TWO FRIENDS TALKING

 [The scene could be any American city. Two old friends – Eliot (“El”) and Alex (“Al”) -- both retired teachers in their mid-60s, meet every Saturday (weather permitting) on the same park bench at 10 a.m. to visit and chat until around lunchtime. Today is a sunny, brisk mid-October morning. The leaves on the trees in the park have all turned to their glorious Fall colors, and some are beginning to drift to the ground.]

Eliot: What a great day to be alive! Just smell that fresh, cool autumn air…

Alex: Any day is a good day to be alive…just consider the alternative.

E: Well, aren’t you Mr. Optimism today!

A: El, you’ve always been the romantic. I’m the realist. My aches and pains remind me of the ticking clock and the Grim Reaper at my heels, that’s all.

E: Look, Al. Just take it a day at a time. We’ve known each other for almost fifty years – longer than we’ve known our wives. Growing old takes guts. You’ve got plenty. I’ve seen you in action. You’re a fighter and a survivor. We’ve both dodged any serious health issues so far. We both exercise and try to eat right. They say that the average body runs well until your late 70s, then you just have to deal with any problems as they arise. With any luck, we’ll both make it to our late 80s or early 90s. Our wives too.

A: I hope you’re right. But in the meantime, look at the direction the world is going. When I was a kid, I would have never imagined that life would be like this in 2017.

E: Like what?

A: Unraveling. Always reactive instead of proactive. Where is the united vision? Where is the long-term planning and goals for our nation? Where is the satisfaction? We seem to limp along year after year. Think of how our country was after World War Two, which both our fathers fought in. America was #1 in just about every category. But now? We are stuck on defense with Islamic terrorism. We take a back seat to China. Our National Debt is sky-high. The country is deeply divided politically, Red States vs. Blue. Mistrust, suspicion, paranoia. The blaring, relentless media banging the drum for ratings. Eleven million illegal immigrants. Greed. Corruption. Continual higher taxes. Hypocrisy. Intolerance towards opposing points of view. Some states legalizing marijuana -- as if our society needs even more intoxicants. Don't get me started!

E: Well, I certainly can’t explain what happened, let alone propose how to fix it. My study of history tells me that all empires must decline and fall. Maybe we are living through the beginning of the end. It might take another hundred years or maybe just a few decades for it to all collapse. I'm worried too, like I know you are, for future generations.

A: Now look who’s Mr. Optimism!

E: You know, Al, I’ve spent my whole life trying to figure out life. Trying to figure out women too, for that matter (chuckles). Why are we here? What is man’s purpose? What is this strange, wonderful thing called “reality” all about? I have come to the sad conclusion that figuring out life simply can’t be done. Too many variables, which in turn are constantly shifting, making the puzzle worse. Data which ultimately defeats itself. A man could go crazy.

A: Maybe that’s why we have religion. To give us faith and hope, and reasons to work for and love humanity. So many different spiritual paths, but they all have to lead to the same source, don’t you think?

E: I know that you and I are not atheists, yet neither of us belongs to any established religious community. The Bible is a unique book with much to teach us, but it can’t be literally believed. I was raised Catholic -- and I know you are a lapsed Methodist -- yet I’ve lately come to doubt the divinity of Christ. He might have been the most enlightened man who ever walked the planet, but – in my humble opinion – he was just a human being. Maybe God miraculously rose him from the dead for a brief time to teach the world something, but I don’t think Jesus is ever coming back – let alone for any Last Judgement as the Son of God. The Church added all the dogma and theology about Jesus later for its own needs. The Jews, meanwhile, are still waiting for their one Messiah to come. I really admire their pre-Christian roots and their incredible perseverance. But likewise, if the Jewish Messiah hasn’t come by now, I doubt he is ever coming. The Mormons and the Hindus both have really odd theologies which I can’t relate to, and the Moslems are way off track because Mohammed himself had so many un-holy contradictions, which are reflected in the Koran. Buddhism, meanwhile, is gently appealing with its emphasis on the here and now, with no afterlife constructs. They seem the most in tune with the Earth and authentic towards how we should all relate to each other. Yet what I like most about the Christians is their history going back to the original Apostles, and their magnificent cathedrals and related artworks. As you know, I have always found all world theologies and philosophies interesting to ponder. I have found that spirituality is the final frontier of thought and mystery. When science and secularism are stymied, humans usually turn to the spiritual realms. Why? Maybe we are divinely created that way.

