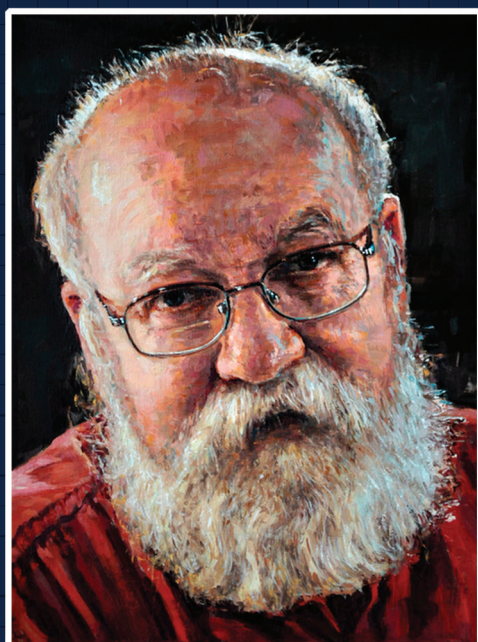


DANIEL C.
DENNETT



I'VE BEEN
THINKING

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I've Been Thinking

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To my family

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Prologue

LUCKY DAN

*I've been lucky all my life, it almost makes me
believe in the stars.*

—Tom Stoppard, 1986, in a letter to his mother

*I've never thought of myself as lucky, I'm a coward.
That's why I can't be a gambler. But I work very hard.
The harder I work, the luckier I get!*

—Alex Bird (famed British “punter,” or gambler), *Sunday
Observer* (London), April 24, 1983

ON OCTOBER 24, 2006, I WAS RUSHED BY AMBULANCE from my office at Tufts University to the emergency room at Lahey Clinic, where doctors discovered the problem: the inner and outer layers of my aorta had come apart—an *aortic dissection*—and I could die at any moment if the blood from my heart burst out into my chest cavity. The day before I had been in Mackerel Cove on Swan's Island in Maine on my sailboat, *Xanthippe*. This was the last cruise of the season, joined by my Swedish friend Bo Dahlbom and his son Fredrik, and as I slowly pulled on the heavy anchor line I felt a slight pain in my chest, reminding me of the pain I had felt seven years earlier when I'd had a “silent heart attack” that had led to a triple-bypass operation. We sailed back to Blue Hill in a stiff headwind, moored the boat, took off the heavy sails, put the inflatable dinghy on the roof of my car, and went back to the farm, before I made a quick trip to the local hospital, where I was told I had *not* had a heart attack but should see my cardiologist as

soon as I could. The next day we drove to Tufts, where I asked the department secretary if she had any Tylenol, and she wisely called the ambulance instead.

One of the little-known side effects of open-heart surgery is ministrokes caused by debris from the operation clogging up the capillaries in the brain, and my cardiologist explicitly warned the surgical team that since my mind was my life, they should strive to avoid turning me into a “pumphead”—the ugly term heart surgeons use in private for those whose brains are damaged by the heart-lung machine. After the operation, before they removed me from the machine, they *reversed the flow of blood to my brain*, sending it into the veins and out of the arteries, hoping to flush out any debris that was about to disable my *res cogitans*, my thinking thing (my brain, not, as Descartes would have it, a distinct and immaterial substance). So I’ve been brainwashed, quite literally. Did it work? As soon as I could sit up in my hospital bed after the operation I got out my trusty laptop and wrote a short piece to see if I still had my marbles. It was put on Edge.org, where it attracted a lot of attention. What do you think?

Thank Goodness! (November 2, 2006)

There are no atheists in foxholes, according to an old but dubious saying, and there is at least a little anecdotal evidence in favor of it in the notorious cases of famous atheists who have emerged from near-death experiences to announce to the world that they have changed their minds. The British philosopher Sir A. J. Ayer, who died in 1989, is a fairly recent example. Here is another anecdote to ponder.

Two weeks ago, I was rushed by ambulance to a hospital where it was determined by c-t scan that I had a “dissection of the aorta”—the lining of the main output vessel carrying blood from my heart had been torn up, creating a two-channel pipe where there should only be one. Fortunately for me, the fact that

I'd had a coronary artery bypass graft seven years ago probably saved my life, since the tangle of scar tissue that had grown like ivy around my heart in the intervening years reinforced the aorta, preventing catastrophic leakage from the tear in the aorta itself. After a nine-hour surgery, in which my heart was stopped entirely and my body and brain were chilled down to about 45 degrees to prevent brain damage from lack of oxygen until they could get the heart-lung machine pumping, I am now the proud possessor of a new aorta up to the aortic arch, made of strong Dacron fabric tubing sewn into shape on the spot by the surgeon, attached to my heart along with a carbon-fiber valve that makes a reassuring little click every time my heart beats.

As I now enter a gentle period of recuperation, I have much to reflect on, about the harrowing experience itself and even more about the flood of supporting messages I've received since word got out about my latest adventure. Friends were anxious to learn if I had had a near-death experience, and if so, what effect it had had on my longstanding public atheism. Had I had an epiphany? Was I going to follow in the footsteps of Ayer (who recovered his aplomb and insisted a few days later "what I should have said is that my experiences have weakened, not my belief that there is no life after death, but my inflexible attitude towards that belief"), or was my atheism still intact and unchanged?

