

"Men who believe they are accomplishing something by speaking, speak in a different way from men who believe speaking is a waste of time." -- Neal Stephenson (pg 372?)

Wisdom Teeth

Wisdom. A few years ago, when Randy became tired of the ceaseless pressure in his lower jaw, he went out onto the north-central Californian oral-surgery market looking for someone to extract wisdom teeth. His health plan covered this, so price was not an obstacle. His dentist took one of those big cinemascopic wraparound X-rays of his entire lower head, the kind where they pack your mouth with half a roll of high-speed film and then clamp your head in a jig and the X-ray machine revolves around you spraying radiation through a slit, as the entire staff of the dentist's office hits the deck behind a lead wall, resulting in a printed image that is a none-too-appetizing distortion of his jaw into a single flat plane. Looking at it, Randy eschewed cruder analogies like "head of a man run over several times by steamroller while lying flat on his back" and tried to think of it as a mapping transformation—just one more in mankind's long history of ill-advisedly trying to represent three-D stuff on a flat plane. The corners of this coordinate plane were anchored by the wisdom teeth themselves, which even to the dentally unsophisticated Randy looked just a little disturbing in that each one was about the size of his thumb (though maybe this was just a distortion in the coordinate transform—like the famously swollen Greenland of Mercator) and they were pretty far away from any other teeth, which (logically) would seem to put them in parts of his body not normally considered to be within a dentist's purview, and they were at the wrong angle—not just a little crooked, but verging on upside down and backwards. At first he just chalked all of this up to the Greenland phenomenon. With his Jaw-map in hand, he hit the streets of Three Siblings-land looking for an oral surgeon. It was already beginning to work on him psychologically. Those were some big-ass teeth! Brought into being by the workings of relict DNA strands from the hunter-gatherer epoch. Designed for reducing tree bark and mammoth gristle to easily digestible paste. Now these boulders of living enamel were horrifyingly adrift in a

gracile cro-magnon head that simply did not have room for them. Think of the sheer extra weight he had been carrying around. Think of the use that priceless head-real-estate could have been put to. When they were gone, what would fill up the four giant molar—shaped voids in his melon? It was moot until he could find someone to get rid of them. But one oral surgeon after another turned him down. They would put the X-ray up on their light boxes, stare into it and blanch. Maybe it was just the pale light coining out of the light-boxes but Randy could have sworn they were blanching. Disingenuously—as if wisdom teeth normally grew someplace completely different—they all pointed out that the wisdom teeth were buried deep, deep, deep in Randy's head. The lowers were so far back in his jaw that removing them would practically break the jawbone in twain structurally; from there, one fustle move would send a surgical-steel demolition pick into his middle ear. The uppers were so deep in his skull that the roots were twined around the parts of his brain responsible for perceiving the color blue (on one side) and being able to suspend one's disbelief in bad movies (on the other) and between these teeth and actual air, light and saliva lay many strata of skin, meat, cartilage, major nerve-cables, brain-feeding arteries, bulging caches of lymph nodes, girders and trusses of bone, rich marrow that was working just fine thank you, a few glands whose functions were unsettlingly poorly understood, and many of the other things that made Randy Randy, all of them definitely filing into the category of sleeping dogs.

Oral surgeons, it seemed, were not comfortable delving more than elbow-deep into a patient's head. They had been living in big houses and driving to work in Mercedes-Benz sedans long before Randy had dragged his sorry ass into their offices with his horrifying X-ray and they had absolutely nothing to gain by even attempting to remove these— not so much wisdom teeth in the normal sense as apocalyptic portents from the Book of Revelations. The best way to remove these teeth was with a guillotine. None of these oral surgeons would even consider undertaking the extraction until Randy had signed a legal disclaimer too thick to staple, something that almost had to come in a three-ring binder, the general import of which was that one of the normal consequences of the procedure

was for the patient's head to end up floating in a jug of formaldehyde in a tourist trap just over the Mexican border. In this manner Randy wandered from one oral surgeon's office to another for a few weeks, like a teratonic outcast roving across a post-nuclear waste-land being driven out of one village after another by the brickbats of wretched, terrified peasants. Until one day when he walked into an office and the nurse at the front desk almost seemed to expect him, and led him back into an exam room for a private consult with the oral surgeon, who was busy doing something in one of his little rooms that involved putting a lot of bone dust into the air. The nurse bade him sit down, proffered coffee, then turned on the light box and took Randy's X-rays and stuck them up there. She took a step back, crossed her arms, and gazed at the pictures in wonder. "So," she murmured, "these are the famous wisdom teeth!"

That was the last oral surgeon Randy visited for a couple of years. He still had that relentless 24-Jam pressure in his head, but now his attitude had changed; instead of thinking of it as an anomalous condition easily remedied, it became his personal cross to bear, and really not all that bad compared to what some people had to suffer with. There, as in many other unexpected situations, his extensive fantasy-role-playing-game experience came in handy, as while spinning out various epic scenarios he had inhabited the minds, if not the bodies, of many characters who were missing limbs or had been burned over some algorithmically determined percentages of their bodies by dragon's breath or wizard's fireball, and it was part of the ethics of the game that you had to think pretty hard about what it would actually be like to live with such injuries and to play your character accordingly. By those standards, feeling all the time like you had an automotive jack embedded in your skull, ratcheting up the pressure one click every few months, was not even worth mentioning. It was lost in the somatic noise. So Randy lived that way for several years, as he and Charlene insensibly crept upwards on the socioeconomic scale and began finding them-selves at parties with people who had arrived in Mercedes-Benzes. It was at one of these parties where Randy overheard a dentist extolling some brilliant young oral surgeon who had just moved to the area. Randy had to bite his tongue not to start asking all kinds of questions about

