

## **HEADING TO YOUNGSTOWN, U.S.A: DISCURSIVE THOUGHTS FROM THE FIRST TWO MONTHS**

*(NOTE: What follows is a rambling account of my first two months in Youngstown, a journal of observations, experiences and happenings from a new professor from Canada. No harm, ill-will or perceived arrogance is intended, and I happily conclude that it was a momentous and highly enjoyable acculturation-period.)*

*Toronto, July 25, 2005*

Things are seemingly falling into place. The thunderous eruption of the watershed of life has sprinkled sweet Charlotte, whatever that means, onto my receding hairline and shifting vertebrae. Translation: after seventeen years of a supposedly “cushy” government job, as a Senior Policy Advisor, whatever that is, in the Ontario Ministry of Education, I am leaving, in a week, for a new job. Outside of government. Outside of the city. Outside of the province. Outside of the country. An academic position in the College of Education at Youngstown State University.

Where, might you ask, is Youngstown?

Deep breath. Drum-roll. Quick surveying of the landscape. Try to imagine that everyone in the room is buck naked. This is what they offer up as indispensable advice for getting over the fear of public speaking, so why not? I’m not quite sure how visualizing the cacophony of varied flesh is supposed to calm the nerves but, anyway, it is good to reduce the other to something a little less grandiose, I suppose.

Well, I am Canadian, to be more precise, a Torontonion. Yes, I know that what unifies all Canadians is the extreme desire to downsize and gently malign and dig the old meat-hooks into the back of a sleekly disjointed back of the universally universal centre of the universe, kind of like a back-hoe on an urban garden without the peat-moss. To clarify, Canadians revel in their antipathy toward Toronto, the apparently great unifier for common folk from coast to coast to coast, as they say up there, eh?

Apparently, every single state in the Union has a Youngstown. I wonder if it’s kind of like Homer Simpson’s Springfield. Anyway, and I’m willing to wager my elbows that my analysis will become exponentially more sophisticated and nuanced as time rolls on, I don’t know too much about Youngstown.

What I know is that Youngstown is located geographically between Pittsburgh and Cleveland, the town, there’s no other way to put it, appears to be a little burnt-out, meaning that its relegation to “rust-belt” status is based on a whole sector of society being closed out, shut down, laid off, and generally slowly put to rest like the calming effect of one of Michael Moore’s documentaries on how the working class has been politely but firmly screwed out of their homes, their jobs, and their communities as well

as the remains of flag-waving marching bands singing the praises of old Glory. I could say that I digress but this is a collection of digressions that will somehow make sense to someone somewhere.

*Toronto, July 27, 2005*

After a few months of all kinds of checks, approvals and sorted negotiations, everything seems to be falling into place, at least that's what I keep saying to myself. All I need now is the work-visa. The last time I crossed the border, two weeks ago, the customs officer, to put it as objectively as can be expected under the circumstances, asked me four times when I would be coming back to Canada. I tried to explain to him that the thousand or so books that I had in my car were for my office at the university where I had just accepted a position.

"Would you like to see the job contract?," I asked.

"No, I don't need that," he retorted. "I want the paperwork from the United States government."

My thoughts quickly sifted to my two friends in Montreal, Hugh and Doug, who came to Canada to avoid what took place in Vietnam. I wondered why it is necessary to undertake this blithering interrogation and verbal body cavity search at the border. What could possibly be achieved? Oh yea, despite millionaire hockey players asking for more, billion-dollar Hollywood movie junkets, and trillion-dollar space shuttles, we are in a war, he says in a Jack Nicholson-kind-of-Shining way, against terrorism. There are some things about terrorism that carve serrated markings of interminable, ghoulish brand-marks, not unlike what we do to cattle, that remain forever ingrained below the skin. Freedom-fighters one day become the dreaded bastards we despise the next. The documentary about McNamara and his *mea-culpa* over Vietnam would be an interesting opener for Fahrenheit 9/11.

Anyway, he put my passport into some sort of plastic Tupperware container with a leather closing, then shook it out to hand to me, terminating the conversation with a curt "That's it!".

I've often wondered why Homeland Security would spend billions, probably trillions now, on ensuring that no one took their nail-clippers into an airport, but never spent a cent on the most visible and vulnerable infrastructure. I needn't go there. Gandhi had a nice quote about it being impossible to prevent and prepare for war at the same time.

So, Youngstown has a university, which I am looking forward to being a part of. And my favourite species-- to avoid any quibbling on whether it's an animal or mammal, a bird or a fish-- is, without a doubt, the waddling, tuxedoed, incessantly collegial and intriguing penguin, and I say this from years of studying the little guy, especially the way the dad sits on the baby egg to warm it up, the good ol' incubation-period. The point here is that

the mascot for Youngstown State University is none other than the penguin. His name is Pete, and he has attitude.

*Toronto, July 29, 2005*

Before the education part, we should get down to the issue of settlement. I called ahead, after reviewing the Mahoning County Review, looking for some suitable accommodations. I was thinking along the lines of a small, comfortable apartment, within walking distance of the university. I want to consecrate a good deal of my time to doing research, being part of the education community, and being a good teacher. Most new profs probably have the same idealistic effervescence. After perusing the rental ads, I made two appointments with two ladies who seemed quite nice.

The first place was literally up the street from the university. To my surprise, some might say horror, I found the street contained about a dozen homes, three-quarters of which were nicely renovated with clean sheets of broad cedar masking every possible entry-point. To complete the picture, imagine urban art, some would say graffiti, creatively scrawled throughout. The theme of women's genitalia seemed popular. I'm probably more ideological than pragmatic but in this case I opted for sheer pragmatism. One down.

The next place was just two blocks over. A beautiful home from the early twentieth century behind a church and a synagogue, which were across the street from a park. Every house on the street had a car, a flag, some semblance of community, and a dash of life, which may sound odd but keep in mind that I just lived through a mild, out-of-body experience. The owner, who coincidentally lived next year, seemed like a nice person. Clip-board in hand, we walked through the four-bedroom home. Wooden floors, solid wooden frames, beautiful wooden doors, the place was shimmering with pride, and wood. I liked it. I immediately indicated that I would take it. My life in Youngstown was slowly falling into place.

Upon leaving the house that I had just ear-marked as my home, I asked one of the guys outside who was painting the exterior about the neighbourhood.

“Let me put it this way, I wouldn't walk around at night.”

“What do you mean?,” I probed.

“Well, let's just say that there are a lot of spooks out at night.”