Yes, I did have an epiphany. I saw with greater clarity than ever before in my life that when I say "Thank goodness!" this is not merely a euphemism for "Thank God!" (We atheists don't believe that there is any God to thank.) I really do mean thank goodness! There is a lot of goodness in this world, and more goodness every day, and this fantastic human-made fabric of excellence is genuinely responsible for the fact that I am alive today. It is a worthy recipient of the gratitude I feel today, and I want to celebrate that fact here and now. **Copyrighted Material**

To whom, then, do I owe a debt of gratitude? To the cardiologist who has kept me alive and ticking for years, and who

swiftly and confidently rejected the original diagnosis of nothing worse than pneumonia. To the surgeons, neurologists, anesthesiologists, and the perfusionist, who kept my systems going for many hours under daunting circumstances. To the dozen or so physician assistants, and to nurses and physical therapists and x-ray technicians and a small army of phlebotomists so deft that you hardly know they are drawing your blood, and the people who brought the meals, kept my room clean, did the mountains of laundry generated by such a messy case, wheel-chaired me to x-ray, and so forth. These people came from Uganda, Kenya, Liberia, Haiti, the Philippines, Croatia, Russia, China, Korea, India—and the United States, of course—and I have never seen more impressive mutual respect, as they helped each other out and checked each other's work. But for all their teamwork, this local gang could not have done their jobs without the huge background of contributions from others. I remember with gratitude my late friend and Tufts colleague, physicist Allan Cormack, who shared the Nobel Prize for his invention of the c-t scanner. Allan—you have posthumously saved yet another life, but who's counting? The world is better for the work you did. Thank goodness. Then there is the whole system of medicine, both the science and the technology, without which the best-intentioned efforts of individuals would be roughly useless. So I am grateful to the editorial boards and referees, past and present, of *Science*, *Nature*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Lancet*, and all the other institutions of science and medicine that keep churning out improvements, detecting and correcting flaws.

Do I worship modern medicine? Is science my religion? Not at all; there is no aspect of modern medicine or science that I would exempt from the most rigorous scrutiny, and I can readily identify a host of serious problems that still need to be fixed. That's easy to do, of course, because the worlds of medicine and science are already engaged in the most obsessive, intensive, and humble self-assessments yet known to human institutions, and they regularly

make public the results of their self-examinations. Moreover, this open-ended rational criticism, imperfect as it is, is the secret of the astounding success of these human enterprises. There are measurable improvements every day. Had I had my blasted aorta a decade ago, there would have been no prayer of saving me. It's hardly routine today, but the odds of my survival were actually not so bad (these days, roughly 33 percent of aortic dissection patients die in the first twenty-four hours after onset without treatment, and the odds get worse by the hour thereafter).

One thing in particular struck me when I compared the medical world on which my life now depended with the religious institutions I have been studying so intensively in recent years. One of the gentler, more supportive themes to be found in every religion (so far as I know) is the idea that what really matters is what is in your heart: if you have good intentions, and are trying to do what (God says) is right, that is all anyone can ask. Not so in medicine! If you are wrong—especially if you should have known better—your good intentions count for almost nothing. And whereas taking a leap of faith and acting without further scrutiny of one's options is often celebrated by religions, it is considered a grave sin in medicine. A doctor whose devout faith in his personal revelations about how to treat aortic aneurysm led him to engage in untested trials with human patients would be severely reprimanded if not driven out of medicine altogether. There are exceptions, of course. A few swashbuckling, risk-taking pioneers are tolerated and (if they prove to be right) eventually honored, but they can exist only as rare exceptions to the ideal of the methodical investigator who scrupulously rules out alternative theories before putting his own into practice. Good intentions and inspiration are simply not enough.

In other words, whereas religions may serve a benign purpose by letting many people feel comfortable with the level of morality they themselves can attain, no religion holds its members to the high standards of moral responsibility that the secular world

of science and medicine does! And I'm not just talking about the standards "at the top"—among the surgeons and doctors who make life or death decisions every day. I'm talking about the standards of conscientiousness endorsed by the lab technicians and meal preparers, too. This tradition puts its faith in the unlimited application of reason and empirical inquiry, checking and re-checking, and getting in the habit of asking "What if I'm wrong?" Appeals to faith or membership are never tolerated. Imagine the reception a scientist would get if he tried to suggest that others couldn't replicate his results because they just didn't share the faith of the people in his lab! And, to return to my main point, it is the goodness of this tradition of reason and open inquiry that I thank for my being alive today.

What, though, do I say to those of my religious friends (and yes, I have quite a few religious friends) who have had the courage and honesty to tell me that they have been praying for me? I have gladly forgiven them, for there are few circumstances more frustrating than not being able to help a loved one in any more direct way. I confess to regretting that I could not pray (sincerely) for my friends and family in time of need, so I appreciate the urge, however clearly I recognize its futility. I translate my religious friends' remarks readily enough into one version or another of what my fellow brights [an attempt by me and others to popularize a new term for unbelievers; see chapter 27] have been telling me: "I've been thinking about you, and wishing with all my heart [another ineffective but irresistible self-indulgence] that you come through this OK." The fact that these dear friends have been thinking of me in this way, and have taken an effort to let me know, is in itself, without any need for a supernatural supplement, a wonderful tonic. These messages from my family and from friends around the world have been literally heart-warming in my case, and I am grateful for the boost in morale (to truly manic heights, I fear!) that it has produced in me. But I am not joking when I say that I have had to forgive my friends who said that they were pray-

ing for me. I have resisted the temptation to respond “Thanks, I appreciate it, but did you also sacrifice a goat?” I feel about this the same way I would feel if one of them said “I just paid a voodoo doctor to cast a spell for your health.” What a gullible waste of money that could have been spent on more important projects! Don’t expect me to be grateful, or even indifferent. I do appreciate the affection and generosity of spirit that motivated you, but wish you had found a more reasonable way of expressing it.

But isn’t this awfully harsh? Surely it does the world no harm if those who can honestly do so pray for me! No, I’m not at all sure about that. For one thing, if they really wanted to do something useful, they could devote their prayer time and energy to some pressing project that they can do something about. For another, we now have quite solid grounds (e.g., the recently released Benson study at Harvard) for believing that intercessory prayer simply doesn’t work. Anybody whose practice shrugs off that research is subtly undermining respect for the very goodness I am thanking. If you insist on keeping the myth of the effectiveness of prayer alive, you owe the rest of us a justification in the face of the evidence. Pending such a justification, I will excuse you for indulging in your tradition; I know how comforting tradition can be. But I want you to recognize that what you are doing is morally problematic at best. If you would even consider filing a malpractice suit against a doctor who made a mistake in treating you, or suing a pharmaceutical company that didn’t conduct all the proper control tests before selling you a drug that harmed you, you must acknowledge your tacit appreciation of the high standards of rational inquiry to which the medical world holds itself, and yet you continue to indulge in a practice for which there is no known rational justification at all, and take yourself to be actually making a contribution. (Try to imagine your outrage if a pharmaceutical company responded to your suit by blithely replying “But we prayed good and hard for the success of the drug! What more do you want?”)

