UP IN THE AIR:

MY CHUCK OVERBY STORY

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Introduction

Journalism has always been about questions. The fundamental building blocks of standard news stories are small questions with documentary orientations: Simple whos, whats, wheres, whens, hows, and whys that flesh out a story. It is easy to make a case for how basic facts help media consumers understand the world around them through simple documentation. But criticisms of modern journalism often take issue with the image of reality that journalism portrays. Scholars have conceptualized it as incomplete, biased, and unhelpful to society. Such questioning of media products and processes is fruitful. This project questions the media’s reliance on objectivity as its means of documenting truth, and the primary question is whether or not compromising conventional journalistic objectivity in favor of a hybrid perspective that incorporates subjectivity could be a legitimate way for journalists to better represent truthful worldly reality. It analyzes how the elements of literary journalism can enable blending objective documentary impulses with self-conscious commentary to yield a media product that answers more questions. It asks if this hybridity can move journalism toward bigger questions approached on personal levels, thereby taking journalism from a passive reflection to an active representation. Ultimately, it is concerned with journalists’ desire to have their work be a record of human activity and a promoter of democratic freedom and the issue of whether or not journalists have the ability or feel the obligation to comment on big questions and their answers.

This project is not the first to question objectivity. It includes a literature review that explores some of the historical and philosophical discourse on the subject
of objectivity and its use by journalists as a means to an end of truth. Journalism holds truth as its primary tenant. Objectivity is truth’s twin ethic in journalistic discourse. After defining and critiquing a synthesized concept of objectivity in the practice of journalism, I formulate a theoretical response to objectivity that argues for the inclusion of subjectivity in journalistic writing.

My questioning of objectivity and my theoretical response to it play out in a professional project that serves as the bulk of this project. It is a journalistic personal essay that operates as a biography of Athens, Ohio, resident and Ohio University (OU) emeritus professor of engineering Chuck Overby, mixed with my reflections and commentary on the story. The professor is 87 and still lives in the countryside near Athens with his wife of over 60 years, Ruth. They still swim together a few times a week at the OU Aquatic Center and, just as frequently, they visit the school’s library to keep up on their reading. They attend public events with regularity, he often in an Uncle Sam costume, and sometimes, in these forums, she will tug at his sleeve to indicate that he should end another improvised speech. He has delivered speeches internationally, organized a local advocacy organization, and written a book all with two interests in mind: The proliferation of peace and the conservation of the environment. While this commitment in and of itself is not unique or particularly noteworthy, Overby’s efforts at pursuing its fulfillment are. I used journalism’s natural tendency and ability to question the world as a means of exploring the uncertainties I have about the work Overby’s done and, more specifically, about what he perceives as a great deal of difficulty in effectively communicating his ideas in any public forum.
My interest in Overby arises from a dedication to the public welfare. Journalism has made its name on serving the public. This is the purpose of guaranteeing its freedom in the United States Constitution. Overby, too, has spent his life working to serve the public. He has a great deal to say that would be beneficial for the public to hear. Studying his life and work is an exploration of the duties, obligations, and liberties that an academic faces, feels, and enjoys. To me, he represents a tangible example of a life devoted to knowledge, learning, and truth that I can meet with and talk to, either in the student center or on his front porch. What I explored in my work, then, were big questions of his life and work. What does it mean that an 87-year-old man who has lived a life of relative ease and comfort is still so concerned about the direction of the human race that he will tell anyone willing to listen about his fears? What will his ultimate significance be? Is it frightening that more people recognize the work of Justin Bieber than of Chuck Overby? Even if it is not, is it meaningful in some way? These are the kinds of big questions this project was designed to ask (and, hopefully, answer). I have intentionally lionized Overby in an effort to present his value judgments as valuable in order to enable my questioning of these valuable values.

I met Overby during my freshman year at OU, and my choice to center my thesis project on his story came after getting to know him during my time as a student. He was the subject of two journalistic pieces—a magazine-style profile and a biographical essay—that I wrote for tutorial classes. These pieces have been drawn on extensively for the project at hand but altered radically because the representations of
Overby they present are incomplete. The incompletion, I felt, was due to objectivity’s ethical imperatives on the more conventional story models in which they were presented. There was much more to say about Overby, and my desire to express that was what motivated my undertaking his story as a part of my thesis project. To compensate for the earlier incompletion, I re-evaluated a significant part of my approach to writing about Overby and decided that the use of my first-person point of view would help address the incompletion. Speaking in literary terms, I am a “character” in the story as Chuck explains to me things like the nature of his work or the method for splitting wood to heat his house. The reason behind this first person inclusion is a conscious response to objectivity. It is my experimental test of the hypothesis that employing a hybrid perspective of objectivity and subjectivity can enable significance in journalism.

Aside from this direct address, I took a few other stylistic liberties in the piece that break from traditional MLA formatting. Most notably, the use of footnotes in the work is a means of fracturing the narrative and including more commentary on the story. It also allowed me to circumvent burdensome endnotes that would slow down the piece’s reading.

After the personal essay comes a section of self-critique, which reflects on the project to analyze my execution of the inclusively subjective theory of journalism I adopt in response to objectivity.
Literature Review

This review of literature is intended to establish journalism’s ideal regarding the search for truth. It then addresses objectivity—how journalism believes truth can be accessed—and critiques the objective model that the majority of the professional industry supports. It analyzes journalistic objectivity through a literary lens, likening it to literary realism, and uses this conceptualization to explore how literary journalism might help journalists overcome the limits of objectivity in their attempts to make sense of the world and its truths. It then explores literary journalism as a means to incorporate objectivity and subjectivity to yield a more meaningful kind of journalism.

Truth: Journalism’s Ultimatum

Sigma Delta Chi, the institutional predecessor to the Society of Professional Journalists, recorded one of the first codes of journalism ethics in 1926. Its first principle: “‘Truth is our ultimate goal’” (Ward, “Inventing Objectivity” 142). The significance of truth in journalism has been echoed both before and after this codification, and the language used in this early articulation is a reflection of professionally agreed-upon values in which truth is the most important objective. Other language used by scholars to explain the relationship between journalism and truth evokes this significance, too. Banaszynski writes that good journalism is motivated by “passion for the truth, and passion for society’s right to that truth” (238). The use of passion as a means of explaining how journalists pursue truth suggests the fervor with which journalists are supposed to practice journalism. Truth, the consensus
holds, is a fundamental component of any attempt at journalism. Kovach and Rosenstiel reinforced this notion when they set truth up as the first element of journalism in their landmark text *The Elements of Journalism*: “Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth” (12). Simply put, however, the first tenant of the traditional journalism paradigm is to “seek external discoverable truth” (Elliott 31).

The scholarship points to not only the importance of truth to journalists and the way they prioritize it, but effectively establishes a broad, working definition that can be applied to any creative product claiming journalistic integrity. That is, journalism must contain truth. This operates as an ultimatum for media products and organizes all the journalistic work that is done by those who maintain their faithfulness to it. Journalists are trained to believe that truth is their ultimate goal, their passion, and their first obligation. This is all very noble and the maintenance of truth’s importance in journalism is essential if journalism wants to assert its legitimacy. But simply having a goal in mind—even an ultimate one—does not guarantee its achievement.

Objectivity and Conventional Journalism’s Truth

Truth is the highest ideal of journalism ethics, and journalists have erected objectivity as the ethical way to access and present it. As Ward summarizes, “Modern journalism ethics was built upon the twin pillars of truth and objectivity” (“Truth and Objectivity” 71). Truth’s significance is assumed with virtual unanimity; Ward even goes so far as to consider it a presupposed ideal built into any definition of journalistic
practice (“Truth and Objectivity” 78). But objectivity has been the subject of much
discussion among scholars.

Objectivity’s history in journalism goes back over a century. Mindich refers to
a survey of 19th century history that documented a move toward nonpartisanship and
objectively packaged news to demonstrate his point that, “The 1890s is ... one of the
first decades when objectivity was a recognized ethic in journalism, but also one of the
last in which ‘objectivity’ goes basically unquestioned” (114). His analysis of the
events in the 19th century that lead to objectivity’s codification portrays an ethic
arrived at not through professional consensus, but at the hands of historically notable
power brokers in the media and the government. It is compelling evidence in the case
that objectivity is not a well-reasoned concept or method for making news but is
instead a concept loosely fitted to its purpose with loopholes for exploitation.

With this historically contested backlight in mind, the fact that a single
unanimously agreed-upon definition of objectivity has not existed for over 100 years
is not surprising. Unlike the scholarship on truth in journalism, scholarship on
objectivity in journalism is complicated and contains many arguments for and against
the objective ideal as well as simple descriptions of the standard. This difficulty in
arriving at a consensus definition of objectivity presents itself in a different form when
the highly regarded definitions in the field are considered; they are often complex and
multi-faceted. Many definitions are broken down into lists of concepts meant to
organize objectivity’s pursuit. Ward, for example, considers objectivity “an ideal that
can be analyzed into six standards”: factuality, balance and fairness, non-bias,
independence, non-interpretation, and neutrality (“Inventing Objectivity” 74). Mindich uses a more historical method to define objectivity with components presented in textbooks and recent criticism: detachment, nonpartisanship, the Inverted Pyramid format, naïve empiricism, and balance (10). These two lists illustrate that objectivity can be interpreted, studied, and prescribed in various ways depending on the relationship a scholar is arguing for between this ideal and its practitioners.

However, the lack of a consistent, consensus definition does not mean that objectivity cannot be critiqued. In order to consider a few critiques, it will help to have a concept of objectivity to consider.

Realism: Objectivity’s Intellectual Kin

For this unified concept, I turn to a sense of empirical realism that held great cultural currency at the beginning of the 20th century, around the same time that journalism codified objectivity (Ward, “Inventing Objectivity” 141). Several scholars point to realism as an informing worldview prevalent in the culture due to the new advancements in technology and science. According to Ward, realism’s relationship with journalistic objectivity begins during the important shift in media brought on by the invention of the printing press in the 17th century. The editors with the power to determine the nature of the press during this transitional period portrayed journalism as “one of the new discourses of fact” alongside the new scholarly discussions in the burgeoning sciences (Ward, “Inventing Objectivity” 139). These media powers operated with a historical predecessor to objectivity as a means of legitimizing
themselves to readerships that were better informed, more logically capable, and inherently skeptical at unprecedented levels. As Ward writes, “…the norm of reporting impartial fact entered the lexicon of journalism from the ambient culture” (“Inventing Objectivity” 139). Ward traces a line between these Enlightenment-era notions of reporting and the doctrine of traditional objectivity other scholars have pointed to as originating in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century. This doctrine asserted that “…a report is objective if and only if it is an accurate recording of an event...[and] reports only the facts and eliminates comment, interpretation, and speculation by the reporter” (“Inventing Objectivity” 141). Accuracy is the keyword in this qualification, and it is a value that lines up with realism’s assumed capacity for representing the world. Accuracy is designed to give a real view of the world, and as Meyer puts it, “The reporter’s task is to directly reflect the world to the reader or viewer, without any of the distortions or biases that would alter the ‘real’ view” (131).

Realism, however, has not maintained the cultural currency it had in history. An analogy can be made to American literature, in which realism enjoyed some time en vogue during the same period that it was helping to establish the principles of American journalism. Realism was, to American authors in the 19th century, a means of representing the world. Notably, realism’s heyday occurred in the 19th century, just as what we might recognize as contemporary journalism began and objectivity became its standard. But literature did not rest at realism. As Eysteinsson writes, “Several critical authorities have declared realism outmoded or dead” (179). Realism was problematized by modernism (and later postmodernism), which aimed to address
realism’s failings in fully representing the world. The concept of naïve empiricism that Mindich uses as a component of journalistic objectivity represents modernism’s critique of realism well. While realists believed that they could recreate the world, modernists believed that language and expression were ultimately limited, as was sensory perception, so that representing the real world is much more complex than simple photographic language. This is, roughly, the difference between a short story by Twain and a short story by Hemingway. Eventually, modernism came to wield “hegemonic power” (Eysteinsson 179) over literary discourse. While realism is not gone from literature, its intellectual dominance has been successfully challenged by a new mode of understanding and representing the world in literature.

Definitions of objectivity strengthen the connection between objectivity and literary realism, and their relationship clearly extends beyond mere same-place-same-time circumstances. Mindich’s historical research demonstrates this, too, when it points to the proliferation of camera technology in heightening the American appreciation for “true” representations of the world (104). He also points to several of the 19th century realist literary heavyweights who began their professional writing careers as journalists: Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane (105). Even William Dean Howells, Realism’s *paterfamilias*, called journalism “the school of reality” (Mindich 105). Given the importance of realism at the time, the journalism of that era was not just the result of powerful actors acting, but was also their reaction to the desires of a public they sought to speak for and to. For Mindich, this reaction resulted in a wider public move from religious paradigms of thought to
the “naïve empiricism” practiced by realism (112). As reality became more readily at hand and the technology behind this readiness advanced in accuracy, realistic representations of reality held great cultural currency.

However, just as literature has seen the flaws in realism’s model, so should journalism. My primary concern with maintaining a realist orientation for journalistic production is a reflection of larger concerns with objectivity in the discourse. As Meyer writes, “Naïve empiricism assumes metaphysical realism” (131). Metaphysics is a hotly contested subject within philosophy, so it is with hesitation that I apply it to journalism, but part of my argument is that journalism should welcome philosophical debate because philosophy is an important realm of human thought with implications that bear on everyday reality, and everyday reality is subject matter of mass media journalism. The communication of the everyday that journalism practices is manifested in daily news reports (Sommerville 10).