just what “brilliant” meant in an oral-surgery context—questions that were motivated solely by curiosity but that the dentist would be likely to take the wrong way. Among coders it was pretty obvious who was brilliant and who wasn’t, but how could you tell a brilliant oral surgeon apart from a merely excellent one? It gets you into deep epistemological shit. Each set of wisdom teeth could only be extracted once. You couldn’t have a hundred oral surgeons extract the same set of wisdom teeth and then compare the results scientifically. And yet it was obvious from watching the look on this dentist’s face that this one particular oral surgeon, this new guy, was brilliant. So later Randy sidled up to this dentist and allowed as how he might have a challenge—he might personally embody a challenge—that would put this ineffable quality of oral-surgery brilliance to some good use, and could he have the guy’s name please.

A few days later he was talking to this oral surgeon, who was indeed young and conspicuously bright and had more in common with other brilliant people Randy had known—mostly hackers—than he did with other oral surgeons. He drove a pickup truck and kept fresh copies of TURING magazine in his waiting room. He had a beard, and a staff of nurses and other female acolytes who were all permanently aflutter over his brilliantness and followed him around steering him away from large obstacles and reminding him to eat lunch. This guy did not blanch when he saw Randy’s Mercato-roentgeno-gram on his light box. He actually lifted his chin up off his hand and stood a little straighter and spake not for several minutes. His head moved minutely every so often as he animadverted on a different corner of the coordinate plane, and admired the exquisitely grotesque situation of each tooth—its paleolithic heft and its long gnarled roots trailing off into parts of his head never charted by anatomists.

When he finally turned to face Randy, he had this priest like aura about him, a kind of holy ecstasy, a feeling of cosmic symmetry revealed, as if Randy’s jaw, and his brilliant oral-surgery brain, had been carved out by the architect of the Universe fifteen billion years ago specifically so that they could run into each other, here and now, in front of this light box. He did not say anything like, “Randy let me just show you how close the roots of this

one tooth are to the bundle of nerves that distinguishes you from a marmoset,” or “My schedule is incredibly frill and I was thinking of going into the real estate business anyway, or “Just a second while I call my lawyer.” He didn’t even say anything like, “Wow, those suckers are really in deep.” The young brilliant oral surgeon just said, “Okay,” stood there awkwardly for a few moments, and then walked out of the room in a display of social ineptness that totally cemented Randy’s faith in him. One of his minions eventually had Randy sign a legal disclaimer stipulating that it was perfectly all right if the oral surgeon decided to feed Randy’s entire body into a log chipper, but this, for once, seemed like just a formality and not the opening round in an inevitable Bleak House-like litigation saga.

And so finally the big day came, and Randy took care to enjoy his breakfast because he knew that, considering the nerve damage he was about to incur, this might be the last time in his life that he would be able to taste food, or even chew it. The oral surgeon’s minions all looked at Randy in awe when he actually walked in the door of their office, like My god he actually showed up! then flew reassuringly into action. Randy sat down in the chair and they gave him an injection and then the oral surgeon came in and asked him what, if anything, was the difference between Windows 95 and Windows NT. “This is one of these conversations the sole purpose of which is to make it obvious when I have lost consciousness, isn’t it?” Randy said. “Actually, there is a secondary purpose, which is that I am considering making the jump and wanted to get some of your thoughts about that,” the oral surgeon said.

“Well,” said Randy, “I have a lot more experience with UNIX than with NT, but from what I’ve seen, it appears that NT is really a decent enough operating system, and certainly more of a serious effort than Windows.” He paused to draw breath and then noticed that suddenly everything was different. The oral surgeon and his minions were still there and occupying roughly the same positions in his field of vision as they had been when he started to utter this sentence, but now the oral surgeon’s glasses were askew and the lenses misted with blood, and his face was all sweaty, and his mask flecked with tiny bits of stuff that very much looked like it had

come from pretty far down in Randy's body, and the air in the room was murky with aerosolized bone, and his nurses were limp and haggard and looked like they could use makeovers, face-lifts, and weeks at the beach. Randy's chest and lap, and the floor, were littered with bloody wads and hastily torn-open medical supply wrappers. The back of his head was sore from being battered against the head-rest by the recoil of the young brilliant oral surgeon's cranial jack-hammer. When he tried to finish his sentence ("so if you're willing to pay the premium I think the switch to NT would be very well advised") he noticed that his mouth was jammed full of something that prevented speech. The oral surgeon pulled his mask down off his face and scratched his sweat-soaked beard. He was staring not at Randy but at a point very far away. He heaved a big, slow sigh. His hands were shaking.

"What day is it?" Randy mumbled through cotton.

"As I told you before," the brilliant young oral surgeon said, "we charge for wisdom tooth extractions on a sliding scale, depending on the degree of difficulty." He paused for a moment, groping for words. "In your case I'm afraid that we will be charging you the maximum on all four." Then he got up and shambled out of the room, weighed down, Randy thought, not so much by the stress of his job as by the knowledge that no one was ever going to give him a Nobel prize for what he had just accomplished. [Pages 776-781]