The best thing about saying thank goodness in place of thank God is that there really are lots of ways of repaying your debt to goodness—by setting out to create more of it, for the benefit of those to come. Goodness comes in many forms, not just medicine and science. Thank goodness for the music of, say, Randy Newman, which could not exist without all those wonderful pianos and recording studios, to say nothing of the musical contributions of every great composer from Bach through Wagner to Scott Joplin and the Beatles. Thank goodness for fresh drinking water in the tap, and food on our table. Thank goodness for fair elections and truthful journalism. If you want to express your gratitude to goodness, you can plant a tree, feed an orphan, buy books for schoolgirls in the Islamic world, or contribute in thousands of other ways to the manifest improvement of life on this planet now and in the near future.

Or you can thank God—but the very idea of repaying God is ludicrous. What could an omniscient, omnipotent Being (the Man Who Has Everything?) do with any paltry repayments from you? (And besides, according to the Christian tradition God has already redeemed the debt for all time, by sacrificing his own son. Try to repay that loan!) Yes, I know, those themes are not to be understood literally; they are symbolic. I grant it, but then the idea that by thanking God you are actually doing some good has got to be understood to be just symbolic, too. I prefer real good to symbolic good.

Still, I excuse those who pray for me. I see them as like tenacious scientists who resist the evidence for theories they don't like long after a graceful concession would have been the appropriate response. I applaud you for your loyalty to your own position—but remember: loyalty to tradition is not enough. You've got to keep asking yourself: What if I'm wrong? In the long run, I think religious people can be asked to live up to the same moral standards as secular people in science and medicine.

I've published seven books and dozens of articles in the sixteen years since that operation, and packed a lifetime of adventures around the world into that supplement of time granted by the goodness of those around me. How lucky can anybody get?

I once participated in a weekend gathering in Seattle of very smart high school kids, designed to inspire them to great achievements. There was an all-star cast, with several Nobel laureates, the novelist Amy Tan, the Google boys Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, and other notables. What struck me about the fifteen-minute talks each of us gave to these attentive youngsters was that most of us focused on the role of luck: we had just happened to be in the right place at the right time, found the right mentors, made a few lucky stabs in the dark. This intense modesty was meant to put them at ease, but wouldn't it have an unintended side effect? "Don't think there's a reliable path to greatness. Just wing it, and if you're lucky you'll end up like us!" Were we just a convention of lottery winners telling others that there was no secret to our success?

I recently received an email from Peter Godfrey-Smith, the great philosopher/scuba diver/octopus researcher:

Hi Dan,

I am reading a stack of Mike Levin's work [my Tufts colleague with whom I had recently coauthored a paper].

How is it that you always pick up the ultra-interesting stuff so quickly??

Been doing it for a lot of decades.

Best wishes,

Peter

As it happens, I'd just been mulling over a version of the same question while composing this memoir. Luck, of course, does play a big role, especially at the outset, when part of the luck includes hitting on a good way to parlay the early luck into more luck—the rich

get richer, as one says. Peter's question—luckily for me—suggested an answer I've only recently come to appreciate fully: he doesn't ask how I *came up with* the ultra-interesting stuff; he asks how I *picked it up* so quickly. I'm a pack rat, a magpie, always on the lookout for a useful tidbit. "This might come in handy someday," I think, as I add a discarded gear or connecting rod or other piece of machinery to my ever-expanding collection of thingamabobs, gadgets, and tools in my home workshop. My thinking machine—my brain—is similarly provisioned with lots of useful stuff I've picked up. I presented a gallery of over six dozen of my favorites in *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (2013). I love to *fix things* with whatever might serve, and for all these decades, I've always wanted to know *how* "the magic" works. I like to quote a passage in Lee Siegel's excellent book on Indian street magic, *Net of Magic: Wonders and Deceptions in India* (1991):

"I'm writing a book on magic," I explain, and I'm asked, "Real magic?" By real magic people mean miracles, thaumaturgical acts, and supernatural powers. "No," I answer: "Conjuring tricks, not real magic." Real magic, in other words, refers to the magic that is not real, while the magic that is real, that can actually be done, is not real magic. (p. 425)

Many people are eager to protect "real magic" in one way or another, and many of them find philosophy to be the ideal profession for this campaign. I'd say it is the distinguishing characteristic of one kind of philosopher. But then there are the antiphilosophers, who look at the mess made by the others and say to themselves, "Fie! I'm going to try to clear this all up!" My guides and heroes have been the folks—scientists and philosophers—who have hunches about how the tricks are done, how the illusions are generated. They are not just skeptics and debunkers but constructive explainers, groping for models or theories to replace the armchair verities of the philosophers with testable ideas.

Way back in my dissertation in 1965 I saw that the best—the only—way of making sense of the mind and consciousness is through evolution by natural selection on many levels, and I began sketching an open-ended framework for how that might run. And I kept philosophical phisticuffs in the background. My approach struck a chord in researchers in several different disciplines. They *got it* in one way or another and saw how they could add a few pieces to my emerging picture and fix a few flaws in their own work. They invited me to be a friendly interlocutor. I didn't have to go to them, philosopher's hat in hand, and ask if I could kibitz; they sought me out.

I somehow managed to create (or, more accurately, preside over the emergence of) an intellectual magnet that just kept bringing supersmart people into my orbit. I got used to being surrounded by people who knew a whole lot more than I did, and I was always happy to be tutored, especially when I disagreed with them. Some of my favorite arguments and examples have been forged in heated disputes with thinkers whose positions I largely reject, for reasons I now understand better than when I first confronted them. The physicist Wolfgang Pauli famously dismissed another physicist's ideas as "not even wrong," and I have opportunistically tried to fix some of the wrong ideas presented by physicist Roger Penrose, linguist Noam Chomsky, neuroscientist Christof Koch, and evolutionary biologists Stephen Jay Gould and David Sloan Wilson, among others. Then there were my long-standing battles with my fellow philosophers Thomas Nagel, Jerry Fodor, John Searle, and David Chalmers. Where would I be without all these brilliant mistakes to correct, with the help of my thinking tools? (For instance, I harnessed John Horton Conway's delicious Game of Life to find a middle ground between Fodor's unappealing "industrial-strength realism" and the equally unpersuasive "eliminativism" of Paul Churchland, in "Real Patterns" [1991], one of my most influential papers.) I won't have room to dwell on all the important details, but the endnotes provide links for those who want to check out my repairs and decide for themselves.