**Critiques of Objectivity Construed as Journalistic Realism**

Critiques of an ideal as multi-faceted as journalistic objectivity raise many issues. Scholars have pointed out hypocrisies in objectivity’s execution in the daily news media. Others point to examples of the figurative language journalists use to describe their objective practices as metaphors for a passive process of recreating the world. This passivity has been conceptualized by some as a loss of autonomy and freedom for journalists and as a source of alienation for media consumers.
Sommerville asserts that the model of daily news, in which consumers must be enticed to return for another installment with each sunrise, has enabled an industrialization that prizes product that “deconstructs our experience of the world and blocks higher mental processes” (11), constituting a fundamental bias that flies in the face of objectivity. This deconstruction, which I’ll call demonstration in the interest of mellowing the rhetoric, is the result of objectivity’s life support for realism. If artistic and literary movements can be considered a valid indicator of a philosophy’s life force, then realism as a mode of documenting the world is problematized to a point that its unconscious practice cannot go without criticism. While scholars disagree on who is to blame—the industry (Merrill) or the consumers (Sommerville)—the solution can come from one source: the producers. But it will require activity.

Mindich sees this, too, as a result of his exploration of metaphors for objectivity. Exploring objects like windows, mirrors, nets, and seesaws, he arrives at the conclusion that the issue with these metaphors that journalists use to express their productive framework all miss the essential fact that journalists are not inanimate objects that show visions, catch stories, and balance discourses (7). Rather, journalists are active participants in the reality they represent, and this integration presents an opportunity to make itself a part of the representations journalists produce of the larger world of which they are one small part. The large-scale missing of this opportunity represents a play into passivity. Ward points to the philosophical assumptions of positivism as the source of this passive model, and when positivism collapsed under
the weight of uncertainty, objectivity’s model was undone (“Inventing Objectivity” 146).

The collapse of positivism in the 20th century had major implications for journalism. Despite high hopes for the ways new technologies would enable more objective reporting, scholars have analyzed how the explosion of journalistic output through new media actually complicated journalism’s adherence to objective standards. As Elliott writes, “…rather than reinforce the belief of a single Enlightenment-style truth, slice-of-life journalistic reporting ultimately revealed that stories have multiple perspectives rather than a single infallible truth” (33). This revelation undid the efforts of objectivity to present a realistic world through journalism and spawned various methods to compensate for the impossibility of truthfulness in objective reporting.

But despite the proliferation of post-objective models for journalists, the objective model lives on and continues to promote a passive model of journalism that scholars continue to problematize. Merrill connects this passivity to an erosion of journalistic autonomy and freedom. The “passive drifting” many professional journalists do throughout their careers results from a lack of will on the part of these individuals (207). A lack of will, in the context of society, represents a surrender of freedom. The power of the free press, Merrill argues, is nullified when journalists abdicate responsibility, so that “…when journalists abide by obligations and responsibility under any kind of pressure or duress or because they have been led by an outside force to believe that a course of action ‘is what good and responsible
journalists do,’ then they are no longer free” (80). Objectivity, with its complicated
definition that forms more by exclusions than inclusions (Mindich 130), presents a
professionally determined guideline for the production of journalism. In doing so, it
robs journalists of their ability to explore subjectivity, stripping them of an agency in
deciding how their representation might reflect something about the subject of the
expression. Because representation is ethically regulated, it prevents experimentations
with subjectivity. Merrill believes that if journalists can reassert their freedom, they
can assume the responsibility this power presents. And power for use in the name of
the public good is ultimately what the news media should dedicate itself to.

One form of post-objective journalism that enjoys both popular and critical
appeals is literary journalism. Scholars of literary journalism contend that objective
standards do not serve the public because they create a sense that “...readers and
viewers [are] separated or alienated from the larger world that is the subject of
journalism” (Hartsock, “Note from the Editor” 5). This alienation is a consequence of
professional, conventional journalism’s model in which journalists feel they must keep
distance between themselves and their audience, effectively building alienation into
their business model (Hartsock, “Note from the Editor” 6). Alienation from audience
is not the only distancing conventional, objective journalism creates; as Alexander
points out, “...the self [is] literally repressed by the dictates of journalistic
‘objectivity’” (61).

Hunter S. Thompson, in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72,*
writes:
“The only thing I ever saw that came close to Objective Journalism was a closed-circuit TV setup that watched shoplifters in the General Store at Woody Creek, Colorado. I always admired that machine, but I noticed that nobody paid much attention to it until one of those known, heavy, out-front shoplifters came into the place…but when that happened, everybody got so excited that the thief had to do something quick, like buy a green popsicle or a can of Coors and get out of the place immediately. So much for Objective Journalism. Don’t bother to look for it here—not under any byline of mine; or anyone else I can think of. With the possible exception of things like box scores, race results, and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction of terms” (33).

Thompson’s point simplifies the entire debate, crystallizing it along a simple line of thought. Objectivity doesn’t make sense. This delegitimization of objectivity, shallow as it is, represents the power objectivity’s rejection can enable. It allowed Hunter S. Thompson to connect with his audience.

*Literary Journalism and Realist Objectivity*

Literary journalists like Thompson have responded to objectivity for as long as the form has existed. The form itself has been characterized by some as existing in intellectual opposition to the imperatives objectivity puts on journalists. Definitions of the practice vary, and appropriately so, given the genre’s ambiguous nature.

A historical exploration of “narrative journalism” reveals that the practice’s origins trace back to the 1890s (Alexander 62)—the same decade in which Mindich argues objectivity begins its tenuous rule over journalistic norms. Practitioners have been the motivating force behind literary journalism’s genesis and development. Sims conceptualizes the entire practice of literary journalism as “...the efforts of skilled
writers who speak about the reality of the world as they find it, and who write about people located in time and space with real names and real lives” (“The Problem and the Promise” 13). His basic definition of what literary journalism involves is constituted by the work of practitioners; to him, literary journalism necessitates immersive reporting, the active presence of the author in the narrative, and literary tools and tropes borrowed from popular fiction styles (“International Literary Journalism” 33). He adds that literary journalism tends to favor the ordinary over the celebrated in its subject matter and that its long-form narratives present a stark contrast from standardized journalism’s hurried pace (“International Literary Journalism” 33).

Literary journalism, then, partially defines itself in opposition to conventionally objective news reportage. By flying in the face of conventions like short-term deadlines, authorial absence, and straightforward factual presentation, literary journalists are enabled to create that which can engage. Hartsock points to engagement as “the center of what literary journalism attempts to do” (“Note from the Editor” 5). This engagement, he contends, has to do with the cultural, the social, and the civil; it is about revealing these aspects of the world for the reader (“Note from the Editor” 5). This is possible through an exchange of subjectivities, and each of these exchanges attempts to bring together human subjectivities alienated by the objective model of reporting and presentation (Hartsock, “Note from the Editor” 5). This is accomplished through the genre’s ability to form a connection between storyteller, story, and audience (Hartsock, “Note from the Editor” 6). This relationship must be strong on all sides, and Alexander points to several cases of classic literary journalism
in which an “uncanny” resemblance between storyteller and story subject creates engagement between those two and with the audience on a “psycho-biographical level” (57). In Hartsock’s view, this relationship of engagement generates literary journalism’s integrity and power because it operates within the artistic powers of language which literary journalists use to establish the triangular relationships with their subjects and their audience with the target in mind that all can “…come together and understand each other better” (“Note from the Editor” 6).

My work is focused on this engagement with both Overby and the reader. As I attempt to grapple with the meaning of Overby’s life, I often use direct address to talk to the reader in order to engage him or her with my engagement with Overby’s life and work. This engagement is necessary because, as Sims argues, all literary journalism must be examined “…on its own terms” (“The Problem and the Promise” 8). No two pieces of literary journalism should be expected to mirror each other’s methods or orientations unless it is the intent of the author. Unlike conventional journalism’s formulaic standards, literary journalism can play with reportorial and authorial expectations for the sake of the story.

But this doesn’t mean that literary journalists are not beholden to truth like all journalists. Just like their objectively oriented colleagues, literary journalists must not stray beyond what Sims terms the “reality boundary” (“The Problem and the Promise” 8). Literary journalism, he writes, “…begins with the reality of the world as we find it” (11). The world being found is the phenomenal one of space and time that we inhabit (14), and capturing it for the page is no simple task. But ultimately, literary
journalism, if it hopes to maintain its journalistic reputation, must be about reality. But this does not imply a realist orientation. Quite to the contrary, literary journalists are in a unique position to reckon with intellectual criticisms of realism. Because these criticisms are based on the explosion of perspective in the 20th century and that explosion’s subsequent challenges to the validity of truth, reality, and objectivity (Sims, “The Problem and the Promise” 13), literary journalists have the ability to deal with these criticisms by addressing their basis. This is the engagement of subjectivities that Hartsock points to. By approaching any story from a personal perspective, literary journalists can self-consciously analyze that perspective’s presentation. I attempt to do this in my work here, reflecting on my own feelings and thoughts regarding Overby and his story and addressing how they might be playing a role in the presentation of the narrative.

The purpose behind this is to recognize that my subjectivity is limited. Hartsock draws on Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle to address the quantum, ambiguous nature of reality that literary journalists deal with (“Literary Journalism” 442). Because “...what we see is only what our questioning permits us to see” (443), there is a “fundamental instability” (444) to every human’s perception of the physical world. However, this real ambiguity is not an impediment to literary journalism. As Hartsock points out: “Literature...examines and acknowledges ambiguity as ambiguity, while...science claims that ambiguity is decipherable and determinate within critical closure” (444). This power of embracing ambiguity is what makes literary journalism “...part of a larger quantum discourse that makes claims to
reflecting phenomenal experience according to our mode of questioning” (“Literary Journalism” 445). This is a fundamental step past realist objectivity. In some sense, it operates in the same mode as literary modernism or postmodernism, which could be parts of that same larger quantum discourse. The point being that I am trying to grapple with ambiguity on a large level in my work, and the power of literary journalism enables my work in this respect.

This power, as argued by others, is derived from the literary liberties practitioners can take with conventional journalists practices. Alexander argues that the literary elements of literary journalism enable “...the literary journalist to confront and acknowledge those aspects of his or her self, [which are] repressed and alienated in conventional journalism” (63). Through the power of rhetorical devices, literary journalists are able to engage with their subjects, their subjectivities, and their audience because, as Alexander argues, rhetoric is about storytelling, not facts and falsities (63). By privileging meaningful rhetoric of raw facts, literary journalists can make better sense of the world, and this is ultimately the goal of journalism.

Journalists as Sense-Makers

Making sense is used synonymously here with truth when it comes to journalistic output. Hartley calls journalism a huge mass of “human sense-marking” (3). Kovach and Rosenstiel, in addressing the outmoded gatekeeper function of the press, present an argument for journalists as sense-makers when they write that a journalist’s task is “helping the audiences make order” of the vast amounts of
information presented to them (19). Sense-making hinges on journalist’s ability to literally create sense (e.g., sight, sound, taste, touch, feel) on a page, to capture the objective reality they experience with the subjective tool of language. After dealing with arguments for and against both sides, I approached Chuck Overby with a mix of objective and subjective orientation. While I tried to present as real a story of Chuck’s life as I could, I also kept my subjectivity intact and maintained it throughout my project’s progression. I trusted my own judgment in making sense of the stories he tells me and the way he tells them and how his house smells and what his walk looks like and to communicate and/or express both that trust and its evil twin—self-doubt—in the piece.

To deal with these issues, I made special use of my narrator’s voice. Using a conception of the narrator as “a speaker through which an author presents a narrative” (Murfin 328), I was able to write myself as an author into the narrative voice that was also me. This is meaningful because modern literary theories often consider narrative voices as of paramount importance. Often, “…the way the narrator...sees things is, to the largest degree, the thing being seen” (Gornick 7). Addressing self-doubt, then, becomes necessary because as Gornick posits, writers “...might not ‘know’ themselves—that is, have no more self-knowledge than the rest of us—but in each case—and this is crucial—they know who they are at the moment of writing” (30, emphasis hers). Much of the product constitutes an attempt at this self-knowledge. It is one of several truths I define and present.
At the root of this work is my fascination with Chuck Overby, the things he’s accomplished, and how, for some reason, he’s still working to do more. The ultimate goal of this piece is some truth about him, me, and reality. It is with this in mind that I present something very meaningful to me.
Works Cited


Up in the Air: My Chuck Overby Story

Introduction

Can you see the sky from where you are? Overhead? Through a window? In the gap between a door and its fame? Even if you can’t see it, you know the sky is still up there. It always is.

The sky was clear on a nice night in the spring of 2010 when I first met Chuck Overby. The sun set late and warm air sat around the brick buildings of the campus. I was a freshman at Ohio University, and I went to a film screening hosted by my academic advisor in the journalism program. It was one in a series on environmental concerns. The film we watched isn’t important,\(^1\) and neither is the event, for the most part. It was only after, during the open-floor discussion, that a polite elderly gentleman in the front row held court on a list of public affairs issues for twenty to thirty minutes. He stood the entire time, leaning on a chair. He was white-bearded, bespectacled, and wore an ornate Southwestern-inspired belt buckle. His pockets burst with pens, pencils, and handwritten notes. The crowd of college kids and a few environmentally conscious townsfolk sat up straight and stayed quiet as he spoke, but clapping punctuated his major points. I watched him from near an open window. About fifteen minutes into his speech, his wife, who was sitting by his side, would tug at his sleeve every few minutes to signal her interest in his wrapping things up, which tugs he

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\(^1\) If you really want to know, it was a documentary on the health impacts experienced by the people who cleaned up the Chernobyl disaster.
would acknowledge individually with an assurance that he needed just a few more minutes. She would allow him that, and then tug again. They repeated this call and response a few times until Chuck relented the floor and received more applause. I watched him from near an open window. I was sitting with two girls, both journalism majors with environmental interests like my own. I remember we shot each other sideways glances as we tried to decide what to make of the guy. He seemed to have come from out of the blue, and so did his rhetoric. But to call it rambling does not do it justice; think of it more as an orated polemic because we were along for the ramble, too. I wish I had the memory to share everything Chuck said with you because there’s a sort of poetry of logic in his speech, but the only concrete memory I can offer you is of an equation Chuck claimed to have performed sometime in the late 1970s; he’d later call it a “back-of-a-napkin” engineering calculation.

