

## *Ernest Medley's Situation*

I can't help but think much of this started with a call from Carlos Hernandez, a friend I work out with twice a week at Gold's Gym. We like to walk the track and lift a lighter variety of dumbbells. He wanted to meet late in the afternoon, about 3:30, at the Roadhouse Grille where they serve a curry chicken salad both of us like. He called around 11:00, and even though I had been putzing around, reading the paper, surfing the world wide web, most of my day was already booked. I was planning on cleaning out the basement, something Cathie--she's my wife--has been on me about for ages. I intended to take several of our old books, along with my entire record collection, to the Goodwill on Fifth. Clearly no small part of our current problem, which really is unbearable, comes from this sudden change in itinerary.

But to be honest, I must admit that much of this goes back to last night when I noticed Cathie reading Dr. Phil's *Self Matters*. It started me thinking a little more about Christmas and that perhaps I could surprise Cathie with tickets to one of Dr. Phil's shows out there in Hollywood. We haven't been on a vacation since we went to Daytona Beach to renew our wedding vows back in '08. I was thinking sometime in the middle of February when--as my father who passed away just last year use to say--the only thing to do is shovel your driveway, we could fly on out, watch the *Dr. Phil Show*, and spend a week living like the stars.

And, sir, I'm wondering if you might want to focus your attention for a moment and look at this spectacular sunset, all purples and pinks. It makes me think how beautiful life can be. Even when things are at their worst, like right now, the universe seems to offer its own little reprieve. I'm not much of a religious man but sometimes it seems like God gives us these small treasures when we need them most. The trick is to not stop looking. In fact, the joy of watching this sunset is the one thing keeping me from feeling overwhelmed by the intense pain in my left kneecap. Six years ago I had ACL surgery and the knee is still a bit gimpy. Some days after my and Carlos' workout I find myself icing down

this old battle wound, which I got, I'm embarrassed to confide, tripping over a soccer ball.

But if you are finding it difficult to focus on the sunset I do understand. I was certainly focused while cleaning my basement after Carlos called again to request we push our late lunch back an hour later--by this point you'd have to call it an early dinner--which is another action on his end, mind you I'm not blaming Carlos, that helps to partly explain how it is that we ended up with what we have here. But I was happy with the new arrangement. It gave me extra time to keep cleaning my basement which by then had become a top level priority.

I must admit, sir, how impressed I was with my own efficiency. It was a few minutes before 3:30 by the time I got to the Goodwill. But then I met a woman working there named Nancy. She told me to drop our books and records off in a pile by a red door next to a green dumpster. Can you believe that? All our nice stuff in a pile. Sometimes it seems no one values the things we own. Not even the people whose job it is to try to find a new place for our old possessions. I must admit I felt a bit piqued for a few minutes, but then I let it go, and as I was leaving the Goodwill I began thinking more about Dr. Phil and it occurred to me that since Cathie seems to be enjoying *Self Matters* so much, and mind you by this time I had definitely been sold on surprising Cathie with a trip to Hollywood, I should try and get more play out of the idea. After all, there are stocking stuffers to consider.

And that's how I ended up here. It was only 4:10 which seemed like a big enough window to pop into the Barnes and Noble. That's why I was driving along your street since I'm fairly well convinced it's a shortcut and would have provided a few more minutes to purchase a paperback copy of one of Dr. Phil's other books. I know he has at least one other book because I've seen it advertised on television--it's called *Life Strategies* and focuses on ten life laws Dr. Phil believes we should live by. I remember watching a commercial where Dr. Phil said one of his life laws is to practice the power of forgiveness, and to be honest, this particular life law strikes me as deeply profound.

And I guess what I'm trying to say is that right now I have this incredible headache which I'm sure wasn't caused by what's happened here. And it seems unlikely it has anything to do with

the stress of Christmas being only eight days away because, really, I've been carrying this headache, this "disorder," if that's even the correct terminology, around for the last couple months. And truth be told, it's been an on-again, off-again problem for the last fifteen years. I know it's been fifteen years because the first time I had one was the same day I started to grow this mustache. Of course the doctors refuse to call what I have migraines, one doctor even said "intense head discomfort" is more accurate, but I keep getting prescribed this purple pill called Rizatriptan, which, from what I've been told by my neighbor Karen Warnsley who works as a nurse at Mt. Sinai, gets specifically prescribed to people who suffer from migraines. So I'm as confused as you on that one.

But what I don't understand is why no first response emergency vehicles have arrived. Clearly there's been an accident, just look at how I ran over your three foot ginger bread man. And then there's the manger scene by your mailbox. You must understand I couldn't see much with the inflatable Santa Claus covering my windshield. But that I actually managed to decapitate all three of your wise men reminds me I have the worst luck. And look at your poor baby Jesus. He's shattered, completely shattered. What a terrible time of year it is to shatter a baby Jesus.

And if only the paramedics would arrive I could ask them about my headache--I can't help but think that seems to be getting worse. And then there's the pain in my left kneecap, which I'm sure isn't helped by my weight problem. It's something I've battled since childhood. That's why I work out at Gold's Gym with Carlos. But what I'm really hoping is that in no way do you think that I think what I'm experiencing is in any way worse than what you're experiencing. I'm just saying we all suffer and it seems the only thing that changes from day to day is the matter of degree.