A: So what do you think happens after we die?

E: Frankly, I’ve given up on the concepts of heaven and hell. Purgatory is an invented notion for that matter too. It’s ironic that at our age -- when our childhood faith should be at it zenith as we prepare for death – my traditional faith has mostly dissolved. The certainty is gone. The sacramental trappings are still there as a kind of comfort, but their value is doubtful. As for the Pope, he is just a fallible, stumbling human being like the rest of us. Yet I truly believe that God knows me. He has given me the miraculous gift of life. I actually sense His grace and blessings. I believe He appreciates my struggles when I use my mind and my reason to try and figure out the meaning of existence. I find prayer and meditation vital actions. After I die, I think my spirit will dissolve into energized atoms and blend into the infinity of the universe, which is entirely the eternally living consciousness of God. No Pearly Gates, no angel wings, no harps, no Judgement, no reunion with deceased loved ones. On the flip side, no fiery pit of eternal damnation and agony either. But life is full of surprises, so maybe death will be too…

A: Your scenario seems both lonely yet satisfying at the same time, El. All we can say for sure is that no one has come back from death to describe it. So maybe your theory is right. Certainly death is part of life, so I guess we shouldn’t fear it. But that’s hard because it is an unknown experience and we can never predict the exact moment when it will happen. If only we knew the exact day and time, we could somewhat prepare, and then relax a bit!

E: Yep, I hear ya, amigo…Hey, I was on Facebook the other day, and one of my old students posted a picture of herself cradling her new grandchild! It’s funny because I always remember her as a teenager in my class, frozen in time. Just think of all the kids we taught over the years. I ran the numbers for myself the other day, and came up with over one-thousand students. Do you think we made a real difference in their lives, Al?

A: Oh, I’m sure we did, El. Looking back, I would say that about a third of my former students were fantastic, as were their families. Supportive, responsive, smart, motivated. They understood the ideals of excellence, hard-work, and diligence. They knew why education was so important. They made it a pleasure for me to teach, a true honor. Another third of my kids were neutral, meaning they were there every day, basically putting in their time as they were required to do. My job was to get them fired up about learning. Sometimes I could win some of them over. They were not a problem. The last third, however, were the bad ones – the disruptors, the misbehaved, the anarchists. Their aim was to try and destroy my educational efforts on a daily basis. They hated school, their parents hated school because they themselves did poorly, and these wayward kids wanted vehemently to wreck it for the good students. They lived to sap a teacher’s precious time and energy, as if school was a sick ‘win or lose’ game. A few were salvageable, but most were doomed to a life of misery, drugs, gangs, crime, and jail. It broke my heart, truly. As for administrators, most of mine were dreadful – bureaucratic dullards who couldn’t hack it as a regular teacher in a classroom, who then had the nerve to dictate to actual teachers how to teach! They and their district overlords would then latch onto every educational fad, force the teachers to adopt it, then abandon it all when it failed – until the next fad was recycled and embraced. It was a farce – a never-ending waste of millions of tax dollars and a devastating loss of precious educational time.

E: For sure, teaching was incredibly stressful, like trying to juggle a hundred balls at once, while trying to keep sane and organized. I hated it when principals sided unfairly with complaining parents rather than support their own staff. I was also quite surprised to find jealousy among teachers, and egotism battles over who was the most popular, and who had the principal's ear. But overall, I’m glad I had teaching as a career. Seeing a student's eyes light up with realization and understanding made it all worthwhile. Plus, having the summers off gave me the golden opportunity to begin my awesome travels around the world.

A: Tell me again, El. How many countries have you and your wife been to so far?

E: 116; 67 of those with Michelle.

A: I think I have 84; Brenda and I did about 54 together.

E: Travel is absolutely the best use of one’s surplus income.

A: Totally agree. I especially like the planning, and the anticipation, and the thrill of pouring over various maps and spinning my trusty globe. Writing up my journals too.

E: And don’t forget the extensive reading before, during, and after each trip. And taking all those terrific photos! I bet I have over 20,000 pics -- both the newer digital ones and the classic Kodachrome 64 slides. I still have my old Carousel slide projector. Haven’t fired it up for a long time, though.