On the back of a literal napkin, Chuck—an engineer by profession\textsuperscript{2}—took the concept of half-lives\textsuperscript{3} and applied it to the most significant exponential decay he could think of: the Earth’s. Taking the 1972 American per capita consumption rate of resources (52 kilograms per person per day of “minerals, both fuel and non-fuel,

\textsuperscript{2} I’m asking you here to give special, anachronistic significance to the term “profession” when considering Chuck’s life’s work. Driven by his interest in flying machines, enabled by top-of-his-class high school grade, and financed by the G.I. Bill, Chuck began studying engineering in 1946 and hasn’t stopped. During this time, he’s played on the national stage, doing research for the U.S. Congress’s Office of Technological Assessment and becoming the first Faculty in Residence for the Washington Internship for Students of Engineering (WISE) program on Engineering and Public Policy. I’m giving you this background in service of explaining that even Chuck’s back-of-a-napkin engineering calculations come from somebody with decades of experience in the field.

\textsuperscript{3} The unit for the measurement of the amount of time it takes for a quantity of a substance to lose half its mass through exponential decay.
metals, and non-food fibers,” as he explains it in his book\(^4\), he used that number and tried to determine how long it would take the entire 1972 world population to consume half of the Earth’s mass. This is a tricky calculation due simply to its scope, but also because it operates on the assumption that the entire Earth is composed of consumable resources, which it is not. But so Chuck, who believes that everyone in the world is ultimately aiming for the American standard of living,\(^5\) was trying to compute what would happen to the planet if its entire population were to consume at that standard. If this equation were to hold the rate of decay constant and just measure how quickly it would take 1972’s world population to use up half the planet at the American rate of consumption, the timeline of our imminent demise is so far off as to be irrelevant to anyone alive today. In a basic cost/benefit analysis, it would make no sense to worry about something so far beyond us, especially if we’ve got more pressing concerns.

But the purpose of half-life formulas is to measure exponential decay; that is, decay that proceeds on a curve, not a line. Chuck wanted exponential decay in the equation because, just as Chuck made a hypothetical assumption about the Earth’s consumability for the equation’s sake, he made another about the exponentiality of its decay. He knew that the sheer demand for resources would increase, as would the sheer human population, and signs pointed to an exponential rise in both as the

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\(^5\) This is an important assumption grounded mostly in Chuck’s international experience with various peoples grappling with the effects of cultural globalization (e.g., Chinese peasants who crowded around Japanese televisions when he visited the People’s Republic two and a half decades ago and the way those people desired the material goods made to appear so appealing on the screens).
population boomed and material desire proliferated. So he accounted for five percent annual growth in the consumption rate. That 5% is a tough figure to work with because it’s a mathematically steady growth, and humanity’s population growth hardly looks steady across any 40-year period (and especially the last 40-year period\(^6\)). So, with 1972’s world population of 3.8 billion consuming the entire planet at the rate of the average American in the same year, and accounting for five percent annual increases in that consumption rate, how long did Chuck conclude it would take to work our way through half the Earth? 430 years.

There’s some slipperiness in these numbers. The assumptions leave room for error and, since 1972, Americans have seen tangible efforts at the societal level to reduce our wastefulness in the form of recycling programs and biodegradable packaging materials.\(^7\) And the capitalist drive for greater efficiency might yet motivate us to adapt our way of life further. But we’re talking about the actual physical consumption of an entire planet here. As all-encompassing of a definition we might grant a word like “world,” there is in it demarcation, a process of exclusion, of omission. A world has limits, finity, an end. Even if it isn’t flat, the Earth has an edge. It is (barring technological enabling) the limit of the sky. We’re bound by gravity to this planet, and unless there’s some large-scale investment in a mean of overriding this

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\(^6\) The current world population is estimated at roughly seven billion, almost double what it was 40 years ago, and I’ll add here a mention of the well-known More People Alive Today Than Have Ever Died statistic to highlight this doubling’s significance.

\(^7\) More contemporary figures on resource consumption are hard to synthesize meaningfully; to put it simply, how could I possibly convey with full, due significance the amount of material and energy that goes into powering and maintaining the current way of human life in every corner of the world?
bondage, it’s imperative\(^8\) that we use the resources available to us on the longest timeline possible.

So even if this 430-year timeline is strictly hypothetical, the number itself is not the equation’s real significance. The point of the Half-Life of the Earth is its implication that the planet, at some point, will run out of resources for us to consume. It’s a recognition that there is still an edge to the world we live in and on, and that limit gets closer every day as time marches on. Before Columbus’s voyage, they thought there was an edge to the world because they didn’t know any better. Now, we know there’s an edge to the world because we’ve run out of New Worlds to discover.

Chuck has a special interest in end-of-the-world scenarios because his work has focused on how plausible they are. Specifically, he sees two not-too-distant possibilities in the future that could bring The World as He Knows It to an end: The Twin Themes, as he calls them. In order to explain them, I’m going to employ a lengthy metaphor here: the Marching Parade of Global Progress. In this parade, nations (the most relevant division humanity erects between itself in our global society) are represented by floats proportionate in quality to the socioeconomic situations they face (e.g., while North Korea might be represented by one madman with a push-cart, the United States’ monster of a float might have rock-bottom gas mileage). The parade in the metaphor is huge. It’s a teeming mass of humanity if ever

\(^8\) A brief note on the use of the word imperative: Imperative’s usefulness has been diminished by its authoritarian connotations that have taken a word that meant necessity and molded it into implicit commands and veiled threats of disciplinary actions (e.g., in uses by governments and parents with good vocabularies). When I use it, I want to keep in tact the sense that the imperative is still a choice (or a series of a lot of choices) and not a command (or a series of a lot of commands), and as with all choices, there are other options, but what makes globally responsible resource consumption an imperative is the certain doom at the end of every alternative (or every series of a lot of alternatives).
there was one, and it moves through all the city streets you can imagine. It is also, implicitly, a celebration of ourselves because if we can’t celebrate our collective survival as an accomplishment, we’re missing out on a key element of the human anomaly. The nation states in the parade are trying to make their way to ideal states. That is, the parade is supposed to end once it reaches a point of singular perfection for the entire planet. The problem with this is obvious: The different nations of the world define this ideal in different ways, and humanity’s recorded history tells the stories of these various definitions competing with each other. It is these contested ideals that hinder the parade’s progress. The nature of ideals is to be unreachable. The reason idealism is easy to write off is because we exist outside of them and any way in seems impossibly difficult. All this means, though, is that the Parade never stops because it never reaches a point where it can of its own volition. Hell, if ideals are good for anything, really, it’s to present us with a hypothetical, future end that determines our tangible, present means to get there. Chuck’s Twin Themes, then, are two untimely impediments (and potential ends) to the parade’s progression before it can reach an ideal state.

The first theme is an arrived-at conclusion that humanity could very well consume our planet’s resources to a point of uninhabitability. This is the idea embodied in the Half-Life of the Earth, that as the Parade makes its way down its route, eating up the road as it goes, the floats might soon find themselves at a dead end or a cliff’s edge where there’s no where else to go. We could run out of street to

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Chuck prefers the term “Martian lifelessness” when he refers to this vision.
parade down. Out of gas, constantly pushing forward, and with no turning back, the Parade will have one route, and it won’t be pretty.

The second theme is a conviction—another fear—that in the struggle to claim the planet’s resources for use, to stretch out an inevitably doomed, globally unsustainable system, nations will unleash the amassed powers of war that brought a country to its knees in 1945.\textsuperscript{10} As the limited reserves of natural resources start to dwindle, the people with the power to claim exclusive rights to them might try to do just that, and, in the process, cause enough global harm to outweigh any national good. This is the floats trying to sabotage each other, all so that there will be a little more room on the route if things start to get scarce. As long as there are nations, there will be national interests, and, considered in the wake of history, national interests seem apt to compete. War is how mankind has handled this competition for centuries, and in my metaphor, it’s represented by foolish children hurling overpriced, destructive candies at each other.

Both of the Themes, like the Half-Life of the World equation, contain something that makes them noteworthy to me beyond their face value as apocalyptic visions. The implication of an apocalypse is a limit, an end, a final act and falling curtain for the human drama we’re played out on this planet. This implicit recognition of a limit is the reason I’ve gotten to know Chuck for the last three years and taken the time to write about him. Call it fatalistic, but the reason I mean to tell you about Chuck

\textsuperscript{10} Imagine what they could do today. (Japan is in a unique position to understand the power of nuclear weaponry, and that their developing relationship with nuclear power [both militaristic and civil] is a potent model that the rest of the world might take to heart. More on Japan-as-a-model-for-the-rest-of-us later though.)
is that he planted in my head the seeds of an apocalypse of global expiration. These seeds began as not much more than a vague impression derived from Chuck’s sense of passion, which I’d only seen embodied in fictionalized prophets, oracles, and mad men. The points he made, which, due to his propensity for effective repetition, I’ve heard made and re-made since, were delivered with heat and fire and the urgency of a Chicken Little who carried a piece of the sky around in his pocket.

But what I felt even more than this sky-is-falling urgency behind the thoughts he vocalized was the fundamental soundness of the thoughts. Despite their fevered delivery, these were ideas with clarity and polish that seemed attainable only by means of the tests of logic and time. I think Chuck’s background in engineering explains this union, as engineers come at things in search of efficiency and sustainability. They look at input and outputs and try to determine how to guide mechanical and electrical systems toward more ideal states. Chuck’s ability to do this, when united with his personal convictions regarding our global system, makes him a special case. In a culture where logic and passion so often find each other at odds in the minds and hearts of its participants, here was a human who was passionate about his logic and logical about his passions. It was this coherence of emotion and reason that prompted me, a week or two after the film screening, to introduce myself to Chuck on the steps of the university library, which he visits a few times a week. It was a chance meeting.
Since then, I’ve done hours of interviews with Chuck—mostly at the fancy, cost-ineffective student center.\textsuperscript{11} I’ve been to his house, I’ve read his work, and I can give you some basic facts about the man, some empirical truths. He was born in Montana in 1926; he grew up in a town called Redstone, which is too small even for Wikipedia. He was the town cowherd in his youth and graduated valedictorian of his high school class (of five). He’s a veteran. He’s been married to his wife, Ruth, for over 60 years. He’s a father of three grown women whose professional accomplishments make him radiate pride.\textsuperscript{12} He’s a peace activist and an origami enthusiast, an avid swimmer and the kind of personality that people who work for or around the university here know or at least know of.

All these facts (and there are a lot more) are intended to give you some idea of who this man is and why I’m interested in him. With the help of these facts, other facts, observations, and my own interpretive powers, I’ve tried my best to construct a sense of this man in my own head. The facts are important, because they’re part of the basis of this sense. They’re a foundation for the meaning I’m trying to assign to this man. They are the concrete building blocks of my opinion, and, if it’s possible for me to reduce 87+ years of humanity to a few salient ideas, then that opinion, that sense, that meaning is what I’m trying to give you here. So let’s talk about me a little bit, and why you might allow my humanistic reductionism. I am another important element of

\textsuperscript{11} Aside from the tuition money poured into its maintenance annually, urban legend has it that the building is slowly sinking into the ground at the rate of nearly six inches a year. Whether or not this is true, it’s a testament to the buyers’ remorse of tuition-paying students.

\textsuperscript{12} They are (1.) a U.S. Department of Justice attorney/computer database manager for a state, (2.) an MD/professor of medicine, and (3.) a supervising pediatric nurse in a major city hospital.
the narrative here because this is not just the story of Chuck’s efforts for a better planet; it’s also the story of me trying to figure out the world.

My name is Max. I’m from a small town in Ohio. I grew up on three acres of country land, and I’m the genetic product of people who instilled in me a strong emotional attachment to the act of recycling. Growing up, my rural school district stopped classes for a full week every year during the county fair. As the child of recycling-loving ex-Dead-Heads, I gritted my teeth at Confederate flags on t-shirts on a weekly if not daily basis at my town’s high school, where there was a kid who, for a whole year, shouted “Douche!” in the hallway at the sight of me. Around age 17, I started to hate walking through the Elder-Beerman’s in the nearest mall because I look just not-white enough to make racist old people give me dirty looks. Now, I attend Ohio University, about an hour south of where I grew up. I study journalism and English. I do stand-up comedy. I like to sit on my front porch with my banjo and whistle pop music. Among other things, I listen to Frank Zappa and I go on runs in the woods and I have a little cubicle called a study carrel in the basement of the library where I do my schoolwork. I think the world’s kind of a messed up place, but I try to embrace that so I can do something about it.

My point in telling you this is that I want you to know where the words on the page are coming from. My story-telling method here is in defense of the personal. My version of this story is what matters, and that’s why it’s not called THE Chuck Overby

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13 Baltimore is its name. We have a Wikipedia page. It’s about 10 minutes of winding state route north of Lancaster, Ohio. (Regionally, the pronunciation is LANE-kuhster, not the Pennsylvanian lane-KAHster. As a shitty high schooler, my friends and I called the town Skankaster to make ourselves feel better about having to go there to do anything fun.)