I have (so far) led a remarkably adventurous and fulfilling life, way beyond the most extravagant fantasies of my youth—and I was a cocksure young man with vaulting ambition. How did it happen? Was it all just luck, or “connections,” or may I claim some credit for getting myself into my current happy state? Do I in any sense *deserve* the benefits I now enjoy?

I believe in free will, in a nonmagical sense that really matters. I think those who do good in the world deserve praise and rewards and those who do evil deserve to be punished, if they are competent self-controlling adults. I also believe that this kind of free will is not threatened by determinism, and have devoted three books and dozens of articles to defending this initially counterintuitive claim. Determinism is the claim that “there is at any instant exactly one possible future,” but this does not imply *inevitability*. We, and other autonomous agents, avoid things every day. Determinism doesn’t “tie your hands,” nor does it prevent you from making and then reconsidering decisions, turning over a new leaf, learning from your mistakes. Determinism is not a puppeteer controlling you. If you’re a normal adult, you have enough self-control to maintain your autonomy, and hence responsibility, in a world full of seductions and distractions. But even if I’m right that determinism is no threat to responsibility or autonomy, this wouldn’t settle the question of whether or not I’m just a preternaturally lucky person who has made the most of the good fortune that has been my lot.

Actually, I haven’t made the most of it. Somebody with a stronger character could have done much more. I have a lazy streak, I’m an undisciplined reader who is easily distracted, and I have an insatiable appetite for time wasters such as the comics in the newspaper, crossword puzzles, Scrabble (and better: Frigate Bird, an intense game played with Scrabble tiles but no board), sudoku, and Rubik’s Cube. A brilliant childhood friend of mine became so addicted to playing bridge that he flunked out of college, and I could have done the same had I found a good partner at just the wrong time. I almost made the mistake at Harvard of not signing up for a course that would inter-

fere with my late-morning game of pool at the Hasty Pudding Club! What was I thinking?

When I reflect on my narrow escapes from dissolution, I credit that very reflectiveness, which has often saved me in the nick of time. That and my willingness, when confronting a difficult moral decision, to ask—and *take*—the advice of friends, chief among them Susan, my wife of sixty years.

There are lessons to be learned from how I handled my own education and how I became such a *good thinker*. (The philosopher Don Ross once said of me, “Dan believes modesty is a virtue to be reserved for special occasions.”) I wouldn’t be writing this book if I didn’t think I had something I could usefully impart to readers—the secrets of my success, my good tricks and policies, my ways of dealing with people and problems. There are many philosophers who are more clever, much better scholars, quicker in argument, vastly better at the technical moves philosophers make than I am. They will tell you so, and I will agree with them. But as Gilbert Ryle, my thesis supervisor at Oxford, told a colleague of mine over a few beers in Salzburg back in the ’60s, “There are much cleverer chaps than Dennett, but he has a fire in his belly.” I’ve gratefully leaned on that crutch now for more than half a century.

As you can see, I am not modest, but I am not overconfident either, like some thinkers I know. John Searle, one of my most aggressive critics, is actually a lot like me: sure of himself, impatient with nit-picking philosophers, willing to brand respected trains of thought as nonsense. When he encounters a philosophical argument or position that is difficult for him to comprehend, he rephrases it in his own terms—in terms that he understands. That’s just what I do too. But when Searle’s digest of the difficult idea strikes him as absurd, he thereupon says so, vehemently. I don’t. I reserve judgment. I reflect: these people defending this view don’t seem to be fools; maybe I’ve misconstrued them. I go back to their work to see if I can find a better version of their view. Sometimes I can’t, and then I can be as tough a critic as Searle. But sometimes—in fact, usually—I can find

a better version of the challenging idea, and then I've learned something. Searle's world is full of philosophical nincompoops; mine is full of philosophers who are learned, intelligent, hard-working but often self-defeating presenters of their best ideas. Why would anybody want to be a philosopher if philosophers in general were as stupid as Searle seems to think? (Sir Karl Popper is another philosopher whose low opinion of those who disagreed with him has made me wonder how he could stand being a philosopher.)

I wasn't always as confident as I am today about the topics I work on. In fact, I had long, scary periods when I wondered if I was cut out for this work at all and seriously considered abandoning philosophy and pursuing sculpture as more than a hobby. I'll say more about those doldrums later. Now, before I turn to the tale of my progress through academia, I want to make two generalizations about philosophers: Anybody who becomes a philosopher and never has any serious doubts about whether this is a wise life choice is not a very good philosopher. Anybody who never doubts their own abilities as a philosopher is not a very good philosopher. Yes, there are dozens, hundreds, of "distinguished" philosophers who show no signs (to me) of having harbored these insecurities, but I think their work is in general superficial and meretricious—dazzling footwork on issues of no real importance. I call it working out "the higher-order truths of chmess." "Chmess" is my name for a variation on chess in which the king can move two squares in any direction. It's probably never been played or ever been worth playing, and it's not worth finding out. Proving truths about chmess is no doubt as challenging as proving truths about chess, but much less important. Nobody cares or should care. The neuropsychologist Donald Hebb once observed, "If it's not worth doing, it's not worth doing well." Many dusty corners of academia—not just philosophy—would be depopulated if Hebb's rule were applied vigorously, but I strongly support the idea that nobody is qualified to judge which intellectual pursuits are not worth tolerating and even funding, so it is best to acknowledge that

academia is in some measure a strikingly luxurious enterprise, keeping alive thousands of projects that will never “pay for themselves” in any recognizable way. We mustn’t allow academia to become just another training ground for whatever workers seem to be required in the near future. Let a thousand flowers bloom, but remember that most of them will wilt or die.

