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The Soft Imperative

I ask my wife, “What language do they speak in Macedonia?”

It’s a Friday morning. This is our pre-breakfast quiet time. Usually we don’t say much early in the morning. What is there to always say? She’s reading a book about the Spanish Civil War and drinking her first cup of coffee. I’ve just clicked off the New Yorker, which I’m partially reading online these days. Anthony Lane has yawned at “Black Mass,” the new Johnny Depp movie, comparing it and Depp, unfavorably, to “Taxi” and James Cagney. I’m about to spread fig jam on a slice of toast.

She turns a page. “Macedonian? Or maybe Greek.” She looks up. “You really should read this book. You never read the books I suggest.”

“I read *The Swerve*,” I say. “I started to read *The Skin*.”

“Started.”

It’s a new jar of jam. The jar pops when I twist the cap off. “Brian’s Fig Marmelade,” I read aloud. “From Macedonia. You wouldn’t think there would be a guy named Brian in Macedonia.”

She picks up the jar, squints at the fine print, and hands it back.

Between slices of toast, I borrow her iPad. “You’re right, Macedonian. It says the Macedonians are slavophones.”

She nods.

“Slavophones,” I say, waiting for her to make eye contact. “I would hate to be called a slavophone.” Another pregnant pause. “How about you?”

She taps her spoon against her cup. It’s code. More coffee. I’ve told her she should just say “Coffee me!” when she wants more, the way, back in college days, guys would shout “Beer me!” That was fun. Verbing the noun added to the casual derangement you felt on a beerful afternoon.

I make her a second cappuccino. This morning, thanks to “coffee me,” which my wife refuses to say, and thanks to Mount Everest and the New Yorker, I’m thinking about verbs. Anthony Lane also reviewed the new movie “Everest.” Too many characters, he writes, most of them under-developed. “The one thing they have in common,” he observes, “is the indomitable urge to use the word ‘summit’ as an intransitive verb. That takes guts.” As in, I would guess, We are here to summit, guys! Or: No, you go first. I’ve summited a few times already.

“Here you go.” I set her coffee down, admiring the foam. “Enjoy.”

“You know I hate that.”

I know she hates that, the universal server-ism you hear in restaurants these days. The plates are all delivered, the wine glasses filled, we’re ready to eat, and the server says, “Enjoy.” Not enjoy your dinner. Not enjoy yourselves. Just enjoy. The locution irks her no end.

It irks me too, but not no end.

Later in the day I’m driving over to the blood depot, a couple miles from the house. Every eight weeks I shed a pint. I do it both for the common good and for my personal benefit. (Back in college, the old beer-me days, I learned to call this psychological egoism. There’s no such thing as a selfless act. You beered your friends knowing they would beer you back. It was a social contract.) According to *The American Journal of Epidemiology*, blood donors are 88 percent less likely to suffer heart attack. Old blood has higher viscosity than the new stuff you make. So bleed me. I’m happy to give.

On the drive over there, I stop at a light behind a car with a personalized license plate: Be Well. It reminds me of an old friend, David Marvin Cooper, a laid back guy who always used to say, Be cool. It meant go with the flow, be open to the universe, or, sometimes, a little more sternly, don't be bogue (dude). Be well says much the same thing, maybe more. Roll down your window and smell the roses. Dial down the Rush Limbaugh and turn up the Mozart. Accept road work as a part of life. It's a philosophical concept. It gentles us, reminding strangers to be mindful. This driver is concerned, in his or her generalized and impersonal way, with way more than my wellbeing or my wellness.

A physician I saw for a short time, whenever I left her office, would touch me on the shoulder and say: Feel better. She also said to apply ice, take your pain meds, no stairs. But then she capped it off with a holistic prescription that went beyond mere better-getting.

These are the soft state-of-being imperatives available to us today, helping us to be well and good.

The blood center is packed. I've made an appointment, but I still have to wait. I pretend to read the Red Cross book for a few minutes, picking out some diseases I might want to check up on (babesiosis, filariasis, spondylosis), then look at old news in used magazines, too many of which are about golf. During the interview and Q and A, the nurse takes my temperature and blood pressure, examines my arms. She asks me if I had a good breakfast, if I've had plenty of liquids. I tell her about Brian's Fig Marmalade, trying to remember, as I do, if Macedonia is on the list of places the Red Cross is not cool with.

"Right or left?" she asks, meaning, Which arm?

I tell her I'm left-leaning. For me, it's part of being well.

On the table, I make a fist. She inflates the blood pressure cuff and says I have nice veins. When the bleeding starts, I relax and roll the thingie in my hand. I watch local news on TV and try to dislodge a few fig seeds from my teeth. At one time, giving blood made me light-headed. Donating at work one day, I sat up too fast and felt a radical wobble in my legs. A blue shirt sat me back down and made me put my head between my knees. Another time I got the paper bag treatment. That was then. These days I'm manning up. I can give and give.

The nurse comes by again to check on me and my bag of blood. "Almost done," she says. "You doing okay?"

I tell her I'm good. And well as well.

Wrapping my arm when it's finished, she points to the juice and cookie table. "No strenuous activity today," she says. "Watch a little TV. Do a little reading."

On the way home I see the usual guy on the usual corner, holding a cardboard sign. In black felt pen he has written "PLEASE HELP." Word has it there's a meth ring going around. This guy might be an affiliate. Wouldn't you know it, I come to a full stop right next to him. "Look at their teeth," I've been told. But I can't. I just sit. Between me and him, a few feet, a universe. Somewhere in between the two categoricals—Get a job! Feed the poor—is the soft imperative, an intransitive zone. Be well. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him wave his little sign. There's no telling what help is, what's good for both of us.

The light changes.

Go.