14 Although, admittedly, I was really into black hooded sweatshirts then.
Story. This story is not fact; no story is. But stories are made of facts and reflections and fresh ideas molded into words and sentences, worlds and significances. Facts, by their nature, limit their meaning, and stories have the power to give them more meaning than they could have on their own. What I’m looking for here is the meaning of Chuck’s life. This is my opinion of him, explored and set to print because I thought his choices merited my investigation because I thought I could learn something big.

But ultimately, all I can give you is the information I’ve come across and collected and found the means to articulate with the intent of some affect and/or effect. I can give you that, and a distant, malnourished desire that I’ll come away from this with a tiny nugget of inspiration that makes my teen-angsty belief that hope is self-delusion melt into one of those silly adolescent thoughts that even a few extra years of maturity can roll its eyes at.

That’s why, for what you’re reading here, the most salient piece of information I can give you about myself is that Chuck is a role model of mine, and this writing, in that respect, is an exploration of the role(s) he models. I’m not out to redeem humanity in my eyes; I don’t think that’s useful.\footnote{Although I’ll take what I can get.} I’m doing this because I know that I need to find a sense of peace—even an uneasy one—if I’m ever going to break the anxious habit of gnawing on my lip while I silently agonize over what to do next. There’s a ball of tension in the muscles of my back that hasn’t gone away for years, and every time I see a bucket of fried chicken or a commercial for a reality show or a Wal-Mart customer zipping down the soda aisle on a motorized scooter, it tightens like the knot in a rope being pulled by rough hands on the end of strong, steady arms.
Of course, I’m only half of the equation on this piece: No writing is worth anything without a reading. But that’s why you’re here. I don’t know who you are or where you live or why you’re reading this. Maybe you’re my thesis advisor editing a new draft. Maybe you’re a close friend lending me a set of eyes. Maybe you’re a stranger silently taking issue with my interest in a man calculating the countdown to Armageddon. The point is I don’t know. The person sitting stringing these words together in some yesterday you don’t care about can’t guide you any better than he plans for and executes, so, despite all the clever or poignant or brilliant things you might have to say, I might never get to hear them because reading is a one-way act where the electricity in my brain gets transmitted to yours through a network of ink and paper. I don’t mean to alienate you. My point is that I know I need to take care of you because this isn’t a piece of writing that meant to be easy, approachable, or fun. I want to push you into uncomfortable thoughts and show you scary visions because the world can be and is an uncomfortable and scary place.16

I hope some of this is starting to make sense to you. I wrote this with a specific mindset because there’s a specific kind of person this piece is designed to appeal to: The kind of person who gets frustrated, depressed, or maddened by the errors in judgment perpetrated at every level of humanity.17 If that sounds like you, then I’m going to take it for granted that Chuck is the kind of person you could sit down and

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16 But at least we have each other.
17 E.g., at the level of one guy littering a water bottle, at the level of an industry packaging life-giving goods in plastics, at the level of a nation of consumers that never asks for alternatives.
have a chat with; it’s something you and I have in common.\(^{18}\) And if I’m taking that for granted, I’m going to go ahead and also take for granted that you’re the kind of person who sees humanity and our evolution as a Darwinian pinnacle only in the qualifying sense of so-far. That is, just because we’re leading the pack in the race doesn’t mean we’ve already won. And if that’s true, then I’d say another thing you and I and Chuck all have in common is a search for something—specifically, answers and knowledge and a better way of life for humanity because if we’re not the winners yet, then we still have something to strive for. I think (because, for my own sanity, I have to) that everyone on the planet ultimately holds this aim dearly important, that we’re all striving for a better world,\(^{19}\) but that we all just disagree on how to make it happen. Maybe, like me, you see the human condition bobbing up and down in the wake of the Powers That Be trying to determine this path. If you feel this on-going search and its inefficiencies, this struggle in the sense that I’m trying to evoke here,\(^{20}\) then, like me, you might see Chuck Overby as a powerful exemplar of what a lifelong pursuit of solutions to human problems can look like.

One of the reasons why I’ve put Chuck at the center of this thing is a list he keeps that speaks to the way he exemplifies that pursuit. It’s about two typed pages and the centered, bolded, underlined, all-capsed title at the top of the page is, “SILENCING, KAFKAESQUE, AND RELATED EXPERIENCES.” With 35 entries,

\(^{18}\) Alternatively, if none of those things concerns you, I’ll do my best to set out here why they might/should (e.g., oceans full of a conservatively estimated 315 billion pounds of once-used, man-made plastic bubbles with labels which, in a beautifully horrific example of capitalism’s inherent ironies, used to hold water).

\(^{19}\) Dare I say an ideal one?

\(^{20}\) That is, in the hubris-could-be-our-downfall, a-system-only-works-if-it-operates-long-term sense.
it’s a catalog of times—both big and small, from the late 1970s to the early 2010s—when Chuck felt himself come up against this great decentralized evil of left-alone well-enough and someone, anyone, told him No or Stop or Not Yet. The list at first looks like a bullet-pointed list of defeats Chuck’s faced. Many of the entries are about his work with The Twin Themes, and they are all frustrations of his efforts, stories of Chuck expending energies that he felt went wasted. In this way, each event on the list is an instance of Chuck experiencing the First Amendment’s shadow because they all demonstrate how the right to free speech doesn’t guarantee an audience. Some of them are small potatoes, like ROTC-heavy political science classes that didn’t invite him back after his thoughts on war and peace didn’t line up with institutional efforts at definition. But some of them come from bigger forces in the world than ROTC-friendly academic departments, like the voting public that ended his 1982 run for Ohio’s 10th District in defeat. All of these events are now little records of when Chuck took the denial of his efforts to heart because, as the kind of person who loves his work, his heart was in the efforts.

To me, the list is a powerful symbol of what it means to be silenced, and not under the brutality of a totalitarian regime or the natural human tendency toward common sense. That is, Chuck’s list isn’t a precipitate of dystopian limitations and there aren’t easy-to-poke holes in his theories. This list he’s accrued for all his hard work is full of good ideas. For example, he wanted to notify students of engineering at OU about a gallery exhibit in the university library that focused on the role engineers played in the construction of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the
engineering school’s PR director told him that putting it in the weekly undergraduate newsletter might “overload” the kids. He’s tried (and failed) to bring prominent Japanese politicians to OU’s campus: The then-mayor of Hiroshima Tadatoshi Akiba and Takako Doi, a female pioneer in the Japanese Diet who worked to get the legislative body to sign on with the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Once, in the early years of this millennium, he tried to identify the Department of Defense research funding that was supporting projects at OU, but was told by the Vice President for Research that there were no records to source that funding. Another time, he threw his hat in the ring to become the University’s ombudsman, surely eager to help them as an internal but independent monitor on the administration’s policies, but he was (predictably) turned down. Some of the list’s items sound easier said than done, and it’s possible that some of them, once put into action, might look better on paper. But the point is that we have no way of knowing that.

For me, Chuck’s experiences on the list demonstrate the limitations on meaningful change. I’m going to draw on a couple of the experiences he listed to demonstrate what I mean by that and also what it means to Chuck—someone who spends so much time considering his thoughts—to not have those thoughts heard out by the people they were intended for. The stories are about wanting something better for the world and being foiled in plans to enact it. They’re about the questions surrounding unrealized quests for that better world.
Now, if you’re still with me, let’s find some ground to stand on; let me break down into a jargonized explanation of the piece of writing in your hand(s). This is, narrato-elementally, the story of a Quest, of one man (Chuck) dedicating his life’s work to saving the world. If there’s a Hero here, it’s him. Chuck Overby, our Hero, is on a Quest that ends (hypothetically) in a better, safer, and more beautiful planet for human beings to live on. His Holy Grail is a functional, just, and sustainable world order. I can represent what is ultimately a pretty simple end result for most of Chuck’s work in words I’ve seen on the Christmas wish list of every child I’ve ever known who went on to appreciate serious novels: World Peace. Whatever tangible or intangible efforts Chuck’s made at changing things, it’s been in service of that goal. As a goal, it’s noble to a point of foolishness. It’s simple enough that kids who still believe in Santa want it, but so complex that no one who knows the truth about St. Nick has a plan to make it a reality. World Peace (or more specifically, its attainment and maintenance) is one of the greatest questions of our time. It’s one we can picture in our heads or catch glimpses of in art, but it’s not a reality we’ve been able to craft as a global civilization, despite the best efforts of any one human.

It’s easy, with this Hero’s goal in mind, to wonder what obstacle(s) is(are) in the way of World Peace. And here I’m forced to complicate my narratological efforts by explaining that Chuck has no mortal enemy, no arch nemesis. There is no Captain

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21 What I mean by “narrato-elementally” is that I’m trying to address directly here the elements of the narrative. This story is going to be transmitted to you as a narrative, so for my own sake, I’m going to speak of this piece narrato-elementally to remind myself of what I’m trying to tell you and how it fits with the ultimate purpose here. It’s my hope that if you’re willing to read this sort of notation and can accept a neologism like the one here, then your readership of this work will indulge me. All I can offer is that I’m doing what I think is best for the both of us.
Hook to his Peter Pan, no Sith Lord to his Jedi Master, not even a Wernstrom to his Farnsworth. The lack of an individualized Evil doesn’t mean, however, that Chuck lives in a world where he perceives no villainy. It’s just that the Evil Chuck perceives operates beyond the means of a single, curly-mustached man in a top hat with or without a monocle. The Twin Themes are the Evil at the heart of the Quest. They’re the apocalypses Chuck has worked to prevent. Because they’re broad, overarching elements of Chuck’s perceived reality, they’re a much more complicated villain than a Man v. Man narrative framework allows for, so this Quest’s fundamental conflict is one of Man vs. Society. And like many tales of Man vs. Society, there is an irony at the heart of the conflict: The very Society that constrains the Man and conflicts with him is the object of his heroics. Despite Chuck’s best intentions, the struggle he faces isn’t against something you can point a gun at. Chuck’s spent his life working against real apocalyptic possibilities that exist outside of the day-to-day consciousness of almost every one they threaten, so that most of the damage is self-inflicted but blocked by an intellectual numbness to things like where our garbage goes and what a car engine exhausts. The victim, then, is also the perpetrator, and if there were a police line-up, everyone would be trying to identify everyone through the one-way mirror. We’re all subject to the social constructions around us, but we also each have our own share of influence on them. Chuck’s story is of the struggle to understand this societal give and take each individual faces and then do something meaningful with it.

At the very least, Chuck’s work reminds me that it’s nice to imagine a world where everyone understands how “Made in China” stickers and Soviet assault rifles

22 Which I would rank among the best intentions I’ve ever seen.
pertain to the question. But when I’m out in my corner of the world, nobody’s talking about the politics of the global economy or AK-47s, so I start to wonder if people really care about World Peace as long as coffee, ice cream, and cigarettes are all still reasonably priced. And so I start to doubt us—humans—and the doubts can spiral into nihilism when I ask myself how we can make progress if we’re putting a product like mayonnaise in a squeezable bottle to ease our access to it. These are issues of scale, where we make no bones about indulging in an extra squirt of mayo because we don’t have to think about where the bottle came from or what the mayo’s made of or when all the waste generated by this product is going to break down to a point that makes it as inconsequential as we imagine it to be in our world shrouded by advertisements for more consumption. I know I’m not totally alone in these feelings. There’s a specific grizzly bearded man I’ve seen from time to time on or near OU’s campus. He carries a sign that says something like, “IS ANYTHING REALLY RIGHT OR WRONG?” This question—of the ultimate validity of human effort—comes at me from his sign, from literary theory classes that assign postmodernist readings, and from just a few years of studying the practices of journalism, where rightness is implied without question, speaking as a know-it-all is expected, and getting something wrong is a threat to job security. Just as much as the World Peace thing or “What can I do?” gnaws at me, so does this question about the divide between right and wrong because it makes me second-guess any answer that I can or do or might come up with before I even articulate it fully. Is there a way to fulfill Chuck’s Quest? Can you convince a culture’s participants that their passivity will be their demise? Can we make deliberate
steps toward World Peace? Why does cheese come in a can? Am I really going to try and find some way to stop the Parade’s march toward the cliff’s edge, to convince the children that candy is a waste of time and energy? Is that even possible?

These big, end-of-the-world questions are the kind of things that ooze through my head, alienating friends and acquaintances unintentionally. They’re the sudden utterances that provoke funny looks. They’re the dark shades that color my perception of the tragedy in something as basic as a guy walking in front of me spitting on the sidewalk only a few dry inches from a perfectly good street gutter. They make me, at my core, an unsettled person because I feel so powerless in their shadows, so insignificant on their scale. Because, to me, if we’re not going to do the best we can, then what’s the point?

And so, this is the story of two Quests—Chuck’s and mine—that both revolve around the same question regarding the personally perceived imperfections of the American society around us. I see this world, and even after recognizing the limits of my own perception, I’m unsatisfied with what’s here, and Chuck feels that way, too. Something he and I have in common is that we want to make it better, and that’s when I ask myself the question that spazzes me out and presents itself in the poetic frustration of dialogues I’ve had with Chuck as this: “What can I do?”