My area of academic interest is racism, and I have spent a number of years giving workshops, writing papers, undertaking research, teaching, and generally being concerned with, and involved in, the issue of racism. As my better-half has reminded me, I should accept the fact that I am white. Of course, I implore her to accept that I am sometimes blue with loss, green from over-ripe mango, pink from the first blush of

Summer, red from a day at the beach, caramel after several days of sipping Mojitos, starchy grey from the Winter blues, and who invented “flesh-tones” anyway?

I spoke with a couple of colleagues over the next few days, seeking to verify if there was any reasonable reason not to remain in the area.

“Well, there are sometimes some gang-fights, and there’s the odd crack-house, and once and a while you’ll have a murder down there,” one colleague told me in a matter-a-fact manner.

“Umm. Good question. There are some areas north of the campus that have really improved over the past fifteen years,” a second colleague conjectured.

“But could you walk around? Could you go for a coffee? Could I make it home alive at night? Is there any fear of being broken into?,” I blurted out.

“Let’s put it this way: that area is not as secure as some of the others in the area.”

A third colleague noted that most of the professors drove into work. It’s a small campus with a lot of commuter traffic. My Toronto-centric vision of the world was quickly imploding.

Perceptions are not necessarily reality, and crime-figures are not necessarily indicative of people. A decision on location somehow was swayed by what I had heard, not experienced.

I contacted the Dean, who had a duplex for rent in a “nice” neighbourhood where you could walk around, have a coffee, and sleep at night knowing that you could sleep at night. At this time, I found it helpful to draft a constitution for which I would be the one and only founding father.

Rule number 1: Youngstown in not Toronto.

Rule number 2: It’s probably not an unhealthy practice to stop referring to Toronto as if it were some sort of cultural Mecca.

So, I’ve got my office, I’ve got my apartment, and I’ve still got a lot of enthusiasm.

*Toronto, August 1, 2005*

After a couple of decades of feeding off of an ideology and steady diet of anti-American pabulum, I am heading to the “promised land”, the place so desired and cherished and fantasized about by so many hungry souls from everywhere. Every English-Canadian, as opposed to French-Canadian, is, to some degree, an expert on American culture. We watch the American news, listen to their music, read their books, consume every dripping, flippin’ trend, observation and idiosyncrasy that stammers out of the hinterland filled with J-Hawks, Cornhuskers, Hawkeyes, and whatever else they have lurking in

mammoth football stadiums over-shadowing the supposedly under-funded, character-filled classrooms of the U.S. of A.

Now that I am in my own real-life reality show, I need to suck it up, as the tyrannical football coach would bark out to the scrawny kid clutching his freshly bruised ribs rolling on the sideline, apologizing for not hitting the other guy with the maniacal intensity required to cause harm, and squeegee off the saline film from my not-so-freshly lazered eyes, and embrace that which is there.

They may have guns, lots of guns, and they may have flags, lots of flags, and they may have drive-through liquor stores and 6,000-calorie breakfast samplers, flea-markets, and all of that, but they have lots of other stuff.

It's time to get past the smoke and haze of blue and red states, preachers obsessed with homosexuality, and thanking God for keeping us free by messing around with folks over yonder. It's time to be free. It's time to be thankful for the opportunity. It's all fine and dandy to be critical of the Americans but what about Canada? The discrimination, racism, oppression, marginalization, violence and poverty in Canada? It's one thing if I talk about my mother, and entirely another if you do, so the old saying goes.

Yes, Canadians are smug about Americans, yes we feel some comfort in thinking that we are nicer and better and so on. When I lived in France in the early 1980s, a Frenchman told me that Canadians were "nice Americans". But the reality is often a pale reflection of the star-spangled, glitzy jingle spurring us on. After all, stereotypes are not necessarily the best barometer of reality.

*Montreal, August 8, 2005*

Gina, *mon amour*, and I spent three days at Youngstown getting me installed for the first semester, which is only a few weeks off, when a plethora of movement will jostle its way into my head-space. Generally, setting up bank-accounts, buying bed-sheets, attending meetings, planning infinite research-projects for an infinitely limited amount of funding, arranging for electricity, a cell-phone and who knows what else, and hanging out at the university, will be on the agenda.

The new place is the top-floor of a duplex in a suburb of Youngstown called Boardman. A suburb in this case is a 6-7 minute drive from the university and the heart of Youngstown. I still haven't figured out why all of these interconnected municipalities in and around Youngstown don't just mesh together. They did it in Toronto, and it kind of worked. They did it in Montreal, and then they held a referendum making Swiss-cheese out of the urban landscape. What seems to be troubling is that the richer suburbs are mainly White, have better homes and schools, and, not unimportantly, their tax-dollars go toward enhancing their schools while the inner-city of Youngstown is quadruply burdened with a low tax-base, obvious urban, social issues, and the scars and torment of marginalization, notwithstanding, of course, the illustrious founders of the Constitution who spoke so eloquently of a civil society in which they, themselves, all owned slaves.

For me, this will be a permanent source of reflection, trying to understand how the United States can be so advanced, so developed, so powerful, and yet also be so burdened with such a visible lack of an equitable distribution of resources. I am becoming fully cognizant that my reflections may be perceived as unpatriotic, less than welcome, and generally received with a healthy dose of trepidation.

Boardman must have a reputation as being some sort of White refuge away from the turmoil and angst of the grittier Youngstown. When arriving from Toronto to Youngstown on August 1, after three turns around the university when we headed off slightly north, we asked a woman at a stop-light if we were in Boardman, and she, a pleasant-looking, middle-aged, African-American woman, had a hearty laugh, and then explained to us, "I'm laughing because you said *Boardman*."

We decided to visit the park, which I claimed was the jewel in the crown of the Mid-West, North-East, somewhere in the blue-red of the land of the Buckeye. While I still wasn't sure what a Buckeye was, I had been told by at least a handful of decent folk that Mill-Creek Park was one of the biggest city-owned parks in the States, and that this was the place to forget about everything.

We enjoyed the drive through, and stopped and watched a vigorous stream beating over a man-made rock formation. It looked serene. We kissed, and romanticized about the tranquility of having an urban retreat, and I mentioned that that part of the scenery resembled a little of the nature emblazoned on the literature and rural *paysage* that is the Canada so exquisitely depicted by the Group of Seven. A trip to the Kleinburg Gallery, just north of Toronto, where their art of early twentieth-century landscapes is displayed, is quite worth the drive.