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I'VE BEEN THINKING

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Part One

OFF TO A FAST START

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Solving a problem in Beirut, 1946

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CHILDHOOD

I WAS BORN IN BOSTON IN 1942, THE ONLY GRANDSON OF Daniel C. Dennett, who was a revered doctor in the Boston suburb of Winchester, and the son of Daniel C. Dennett Jr. I hated the “III” suffix (it seemed snobbish), so I became just Daniel C. Dennett, to the occasional confusion of librarians, who couldn’t see how I could have a son who published “Pirenne and Muhammad” in *Speculum* in 1948. My father was a historian of early Islam and a master spy in the Office of Strategic Services and then the Central Intelligence Group, the forerunner of the CIA. He was killed on a mission in a plane crash in Ethiopia in 1947, when we were living in Beirut. My younger sister, Charlotte, an investigative journalist and lawyer, has published a book, *Follow the Pipelines* (2022), about her attempts to get to the bottom of that convoluted mystery, and my sisters and I were recently invited to the annual memorial service at the CIA, which has finally decided that Father was in fact the first CIA agent killed in action. He now has a star carved into the white marble Memorial Wall in the entrance to the Langley headquarters. My mother, Ruth, was an English teacher who left Minnesota to see the world, traveling to Beirut in the early ’30s to teach at the American Community School (affiliated with the American University of Beirut), where she met my father, who was teaching there while researching for his PhD at Harvard in Islamic history and gallivanting all over the Middle East, learning Arabic and making friends.

Since my father died when I was just five years old, my memories (of memories of memories) of him are all quite foggy and rosy, but I adored him and loved to ride with him in his special Jeep. He

even took me on nondangerous missions, having a young child in tow being a great disguise for an agent. A memento of one of those missions is two small scars on my ears; the Bedouins he was visiting had decided that I should have my ears pierced. Mother removed the strings as soon as I got back home in Beirut, but the closed slits are still apparent. Having heard wonderful tales of his adventures and accomplishments over the years from old family friends who knew him well, I gather he was a charismatic and charming fellow, a natural center of attention. At Phillips Exeter Academy, where I spent the last two years of high school, I got to know the sons of quite a few famous dads—novelists, diplomats, scientists, plutocrats—and noticed a syndrome among them: Some of these offspring (not all) were almost disabled by their efforts to be worthy intellectual companions to their brilliant dads. They were dauntingly articulate and knowing, very well read, intellectually superior in every way, it seemed, but often unable to get to the finish line—to get the term paper written, the problem set completed, the book review composed. I have often wondered whether I could have led the life I have led in the shadow of such an intellectual hero and adventurer had my father lived on. It was hard enough trying to live up to his near legendary status among my mother's friends, who would often insist, sometimes with tears in their eyes, that I was an uncanny replica of him, right down to the way I told stories and used words.

In Beirut, we lived in diplomatic comfort. America had no embassy in Lebanon then, only a legation, and Father was the cultural attaché. Our elegant house, right in the heart of Ras Beirut, on Bliss Street (then *rue Bliss*), had a high iron fence around a large garden, and we had a cook, an Armenian nanny, and a “chauffeur” who was often a babysitter/bodyguard for me and my older sister, Cynthia. Not a bad beginning for a life of intellectual adventure, with a gazelle (whom I named Babar, of course) in the garden and a house full of books and records and art.

For years I dreamed of somehow topping one of my father's most celebrated coups from the '30s. Fluent in German (and French and

Arabic), he followed the European press in Beirut and noted the passing of Peter Graf von Spaur, who left his large hilltop villa in Salzburg to his aging housekeeper. Dad wrote her a letter immediately, inquiring whether she would be interested in renting the furnished villa to him and his friends for the summer, while she figured out what to do. She replied gratefully that this would be an excellent plan and offered him breathtakingly easy terms. He immediately wrote to his Harvard friends and others who were studying in Europe, telling them of a grand house party he was hosting in Salzburg all summer long. They were all invited to join, staying as long as they liked so long as they contributed to the cost of meals and rent. Many showed up, filling the bedrooms, while the housekeeper cooked the meals and kept the villa intact. Regular concerts in the Mozarteum down in the town were followed by walking back up the hill with their neighbor, Richard Strauss, humming tunes and discussing the concert. The young harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick could be counted on to play impromptu concerts on the veranda, while other musicians and artists and historians carried on through the night. My mother was one of the long-term guests, and in later years would get quite starry-eyed when recalling those golden Austrian nights.

After Father was killed in the plane crash, Mother packed up the family and our nanny and we returned to Massachusetts to live first with Grandpa and Grandma Dennett in Winchester and then in a modest house in the same town, purchased with the life insurance money Mother received from the government. She cleverly called the two local rug dealers, Messrs. Mouradian and Boodakian, and they arranged a series of, well, debutante parties introducing the nanny, Mary Bedomian, to dozens of eligible Armenian American bachelors. Two days before her allowed year of residence elapsed, she married a fine young garage mechanic, Johnny Mkhjian, and settled down in nearby Watertown, which has a large Armenian community. We considered them extended family and kept Beirut memories and customs alive with them for decades.

Mother went to work in Boston as a social-studies editor at the

textbook publisher Ginn & Co., while Edna (“Cookie”) Anderson, a sort of Mary Poppins, became our second mother, running the household, packing our lunch boxes, correcting our few minor transgressions. Cookie had been a society woman, living in Newton with her husband, a successful interior decorator, but when the Depression hit they lost everything, and her husband left her with a mountain of debt. We were, I think, the third or fourth family she’d worked for, and she stayed with us for almost twenty years, becoming a beloved part of the family. Mother walked to the train station every weekday morning, commuting to Boston, and walked home from the station in the early evening, where Cookie and the kids would be waiting for her, supper ready after she’d had her bourbon on the rocks and read the mail. Some evenings I watched Mother editing textbook manuscripts at a card table in the living room. She would often explain to me what was wrong or flabby or misleading in a sentence she was surgically revising, a lesson that sank in. She instilled in me a sense of duty, really, to write clearly and forcefully.

