Jonah Raskin (Photo: Colin Campbell)

## Jonah Raskin (1942–  )

## My Symmetrical Life

I wasn’t trying to be a character in my own life, or to live my life symmetrically, but at a certain point in my journey through the years I looked back and noticed that my life divided itself into two more or less equal parts, and that the second half of my life was the mirror image and largely the opposite of the first half.

As a biographer who wrote about Jack London, Allen Ginsberg, and Abbie Hoffman, and who read and studied a ton of biographies, I knew that individuals could, to a certain extent, consciously shape their own lives, cut them up, and put them into chapters with heightened drama. But it took a while to see the same or similar patterns in my own life. After all, I hadn’t set out to study myself. I was preoccupied with living life in the present moment, putting one foot in front of the other and dealing with quotidian reality. Finally, I had time and space to poke around in my past. I had daylight to burn, and I gave myself an assignment: to know myself.

I saw that, in the first half of my life, I had gone about almost systematically aiming to undo the self I inherited at birth. Call it a kind of suicide. I rejected or effaced or hid from the man-child who was born into an East Coast, middle-class, secular, suburban Jewish family. I joined a gang, went to church and dated Catholic girls, drag-raced, cut up in school, and rebelled against nearly everything and everyone there was to rebel against, including my parents and my school teachers.

A troublemaker, I landed in big trouble; even a simple act like wearing a hat, a beret, or a cap in school brought the wrath of the principal down on my head. My mother was summoned to his office. They didn't know what to do with me. But the school psychiatrist said I was normal and not to worry. I felt I'd put one over on him, too; faked him out the way I did other adults.

In the second half of my life, I went about half-blindly recreating myself and reassembling the pieces I had tossed aside as though I would never need or want them again. In the first half, I would not have thought it was possible to live a symmetrical life. In the second half, it seemed perfectly natural and even expected to live a life as though one were a character in a postmodern novel. But finding the exact pivot point between the two halves, and linking it to an event or an occasion, wasn't easy.

The pivot might have been the time I was arrested, jailed, and beaten by the police (along with friend and fellow rebel, Robert Reilly) in New York, charged with criminal anarchy and attempted murder.

I didn't mind the anarchy charge; after all, I thought of myself as an anarchist, but I chafed at the charge of attempted murder. I had not intended to kill the two police officers: they had merely gotten in the way of the lead pipe that fit snugly in the palm of my hand. It was December 1969, the end of the '60s. On December 4, 1969, In Chicago, two Black Panthers, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, were murdered while they slept by a bevy of law-enforcement agents. Five days later, Reilly and I rioted in the streets, smashed, or rather "trashed" (to use the word of the moment), five large plate-glass windows at Saks Fifth Avenue, the posh department store. I felt as if I had gone into a kind of sacred space and was invincible and even invisible.

Two plainclothes cops wrestled me to the sidewalk, handcuffed and booked me, and in court the next day the district attorney charged me with two felonies. I could no longer expect to convince anyone I was merely a mild-mannered college teacher who spent his days in libraries. *The Village Voice* ran a frontpage story about me and my arrest, with a photo that showed me black and blue. The *New York Times* didn't run a photo, but the headline for the story about me and Reilly read, "2 Arrested at Nixon Protest Say They Were Beaten By Police." In some anti-war circles I was a hero of the revolution. I let the notoriety go to my head.

My American Civil Liberties Union lawyer, Paul Chevigny, charged the cops who beat me and Reilly with police brutality. He said the beating we had received was the worst he had seen in decades. We dropped the charges against the cops, and the cops dropped the charges against us.

So, I avoided a long prison term. I could thank the cops for a post-graduate course in law enforcement brutality.

Or the pivot in my life might have been when I returned to my parents' home in California after turning my back on them, my family, and the family itself as an institution of oppression. (See Frederick Engels' classic, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which crucifies that unholy trinity.) Or the pivot might have been when I went back to academia and teaching, after rejecting a job as an assistant professor at a college in New York, where a significant part of the first act in the drama of my life had taken place.

In act one, I had defined myself as a rebel and even for a time as a revolutionary. In act two, I gradually realized I was a conservative. Once upon a time, I wanted chaos—the more, the better. Out of chaos came art, or so I reasoned. As I aged, I wanted continuity and stability. As Flaubert noted, "Be regular and orderly in your life*,* so that you may be violent and original in your work." That became my credo.

Of course, in the first half of my life I had, from time to time, a regular and orderly life, and in the second half I sometimes acted impulsively, incautiously. I have never been all one thing. I remember visiting Professor Edward Said in his office in Hamilton Hall at Columbia University, where I had once been an English major.