And that's what gets me so riled up about Nancy, the woman at the Goodwill. She should recognize the memories attached to the possessions people give her and not tell us to leave them in a pile beside a dumpster. Our possessions deserve more kindness. That's something my father understood. He was such a packrat, especially in those last few years before he died of throat cancer. It was like he just wanted to collect all this stuff to ensure his life wouldn't lose value.

And I can't help but wonder, sir, if maybe my life lost a little value today with one of the records I donated--Elton John's *Honky Château*--which was playing on my record player the night me and Cathie first made love. The night, sir, I finally lost my virginity. I met Cathie in the middle of 1987, during a heat wave toward the end of June. I was 38 and had given up hope of any woman finding me attractive. Heck, my hair had already receded to the crown of my head, something that you best bet no comb over could cover, and I was even more overweight than I am now. Then I met Cathie at Coleman's Chicken Shack, both of us eating alone on a Saturday night, falling in love over biscuits and gravy.

That's why, and this is a sudden bit of insight on my part, but I think it best for you to take your dog to the taxidermist the first chance you get. My point is this: Possessions tell our history, without them our stories would be lost. Now if I could only change my own recent history, make it so I hadn't picked up my iPhone when I pulled on to your street to call Carlos to inform him I might be late because I had to rush over to the Barnes and Noble to buy Cathie Dr. Phil's *Life Strategies*, if I could only keep my iPhone from slipping from my hand, you best bet I would. But I think it's best to accept the fact your dog is dead. It does appear he sustained some dramatic facial injuries. That said, given just a few minutes, I'm almost certain we could find your dog's lower jaw. I bet it's under a tire or something. It seems to me a taxidermist worth his salt should be skilled enough in the art of cosmetics to be able, with just a bit of effort, to fix your dog like new.

And, honestly, you might want to consider the same thing for your wife. Forgive me if that sounds a bit inconsiderate but hear me out: If you could track down a taxidermist skilled at the preservation of human forms than you wouldn't completely lose your wife. One day you could put her in the kitchen to keep you company while washing dishes or sneaking yourself a dish of ice cream, another day you could have her watch *Dr. Phil* with you in the living room. Some nights you could even have her slide into bed, her head, just like old times, on the pillow next to yours. We don't need people like Nancy who has such little reverence for the things we love.

Understand this all depends if your wife lives or not, and the fact she keeps making that low gurgling sound is probably a good

sign. It suggests she's got a fighting spirit. It's just like this lovely sunset, which seems to be hanging on much longer than anyone has a right to expect. I do wish my neighbor Karen Warmesley was here, the nurse I was talking about at Mt. Sinai, because she could shed some light on the status of that bump on your wife's forehead. It's approaching the size of a coconut. What a shame it was that my car came upon her when it did because I bet your wife had just lowered her head right toward direct impact. I suppose she was trying to drag that life-size Frosty the Snowman. My point is that Karen could explain if we should be more concerned about your wife's cranial injury or the fact that her chest has apparently caved in. I mean, everything about this is awful, but it's these choices we make in the first minutes that make the difference between life and death.

And that's why I think it's a good decision on your part to begin applying CPR. It's clear your wife hasn't been breathing for the last twenty seconds or so. But what perplexes me is that the paramedics have yet to arrive. Look at all of these onlookers, there must be at least fifteen of them. Why haven't they called 911? I'd call myself but believe it or not I managed to drop my iPhone again when I got out of my car. I think it might be somewhere by the shattered baby Jesus. I'd walk over myself but my ACL is just about throbbing.

But maybe your fortune is changing. It was kind of those two onlookers to finally take over CPR duty. And I could be wrong but I believe I'm finally hearing sirens. If I were a betting man, and trust me when I say I haven't been since Super Bowl XXV when I was tricked out of fifty dollars betting on a team that wasn't apparently playing, I'd say the ambulance can't be more than a couple minutes away. That's assuming they're not driving along Washington--the traffic there is just a nightmare. Perhaps I was a bit too harsh on these onlookers. Apparently one of them has called for help and just look at how hard these two gentlemen keep working to resuscitate your wife. Their act of kindness allows you to be with your son which is appropriate in a situation like this. It seems like every time you want to cancel out the human race, every time you meet someone like Nancy at the Goodwill, you come across people who actually do care.

Truth is, I too could use my father. I know he's been dead over

a year and I guess that's what makes this so painful. Today has turned into a colossal disappointment, and it's not just what's happened in your front yard. It's also this feeling I've got about losing my past. What a fool I was to hand over so many memories to the Goodwill. I guess, just like your son, I've never needed my father more. I suppose we never stop needing our fathers. I'm so sick of this idea that to be materialistic is something awful. What's so wrong with keeping the things we love? *Honky Château* means more to me than even a thousand lunches with Carlos Hernandez. That's what my father understood, especially in those last years. His house got so cluttered it was difficult to even find a seat on the couch. But now I understand. There's a lesson in all this and it's the biggest lesson of all: Don't ever let go, sir. That's what you need to remember. If you do, each thing you give away, each tiny possession, will only drill a bigger hole in your heart.

STEVE COUGHLIN lives in Athens, OH. If you or someone you know would like to offer him a job, please send an email to [coughlin@ohio.edu](mailto:coughlin@ohio.edu).