What we found quite striking in these parts was something very basic: people don't seem to walk, there are no pedestrians, the streets are not teeming with the masses (re)claiming their public space. This is bizarre, and a big change from Toronto and Montreal. Driving everywhere, and seeing all of these drive-through banks, liquor-stores, restaurants, pretty-well every type of service imaginable, and it being juxtaposed against the obvious issue of, well, there's no other way to put it, obesity, requires some reflection. The documentary entitled *Super-Size Me* raised some critical questions about life-style, and it also didn't under-estimate the proverbial enormity of the situation.

It's getting late, and we finally find an exit to the park, and end up in an area that appears to be entirely African-American. I pull into a garage, and wave at two guys who just finish paying for their gas.

"Excuse me, do you know where Market Street and 224 is from here?" I ask, presenting the only intersection I am aware of.

The chauffeur looks at me, then Gina, then me, and says in a mildly bewildered tone, "You're lookin' for Boardman".

He gave me some directions, I thanked him, and waved good-bye. As Gina has reminded me, I need to accept that I am... White. I responded that I was her... "Boardman".

We headed out for a steak on the 224. Half-way through the meal, Gina discovered that the steak was in the shape of a T, and we both enjoyed succulently sweet, blood orange margaritas.

We returned to sleep in our new second-floor duplex on a blow-up mattress my mother gave us. It was comfortable despite the lack of sheets and pillows. We agreed that we would tell Guy, my room-mate in Toronto, who is an avid camper and outdoorsman, and who knows of our obvious urban foibles, that we had, indeed, gone camping for our vacation.

Guy found my questions about being able to plug a laptop into a tree in the nature beside a tent to be mildly Seinfeldesque. Regardless, Gina and I are both drawn to the city, to cafés and cosmopolitan landscapes where we can safely intellectualize about the need for more ecology and less economy.

The three days in Youngstown were capped off with two exceptionally enjoyable visits with a couple of colleagues. There is a nice homey feel to the folks I've met at the university, and yet I've been asked three times already if I've had my head examined for choosing to come to YSU. The best response that I've been able to come up with is, "Is there a machine that I could use to examine my head?", thinking of a cross-between a micro-wave and dishwasher. I like the self-deprecating stuff the locals are fond of spewing to us foreigners but I don't fully understand the notion that no one could willingly desire to come to this area.

*Youngstown, August 19, 2005*

I'm reading a few books at this time, starting and stopping, vacillating, manoeuvring, and ploughing through when the time permits. Two books I've just finished: one is about an academic's first year on the tenure track, and the other is Peter McLaren's *Life in Schools*, a book I will be using to teach my Master's-level students in the sociology of education class. The former is a quick read that hinges on the million idiosyncrasies of academics, all of the little battles and power-plays juxtaposed against the freedom and delight of being able to think for a living, although there is never enough time, as the author makes clear, to really, fully think through what you want. McLaren's book is art, in my opinion, a brilliant critique about why schools don't work, containing an analysis of what can be done to change the moribund reproduction of social order that our present-day schools have been relegated to. His description of schools in the poorer section of Toronto, which could easily be replicated in the US, awakened in me the sense of privilege that many of us have to work to avoid confronting the daily unease that is a fact in many of our communities. McLaren does not shy away from his Marxist ideology, and this is a strength since the right wing has permanently discredited so many invaluable insights simply because "they're Commies!"

The two other books pertain to democracy in education, a research-area of mine, by two professors from Toronto, and a book I picked up at a garage-sale a block north of the university entitled *Makes Me Want to Holler* by Nathan McCall. The first book reinforces that notion that we are not as democratic as we think, notwithstanding the non-existent search for non-existent weapons of mass destruction carried out by Dick, Rummy and the boys. Why such truly logical ideas are so firmly rejected by the masses is difficult to digest. But, as Chomsky reminds us, there is no real benefit for the dominant classes in letting others have the room to think and question, so there is no debate: keep the natives dancing with drivel about sports and entertainment, anything but poverty and racism, he postulates. A famous French philosopher, Paul Valery, stated that “Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them”.

I still can't believe the guy I heard on sports-radio in Buffalo about a decade ago, my ears still stinging, who barked out at the proverbial bingo-caller that the Buffalo Bills, a.k.a. the local religion, damn well better cough up the green-backs for the star quarterback, who was asking for roughly \$10M, or they could write off his support. There isn't enough words and paper and hyperbole and electric-shock therapy to fully get into it here, but why would a guy who probably only makes \$25,000 a year, lives in a wooden house in the coldest city in the country, faces infinite crap from just about every layer of government and society, care less about some working-squid like himself making about 400 times his salary for tossing a ball? It is a sport, it is fun to watch, it doesn't save a single life, and it keeps blue-collar types like him locked into a system that keeps him locked in. As incredibly insane as it might be to say it, we could pay these high-fallutin' athletes \$100,000 a year, and they would still do it, tickets would cost a maximum of \$10, profits could be mandatorily shared with the communities in which teams are situated, amateur sport could be restored and made accessible, and we could re-emphasize placing a priority on people, not the one in ten thousand young poor kids who risk it all to become a super-hero. This concept of sharing is the foundation of every religion, not that I'm preaching. All of our children learn it, and it would mean ceasing the massive accumulation of wealth by a few. How about this, no football/basketball/baseball/hockey/whatever player could make a million until every American has access to baseline healthcare? Next question.

*Youngstown, August 20, 2005*

So, here we are, in Youngstown, my mom, Bob, her partner, and I. We're settling in, especially since my mom has been able to hit a number of garage-sales this morning. She is, from the vantage-point of those who have seen her in action, an ex-officio president of Bargain Hunters International. We went to the Butler Museum on campus today, which was a real treat. Unfortunately, with the support staff at the University, commonly known as ACE, on strike, we couldn't get into any of the buildings. The university-campus is a rectangle, and is quite attractive on the inside, full of green, and looking out towards the world with a sprig of hope and charm. What would the town be without the university? And when you drive 3 miles from the university to Boardman, everything changes, a full-size mall, stores, car dealerships, people, houses with no boarding. I'm

not attacking the people of Youngstown, and I'm not at ease knowing that the society has been segregated. There are surely a million reasons and nuances to explain what looks to be like a society spliced into rich and poor, Black and White.