And the really scary part—for me, anyway—is that I can’t promise you (or myself) an answer, a resolution, or even an ending, happy or sad. There’s a lot of fear behind this piece of writing: fear of the end of the world, fear of the loss or waste of human life, fear of the past, present, and future. And anytime I produce creatively,
there’s always a fear of failure, that thoughts I set down in words will be passed over, ignored, or skimmed, and then there won’t be any point to their being set down at all. In that ensuing silence, where the thoughts just sit, nothing really happens. A writer’s prime directive has to be communicating with his audience, and in, e.g., the undergraduate fiction workshops or lengthy text messages where that communication doesn’t happen, it can be brutal for everyone involved. I’m afraid of that silence.

If, at the end of this project, I still feel like I’m drifting aimlessly and ineffectually in a sea of cultural entropy, I apologize for asking for your indulgences, especially if all I did was make you as upset as I am. But, for now, as some kind of pre-emptive consolation, I can at least offer you the words I found in a fortune cookie at an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet that I pinned with a used toothpick from the same restaurant to the wall of the little cubicle I keep in the basement of my university’s library: “The virtue lies in the struggle, not in the prize.”
I’d be lying to you if I said I had much imagination for what Montana looks like, but I know they call it “Big Sky Country.” If I think about it, I see a 360-degree panorama view, panning in slow motion; flat brown and green plains reach out in all directions to touch a flat blue sky at the horizon, which looks like the seam on the inside of a big plastic Easter egg with an earth tone bottom and a sky blue top. In my head, Nature presents herself at her plainest there—the Romantics’ muse is not so intricately god-like. Her beauty, if it comes, reveals itself in the simplicity sprawling from horizon to horizon, taken in slow panorama. It must be awe-inspiring because sometimes, when I’m sitting on my porch in some silence after a long day or just walking around town conscious of the shuffle of my sneakers on the sidewalk, it’s hard to imagine a place where the sky feels bigger than it already does everyday from everywhere on the planet.

Chuck is a native Montanian. He takes pride in being from there, and he’s gone back to visit and to work. He still has vivid memories of his childhood there, of learning to swim at Muddy Bennett’s swimming hole and herding cows. Redstone, the town he grew up in, still isn’t much more than a dozen streets in Montana’s northeast corner, not far from the borders with Canada and North Dakota. It’s just one settlement in the vast expanses of the American west, where villages come and go with the births and deaths of industries. If the United States were studied as an empire, Redstone would be left out of everything but the most in-depth histories. So it makes
sense that Chuck’s also proud of how far he’s come from his childhood. He grew up poor, one of six children born to an immigrant mother. His father worked for the railroad as a section foreman while his mother made the home and raised the children. Relative to my lifestyle growing up, Chuck’s sounds simple, and it was. But simple lives can be just as rich as complex ones. As a boy, Chuck passed the time with his eyes on books and his hands on model airplanes. When the rare actual airplane would fly overhead, Chuck would stand outside and watch it from horizon to horizon as it moved across the Big Sky.

Chuck’s traveled far and wide since then. He’s been to Minnesota, Wisconsin, Korea, Ohio, Japan, the Netherlands, and his ancestral Scandinavia. He’s traveled for education, for war, and more recently and most meaningfully, for peace conferences and humanitarian events. And if he’s half the man of the world that I consider him to be, then it’s no coincidence that when he talks about his travels, wherever they took him, he mentions landscapes. I think Chuck remembers Scandinavia’s rocky edges because he loves the physical body of this planet.\(^{23}\) It’s not hard to do; each of us carries around little threads that tie us to places. These memories of the spatial contexts of memorable events matter to us because our spatial-temporal existence happens in this realm of geography. Places mean things to people. For me, some of the thickest threads lead back to the places I first knew as a kid.\(^{24}\) I’m sure you’ve got your own stages set in your memory, decorated to match the moods you cultivated or had forced upon you in one place or another. Maybe, like Chuck, you don’t live in a

\(^{23}\) It’s important to bar any lame anthropomorphizations here (e.g., Mother Earth) because, like most lame anthropomorphizations, they miss the real spark of nature in things by reducing them to humanity.

\(^{24}\) E.g., a pre-school playground, a grandparents’ pond, a youth league soccer field
land or *on some* land; maybe you live *with the* land. That would mean that, like Chuck, on the coordinate plane of space and time, you’re conscious of your position on both axes.

In the late ‘60s, Chuck found the land he still lives with now: sixteen acres of hardwood forest with a house in the countryside near Athens, the “beautiful little democracy” of a college town he’s called home for the last four and a half decades. He sold off a few pieces of the land as the university and, subsequently, the town’s metropolitan area continued to grow. In 2000, he built a new house on top of the biggest hill in his domain. It’s pale yellow with white trim.

One Saturday afternoon with about a week and a half left in the winter that carried us from 2011 to 2012, I pulled into his driveway for an afternoon interview. The driveway was long and gravel, with about ten feet of mowed grass on either side that gave way to bare trees on steep declines, giving it a catwalk effect. The weather had started to thaw a few days earlier, so the snow was gone and the sky was blue. At the end of the driveway was a broad clearing with three structures: Two barn-like building with sheet-metal siding and the white-trimmed, pale yellow house. I parked in front of a garage attached to the home. As I made my way up the front walk, I noticed that off to one side of the clearing were seven or eight big lumps covered with black tarps held down by ropes anchored to old tires. I knocked on the door and waited. Inside, the corners of each room were cluttered with stacked boxes, old shoes with life still in them, knick-knacks from around the world, and tokens of everyday

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25 Beautiful is one of his favorite words; he uses it to describe things like trees, peace, the First Amendment to the United State Constitution, as well as the little democracy of Athens
living. There was a telescope in the corner of the dining room and a home office full of documents like Dorothy’s friend the Scarecrow was full of straw: The corners of papers hung out of the seams in cardboard boxes and filing-cabinet drawers. The light came through the windows in sharp slants, and whatever sat or stood in sunspots seems to glow. Chuck welcomed me in and introduced me to his wife, Ruth, who showed me the kind of old-school hospitality my grandma still uses. She offered me an off-brand cola and asked, “Are you a chip eater?” I told her yes.

This was one of the first nice days of the year, and I was glad I spent it at Chuck’s, walking around and sitting on the porch step, talking with him. In the clearing, our voices echoed a little. They came back us, but not all the way to us, from the woods, mixed with a chorus of bird chirps as frequent, loud, and multiple as an auditorium full of should-be cell phones all going off at the same time. At one point, we looked down one side of the hill his house sits on top of, and he pointed out some “beautiful old trees.” He said he mows this side of the hill three or four times a year. It’s steep but he’s got what he needs to get the job done: a Bush Hog, which is an industrial brand of mowing equipment that exists because human beings want to mow miles of highway median, fields of prairie grass, and places like this one. Even then, with the naked trees’ tangled branches and the grass’s brown-tinted winter coat, it was a hell of a view. Chuck told me that when the trees leaf in the spring, you can’t see any of the neighbors.

26 Who needs Coke or Pepsi?
27 When Chuck and I came back in from our outdoor conversation, there was a bowl of chips waiting for me next to the vase of flowers on the dining room table.
This is the kind of home I imagined Chuck having: Managed wilderness that can buffer him in when he needs to get away. Its maintenance isn’t a chore; it’s a source of pride for someone who sees it as a natural, material extension of himself. We stood on the front walk and talked while he used his metal cane to push mulch back into a flowerbed a piece at a time. What I noticed most when I heard Chuck talk about his property was that, in a very material way, he appreciates the trees, the grass, the dirt, and the world around him. He respects the physical, natural world’s autonomy from human hindrances. He gets a sense of peace from nature that he doesn’t feel many other places. And he worries that a lot of us don’t do that.

Chuck is a man of great idealism, and the sources his idealism is drawn from matter. He is a man of Logic, Reason, and Science (not Gods, Kings, or Comfort). The heroic element of Chuck’s idealism is that his ideal world is ideal for everyone in it. He still believes in and dreams about the possibilities of World Peace for all of us. For example, consider the world Chuck imagines for his three daughters (all well into their 50s now); he writes:

“Our hope is that all three of them will have many more years of significant input toward helping temper this militarist, oftentimes mindlessly greed-driven, unnecessarily profligate and inequitable ‘possessive-individualist’ consumption culture of ours, a culture that turns our beautiful Mother Earth’s resource treasures into entropic randomness and globally warms us to Martian lifelessness while we increasingly fight resource wars over the declining resource base. Sadly we conduct ourselves in this way—rather than seriously seeking to clean up our resource wasteful culture with some ‘green technology by design’ and thus demonstrating a more healthy sustainable model for ourselves and all nations on Planet Earth—especially for the developing nations.”
It’s heavy stuff for a holiday letter.²⁸ But it hits me hard in the gut. It’s a reminder that for all Chuck’s scholarship, he’s still a human being who wants the best for his children, for all children, for the world. He’s just frustrated to superhuman levels by the actions every one else takes that speak louder than their words when it comes to this issue. It’s not that Chuck thinks people don’t appreciate Nature, it’s that in one of the bigger Big Pictures on the planet right now, we’ve set up a complex system that uses natural resources in some irresponsible ways. Consumption is the danger he sees. He believes it could be the death of us all.

Outside of Chuck’s house, he and I walked through some of the tarp-lumps, and I felt myself sweating a little in a light jacket and khakis. I tried to aerate my pits by holding my elbows away from my sides, and wondered if Chuck was warm at all in a denim jacket and a Western-style shirt (a lone pen in one pocket).²⁹ Chuck explained that the lumps were about two winters worth of hardwood for use in their furnace. He and Ruth run it from about September to April or May, depending on the weather. He explained the difference between the split wood and the unsplittable smaller branches that keep their bark on all sides: the split logs leave less ash and have a higher BTU count than their bark-covered younger brothers (i.e., can put out more heat; British Thermal Units measure the amount of heat a fuel source can put out). He told me he used to split the wood by hand, but now he has a hydraulic wood-splitter.

The wood-splitter is going to help me make a point here. It’s an industrial product, a purchased good, and something that Chuck appreciates because it helps him

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²⁸ Two full pages in tiny, single-spaced Times New Roman.
²⁹ I wondered then and I wonder now what exactly (biologically, psychologically speaking) makes older bodies feel colder than younger ones.
stay warm in the winter. It’s got a specific function and it does it well. It’s also
tangible evidence that Chuck’s material appreciation does not end with nature. He
appreciates human-made materials, possessions, goods, and things. He understands
that people identify with what they consume because he does it, too. For another
example, consider his Honda motorcycle. One day, after an interview in town, I
walked with him to where he had it parked, down the brick street from the student
center. It was a sunny day in the spring, and Chuck was wearing a light blue samue, a
traditional Japanese laborer’s uniform. It looked a bit like a karate gi made out of the
same material as a durable jumpsuit. He showed me his bike and talked about flying
down country roads on the thing, about taking Athens’ Appalachian inclines on it with
gusto. The bike isn’t big or powerful, but that’s not what Chuck wants from it. In fact,
he bragged about its fuel efficiency and then admonished the state of Ohio for a recent
decision to relax helmet laws. Chuck always wears his helmet. As Chuck said good-
bye, he slid his cane into a sheath made of PVC pipe mounted on the side his bike.
Then, he bungeed it in place and mounted up—helmet on, engine revving—and took
off down the road at 80 miles a gallon.

“It’s powerful stuff to have things,” he’s told me over and over. And who can
argue? Even he knows he wants at least a part of what he calls the Goods Life. But
Chuck’s materialism considers a responsibility based on this power. In a classic
Spiderman’s Imperative: The power of having things necessitates the responsibility to
have things that aren’t bad for the world. It’s not hard to see how we, as a species,

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30 It’s a simple equation for him, one where ounces of prevention are greater than or equal to pounds of
cure.
have abdicated the responsibility in this equation. One of the remarkable things about Chuck is that he has some ideas about how we can make sure the power of our massive thing-producing industrial complex is used responsibly.

“You have to look at everything completely differently when you start thinking about, ‘What are we gonna create?’” says Chuck. “We need to design systems that are orders of magnitude less wasteful of resources and that do not globally warm the planet.” This is an ideal we’re addressing here, and Chuck has been helpful enough to name it himself: Zero Material Growth (ZMG) is the term Chuck uses to envision this. In engineering terms, it means the entire world runs at a level of 100% efficiency. Chuck’s ideal world is built more satisfactory and conscious designs that can establish an economy that sustains itself without the need to grow and absorb more material resources. Instead of constant needs for new resources, a ZMG economy has legitimate means to take old resources and use them for new purposes. Chuck believes that these new systems, the concrete steps toward his ideal world, have to come from an engineering mindset he calls Green Technology by Design (GTBD).