Who were my surrogate father figures? First, there was Sherman Russell, who had been Father’s best friend in high school and from whom Father had extracted a solemn promise to take care of “Ruth and the kids” if anything happened to him in Beirut. Sherm kept his promise magnificently and came close to proposing to Mother. (He never married but I adored him and was all in favor of the marriage that never happened.) Sherm met us when our boat landed in New York City, and after a few days in the city—including a trip to the Bronx Zoo—he brought us to Winchester. It was Sherm who gave me my beloved Erector set, which got me started building things. I went on to produce a tree house in the backyard apple tree, model sailboats, and a Lionel electric-train table with lots of switches and houses and bridges. Sherm was also a horseman of considerable expertise, flying to Ireland every year to be one of the three “joint masters” of the fox hunt at the legendary Lady Molly Cusack’s estate, Bermingham.

One weekend when Cookie was away, Mother hosted a few of her office mates for a lobster dinner at our house, but, Midwesterner that she was, she made the mistake of putting the four live lobsters she bought into a bucket of fresh water in the basement. They were dead and inedible when she learned her mistake and sent me, with my brand-new driver's license, off to the fish market to buy four more. Done, but what should we do with the embarrassing green corpses? Putting them in the in-ground garbage pail wouldn't do, because Cookie would see them Monday morning when she emptied the coffee grounds and would tease Mother about it for years. What to do? Simple. I called Sherm: "Mother has made a terrible terrible mistake and, . . . we have some dead bodies to hide."

"How many?"

"Four."

"Where are they now?"

"In the trunk of the car."

After a brief pause, Sherm said, "OK, Danny. Listen carefully. Drive to my house. I'll be in the garage and I'll open the door when I see you coming and then close the door as soon as you're in. We'll figure something out. Drive carefully! Don't speed." He was more amused than furious when he saw the dead lobsters, which he promptly dropped into his own garbage pail. That was a measure of how far Sherm was prepared to go to keep his promise to my father.

Another father figure was my scoutmaster (yes, I'm an Eagle Scout), Paul Butterworth, a commercial artist who encouraged me to develop my drawing and cartooning skills. More influential still were some of the counselors at Camp Mowglis, on Newfound Lake in New Hampshire, where I spent seven summers, from 1951 to 1958, first as a camper and then as a counselor teaching sailing and canoeing. Ed Lincoln, the sailing instructor, taught me to sail and also introduced me to jazz; he was a drummer and his brother played trumpet. Other counselors were influential in other ways. For me, Mowglis was the best part of the year, and as I look back on those

years I find I have only a few vivid memories of grade school and the first two years of high school, but detailed, vivid memories of the eight weeks I spent at Mowglis each July and August.

I had two wonderful teachers of ancient history in my freshman year (1955–56) at Winchester High School: Catherine Laguardia and Michael Greenebaum. They were young interns from the Harvard master's program in teaching, and they lit fires in me. Miss Laguardia inspired me to write a term paper on Plato (complete with a drawing of Rodin's *Thinker* on the cover), and while I understood only a few of Plato's ideas, I put him in my pantheon of thinkers to study later. Mr. Greenebaum was my hero, whose ways of opening young imaginations convinced me that I should become a teacher. Our term paper for him was to make up an imaginary ancient Mediterranean civilization and give an account of its history, its wars, and its culture. I poured my energy into the illustrated history of "Lucrenia," complete with maps, the birth of a new religion, a few wars, and some architectural advances.

I also had one spectacularly bad English teacher, a pompous snob who arrived at Winchester High School from elsewhere with accolades and testimonials. (I won't name him, but if any of my classmates read this book they will know of whom I write.) One day in class he announced, as if it were an obvious, unvarnished fact, that Shakespeare was the greatest man who ever lived. I'd had enough of his *obiter dicta* and raised my hand. When he called on me, I said that perhaps Shakespeare was the greatest *writer* of all time, but what about other fields of endeavor? What about Alexander the Great or Albert Einstein or J. Christ of biblical fame? His retort was dismissive, but after that day, whenever he issued one of his many fatuous remarks I would raise my hand. He seldom called on me, and when he didn't, I would quietly get up and gather my books and walk out of the classroom. He never turned me in, and I treasured the A for work and F for comportment he assigned me at the end of the year.

In 1957 I went off to Exeter for the last two years of high school, cajoled by old academic friends of my father (Harvard professors and the like) who insisted it would be the right place for me. Grandpa Dennett paid the tuition, and they were right. Wonderful teachers, wonderful classmates, wonderful projects. My writing skills were honed by the renowned George Bennett, whose students included Gore Vidal, Peter Benchley, and John Irving, among others. My sculptural skills—first awakened under the benign eye of Thayer Garland, who taught me to whittle at Mowglis—took me into piece molds and metal under the inspiration of Glen Krause, a painter whose studio at Exeter was a second home to me in 1958–59. A few years later, when I was a student at Harvard, a Newbury Street gallery in Boston put on a two-man show: paintings by Glen Krause and sculptures by Daniel Dennett. When I told my mother I was about to have a show on Newbury Street, she realized she could dash over during her lunch hour from Ginn & Co. to see it. Before I told her the name of the gallery, I made her promise not to reveal that she was the Mother of the Artist. She went over while they were still hanging Glen’s paintings, and there were no signs up yet identifying the artists. She saw a new sculpture of mine in a rather different style and medium than I had been working in, and she asked the gallery owner who the sculptor was. “Oh, that’s a new work by a very exciting young Italian sculptor, Danielo Dennetti.” This is a main reason I am not heavily involved in the art world now. I love the company of artists, but I can’t stand gallery owners, art critics, or—sad to say—many of the people who can afford to buy original art. Selling a piece to them often seemed to me like a betrayal—like giving them a child of mine. I did have a show of my “haptic whittles” in the Underdonk Gallery in Brooklyn in 2017, but none of the pieces were for sale. (In my dislike of gallery owners, I make an exception for Nicholas Cueva, who runs that gallery the right way.)

In my class of some two hundred seniors at Exeter in 1959, about forty went off to Harvard, and I was expected by the family to go

there as well. My father had been a tutor at Harvard in Eliot House for several years while Cynthia and I were toddlers, and had been offered a chair there in 1947, just before he was killed in the plane crash. We had good friends on the faculty. But I wanted to be a little independent and had been impressed by Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, so off I went.

2.