If the US would take one week's worth of "re-construction" in Iraq, and place it in Youngstown (editorial note: the financial resources, not the bombing), gold would flow from the faucets of the schools which, according to the local paper, the *Vindicator*, are the worst in the district, and probably in the bottom three or four in the State. According to a recent study, the Youngstown school system met only one of 23 standards used to evaluate schools, whereas some of the neighbouring school systems met all of them. At the academic level, I question the rationale and utility of these comparisons. Is it surprising that some schools, where the social context imposes unique challenges, fair less well? Can and should we blame the teachers, students and parents, or society, or both, for the educational outcomes of the system?

With school approaching, and my status as potentially being on strike from my first day looming, I needed to get a few of the basics out of the way. First, a cell-phone, as indispensable as a flush-toilet. There are a mere 45 options to choose from, and the one I like best, a snappy enterprise named Cingular, was quickly condemned by two people I consulted; the coverage was poor, to say the least. Sprint looked good but, to my surprise since it was my home-carrier in Canada, the salesperson told me quite straight-forwardly that this plan wouldn't work because "there's no service in Canada". When I finally chose one at the Best Buy on 224 and Market Street, I was told that I couldn't get it because I didn't have official Ohio State photo i.d.. I'm buying a cell-phone here, not a gun. Wait a minute, a gun doesn't require any i.d., but I digress. The next day I went to Alltel where I was greeted by a hulking young man who shook my hand, and then introduced me to Cindy. What a deliriously delightful experience. This is America. A few phone-calls, and I was using my cell-phone. It appears that the i.d. loop-hole was as gaping as the property values between Youngstown and Boardman.

Second, a hair-cut, to make myself a little more cleaned up for first day of class, and tidy up the pony-tale, which is not as nice when not braided by *mon amour*. I stroll the JC Penny Mall, which is remarkably shaped around some designer's blue-prints, and stumble upon a barber shop. The barber is a nice guy, whose photo some thirty years ago is tacked to his work-station, with hair dangling down about the shoulders, and is chatting about gas prices.

"Well, I bought an SUV two years ago, and now that gas is about \$2.20 a gallon, it costs me another \$100 a month to get to work. I used to own a shop in Lisbon but I had to close it when the steel mill shut down. Around here, everyone lives paycheck to paycheck, and there's no jobs, so things are pretty tough. When you have to tighten the belt, people don't have the money for a hair-cut," he offered, in a lackadaisical way that I thought offered a pretty insightful portrayal of local economics.

"But does the Youngstown area have any hope of diversifying its prospects, of replacing the steel mills, of attracting other industries," I enquired, remembering at that moment

what a colleague from Washington State University told me at a citizenship education conference in July in Toronto, that I would make out alright down here as long as I wasn't arrogant. I hope curiosity and an obviously urbanized viewpoint wouldn't come across as an invasion of privacy.

He answered in a matter-of-fact way that the future didn't look good. "People stayed around thinking that the good jobs would come back but they didn't."

There is a decency here that I find in simple interactions. The woman who sold me the phone calling me "honey", the video-counter girl telling me that it's no problem to bring back the films any time during the week, the Black and White older folks sharing a bench in front of the grocery store in New Castle, PA., chatting about nothing, the coffee-woman, Michele, in my building at YSU, smiling, and engaging in friendly banter about the book she was reading. How I feel for the morbid justice, or the lack thereof, so boldly preached from the pulpits of the bi-partisan Senate chambers. Bi-partisan, my ass, but I am a guest so it probably won't be my ass. Life is complex and short, and yet co-existence seems to be so simple and elusive at the same time.

*Youngstown, August 22, 2005*

It's now official: I left my job in Toronto to go strike in Youngstown. My first day as an academic was spent in the Carpenter's Union Hall across the street from YSU hearing of the vitriolic animosity the faculty have toward the University administration. There was a personal acidic lining to the discourse, and then we placed on our tribal-buttons clamouring for a deal as cushy as the one obtained by the senior officials.

The vote in favour of a strike was a massive 207 against 57. The main issue appears to be the administration request for faculty to pay about 1.5% of their salary for health-care, which amounts to about \$650 per person or \$1300 for a family. At the same time, the "last, best, final offer" from the administration is a 3% increase a year for a three-year period.

The dynamic and discussion around the deal was intense, involved some yelling, several votes in order to establish how to function, some fancy foot-work on the procedural issues (should we have a hand, voice or paper vote?). The chief negotiator, a likable fellow, after a detailed analysis on the provisions of the proposal, summed up the recommendation of the union side quite nicely: "It stinks!".

The debate ensued: "you know, if we are on strike for one or two weeks, we will have lost whatever concession they give us afterward", "can't we wait for a week, until classes start, before we go on strike?", "are we sure that the administration has the money to come back to the table?", "is there a chance that we will be out for months?", "over time, our raises will out-weigh the amount of the healthcare premium", and so on. But the rationale to strike was too compelling: "they have treated us like dirt", "they have the money", "once we start paying for healthcare, it will never end", and then there is the

reality that some administration folks already got supremely tantalizing deals, including private healthcare in Cleveland and other perks.

I've been dropped from the sky so I don't know much about who's been cheated before. There was a one-day strike on the first day of classes a number of years ago but, besides that, people seem to be somewhat happy. The rhetoric at the meeting is harsh, and a vote of no-confidence against the President is unanimously passed. With the support staff union already on strike, the university has now been effectively shut down with classes due to start in six days.

The local newspapers describe the situation, emphasizing that the President is surprised to learn of any disrespect or difficulties at the bargaining table, the average YSU faculty salary is \$65,000, excessively above and beyond the average working-class person in the vicinity, and making the not-so subtle point that things may not be so bad. Of course, the paper writing up the story has just gone through a nine-month, bitterly embittered slugfest, one of the worst blights on a society that has known its share of blights, a pock-marked steel landscape with the salty sweat of generations of labourers' DNA as proof.

There is good news. I've met a number of the faculty, and they're good folks. Striking today with my colleagues in the College of Education allowed for four hours of discussion about purchasing cars, taking vacations in Toronto, Italian food, art at the Butler Museum, technology, reality-shows, the effectiveness of basil in keeping bees at bay, and life in Youngstown, where it seems that almost none of the faculty reside. This will certainly rival the orientation planned for later this week.

This afternoon, I met with a union representative, the lawyer for the union, and four other international faculty to determine if our work visas are still valid while we're on strike. They are. We all want to work but I would be extremely surprised if anyone crossed the line. Once a decision has been made to strike, solidarity must rule the day. But there is also the issue of strategy and communications. The two strikes by support staff that I witnessed in the Ontario government were not easy to watch, and the union took it on the chin twice, although I'm not sure that everyone would so readily agree with this assessment.