Let me include an instructive personal example to demonstrate how all technology works by design. I spent the Decembers of 2010 and 2011 working in a warehouse during its annual holiday rush, and it was impossible for me to shut down my analytical mind while I worked in a system as complex as a warehouse that ships nationally. In the middle of rural eastern Ohio, the place systematically sends fruits, candies, relishes, and other assorted non-essentials to paying customers. I spent the first December in the special orders division, packing boxes for people who couldn’t

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31 E.g., your local dump.
find a pre-made gift basket they liked. The second December, I worked nights in the shipping department, stacking boxes in the backs of refrigerated semi-truck trailers from midnight until five or six in the morning. Both Decembers, about once a week, somebody from the Quality Control division would come through to verify an order’s accuracy or ensure a stack’s structural integrity. These coworkers would derail whatever I was doing to make sure I was doing it right. I can tell you from this experience that customer satisfaction—a practical business’s end goal—is only ensured by the folks in quality control, who take on the reputation of ineffectual clipboard jockeys to the people packing the “quality” being “controlled.” Without a design that can satisfy, there’s no quality to worry about controlling. If the relish doesn’t taste good, how I pack it in a box for shipping won’t make the customer like it any better. It’s a matter of doing it right from the start. Controlling the relish’s packaging’s quality was no substitute for a tasty recipe.32

By adding a criterion of greenness, Chuck is only pushing for a new standard in designed technology. That’s the point of GTBD: A pre-emptive step to prevent waste. It’s a conscious decision to emphasize prevention instead of control. It’s a recognition that bringing your own cup to the coffee shop means you won’t have to throw anything away later.33 It’s buying shirts at the local Goodwill in the hope that it reduces (even minutely) the demand for more shirts in this country. It’s clipping toenails right over the trashcan to avoid wasting time trying to pick them out of the carpet. It’s the impulse behind national fuel-efficiency standards on American

32 I.e., ounces of whatever makes the relish taste good prevent pounds of wasted product.
33 Except maybe some cold coffee.
automobiles and reusable grocery bags. What’s most significant about Chuck’s interest in GTBD is that it considers the entire process of consumption, focusing on design as a specific part of this process where a great deal of the consumption’s global impact is created and can therefore be managed. Design, in essence, is the root of the problem and is therefore also its solution.

This is the kind of treat-the-problem-not-the-symptoms thinking that sprouts from the same logic Chucks bases his ZMG concept on. He thinks that if we can approach the pollution a product will create the same way, we can stop the problem before it starts and shift from what he calls an “end-of-pipe” mindset that only worries about the bad stuff once it’s already in the air, water, and land. By designing every part of a something to be reusable or salvageable, it never needs to be completely discarded.

This is bud-nipping at its most noble. It’s preaching the gospel of ounces of prevention worth pounds of cure. Chuck sees it as the answer because he comes at the problem like an engineer. He sees the facts. He sees a process that turns resources into goods that people consume. A lot of those goods, once consumed, create waste—the parts of the good or its packaging that no one uses. If the producers just design the goods to avoid waste in the first place, it stops the problem at its source. That’s Green Technology by Design: Waste prevention instead of pollution control. It’s easier to prevent the nail clippings from getting into the carpet in the first place than it is to “control” them to come out.

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34 E.g., banana peels, shirt tags, the box a Barbie comes in. (See also: Your local dump.)
35 Especially with fleshy fingertips left after a fresh clipping.
And all of this is motivated by the knowledge that resources only last as long as they do. Consumption threatens our planet, our lives, and the whole Marching Parade. Chuck’s utopian vision is of a culture with zero dependence on the shrinking supplies of nonrenewable resources in the world. It seems farfetched—a sort of economic perpetual motion machine—but it’s the logical motivation behind sustainability and efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle the materials we’ve already pulled out of the ground and processed for consumption. My point being that the destination at the end of Chuck’s path is a lot more hopeful than any other. I mentioned earlier that the floats try to progress toward ideal states. If that’s true, then Chuck’s navigation drives toward ZMG—an ideal state. And like most ideals, it’s easy to question the possibility of achievement and use issues of plausibility to undermine the whole argument. We’re so enmeshed in the unideal state that the ideal seems unattainable. But short-term implausibility shouldn’t determine the sorts of thing we (as a species) should strive for. Chuck’s compass is calibrated towards his ideals, and the rest of us can do the same.

But I’ll invite you now, as a counterpoint to Chuck’s eternal optimism and idealistic orientation, to revisit Chuck’s Half-Life of the Earth equation, but this time through Chuck’s eyes. Chuck writes that in the late 1970s, some research he was doing in Washington, D.C.,

“...stimulated me to wonder how long this growth phenomenon could go on if all humans on Earth were to over-consume and pollute, as do we in the developed countries. To get an answer, I made a ‘back of the envelope’ ‘engineering calculation’ to estimate the ‘half-life of the Earth.’ How long, I asked, would it take to consume half the weight of the earth and turn it into high entropy irretrievable wastes, if Earth’s
entire population were to begin, today, to consume the Earth's resources at the same rate, as did the USA in 1972? ...it would take only about 430 years for Earth's people to consume half the weight of the Earth and reduce it to high entropy irretrievable wastes. From this we might conclude that it is likely not possible for the teeming billions on Earth to enjoy the lifestyle of we, 'the rich'—and yet that is exactly what they seek. 

It’s not fun to think about the Earth becoming some sort of barren wasteland, but that’s exactly what infinite economic growth will turn it into. Humanity’s short-term cost/benefit analysis holds this wasteland future out of the realm of possibility because the global scale and its gradual destitution seem far off, fictional, and overly worrisome. But can’t you see little drops of ignorance swell to a flood? If we’re not careful, something as beautiful as a planet capable of supporting life might find itself ground out and turned into something worthless. Remember that old statistical implication about the monkeys with typewriters and as much time as they needed that always sounded like a diss or a warning to Shakespeare? As if the Bard wasn’t so big and bad because monkeys could replicate his entire life’s work if we just gave them a chance. If we believe monkeys could do Shakespeare, is it that big logical jump to believing that humans could do Apocalypse?

But the legitimate recognition of global mortality is only one obstacle in the way of the path to Chuck’s ideal world. There’s another, much more mundane, day-to-day impediment to Zero Material Growth: The consumption itself taking place everyday, unconsciously in the lives of global citizens across the face of the planet. It’s a sort of path-of-least-resistance phenomenon. It’s that trip to McDonald’s on a

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36 From his book, A Call for Peace (written in side-by-side English and Japanese—he didn’t translate it himself).
busy day when there’s no time to cook a meal, as if every Happy Meal is a monkey’s correct stroke for the next letter of *Hamlet*. It happens at personal and institutional levels, and Chuck’s efforts to grapple with both pit him against societal assumptions about the evil in each chicken McNugget.

On that Saturday in his clearing, Chuck retold me the story about his attempts to get OU, where he sat as chairman of the Energy Conservation Committee at the time, to invest in technology to enable cogeneration, a process that enables an energy-producing apparatus to serve dual functions: First, to generate electricity by its design, and, second, to harvest the heat generated as a consequence of that generation, either as warmth for indoor climate control or as a means to generate more electricity. Most energy generation creates an entropic amount of heat just from operating the machinery; it’s the same kind of heat that comes off of an engine. Cogeneration is an attempt to harness that heat before it just dissipates into the atmosphere, and use it to do some other work. If you can imagine frying eggs on the hot hood of a running car in the sweat-dampened middle of a July afternoon, you’re imagining cogenerating a breakfast. On the McDonaldsian scale of Billions Served, this is maybe a tiny battle for Chuck, but significant all the more for its modest, studied approach.

Chuck wanted OU to add this kind of technology to Lausche Heating Plant, a coal-burning facility that supplied (and still supplies) all campus buildings with heat through a network of underground pipes. It’s a dominating piece of industry at the end of a dead end street in Athens, imposing itself on the modest two-story skyline of the city’s southwest side. Without a sidewalk to approach it on, it looks like an oil derrick
in an oasis of asphalt. The whole facility towers, but the smokestack projects out of the
town like an obelisk, especially when it’s spewing. Sometimes, I take the scenic (read:
long) route from campus to my house, and it takes me along a ridge looking out to the
southwest over a hillside of trees. From there, I can see Lausche jutting out from
between the red brick office building and the vinyl-sided low-rent apartment
complexes that all seem to have the same dusty ash-gray shingles. On cold winter
nights, when all the trees’ leaves are gone, the view from the ridge is rows of dark
boxes with light inside, all under a cloud of Lausche’s vapor that the wind sweeps
across the sky.

Chuck’s game plan, which he took to the university in 1980 with a half-dozen
students taking his class on how engineers and engineering relate to the government,
was to set up turbines as a sink for some excess steam the Lausche operations created.
Lausche’s steam pressure was too high for the underground network of pipes to
handle, and OU decided to run the steam through some regulators that would reduce
the pressure to a manageable level. Regulators, however, don’t make anything of that
extra energy. It’s wasted as a side effect of the process. Chuck proposed that instead of
reducing the pressure of the excess steam and dissipating it into useless vapor, they
should push the steam through a turbine and let it generate more electricity, thereby
turning a side effect into something useful. In Chuck’s model, it can still be used in the
district heating system that warms the campus, but would also actively cogenerate
more electricity instead of just being blown off.
We were in the student center the first time Chuck told me his cogeneration story, warming ourselves with Lausche’s output. That day, he brought in copies of an article printed in the September/October 2011 issue of *Sierra* magazine. The article was called “America’s Coolest Schools” and was a ranking of the 100 “greenest” universities in America. Number three was the University of California, San Diego, which made it into the magazine with this blurb: “UCSD’s cogeneration plant provides up to 85 percent of the school’s electricity and heats more than 6 million square feet of building interiors.” Chuck was excited to see this technology put into such impressive use. There was a sense of validation in seeing cogeneration applied on such a large scale with such powerful, noteworthy results. He was happy for UCSD and all the schools on the list, impressed by their environmentally conscious strides. But he was also upset because this was the exact same thing he suggested to OU 30 years ago and was turned down.\(^{37}\) So why didn’t the university want to listen to a professor who had worked for them for over a decade? Why didn’t cogeneration get a chance at OU?

Chuck says he just go no interest: “I got zero response from this university.”\(^{38}\)

In the mid-1990s, Chuck told me that some Vice President of something at Ohio University was able to get the school to add cogeneration to Lausche, which means Chuck was 15 years ahead of his time. But this victory was fleeting. After a

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\(^{37}\) OU didn’t even make the top 100 in the article.

\(^{38}\) In the interest of full disclosure, I’ll tell you that I altered this quote. At Chuck’s request, I took out some foul language. I don’t hear bitterness in Chuck’s voice often, and it’s even rarer to see it concentrated into obscenity. He had clear reservations about my including his “military language,” which I took as a sign of integrity. The reason I included this footnote is that the cursing I deleted spoke to how Chuck feels about not being listened to—it sticks with him. Plus, I think it’s pretty badass that he curses even if he won’t let me show it.
short period of time, maybe a year or so, the cogeneration capabilities ceased application inexplicably. Today, according to the university’s website, “The Lausche Heating Plant has a cogeneration unit capable of generating 1 MW of electricity, though it is not currently in use.”

Now, OU is planning to build a new heating plant to replace Lausche, and in the process, coal is being abandoned in favor of natural gas. Reports indicate that the task force generating the plans for the new plant are interested in implementing cogeneration technologies in its designs. Which means that almost 30 years after he first went to them with the idea, OU is finally doing what Chuck suggested, of their own volition. Which means Chuck Overby survived to be 30 years ahead of his time, too.

When I asked him how that felt, he told me, “It’s very frustrating,” and left it at that. Chuck is not usually a man of so few words, but maybe he just wants to see if it sticks for more than a year this time.

To dissect some real significance from this whole cogeneration struggle, I’m turning again towards my Marching Parade of Progress metaphor, but shrinking its scale so that we have one float (OU) trying to figure out which path forward will be the longest, smoothest ride. Chuck, in a position to speak out, tried to advise a certain path, but his proposal was turned down. For this argument’s sake, I’ll concede that university administrators have other priorities that present their own forks. But let’s

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39 Available at <http://www.ohio.edu/sustainability/ou-energy-faq.htm>.
40 The phrasing here is a bit tricky, as I’m not sure how to express that Chuck managed to be ahead of his time twice on the same issue.
41 Anything with a name as ambitious as “university” probably has a lot going on.
be critical of OU here, who had a fork in the road to choose between and is now, after
three decades, trying to merge on to the side of it they didn’t pick the first time
because as natural gas replaces coal in America’s furnaces, they want to make the
most of their investment in new technology. It’s good that they’re seeking efficiency,
but it would be better if they had been more efficient in that seeking.

But this is just one frustrating example I’m using to illustrate that for Chuck,
consumption is more than just a part of daily life. It’s been a subject of his study for
decades. He spent a year and a half in the late 1970s working for the Office of
Technology Assessment (OTA), an office Congress established in 1973 as an
institution for researching national issues related to science, technology, and
engineering. The OTA acted, for Congress, as a balance to all the research capabilities
of the executive branch in places like the Department of Defense and the
Environmental Protection Agency. Over the course of more than 30 years, the office
produced over 100,000 pages of reports. “A big thick thing” is what Chuck calls the
one he contributed to; he says it’s somewhere around his house in one of his
overflowing filing cabinets or in one of the stacks of refugee documents that couldn’t
find a vacancy in a drawer. Chuck got involved with the OTA in 1977, on sabbatical
leave from OU. He spent over a year working with the OTA, first researching
municipal solid waste and then studying remanufacturing, the process of taking worn-out products and remaking them into something saleable. This was the kind of work he
could do on this national scale, and he loved it. His time there pushed him toward his

Chuck tried to get this sabbatical in 1972 or ’73, but with Kent State still large in its rearview, the
state government of Ohio wasn’t doing its public university’s faculty members any favors: It revoked
sabbatical privileges for a few years, until after the war in Vietnam was over.
studies of GTBD and how engineering interacts with social justice. It was during this time that the Half Life of the Earth came to him. By the time he left, Chuck had established the major thrust of his scholarly endeavors for the rest of his life.

Aside from its formative influence on his career, part of the reason I think Chuck remembers his time in the OTA fondly was its lack of partisan allegiance. It’s a vision of utopian bureaucracy: An institution within the government that (1.) swears no loyalties except to truth, reason, and science and (2.) privileges no special interests, entertains no lobbyists, and does not engage in political speech’s intentional miscommunication for the sake of provoking speculation about the other side of the aisle. The OTA’s power was to look past the immediate realm and consider America, its citizens, and their use of materials on a larger scale of time in order to make long-term plans for providing stability and sustainability to that nation, those inhabitants, and their materials. If I might borrow one of Chuck’s favorite words, the whole enterprise seems beautiful: An organization created by the Congress—America’s most powerful intellectual quagmire—dedicated to basic, factual understanding of the way Americans use the new technologies available to them. In a time when the list of things we use that don’t give us cancer seems to shorten everyday, this sort of technological assessment sounds beyond valuable.