I asked Said (the author or *Orientalism* and a firm supporter of the Palestinian cause) to write a letter of recommendation for me. He seemed willing to do that, though first he wanted to know where I stood politically. "Are you like those Sixties radicals who have drifted over to the right?" he asked. I didn't think so, so I shook my head. Said wrote a glowing recommendation, which led to a job.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized I had in fact drifted to the right. I no longer espoused anarchy and anarchism. I didn't vote for either Bush I or Bush II, but I belonged to the group that owned private property, obeyed traffic laws, said "Yes, sir" and "No, sir" to police officers, mowed the lawn, made sure the house looked spiffy, and dressed like a gentleman in a shirt and tie. And I worked for the State of California.

At the age of 30-something, and as a prodigal son, I had gone home. My parents were no longer living in Huntington, on Long Island, where I grew up, but rather in rural Sonoma County, north of San Francisco, which was unexplored territory for me. Their house was newly built, but almost everything inside was old and familiar. My parents had moved most of their possessions from the East Coast, where they had lived for more than 30 years and accumulated a lot of stuff.

When I stepped inside the house in Sonoma, I experienced what Casey Stengel called "déjà vu all over again." In the living room, with its exposed beams and large picture windows, and with the same furniture, paintings on the walls, and rugs on the floor as I had known as a child growing up on Long Island, I remembered the expression "in medias res," which I first heard in

college, and that an English prof had said was the best place to start a narrative: in the chronological middle, not at the beginning of the story.

I remembered, too, that Dante began the *Divine Comedy*, which I had read in college, with the words "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita,*" which translates as "in the middle of our life's journey." I didn't know it at the time, but my arrival in Sonoma marked the start of my California adventure. I didn't say or believe that I was a Californian for another 15 years, until I was living and teaching in Belgium as a Fulbright professor who gave lectures about American literature for the U.S. Information Agency, described by Wikipedia as a "U.S. government agency devoted to propaganda."

In Belgium I was more enthusiastic about American culture than ever before, in part because the students were instinctively anti-American. I promoted jazz and the blues, folk songs, Hollywood film noir, and the writings of Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, Faulkner, and Gertrude Stein. In New York in the 1960s I'd been an Anglophile and raved about Joseph Conrad and Henry James and T.S. Eliot, all of whom, though born elsewhere eventually settled in England and became British subjects. I disliked royalty and Queen Elizabeth, but I accepted a "Student Fellowship" of £200 a year from "Her Majesty's Government."

Back in California after a year in Belgium,  I grew a beard and long hair; I'd been clean shaven and had a crew cut up till then. I gave up coffee and beer and drank wine and smoked marijuana.

In New York, during the eight years when I was married, I had been monogamous. In California I was reborn as a Don Juan and a Capricorn, though for most of my life I had no idea what astrological sign I had. In New York, I abhorred hippies. In California I became a card-carrying hippie.

In California I became a parent: my parents became my children, especially as they aged and became sick, took to bed and were dying. That was a huge pivot. I took care of my father and my mother, and they no longer took care of me. Also, for much of my life, I'd been a cynic and a pessimist. I almost had to be after reading Henry James ("The Beast in the Jungle" and "The Turn of the Screw"), Joseph Conrad ("Heart of Darkness"), and T. S. Eliot ("The Waste Land"). Now I was an optimist and a purveyor of hope, which has almost always been the primary currency of California.

I suppose that many of the changes I experienced were the kinds of changes one might expect as one matures. I did feel more mature, wiser perhaps and less naïve. When I began to recognize the changes I'd been through, I cultivated them and embellished and exaggerated them. At work I identified with the president of the university, not the head of the union, who seemed to be a thug in a tie and jacket. I played it safe, didn't rock the boat, and aimed for promotions and a larger salary. When I made it to the top of the pyramid as the chair of the communication studies department, I looked back and was proud of the distance I had traveled, from near-felon to tenured professor.

I’m a ball of contradictions, but the contradictions don’t trouble me. Contradictions, I tell myself, are inevitable. They are to be embraced and treasured. Even the good, gray poet and American patriot, Walt Whitman, said, “Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

Now that I’m in my 80s, I don't have the energy to go on recreating myself. But I can’t stop myself, either. I’m in the habit of manufacturing new identities, and so I go on manufacturing them. Not long ago, when one of my ex-wives told me she was trying to write the third and last act of her life, I thought that was ridiculous. At that time I did not think of my life as a series of acts, but still I liked the idea of a third act. Or was it the fourth or fifth act? I had lost count. I wanted to do my best to die when and where and how I want. Maybe that’s impossible, but it’s worth a try. Watch me and see.

———

Jonah Raskin is a co-editor of *Caveat Lector*, a retired professor of communication, and author of eight poetry chapbooks, including *The Thief of Yellow Roses* (Regent Press, 2023), *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and the Birth of the Beat Generation*, and other books. He grew up reading the poetry of Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, and Allen Ginsberg; these days, he’s likely to be reading Emily Dickinson, Anna Akhmatova, and Rainer Maria Rilke.