This could be long, or this could be short. The main thing, as union leaders have been clear to emphasize, is to not circulate, validate, transmit, or generally consider anything that could be considered a rumour.

A few ACE folks, the support-staff union, came by our station on the picket-line, and informed us that the President told ACE members that they could stay out until December, that the university doesn't need them.

"That seems a little harsh," one of our group offered.

"Well, it's true but I guess the fact that there were six union-guys on motorcycles on his front-lawn at the time probably didn't help," the respondent clarified.

Context, as they say, is everything. The glass may be half-full, or, well, you get the picture.

An interesting twist here: practically every car that drives by honks and waves. This is a union town that knows union issues. What I find most striking is that people, Black and White, young and old, are all showing solidarity.

I went out to dinner with Dick, a colleague, last night, to a Chinese buffet, one of those typical 150-choice things that has nothing to do with China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, or any of the countries where there might be a significant Chinese Diaspora, like Vietnam, Malaysia, Mauritius and Singapore. Dick has a fascinating story about the army, and his almost being sent to Vietnam. I like him.

I often think of Vietnam, of the people and the culture, and the two million Vietnamese (and 58,000 Americans) killed, and the thousands of Americans who came to Canada, which benefited Canadian university students from coast to coast, and the grace of the Vietnamese who toil away in Chinatown in Toronto. I also wonder if Bill O'Reilly and company are so over-zealous about the invasion in Iraq because of the scar of Vietnam.

I measure my words. So many people have those "Support the Troops" decals on their cars, and flags are everywhere, and radio phone-in shows decry the need to rally around the President, and there seems to be only passive acceptance that somehow the war in Iraq is connected with fighting terrorism. And then there is the brutal blasphemy committed against the mother of a young man killed in Iraq. Bill O'Reilly seems pleased with himself that he and others can urinate all over her. By saying this I realize that I may be permanently labelled one of Michael Moore's boys, a lackey of the left, some special interest interest, or just some scum that doesn't have the right or temerity or conscience or insight to be able to comprehend the situation. But I also know that many good people question war, any war.

Outside of the strike, I took my mom and Bob to this gargantuan flea market, an orgasmic delight for garage-salers from here to Timbuktu. Lots of Harley t-shirts, and every kind of tool possible. I had a Philly cheese-steak sandwich, and my mom and Bob opted for the lamb pita-sandwich.

What else? The local media are full of reports on assaults, killings, and other sundry stuff. Be aware, as they say, of the night.

The dog next door howls. She's old, and she misses her owner, the woman I bought my furniture from, who has headed South.

*Youngstown, August 25, 2005*

The strike continues. A boisterous rally of faculty and staff was held today. The only thing-- if you add all of these "only things" it could be a rather large ball of wax-- that I

still can't comprehend is why God Bless America was the featured tune at a union gathering. It all feels so real in a surreal sense. Billionaires bullying the workers, who provide the basis on which their wealth is filtered, cleansed and plumped up in a not so free free-market that always seems to ring true for those who employ gardeners, nannies, security guards, maids, and a host of other look-the-other- way types.

The morale is high, and the faculty and support staff, with some 800 employees between them/us, have effectively shut down the university. This is a university town with only one serious industry left, namely the university, and the thought of Youngstown existing without YSU is difficult to fathom. There is too much going on to capture it all in its glorious proletarian beauty.

This is a blue-collar, union town, and I can sense and feel and embrace the solidarity amongst faculty, support staff, and the thousands of cars which drive by us throughout the week, waving, saluting, stopping to ask how we're doing, and, better yet, telling us not to "give in", as one passer-by told us because "shit travels down hill, and we're all gonna get it if you give in".

It seems clear that the administration is aiming to break the support staff union, kind of like the way that the Harris cabal sought to do so in Ontario for eight years. At the end of the day, you can strip away the benefits, you can strip away the salary, you can strip away the working conditions but, as Paul Robeson might have said, "you can't take away our dignity". The YSU administration is learning that all of our interests, including theirs, are tied together.

I took my first walk in the neighbourhood today, and was greeted by Barbara, from across the street, who, as it turns out, owns four houses on the street. We had a nice chat, and agreed to have tea soon. It is reassuring to meet people who live here. Our street is lined with trees, and, although devoid of the ever omni-present American flag, it seems like your typical down-home USA homestead.

*Youngstown, August 27, 2005*

I went to Cleveland today with a colleague, Peter, and his wife Ann, to have dim sum in Chinatown. I've made it a habit to visit Chinatowns wherever I am, including in Havana and Paris, so it's nice to see the one in Cleveland, which is just down the street from Cleveland State University, a sister-institution of YSU that is not on strike. Cleveland has some of the same working-class roots and burnt-out steel mills that are so notable in Youngstown, and I still can't get over the signs in front of some of the restaurants and stores prohibiting guns. Question: are we really safer when so many people have hand-guns that they may use?

In talking with Peter about China, his homeland, I find it mind-boggling that there are billionaires in China when the masses are struggling to eek out a subsistence life-style which includes a few meals, potable water, and some hope of a better life. I had a few friends from China at the University of Toronto where I did my doctoral studies, and I

can attest to the trend in large numbers of Chinese studying abroad some years ago. And there are many of us heading over there at the same time to tap into the river of gold flowing from the non-Kyoto skies of Beijing. The Olympics, the boom in everything economic, the notion that there are one billion consumers, all of this has got sweaty-palmed, jittery Wall Street tycoons begging for a shot at the glory. The fact that there is less regulation may also be a factor, Martha Stewart notwithstanding.

I have now been completely disabused of any delusion I had about China having any aspirations of creating a socialist society. China is no Cuba but it is tough to hear about the Chinese being more cut-throat than the US in the market-place. I almost fell off my chair the other day when I heard one of these stereotypical right-wing, reactionary radio types pleading with her, yea a right-wing, equal opportunity woman, audience to condemn and label China an enemy of the US for accumulating resources and trading unfairly. Say what?

Back to the strike. The faculty union met at the church on campus to vote on the latest offer, which hasn't changed much in the last week. The church is packed, it's hot, it's dimly lit, the acoustics are poor, and everyone wants an end to this. We are greeted by hundreds of support staff on the way in, who are carrying signs, patting us on the back, and singing "all for one, one for all, the union must be strong". One would have to be heartless to not be moved by the compassion and strength and decency of those out there while we're discussing endorsing a deal with the supposed devil, known in more formal parlance as the administration.