MUSIC: AN IMPORTANT DIGRESSION

OUR FAMILY LOVED MUSIC. IN BEIRUT WE HAD A PHONOGRAPH that played the big 78 rpm records that had to be flipped every few minutes, quite a chore if you wanted to listen to a whole Beethoven symphony. We had an upright piano in Beirut and when we moved back to the States in 1947 after Father's death, Grandma Dennett gave us her cherished old Steinway grand. That became a central feature of our home in Winchester, and I have it in my home now. Cynthia and I began piano lessons immediately, with Louisa Parkhurst, a dear but ancient teacher who had been a student of Dame Myra Hess, whom she rightly idolized. Miss Parkhurst was a softy, more concerned with feeling and the Leschetizky Method, which involved relaxing the forearms and hands and caressing the keys (as I remember), so I was spared a lot of stern fingering drills and Hanon exercises and had minimal practice in sight-reading. My mother was an excellent pianist, and I loved to hear her play at night while I was falling asleep upstairs, but I never managed to become a good sight reader like her, very much to my regret. She had earned money in college in Minnesota by playing the piano accompaniments for silent movies—several different movies each week, a challenge that she apparently handled with aplomb. I couldn't seem to train myself to look ahead sufficiently and always wanted to dwell with both eyes and ears on the chords I was reading and playing at the moment—like reading a book one word at a time. I often fell

asleep listening to Mother downstairs, working on new pieces or playing some of her favorites, Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" and Rachmaninoff's Prelude in E-flat Major, both of which choke me up every time I hear them.

We often sang around the piano with Mother playing whatever we put in front of her: Christmas carols, Gilbert and Sullivan songs, sheet music from *South Pacific* and *My Fair Lady* and other musicals, and camp songs and folk songs, especially from our favorite collection, the *Fireside Book of Folk Songs*. Over the years, I've often spotted that beloved green book on the pianos of friends who also grew up with it. It has beautiful and easy piano accompaniments by Norman Lloyd, and a gentle left-wing emphasis that I recognized only many years later. Most Americans today, I guess, could sing "Home on the Range" or "I've Been Workin' on the Railroad," but we Firesiders can also sing "Joe Hill" and "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" and even the Russian song "Meadowlands." We also sang hymns. Mother wasn't a regular churchgoer, unlike Grandma Dennett, but she sent us to Sunday school, and we learned dozens of hymns there, which we enjoyed—and still enjoy—singing.

When I was about thirteen, I tired of Miss Parkhurst. I'd performed various classical pieces at various recitals to polite applause, but while I loved the musical experience, I was getting excited about jazz. Cynthia and I, like most kids our age in the '50s, listened to popular music on a few favorite radio stations, and each week we eagerly watched NBC's *Your Hit Parade* (sponsored by Lucky Strike and featuring Dorothy Collins, Snooky Lanson, and Gisele MacKenzie) to find out if our favorite song of the moment had moved up from number seven or maybe even fallen off the Top Ten. But the pop music of that era, just at the dawn of rock 'n' roll, was schmaltzy mush, and I didn't want to play *that* music on the piano. Miss Parkhurst, trying to revive my enthusiasm, assigned me, in vain, the sheet music for "Shrimp Boats Are A-Comin'" and Leroy Anderson's "Syncopated Clock."

Mother found a jazz piano teacher for me in Boston. Each week

I made the trip into Boston on the train, took the subway to Copley Square, and walked past Jack's Drum Shop and Storyville, the city's top jazz nightclub, to Alan Smith's studio. It was a very grown-up adventure, and I was hooked. He taught me basic harmony: the chords, the circle of fifths, twelve-bar blues, jazz voicings, comping for soloists, the excellence of flatted fifths; and we explored various styles: stride like Teddy Wilson, the two-hands-together octave crawl of George Shearing, Erroll Garner's distinctive percussive flamboyance, Count Basie's minimalism. I went to the local music store and discreetly paid my twenty dollars under the table for my first "fake book." This was standard gear for any pianist who wanted to play in pickup dance-combos or small jazz groups, since it had all the jazz and dance standards of the day mimeographed in a black three-ring binder, with two or three songs on each page, providing the melody in its standard key, the chords, and—in case you had a vocalist—the words. The fake book was an illegal and anonymous *samizdat* production, inspired by and often plagiarized from an expensive legal system, Tune-Dex, which mailed subscribers three-by-five index cards with standard songs on them. Tune-Dex paid royalties for publishing these cards; the fake book didn't, but I have never heard of anyone getting arrested for selling or openly using one. So I learned to read lead sheets (or "charts"), and since there was only the familiar melody to sight-read and I knew how to make all the chords, I could rattle off the songs of George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, and about a thousand other songs with some fluency. I could even follow up the first chorus with further choruses, improvising on the chords alone. I soon learned to "play by ear" and could sit down at a piano and play requests of almost any popular song, almost always guessing the chord progressions, and changing the key if need be to suit the singers' voices.

Whereas I had often found excuses not to do my daily practice session when studying with Miss Parkhurst, I now spent hours every day playing from the fake book, or just playing new songs I had heard. *Jazz!* Good enough to be the pianist in the pit band in 1957

for the Winchester High School annual vaudeville show, a much beloved event for which students—cliques and singles—would form acts and audition. There were singers and dancers and jugglers and acrobats and skits and dog trainers and barbershop quartets. Many of the acts were groups of girls dancing to some popular song, and they rehearsed to 45 rpm records, which they then handed to me to transcribe for the pit band. That was a great learning experience, since the band, under the direction of Chip Mead (son of a Tufts professor who later became president of Tufts—my Tufts links go way back), had Mead on alto sax, plus a trumpet and trombone and guitarist, along with piano, bass, and drums, so I had to write parts for E-flat and B-flat instruments as well as a lead sheet for the guitarist, the bassist, and me.

I also was given the job of rehearsal and performance pianist for the annual Tap Chorus. Girls took tap-dancing lessons then, and the school had wisely hired one of the local dance teachers to coach all comers in a Rockettes-style Tap Chorus. You didn't have to be in a popular clique to be in this act. The song chosen that year was Cole Porter's "Anything Goes," and for several hours a week after school, for what seemed months, I dutifully labored at the ivories while the girls were led through the drill.