A: I still have mine too. My students used to rave about my slide shows. History, art, architecture, foods, culture…it’s all there, and from a personal experience point-of-view too. Loved doing them. Too bad our wives aren’t more adventurous in traveling, like in the early days. Of course, Brenda had that recent hip replacement surgery, so that slows her down. Our women-folk increasingly like their comforts, and would prefer taking cruise ships to exotic ports, and then doing those short half-day and full-day excursions. You and I still prefer week-long foreign cross-country hiking or bicycle touring trips. But that’s how it goes, I guess…

E: (looks at his watch) Hey, it’s time for our coffee break. I think it’s my turn to treat…

 [The two men rise and walk a short distance to a familiar mobile food/coffee truck, place their order, then return to their favorite bench with their warming beverages.]

A: Now El, you and Michelle are slightly more liberal than me and Brenda. I know you believe in global warming and so on. I think climate change is a natural cycle, basically independent of people -- not that I am advocating limitless air pollution. But don’t you think that politics in general is pretty much a losing proposition? The older I get, the more I sense its futility.

E: You are right that I am very concerned about the environment. I think it’s prudent to restrict greenhouse gases, and to safeguard our air, land, and water – both for future generations and for all other life forms on the planet. But I agree that politics is a certain road to disappointment and heartbreak. Both major parties are lying and corrupt, and unresponsive to the real needs of the people. Corporate lobbying and Big Money have wrecked our democracy. I believe in being an Independent voter. As you know, I've always been a non-conformist and somewhat of a rebel. The last candidate I had any faith in was Ralph Nader, who you recall ran as a Third Party choice. I tell any young people who will listen to me to always “think for yourself.” Don’t be led astray by the media, or by golden promises of utopia and slick rhetoric, or by subtle social indoctrination at any institution. I believe in complete free speech and open debate. I loathe – and I know you do too -- the whole concept of “political correctness”, which is nothing more than censorship pressure by certain groups. I advise others to strive for a balanced view of the issues, and to seek out a variety of sources of information. Look for the larger, long-term view. Ignore the blather of the 'experts.'

A: Brenda and I pretty much ignore the TV nowadays, other than to watch documentaries or movies. Just can't stand watching commercials anymore. As you know, I voted a “Write-In” candidate in the last election. I had to vote my conscience, even knowing he had no chance of winning.

E: You know, Al, I was thinking about abortion the other day, and it occurred to me that whereas 6 million Jews were exterminated in World War Two, almost 60 million babies have been aborted in America since abortion was legalized in 1973. But where is that outrage? Why isn’t adoption loudly promoted instead of infanticide? And what about black-on-black killings in our inner cities? Where is the concern and solution there?

A: I wish I knew.

E: The older I get, the more complicated the world seems.

A: At least our families are both doing well. But marriage and parenthood have both been an eye opener, as we have discussed many times before. Lots of unforeseen challenges.

E: I wanted marriage to be like that of Ward and June Cleaver, or like Rob and Laura Petrie. But it turned out a lot different than I imagined. I love Michelle, but my feelings have evolved from initial fiery passion to those of protection, loyalty, and relaxed companionship. Couples go through so many changes over the years, it’s simply amazing, Al.

A: Being emotionally steady and reliable is crucial for the long haul in any marriage, El. Being gentle and supportive through ‘thick and thin’ is equally important, don’t you think?

E: Very true. Don’t want any drama at our age, for sure!

A: As for the kids, they are a two-edged sword: they are both the best part of a marriage, and a bafflement as they get older. Why don’t they call and visit more, now that we have the time to listen more carefully and advise them on all aspects of life? The ages 4-12 were my favorite years for raising my three children. Now, we have the two grandkids, and that is pure joy. And Brenda loves being a grandparent.

E: We Skype and Facetime with our two kids and our granddaughter as their schedules allow, but it is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. Maybe our children have to largely ignore their parents as part of their own individual growth paths and social evolution with their peers. But it makes for hurt feelings and loneliness for us seniors. Everyone lives in different parts of the country. Not like The Waltons, back in the day!

A: Hey, speaking of family, how’s your genealogy research project going, El?

E: Lots of fun. I traced my Father’s side of the family back to around 1740, but then any further records have vanished in wars, fires, and the rest. Now I’m working on my Mother’s side... By the way, how are your new kitchen cabinets coming along? I find that carpentry projects can be very satisfying. Really gets your mind off all the problems of the world.

A: My garage workshop is always getting larger, because I keep seeing new tools at Home Depot that I think I’ll need someday!