Two support staff representatives remind us that they're finished if we don't stick together, and that we are a community. They are right. Then the negotiating team gives a thorough analysis of the agreement before us.

One after another, the negotiating team members condemn the agreement, saying that we're not respected, that the University has the money, that we can't let our support staff colleagues down, that if we agree to this now it will only be worse in three years for the next agreement. The chief negotiator then makes a point that I think carried some weight: "This administration is entirely intransigent". A standing ovation ensued.

One of the negotiating team raised a key consideration, that this administration may risk a long strike, and may not want to sweeten the pot if we turn down this agreement in light of the fact that student enrolment would decline, meaning less tuition and state revenue, and, as he put it, he's not sure that the administration is as committed to this university as much as we are. They might even want to bankrupt the university, and with some fifteen universities, the majority of them private institutions, within a few hours drive; this is a make or break moment. This is a strike, and such things are said in the heat of battle.

A prominent union activist then stood on a point of order, and requested that we put off the vote for another twenty-four hours in order to give support to the other union, and also to apply some pressure on the administration to get the job done. Another union representative followed this up with an excellent piece of strategic advice: "I always tell

me students that your real power comes in the threat of a strike; once you're on strike you've taken away that leverage". Another standing ovation.

A unanimous vote ensues. The faculty vote will take place on Sunday August 28, from 6 to 8 pm.

The moment the decision to delay our vote is taken, there are screams and cheers outside. As we stream out of the church, hundreds of support staff wave, hug, kiss and offer thanks.

This is my first week in Youngstown. I am a university professor who has not yet taught a class here but I like the school and people.

To cap off an emotional event involving people's livelihoods, I headed down to the local video-store where I rented two DVDs and video for a whopping \$1.57. Suffice to say that the tax for such a transaction in Canada would have been more than double that. So, it is true, in the land of the proverbial free, things are cheaper, although you wouldn't want to lump your healthcare in with the electronic items that have become so indispensable.

*Youngstown, August 31, 2005*

It's almost as though the strike took place months ago. We're now been back in class, in our offices, in reality, with paychecks, and all the rest, for a week, and it has been a very good week.

The strike did have an effect, especially on the support staff, and the faculty listserv still generates a lively and spirited debate on, if you can believe it, strike strategies for the next time in three years. As convinced as I am that the University administration was not entirely sympathetic or empathetic in this case, and that the strike was not necessary, I also do not believe that this agreement, 10% over three years with a first-time payment of up to 1.5% of salary for healthcare, was the worst possible insult. Perhaps having lived through the proverbial Common Sense Revolution in Ontario where we were forced to accept a 0% increase has warped my sense of (sur)reality. The union must be strong but the union must also be strategic. Knowing when and how to strike when the iron is hot is key.

The reality is that the United States is not considered to be a place where workers could make gains. Perhaps my expectations were disproportionately out of whack. I'm aware of all of the Walmart greeters raking in a cool eight bucks an hour, and also the stories of that infamous money-machine closing down any store that considers contemplating a kernel of an essence of a thought to mobilize to fantasize about forming a union. When the workers at a Walmart in Quebec voted to unionize, they promptly lost their jobs when said company closed shop.

But the solidarity amongst the workers was impressive, and it was this solidarity that got us the deal, however inadequate it was, that we finally agreed to, and we didn't lose any money for striking, which is entirely unprecedented for me.

We are all happy to be back. The university seems like a university, with students everywhere. People can rage on about Youngstown but the university itself is a gem. The inside of the campus is green, hilly foliage spread over to the fringes of all the buildings. Apparently one of the brain-trusts in the university hierarchy, and this could also be an urban myth like the cell-phones that will make your car explode while pumping gas, had the revelation of his life in wanting to pave the nature-rich quadrangle that makes us forget that we're in an urban Tropicana.

My two classes went well. Two graduate classes, one a Master's level and the other for doctoral students, who are mainly senior education officials. I like the students, and their direct, sincere outlook on life. The lack of pretension and blame differs, most definitely, from other urban contexts. I have been greeted and treated very warmly, and the days go by quickly.

*Youngstown, September 1, 2005*

The world seems small, and yet with Hurricane Katrina there is no end to the drudgery and hypocrisy exhibited so boldly daily on talk-radio. It might seem too obvious and too omnipresent and too atheistically religious but is it humanly possible and unconscionably conceivable that the average tax-paying, God-fearing, patriotic citizen cannot make the connection between the billions spent weekly in Iraq, where lazer-guided, super-sonic missiles can take you out from another continent, and the absolute misery taking place in the Southern states at this time? I have heard reports, albeit not that public, that Bush and his boys turned down a proposal for funding a few years ago to actually prepare for the inevitable flooding and naturistic rage against the city of New Orleans.

If the folks most affected were White, would Bush have found the resources, the time, and/or the energy to assault the on-slaughter with the same vigour as he exhibited in hammering Baghdad? Unfortunately, there was no "shock and awe" campaign in slaying the dragon of impoverished displacement in the Deep South.

One caller on the radio, and she must represent a good number of folks because she was allowed to talk, wasn't cut off, and wasn't ridiculed by the announcer after her comments, boldly stated that New Orleans is hedonistic, and full of homosexuals, and, therefore, God had simply taken revenge.

*Youngstown, September 2, 2005*

Had a great day at the university in the morning, followed by a round of golf in the afternoon with five colleagues. We went about 25 miles (what was the point of the metric system if I am to live in the US?), and pulled into an extremely unpretentious

nine-hole place sandwiched between new homes on both sides. For the nine holes, a cart, a hot dog and a beer, the grand total of \$12 was required. I'm fond of telling myself that that would be the cost for the sales tax in Canada. So, there are some deals down here, although I am constantly flipping back and forth in my mind over the individualistic/collectivist dichotomy.

You're free to ride a motorcycle without a helmet because it is an expression of individual choice whereas in Canada you can't ride a bicycle without a helmet because your imprudence may end up costing the universal healthcare system a fortune.

Everyone is talking gas. The price has increased about 30% in two months. Do people know that bottled water is still more expensive? Do people know that each rocket sent into the desert in the Middle East could buy two homes for two socio-economically challenged, and otherwise disadvantaged, families in this land of plenty, especially in light of the horror taking place in New Orleans? Do people know that gas here is half what it costs in Europe?