By the time of the dress rehearsal (with an audience), I was utterly sick of the song, though Cole Porter is still a hero of mine. The plan was that the girls would get lined up in position behind the curtain, at which point a tiny light would go on in the pit telling me to begin the intro, which was just the last eight bars of the chorus. Just me, no pit band in accompaniment—the audience had to be able to hear the taps, after all. The curtain would start to open, revealing all the spangled beauties in a fetching pose, and they would begin the routine as soon as the intro ended. The little light went on, I began the intro, and looked up to see that the curtain was not opening. What to do? I decided I'd just play through a whole thirty-two-bar chorus, counting on the curtain to rise during the last eight bars of it and off we'd go. But when I got to that point the curtain *still*

didn't go up, and I had already committed to the next few notes, so I played another chorus and stopped. The audience was puzzled. Why was this piano solo happening? It wasn't in the program. They politely applauded, and I stood and turned and politely took a bow, hating every moment. I waited. Now the light came on, but I didn't budge until the coach stuck her head out of the curtain and whispered, "Now we're ready!" So with mounting apprehension I did the eight-bar intro, and sure enough, there they were, dancing in pretty good unison. At last! But in my relief I didn't pay sufficient attention to what I was doing, and in the third or fourth chorus I got momentarily lost and played the bridge ("The world's gone mad today, and good's bad today, . . .") eight bars early. As it turned out, roughly half the girls (randomly positioned) had used the change in the music to trigger the next dance move, and the other half were just silently counting and not paying attention to the melody. Train wreck! You can imagine the confusion, anger, embarrassment, accusations, tears, but however you imagine it, the reality was worse. Happily the three official performances of the Tap Chorus went off without a hitch, and at least some of the girls eventually forgave me.

Off to Exeter I went the next year, and most evenings when I wasn't playing bridge I hid out in the basement of Phillips Church, where there were practice rooms, pianos, and you could smoke. Of course, that was where the jazz happened, and there were some budding talents who knew a lot more than I did about jazz. One classmate, Tim Marquand, had an amazing ability: he was the first person I ever encountered who could *really* play by ear. He'd listen to a new jazz piece and without having to figure out what the chord sequence was (is that E-flat major, G minor, C9, . . . ?) would just lay into it on his trumpet with improvisations that were fine, tasty, surprising. Years later it struck me that these two different ways of playing by ear—swiftly applying a theory, or just hearing and doing without having to think hard about it—were parallel to the distinction between how Temple Grandin, the autistic animal expert, understands other people and the way most people do. As she tells us, she has worked out how to

read the meanings of facial expressions and gestures and uses this perceptual data in her theory to figure out what others intend and want and know. I am, you might say, an autistic jazz pianist. This is one of the reasons why I have always disliked the popular TOM (theory of mind) version of the intentional stance in cognitive science. Temple Grandin has a TOM, a *theory* that she has put together and uses with great skill. The cognitive processes by which we “normal” people “read minds” are more like walking. Do you have a theory of walking that you use to keep from falling over? We are not Walking Encyclopedias. I think there are better, less intellectual, ways of explaining these standard competences, but they aren’t in place yet, though many are making progress on it.

There was another fountain of jazz memes among the students in that smoke-filled basement: Ron Brown, who was a true scholar of jazz in addition to being an excellent hard-bop pianist. When he was sixteen, he wrote record reviews for *DownBeat*, and the dean of reviewers, Leonard Feather, praised him in print. Ron knew I would never be a pianist as talented as he was, but he was a good friend and enjoyed teaching me changes and riffs and other things. Some years later, when we were both Harvard students, we ran into each other in Paris in the summer and went to Le Chat Qui Pêche, where Chet Baker and his band were playing. I stayed until after midnight, when Ron egged me on to ask to sit in. This was granted, and I giddily did perhaps ten choruses of blues in F with these immortals and returned, flushed, to our table. Then Ron got up and began playing, and they really paid attention. I left after one o’clock in the morning with Ron still sitting in, and he showed up at my Left Bank hotel while I was having a late breakfast at about ten the next day. When I remarked that he was up early, he said he was just then getting back from the jam session. He was brilliant but insecure, and sadly a few years later he committed suicide. I never found out the details.

The next year at Exeter, I was singing about seven hours a week in the glee club (a good way to meet girls, since the glee club traveled

to girls' schools for joint concerts and a dance afterward) and the choir (a good way to learn hymns, anthems, and other religious music) and the Rockingham Choral Society, a fine regional group for which you had to audition. When I told my classmates I could arrange songs, I was instantly in demand, writing a capella music for a would-be Hi-Lo's-style quartet and then the Peadquacs (Phillips Exeter Academy Double Quartet), our version of the Whiffenpoofs. I was added to the Peadquacs as a baritone, and two tenors and a bass were added, making a dozen singers in all. I was soon singing ten hours a week and more, and staying up late, pirating songs from records (such as the Princeton Tigertones' delicious version of "Button Up Your Overcoat") and writing some jazz arrangements of "Ain't Misbehavin'" (with "Keepin' Out of Mischief Now" thrown in) and "Moonlight in Vermont," among others. We made an LP record and flogged it on our concert dates, which were mainly those glee club dances. I can hardly bear to listen to it now, but it sold well at girls' prep schools. We *almost* got a gig singing at a hotel in Bermuda during spring break, but some parents put their feet down—wisely, I think in retrospect. I spent parts of that year—and never again—in a world quite different from any I had experienced, with classmates whose bathroom mirrors were festooned with engraved invitations to cotillions and balls. We Peadquacs had tuxedos, and white dinner jackets for summer gigs, and I will never forget sliding down the banisters in the Plaza Hotel in New York with Carol Channing, for whom we opened at the Gold and Silver Ball of 1958.

When I went off to Wesleyan the next year, I met another real musician, Stanley Lewis, who was also a superb artist and has made his career as a painter. We formed a quartet (piano, bass, and drums, with Stan on alto sax) and played at fraternity parties that year, and one night we particularly got it together and played some amazing jazz. The next day, I said to Stan that I wished it had been recorded, and he jumped on me. **Copyrighted Material** "NO! Don't try to accumulate things like that as if they made you somehow *better*. Last night was a trip. Be grateful it happened, but now let go of it." That was Stan the purist, and I got