E: Well, I know where to come if I need to borrow any tools, old buddy…

A: You’re welcome because you remember to return them in short order, unlike my neighbor Gil. He kept my power sander for three months, until I was forced to remind him. He was so embarrassed!

E: Hey, I just remembered that our two high school reunions are both coming up next summer. Wow, 50 years…where did all that time go?

A: At least we still both have most of our hair (even if the color has changed), and our bellies aren’t too shameful!

E: Yeah, but it would still be nice to lose twenty pounds or so. I would love to have a size 34" waist again. I walk an hour a day, and bicycle another hour a day if the weather is good. And I take those senior fitness classes with Michelle twice a week. But the weight sticks to me like it was welded on.

A: Like you, I also exercise and watch my diet, but I think we are simply stuck with aging metabolisms. Brenda too. I wish I could run again like I did in high school on the track team. But my doctor says my knees won’t take it anymore. Remember when I had that one torn cartilage and was on crutches and PT for six weeks?

E: Oh, yeah, I remember…Hey, I wonder how many of my old classmates will come to the reunion? Who has died? Will any of my old teachers come? They must be living mummies by now, if they are still around. Maybe Mr. Wayland, my favorite history teacher, will make it. What a great guy! Totally inspiring. Plus, I am curious about my old girlfriends. I’d love to find out who went to fat, and who still takes care of their appearance, and who still develops their mind…

A: Yep, those old flames…when I think of what I had to go through to get them in the back seat of my car or alone on their living room couch! I was awash in raging hormones, acne, and too much of my father’s Old Spice.

E: Those school dances were a blast too -- the music, the surreal gym atmosphere, the heady mix of body odor, different perfumes, and breath mints. But the absolute best were the slow dances, holding your special girl tight, feeling her breathing and her heartbeat, cheek-to-cheek and groin to groin, very arousing and dreamy at the same time. Your hands sweaty in hers…ah, young love!

A: You know, El, those times were some of the most powerful memories I have too. The combination of surrender and lust and sweet awkward innocence -- yet wanting to be grown up at the same time. If only I had a time machine.

E: Yet today, young couples are getting married later and later, and having fewer if any children. Some are even still living with their parents -- into their 30s. What happened to American society, Al? Why this fear of commitment?

A: I wish I knew, El. Is it the continued breakdown of the American nuclear family? The fear of divorce? Not enough savings to afford a house due to student loan debt? The influence of social media or peer norms on the internet? The whole LGBT thing? Lack of confidence or fear of the future? It is so different now than before. Kinda scary…

E: Ah yes, the present and the future…it’s funny how I prefer to look ‘back’ now in my senior years, instead of looking forward as I did when I was younger. I imagine small-town America, somewhere probably in the Midwest, set in a time well before my own childhood in the 1950s. I always ask myself: How would the people back there and then think, react, vote, and solve life’s problems as they arose? It would have to be with steady, clear-eyed moderation and good, old-fashioned common sense. No political extremism, but favoring limited government intrusions. The people of my mythical town surely moved more slowly in those days, but they acted with care, intelligence, and assurance. They were unafraid of delayed gratification, thrift, and saving. They were mostly humble, God-fearing folk. These were the people who came from many lands, but who made this nation a unified one. They were honest, hard-working, patriotic, and self-sufficient when possible, while being generous and self-sacrificing when helping others. That is the ideal vision I hold. That is what I want, and that is what America needs, in my opinion…again.

A: Sounds wonderful…where do I sign-up, and when can Brenda and I move there? (chuckles)

[At this moment, various church bells around the city begin to toll the noon hour.}

A: Well, Eliot, time to head home for lunch and my nap before I start raking the leaves in my yard and finish my other chores. As always, it was really great seeing you and solving all the world’s problems! Take care, my good friend, until next Saturday -- same time, same place. Don't forget that list of books you are currently reading. And think about a good new movie that the four of us might enjoy seeing. Give our best to Michelle.

E: Will do. I have to take Viceroy to the dog clinic for his shoulder X-ray. Hope it's nothing serious. Then I have my English language volunteer tutoring. You know, Alex, your continued friendship means so much to me. You are like the brother I never had. I can be totally open with you -- more than with anyone else I know. We go back so many years. I only hope that there will be many more ahead…Say hi to Brenda for us…I’ll walk you to your car…

[The two friends head toward the parking garage, as the city goes about its day. They shake hands, then one-arm hug, as they say goodbye...]

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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