But Congress, with its short-term drive to the next election, clashed with the Office’s attempts at longer foresight. And despite demonstrating its international impression by drawing more than 100 interested visitors from the governments of 25 countries over the course of just one year in the mid-80s, funding became harder and
harder to come by as the OTA failed to resign itself to one side of the aisle. Without a partisan allegiance, it had no partisan champions, and without partisan champions, it had little defense on the Congressional budgetary playing field. In 1995, Congress officially de-funded the OTA, a move made under the direction of America’s perennial media-darling and the eternal righteous champion of the people, Newt Gingrich.\textsuperscript{43} Over its 30 quiet years, the OTA generated just a little press, and it lives on now thanks to scholars at Princeton, who established the “The OTA Legacy” website to sing its praises.\textsuperscript{44} It’s a sad memorial to a nonpartisan governmental institution’s political weakness.\textsuperscript{45}

Chuck’s own involvement with the OTA was limited to 1977 and ’78, but he made other trips to Washington. In 1980, he was the first Faculty in Residence for the Washington Internships for Students of Engineering (WISE) program. He was in charge of a group of the nation’s most promising engineering students, and it was his task to familiarize them with the way things work in the capital city so that they might become national figures in their field. Chuck’s strongest memory of the program, though, seems to be the afternoon he spent with his students watching the comings and goings of lobbyists in Congressional offices. It was not inspiring to see special interests with such easy access to the inner workings of the American democracy. But that dark side of the legislature only motivated Chuck to try to make more change.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{43} In a move that seems appropriate only in the irony-clogged middle of the ‘90s, OTA employees printed up shirts that read, “The Library of Congress got $350 million and all I got was this lousy tee shirt.”}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{44} Available at <http://www.princeton.edu/~ota>.
\textsuperscript{45} It’s easy to condemn Washington from afar, I know, but allow me my principles.}
In 1982, he ran in an Ohio Democratic primary for Congress. I have an old campaign pamphlet. The paper might’ve been white once, but it’s yellowed a little now with age. Inside are some policy explanations. The pamphlet hits on the topics of Jobs, Taxes, Peace, World Affairs, and Energy. In the Energy section, it reads: “I will work for an energy policy that recognizes the importance of conservation, solar energy, and renewable energy, and help to reduce household heating and utility bills.” Pretty tame words for Chuck. If I didn’t know better, I might not recognize them as his. But then again, the confident smile on the front of the pamphlet doesn’t look much like the Chuck I know either, not with that neatly-trimmed mustache with some color still in it, and the well-placed clutch of hair swooping away from a crisp part. There’s confidence in his face. Over his head it says, “Chuck Overby...” And then underneath the photo: “A leader for our times.”

I think of Chuck now, with a bushy beard, white and wild. He almost always has a ball cap on, always with a paper crane golden-safety-pinned to the side. There’s a no-man’s-land of smooth skin between the highest wrinkle on his forehead and his first white hairs. Maybe he looks like a kook—he definitely looks kookier now than he did as a candidate for Congress. But who can blame him? He lost in the primary to a used car salesman. He laughs about it now, 30 years later.

When Chuck was giving me the tour of his place that day in the winter, as we walked between the tarp-lumps of wood, I told Chuck about my grandparents who had a place like this, just smaller and on flatter land, until they moved into a condo.
“Well, that’s sort of where you have to go when you get to the point where you can’t take care of yourself,” he said, looking down at his cane. “And I gradually see more and more of that happening with my wife and I. You just slow up. You can’t do things like you used to do them without getting tired out.”

Chuck is old. Even as I sweated in a light jacket that day, I noticed a thermal shirt under his button-down and denim jacket—insulation against winter’s end days. His old body, for whatever reasons I don’t understand, has a sensitivity to cold and to gravity, as evidenced in the cane he hangs on chair backs and bungees into the sheath on his motorcycle. He had a special way of leaning on it while he stood on his front walk; he put it behind one thigh and half-sat on it once all the mulch was cleared. I’m not trying to evoke pity for “poor old” Chuck, I just want to recognize some worldly elements we all deal with. To be old, you have to live a long time. Chuck has lived a long time—long enough to lose a brother to Scarlet Fever, to bomb Korea, to be a friend of a friend of Kurt Vonnegut.46 That’s a long time to stay up in the world, so if Chuck sounds a bit extreme some times, maybe it’s only because the rest of us can’t understand what almost nine decades trailing behind us would even look like. Twenty-one years is my eternity, and he’s got four of those and change. So, Chuck embodies a lesson to me. Call it, “Respect your elders,” if you want because even that name carries with it the weight of reason. The reason elders should be respected is because they might know a thing or two we don’t. There’s a good chance that during their lives, they’ve picked up a thing or two that we haven’t yet and they’d be happy tell us.

46 Chuck’s friend Gifford Doxsee was a POW in Slaughterhouse Five with Vonnegut in Dresden, Germany. More information available at <http://ezramagazine.cornell.edu/SPRING11/People.html>. 
As much as the story-telling old person is a stereotype, it’s also a fountainhead of knowledge that human civilization has relied on since its beginnings. The earliest humans couldn’t write how-to guides for fire building. So, like them, we have to listen to the stories if we want to gain anything from them. And if we don’t, we might be stuck trying redundantly to figure things out on our own. All Chuck wants to do is help. And he knows he can’t do that forever.

My point being that if Chuck has some ideas about material consumption and the finite nature of our planet and how we can overcome it, part of why I’m willing to listen is because he’s been here a lot longer than I have. Even if his visions are scary, they’re plausible, and this maybe makes them even scarier. But unlike prophets of doom, Chuck has solutions, and they’re plausible, too. There’s a way to save the World, and Chuck’s petitioning for his path’s inclusion on the official parade route.

But if it doesn’t work, there’s something else that Chuck, his age, and his frustrations embody for me: A great fear of always studying and never being studied. It’s like he’s what happens to the ideas no one listens to the first time they hear them. If only one out of every one million people is the kind who will make a “silencing list,” that’s still a hell of a lot of people in today’s world. There’s a very real possibility that these people, people like Chuck, are living and dying every day, unsure of how to make the rest of us hear and listen. The struggle Chuck faced, the one he still faces, is just getting people to understand things he takes for granted as common sense.
“Little buggers love these cranes,” Chuck told me once while he folded a pink piece of origami. We were sitting in the student center again. Chuck’s hands worked methodically, moving with the grace of muscle memory. He had his legs crossed casually with the crook of one knee resting on the other thigh. Project completed, he pulled at the nose and tail of the paper bird, and the wings moved up and down. Chuck’s cranes are a variation on the more popular avian origami you might’ve seen. I don’t know where he found the instructions, but he folds his cranes so that their wings can flap in a stiff but simple imitation of flight. One of the first things I noticed about Chuck, aside from his hunch and his cane, his beard and his willingness to vocalize, was an origami crane safety-pinned to his hat. I can’t remember what color the crane was the first time I saw it there, but I know I’ve seen them in orange, purple, red, and blue, always affixed with a golden safety pin to whatever well-made, well-worn ball cap Chuck has on. He changes these cranes out as they begin to crumple on the side of his head, victims (like all of us) to the elements in space and across time. He told me that day about how children go crazy for the cranes, and I can picture a crowd of undeveloped yet developing little humans milling around him, each waiting for their carne. In my mind, none of them need to be reminded by nearby parents to say, “Thank you.” For Chuck, the cranes are a fun way to connect with fellow human beings of any age, and the fact that kids like colorful animals doesn’t hurt.
Chuck likes kids. He’s been around long enough to see children become the future a couple times. And the cranes are more than just a way to interact with kids and other humans. The little slips of paper are covered in text that patterns their wings. They begin as square pieces of paper in bold primary and secondary colors, running 3 5/8 inches on all sides. He likes to hand out an extra two-sided slip each time he passes out a crane to provide a little reading material for parents or the occasional curious college student. On one side, the printed message is Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution.

“Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order,” it reads, “the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.” It continues, “In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained.” The last sentence is Chuck Overby’s favorite, so he underlines it: “The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.”

Take a second with that, especially the last line. I cannot allow you to gloss over, skim, or miss Article 9 because those 73 words, together and in that order, are a message that inspires Chuck Overby every day of his life. Even though they were articulated long before he grew into the man he is today, he believes they have the power to save the world. That’s why he started the Article 9 Society. He’s dedicated

47 Available at: <http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/constitution_and_government_of_japan/constitution_e.html>
48 They have a website (article9society.org). Chuck is its webmaster, and the group celebrated its 20th anniversary in March of 2011.
time over the past two decades to spreading those words, to proliferating a message of peace that he believes in.

“The first George Bush was making a lot of comments about how we need a new world order,” Chuck told me one day in the student center, explaining the 1991 post-Gulf War climate that fostered the society. “I thought to myself, ‘By God, that’s exactly what we need, but not a military world order. We need a world order based on a rule of law.’”

The rule of law Overby wanted was one he found almost 10 years earlier. In preparation for a professional trip to teach and study in Japan and China, he took a class on East Asia in 1980 at OU. Assigned reading for the course included the entire Japanese Constitution, a special part of which caught Overby’s attention. Since then, Chuck’s worked to spread his appreciation for Article 9 to friends and strangers. He’s written papers, a book, and sandwich board signs in the service of this goal, and Article 9’s message of peace is a kind of personal fixation for Chuck, the kind that he’s always ready and willing to talk about because it’s never an insignificant conversation to him. That eternal significance, like most eternal significances, has its own digression-full backstories, with elements of context that enable the kind of timeless prioritization Chuck gives them.

For example, on the other side of the crane slips is the story of Sadako Sasaki, the Japanese girl who died at age 12 in 1955 from leukemia. It explains (and Chuck will readily elaborate) how Sadako, when she was diagnosed, began folding paper cranes in an attempt to prove a Japanese myth that if a person could fold 1,000 paper
cranes, by the time he or she finished, any problems would disappear on their own. It sounds like a tedious way to deal with something, but for problems that are matters of time, it’s not a bad way to kill the clock. I don’t mean to be a downer, but Sadako never made it to a thousand. The myth stayed mythic, but her story grew wings and flew across her country and the world, becoming mythic in its own right. The timing of her illness led doctors to believe that it was a result of nuclear radiation from the United States’ explosive end to World War II. She became an example of the tragedy left behind by a couple of bombs that presented a ruthlessly efficient solution to a grisly problem. Her legacy even became tangible: Statues memorialize her in Japan and in Seattle, making her a symbol of not just those bombs’ innocent victims, but of needless casualties of violence everywhere. At the biggest memorial, in Hiroshima, people from across Japan and around the world gather to pile paper cranes at the foot of her statue, and the little birds flock in the millions.49

Stories like this fire Chuck up. His version of Sadako’s story has a drama that comes from telling it as many times as he has, like a well-rehearsed monologue with all the dynamism of real drama plus the encapsulated chilling reality of the situation when it’s shared in the same conversation as small talk and well wishes. He works through it with the same practiced energy he uses to fold cranes, as if his vocal chords have muscle memory for the words he uses.

“So this guy is into peace, we get it,” you might think. “Lots of people are into peace; it’s a pretty cool idea. What makes him so special?”

49 Once, years ago, Chuck visited her monument, the big one in Japan with all the cranes around it. When I picture him there, I see the piles of silent paper birds, blue skies, and Japanese cherry trees in bloom because, in my head, Chuck belongs in the middle of a peaceful space.
There’s something in my mind that sets Chuck apart from other peace activists, especially younger ones.\textsuperscript{50} It’s a difference not of type, but in degree. All ideologies enable a spectrum of devotion, and an umbrella concept of peace-based ideology is no exception with its dynamically, varyingly devoted participants. Applying a scale that runs from casual interest to brazen fanaticism, I’d say Chuck falls further towards the loons, but not amongst them. What keeps Chuck within the realm of sanity is that his ideal world is on Earth, it is populated with human beings, and its attainment means the end of wars between groups of the human species. He thinks a nearly Edenic paradise could exist in this world if we could all make it happen together.

To pinpoint the nature of Chuck’s passion for peace on this spectrum, it’s helpful to turn to the 2005 edition of his book \textit{A Call for Peace}. It’s a spirited text where Chuck makes his case for non-violence, so I’ll let make his own point. He asks:

“Can we imagine a more ridiculous folly than that of over-consuming, ecosystem-destroying so-called great powers, poised at the end of fifty years of Cold War paranoia, still armed to the teeth with unbelievably lethal nuclear and other military technology capable of ending life on the planet while real needs of people around the globe are grossly unmet?”

