any assurance, without any proof, that is why we call it faith.

So now let me take my place among the sanctimonious, self-appointed gatekeepers of the "Real World" and welcome you to it. No, not out there, where you will have to cook your own food and clean your own bathrooms. Welcome to the real world right here. Sing a song. Say a prayer. Cherish a friendship. Relive a memory. Confront your fears and hopes for the future. Say good bye. Say hello. Where you are going, you will find some more pain, but you have had some pain here. Where you are going you will find some stress, but hopefully we have stressed you a good bit here. You will be challenged and tempted where you are going, but you have experienced that already. You have had some fun and joy here, but you will find a lot of that where you are going. What you will not find ahead is anything more real than what you leave behind. And if anyone tries to convince you otherwise, treat them with the benign amusement of one who is willing to choose for one's self what is real.