Where is Opra, where is Bill Gates, where are all of the big-time contributors to the Republican Party? Your country needs you. Iraq was fun while it lasted but your country now needs its troops, its machines and technology, its most robust and unceasing charity. Give now, give to all of those who have made it possible for you to have so much.

A rap artist claimed on mainstream t.v. yesterday that President Bush didn't care because they were all blacks down there. How utterly obvious. Of course, the t.v. station and everyone else disavowed themselves from such "careless, senseless" remarks.

Opra apparently has the net wealth of the 50 most least-developed countries (at least their GNPs). How can that be? You will probably control-alt-delete this foray on this page but does anyone really need more than a billion? If we could share, we would set ourselves free from the slavery of the market-place. But that would be an infringement on the market-place.

As a non-religious man, I am stymied at the notion of many church-going folks not being scared out of their skins at the thought of the wealthy not sharing with the poor. But, I also hear on a daily basis from Rush et al. that poor people deserve to be poor, and, in a mildly cruder moment, some of the so-called religious folks claim that New Orleans deserved it because of the unprecedented levels of, once again, homosexuality. Even if God were a homophobe, would it be necessary to torture so many African-American folk so unconscionably the way they are presently being tormented down South?

*Youngstown, September 4, 2005*

Usip, a professor of Economics who I met on the picket-line, invited me out to Liberty, a suburb of Youngstown, where he and his community, about thirty-odd African folk, several of whom are professors at YSU, got together for a picnic. It was a typically

enjoyable African party. Lots of food, good music, some of which I brought from Toronto, a hardy soccer game with the kids, and my pulsating buttocks to prove my illustrious conditioning, and camaraderie. We also played a game of monopoly, which was a first for me in about two and half decades.

I feel connected when I can see and experience a similar cultural milieu to that of Toronto. There are lots of different folks but they don't seem to mix as much, at least that's an initial impression. They live in separate areas, there aren't many mixed marriages, and socially it's clear that cultural mixing is not the norm. But I could be wrong. People are generally nice and welcoming so I can't clinically state what is in the minds of everyone out there. But the harsh reality of poverty at one end, and comfortable estate living at the other, is perplexing, and a little disturbing. And it is not only here in the US.

I crave Thai brochettes, Vietnamese soup, Chinese dim sum, Chilean empanadas, Salvadoran pupusas, Greek soulaki, Indian biriani, and all kinds of other stuff. I went to the Canfield Fair yesterday, a tremendously large animal, tractor, roller coaster, and food extravaganza. I didn't think that there would be C and W music in Ohio but it thrives here. There were four guys in blue jeans, large metal buckles, black t-shirts and cowboy-hats, dancing with their feet only to Nashville tunes on a hardwood floor, which seemed to gather a crowd. There were kiosks for the political machinery in the county, the two engines of American democracy, those two parties vying for your cash, donations, bequeaths, inheritances, payroll deduction, etc., and probably your votes too. Well, for those interested in supporting the Republicans and/or Democrats, please state which is against money in campaigns, serious pork in every barrel, maintaining a huge military presence everywhere, and putting an end to poverty and racism. I know, each party has a perfect plan to perfect the world. After all, this is a bi-partisanly virtual little slab of tofu that we've been sautéed in.

But let's face facts, the Canfield Fair is all about slyly slithering through the peccadilloes of internal, intestinal, ingratiating food consumption. No, Super Size Me was not based on the Canfield Fair but it could have been. Americans like to eat. And, they're having a good time doing it. And I relished seeing everyone together.

*Youngstown, September 10, 2005*

The day before 9/11, and the United States seems eternally turned toward what some have characterized as a "permanent war against terror". I say this with the fullest respect possible for the working man and woman, who have been taken hostage by elite forces hell-bent on profits, more profits, and cold hard cash, in buckets, falling from the sky, not in drips, but in a geyser-like gusher of black gold, streaming through the leather-backed corridors of Haliburton. The average person here strikes me as a decent guy and gal, and I am conflicted by the treatment they are subjected to.

No need to belabour the trauma of daily life, and the constant fight for cash, and the visible, visceral, vitriolic state-imposed violence that slices through poor communities here and there.

New Orleans is no more. 9/11 lives. There are rumours that some twenty thousand have perished in the poison-snake-infested waters consuming the lungs of innocent poor folk in that area of the world's only super-power, and, coincidentally, they are all, or arguably the utter vast majority, black.

My classes are going well. The students are good to be with. There is much talk about health-care in the classes, and obvious comparisons between Canada and the US come to the fore. I am, by no means, a nationalist, a patriot, a nostalgic-loving, flag-waving, Johnny Appleseed-like forbearer of the Canadian national identity but I do believe that healthcare north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel is better. Why should some people get none whilst others get it all?

Our new faculty orientation took place on Friday, and after quickly perusing through the three telephone-book-like healthcare guides for the various healthcare providers, and then looking at the forms and charts and directives about co-pays, formularies, restrictions, caps, limitations, extra-billing and other sorted goodies, I conclude that the Canadian system is mildly more focused on the patient than the administration, not to say that administration is not a worthy field, and that doctors can't be good administrators but there is a limit to the folly. Forty-five million Americans without healthcare coverage, thanks but no thanks.

I went to the YSU Penguins football game today with my mom and Bob. What a great day. The ambiance, the weather, the game, it was a really nice time. The marching band did a snazzy little rendition of the Austin Powers theme-song. So naughty, babeeeee!

There is a mounting pressure to publish, which is a self-generating ball of anguish. The whole publishing thing has become the bar for establishing oneself, for getting tenure, for having some peace of mind, and, I suppose, for being able to say something credible about something. It must be peer-reviewed; it can't be some fluff in a newsletter, a newspaper, and professional journal, or some other organ of the state. It has to be in something usually preceded by ... the Journal of ....

*Youngstown, September 14, 2005*

I had lunch with a couple of colleagues, and we spoke about the vacillating disposition of some of the doctoral students who are in a hurry to finish their dissertations. It's understandable but there is also the ethical quagmire related to quality. It can't be too easy or its relevance will be brought into question. If it's too hard, and people don't complete the program, will it still function with fewer, or no, students? I suppose that this is the dilemma for all programs, whether they be law, medical or doctoral ventures. You need a relatively high success rate or people will be dissuaded from entering, and you also need, therefore, some pretty good indication of who, amongst those who are

accepted, will complete the program. Doing a doctorate is a long-term venture, which seems to never end but it eventually does, and then you end up wondering what you'll do with your time.

With so much misery and eternal poverty, it appears that the 15-minute, Andy Warhol soup-can pan of New Orleans has pretty well died out. Iraq is no where in sight. The big news these days is whether or not Bush's nomination for the Supreme Court, John Roberts, not the former VJ from Toronto, and current newsman at CBS, believes that women should have control of their bodies. Perhaps if the legal-beagles were to pass a rejoinder with the Roe v. Wade stuff stating that if women cannot seek an abortion, period, then men can no longer control their bodies. This way, as the true Socratic method would demonstrate, nobody would control anything.

It is interesting to see Bill Clinton re-invent himself as the elder, more Conservative statesman. Suddenly, he is everywhere with Bush's dad, raising funds for the Tsunami, raising funds for New Orleans, acting as though America is one, and so the story goes. Nary a criticism of the war in Iraq. 1900 dead, and the mother of the killed soldier, Cindy Sheehan, has been, it would appear, permanently silenced. The right-wing media, the one that is constantly decrying a left-wing bias in the media, has bludgeoned the poor woman so long and hard that it is difficult to understand how anyone could be so bloody heartless.

I miss some elements and things and people back home and elsewhere. The five days I spent in Chile in May made me think about the tightly-wrapped Euro-centric world we are so tightly wrapped up in. In corresponding today with friends down there, who, by the way, didn't hesitate to remind me that I am in the United States of America, which would seem obvious but given American foreign policy would also seem incredulous for some, I am struck by how that part of the world, and I was part of it for the past twenty years, perceives the US.

There was a meeting this morning with Wendy Webb, Superintendent of the Youngstown School Board, and a graduate of the doctoral program at YSU. She has energy, vision and a mountain of challenges before her. Some fifteen faculty here are interested in research opportunities. I am interested in helping out, and hope to look at the institutional culture as a way of suggesting policy changes. I feel that kids in Youngstown should be entitled to the same opportunities, advantages and experiences as those in the suburbs.

The day would not have been complete without my daily briefing with the Human Resources department. I still can't get my head around the fact that healthcare here is so undeniably complicated. Anyway, I signed up for the Classic program, was given a phone book of addresses, a pile of forms, and a list of what is covered, when, how, where, by whom, for how much, and generally left bewildered and in a complete haze over the visceral, maze-like, administrative-orgy awaiting all those in search of medicinal relief.

I asked the HR representative who has graciously helped me out these past two weeks: “Do you actually have to give the doctor money?”.

“Not the doctor but one of her staff.”

“What if you need a test?”

“No matter what the test is, you have to pay a \$200 deductible.”

“But with the co-pay, and the deductible, and the extra costs for the pharmaceutical plan, and so on, I would imagine that this is a pretty serious disincentive to use the healthcare plan at all.”

“Actually,” she surmised, “ours is one of the best plans around. A lot of people don’t have nearly half as much as we do.”

I’m now starting to understand why the faculty union was so enraged about paying 1.5% of one’s salary for healthcare. This stuff never ends. Note to Canada: stay with the flawed, defective universal system that makes no one happy; it could be worse. I feel that I should open up a line of credit for my cholesterol.

What we lose in healthcare, we more than make up for in golf. Why golf is so cheap here is beyond me. \$20 for 18 holes plus a cart at a top-notch course seems insanely surreal.

*Youngstown, September 20, 2005*

So much for all of this naval-gazing about the US healthcare system. After going out to the local driving-range in Canfield, a nice little suburb safely on the outer rim of Youngstown, and whacking about a hundred and fifty balls with Bob, I completely through my back out two days later. I’m no Tiger Woods but when you sit in an office for several hours a day, do no exercise, spend unacceptably long periods of time working yourself into a lather about that which lathers me up, and generally attack the golf-course like there is a religious rationale for it, well, it seems to make sense.

The administrative assistant in the Educational Administration, Research and Foundations department, who has single-handedly made my welcome complete, and has answered all of my three hundred, mainly innocuous questions, without fail, and even helped me pick up my sofa-bed with her truck, made a few phone-calls, and before you know it, I had switched medical plans, and was on my way to the chiropractor within an hour of arriving at the university Tuesday morning.

The doctor, a young guy with a typically engaging local persona, greeted me warmly, went through a long check-list of symptoms, had me review, fill out and sign about eight forms, and then put me on the table for some sort of cream that helps freeze the wounded zone, and then attached four vibrating tensors. After that, he, for lack of a better term, cracked my back. It felt good, and I immediately felt fifty percent better. I went back the

next day, and felt seventy-five percent better. By the time a group of us went out to play golf on Friday, everything was back to normal.

The golf-course where we've now played twice is a gem, not expensive, easy-going, and the main thing is the camaraderie. I've been sharing some of my limited insight on the game with Gunna, who, originally from Sri Lanka, is new to the game. His game seems to have improved a little, and the friendship is most appreciated.

Between holes, we tossed a football that I purchased at a sports store called Dick's. It felt good to throw it around, and it brought back memories of the years when I played the game as a youngster. Of course, as I told my American colleagues, and this was the unbelievable theme of an actual marketing campaign of the Canadian Football League a few years ago, "our balls are bigger".

Football is more than a sport in these parts. Ohio, apparently, is one of the three or four hot-spots for the game in the US. It is astonishing to see high school games being televised, and the coverage in the newspaper and nightly news is something to behold. I read in today's newspaper that there were some 104,000 fans at yesterday's Ohio State game in Columbus. The coach was actually at YSU in the 1990s, and the team won four championships here. He has his own following, and everything he says is closely monitored.

I had a very enjoyable evening last night with a few colleagues and their wives at a nice restaurant called the Springfield Grill. I had a mildly spicy Thai Calamari, which made my taste-buds tingle, especially since I've been talking about Vietnamese food, or something from the Orient, these past few days. We went back to Dick and Janet's afterward for some wine, and Janet served up a delicious key-lime pie. I liked her candour and demeanour, her gentle way of conversing about her family.

When she found out that I have two daughters, two beautiful daughters, Chelsea and Sarah, she simply stated: "Daughters always have a special love for their fathers". A father will always miss his daughters, regardless of their ages and the mysteries enveloping the human condition, and I miss them, as well as some of the sounds and rhythms and contortions that vibrate in the streets I know a few hours to the north. However, I am also happily ensconced in the balmy climes chiming through the Mahoning Valley and in the corridors of where the Penguin lingers. It's been a good two months.