Let’s take a second with that. Basically, here is a man questioning the very reality of our everyday geopolitical status quo and reducing it to folly. That’s a big jump, but I need you to make it with me because Chuck’s thinking on war and peace is as far from the subjects’ current status quos as I can imagine. To ask whether or not the global system of national defenses (which most people can’t even comprehend the financial

\textsuperscript{50} It’s important to note that due to Chuck’s age, most peace activists are younger peace activists. But I’m referring especially to the casual post-hippies whose peace sign necklaces constitute little more than commodified passionless idolatry.
and human scales of) is anything but folly is to embrace the outside of the box. It
evidences how far Chuck’s thought process is from the act of merely processing his
daily reality and it should orient you to the level of his idealism. What he presents in
that question is a thorough, internationally oriented questioning of the military’s
position of power in our culture as a tradition, an institution, and a force. So this
question comes from a distance, a figurative space far away from where our society’s
usual questions about nations’ global responsibility and the existence of nuclear
weaponry come from. Maybe because of the space between there and here, the
question itself is also huge. There’s a lot of energy wound up in feelings like that. It
inspires a round of What Can I Do?s to start bouncing between my skull’s walls. If I
sincerely believe Chuck is asking the right questions (and I do), then I ask myself how
do I make sure everyone agrees with me? How do I demonstrate that the guy’s got a
real point? How do I get past the exterior others see as “kooky” and lay out in words
and sentences and paragraphs that we need to be asking ourselves the things Chuck is
asking us? There’s a unique challenge in this, and it manifests itself in the uniqueness
of Chuck.

There’s something else that makes Chuck a special case when it comes to war
and peace: Chuck is a veteran. This is a big jump, too, especially for me. Knowing
Chuck how I do, it’s hard to imagine him enlisting in the military. Maybe the problem
is that I’m stuck on envisioning “the military” as a parody of the campy newsreels
circa World War II, with bombastic narration and clips from interviews with the boys
going overseas. Cue Sousa march, include relevant national symbols (e.g., eagles,
stars), and promote hope with excessive patriotism and relentless optimism. The problem with that nostalgic vision is that Chuck sticks out of it like a sore thumb. I can’t picture him there. But sticking out isn’t unusual for Chuck, who wears his Uncle Sam costume to peace rallies. He has stamina for the work of peace that makes him stand out in Athens, where the dearth of young people casually dedicated to the cause of peace doesn’t help provide outlets for real, dedicated peaceniks. He’s on a level all his own in terms of devotion. And if this guy’s peace activism distances him from fellow pacifists on a liberal college campus in 2013, how did he handle real combat in the ‘50s? If he were a man of my generation, I don’t think he would’ve enlisted. But almost three-quarters of a century ago, Chuck did sign up. And it was eagerness (maybe drawn from the same well that he still taps today) that motivated him to do it.

Earlier, I mentioned that Chuck dreamed about flying. Flight had some kind of spell cast on the small-town Montana boy with high grades and Big Sky to look at. In an age before radio, television, and the Internet, Chuck spent the free time of his youth gluing together model airplanes. I wasn’t there, but based on the way his hands move when he makes a crane, I can still imagine a young man in rural Montana, hurrying home with a new model, bought for a few coins in the next town over. I see Chuck’s hands clear a desk or a table, and then a chair creaks under his weight as he sits. He slides an end of the box open and spreads the contents out only to put them all back together again. If you’re familiar with attempting precision, maybe you can feel the focused tension I imagine in the muscles around Chuck’s eyes as two parts move

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51 But we’re a generation that hasn’t needed to go to war in major proportions. This is one of the major differences between Chuck’s generation and mine, one too complex to treat here, but still one that defines both he and I (and our respective peer groups).
carefully toward each other in the void over the desktop, where their edges finally
meet and the chemically pungent excess glue oozes out to be wiped off with a rag kept
readily on hand. If you appreciate a long, slow look like that one, maybe you can also
feel the breezes coming off the Rockies as a young Chuck stands on the ground in the
northwestern corner of Montana, his head craned up to watch a plane flying overhead,
its engine’s whir coming to him on a delay. With a sky that big, he must’ve stood for a
while to watch aircraft go from horizon to horizon.

Chuck first real experience of flight came on July 4, 1941\textsuperscript{52} at a local air show
in rural Wisconsin. It was then and there, teenaged and with two quarters\textsuperscript{53} in his
pocket, that Chuck stood in line for a chance to fly. He waited and got his turn and left
the ground for the first time that day. Chuck had flyboy dreams, and this was a step in
their direction. The pilot was a friendly man and an aviation hobbyist. Together, they
made a flying lap of the mowed-grass landing strip in an overgrown hay field, and
Chuck ogled the levers and panels and dials in the cockpit. But, in one of life’s quiet
reminders of worldly limitations, this step towards a dream went harmlessly wrong.
As they prepared to land, another plane cut them off so Chuck and the hobbyist veered
into the unmowed grass of the field. The aircraft crash-landed, losing its landing gear
and pulling Chuck’s seatbelt tight in the process. But no one was hurt, the aircraft
sustained minor damages, and the pilot demonstrated himself to be a true paragon of
customer service by refunding Chuck’s quarters. Chuck’s care-taking sister had to pull

\textsuperscript{52} Only 28 years after the Wright Brothers broke into the sky for the first time.
\textsuperscript{53} Earned for a day’s work polishing eggs and cleaning chicken coops for an egg farm where he was
spending the summer with his sister and her husband.
her teenaged brother out of line when he tried to invest his windfall in another ride aboard a different plane.

Despite his yearnings, Chuck didn’t have the resources to become a pilot on his own. He only had fifty cents to fly on that day. So where do flyboy dreams take a bright young man from rural Montana, one who also has college aspirations and the grades to get in? Some well-placed advertisements on pilot training convinced Chuck that the military had the means to put him into the sky, as long as he would wear a uniform while he was up there. Like so many members of the American military, Chuck joined up because they promised they could make a dream come true.

The phrase “dream come true,” though, sets up a polarized set of story arcs. On one end is fantasy and on the other is its denial, and if fantasy is denied, it will be hard to stay consistent with this Hero paradigm I’ve set out for myself. The fantasy side of the polarity is a classic war hero tale, and Chuck had the makings for this when he said good-bye to his new wife who had a kid on the way. But I’m trying to make Chuck into a Peace Hero, which doesn’t exist in this dreamy space between war hero and dishonorable discharge. Chuck, whose heart doesn’t seem to know how to be in a wrong place, had no war hero aspirations. He just wanted to fly. So to me, it seems that Chuck’s participation in various war efforts was motivated by a belief that he was doing something important for his country in order to do something important for himself. This dual prioritization matters because it’s still what motivates many of the servicemen and -women I’ve met in ROTC programs. The opportunity they sign up for is a college education; the price they pay is service to their country. That, in and of
itself, is not an ignoble arrangement: I would happily serve my country for a chance at higher education. But the What Can I Do? s start when I interrogate the nature of the service these people are enticed to perform.

The military is designed to change people, to re-shape them (through intensive training) as knowing how to use designed responses in reaction to potential combat-scenario stimuli. All the fresh-faced young men from those mid-20th-century newsreels I imagined were just kids with clay brains that could be molded into martial units. In those glory days, the changes could really take. I’ve spent enough time around members of the VFW and American Legion to see what military training can do to a man if he buys into it and never sells that stock. Things are more complex now, after Vietnam, Jimmy Carter, and 9/11, but the changes are still coming. I know people who lost academic scholarships and joined the ROTC to pay for school. They’ve got new haircuts, new bulked-up bods, and new, growing resentments for the only institution with the resources and willingness to enable their education. Like Chuck, they committed hopefully to a series of institutionalized steps toward their dreams with a naïve impression of the possibilities the military could afford him. For Chuck, in another example of worldly limitations, something went wrong. There is still a harmlessness to the unintended consequences of Chuck’s entering the military. He hasn’t been disfigured or handicapped or even post-traumatically stressed into any

54 I’d like to offer a source to cite this assertion of enforced dynamism, but the best I can offer is the first half of Stanley Kubrick’s “Full Metal Jacket” as a notable (yet fictional) case of when the changes don’t take.

55 Their respective dreams of flight and education seem too easy to draw metaphorical parallels between, so I’ll spare you and mention just the tense contrast between the sense of elevation both these goals embody and the human debasement that military training enforces.
sort of disorder. But he’s changed his mind about a great deal since basic training.

There are two stories Chuck’s bothered to make a detailed, unpublished record of, both of which he can present—to anyone interested—as short essays regarding his experience in the military.

Chuck’s piece titled “A Mountain Kiss” tells one of these stories. It begins at home, in Redstone. From Chuck’s modest hamlet in Montana, the farmers used to send their wheat crops to Minneapolis, one of the biggest metropolitan centers on the western part of America’s border with Canada. It was to boom-time Minneapolis that Chuck, cream of his town’s academic crop, went as a student enrolled at the University of Minnesota. He was invited by an old friend named Torstead (Tor for short), who he’d met in World War II pilot training and bonded with over a love of flight and an interest in model airplanes. It was in the crown jewel of the Land of a Thousand Lakes that Chuck lived with Tor’s family while the military buddies studied engineering. Eager to augment the $75 a month they received from their G.I. Bill benefits, the two enlisted in the university’s ROTC program on an accelerated track (thanks to their prior service), and they each earned another $25 a month for it.

It was in this program that Chuck first had the opportunity and found the impetus to sit and thoroughly question the military’s place in our culture. Taken alongside high-quality engineering classes (on a campus in one of the Midwest’s

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56 This is the time when Chicago was America’s number two city and Detroit rode its industrial surge into prosperity. The 1950s’ census saw population peaks for both cities, as well as Cleveland and St. Louis, all of which were in America’s top ten that year for population. Minneapolis, as well, peaked, but not on the top ten list. The 1950s were the turning point on the American Midwest’s golden age, as manufacturing’s growth slowed and the decades-long process of population drain began to trickle east, south, and west. Chicago is the only one of these cities that still has a spot in the top ten. (Third, if you want to know).

57 The war ended before Chuck finished training.
industrial hotbeds), the ROTC classes felt worthless to Chuck. He asked himself then, as he does in the story, “How can a respectable university offer academic credit for this garbage?” I don’t have any concrete examples of the accredited garbage, but I do know that I’ve been there, trying to get comfortable in a cheap desk while the drone of professorial verbalization wafts through a room of sleepy heads. Some classes seem like they’re required because no one would take them otherwise. In that kind of atmosphere, the studious commitment I want to show feels wasted, and the resentment comes in quick waves as I jump through hoops of arbitrary design. These are the general education classes where professors can appear as avatars of their field’s clichés and the margins of my notebooks become camps of refugee doodles. It was that kind of mind-dulling insignificance that let Chuck rationalize the only lapse of academic integrity I’ve ever found in his past.

His buddy Tor, failing out of both the engineering and ROTC programs, asked Chuck for help in boosting his grades. They enrolled in the same ROTC class offered at two different times. Chuck would take the morning class, memorize its exams, and give Tor a full report over lunch before he took the same exam in the afternoon class. Chuck had reservations, but his moral agony was cut short by the nature of the classes: His qualms dissolved in the wasted time he felt being spent. Tor’s grades began to climb and his hotshot pilot dreams re-entered reality. Eventually, he received his Second Lieutenant’s commission, dropped out of the engineering program, and found

58 E.g., sociologists with hip pony tails, film critics with insufferable pretension, literati with too much to say about William Wordsworth.
work in Korea as an F-80 jet fighter pilot.\textsuperscript{59} Chuck received letters from Tor about the fun he was having with the “hot airplanes and hot women” all around him.

A few months after that, Tor was the number two man on a typical napalm run. Over the target, his plane took some anti-aircraft fire, and he was too low to the ground to bailout. He needed to crash land, but there was nowhere to go. And so, as Chuck puts it, “He kissed a North Korean mountain with his fast F-80.”

Tor’s mother shared with Chuck the letter regarding her son’s M.I.A. status from a commanding officer, in which the unknown man hoped that “the knowledge that Lt. Tor is an exemplary officer, a superior and resourceful pilot will afford you some comfort in this anxious period of waiting.”\textsuperscript{60} That was 60 years ago, and Chuck still visibly has a hard time talking about it. He feels guilt—not a murderer’s guilt, but a friend’s guilt from enabling something so tragic. This is a complex emotion: It’s not the red-handed kind of guilt where you hide the knife and hear the telltale heart. It’s more like tripping over the life-support machine’s plug and not knowing what the alarms mean. It’s like a Butterfly Effect that a person can feel responsible for every time the thought of it flutters through his mind’s meadow. Any time human life is extinguished, it has a great potential for meaning. So to feel even a molecule of responsibility for a death of great personal significance can change a man. Death has a way of changing people, and our earliest experiences with it can haunt us because we know that death is not just in the world around us. It makes its own moves in our direction.

\textsuperscript{59} Chuck would join in the war effort less than a year later, but involuntarily.
\textsuperscript{60} They still referred to him in the present tense after his mountain kiss.
Mortality’s movement is the theme of Chuck’s second essay, “Colonels Covering Their Asses,” which is the story of a time he faced his own flirtations with demise. After he was involuntarily recalled to active duty in the build-up to the Korean War (which was after Chuck’s graduation from the University of Wisconsin with a commission as a U.S. Air Force Second Lieutenant), Chuck was one of many reluctant soldiers in pilot training for B-29 bombers at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Most of the men had been WWII hotshots brought back to war by their government’s insistence. Ways out of the impending war were few, but that didn’t mean nobody tried. Across Randolph, men were scrambling for ways out of the war. The higher-ups began to investigate the phenomenon, generating a report on the base’s residents’ “fear of flying” and how it threatened the base’s ability to meet its flight crew quota. Dizziness, a medically sketchy but militarily risky condition, was good enough to get some guys out of their cockpits. But the colonels in charge had a quota of flight crews needed at Forbes Air Force Base in Topeka, Kansas, and when Chuck’s aircraft commander, a dizzy major,\(^6\) got out of flight duty, there was one hole to fill. So they assigned Chuck’s crew a new aircraft commander, a captain who lacked the in-flight competence of his predecessor and also made the cockpit reek of alcohol.

It’s easy today to imagine the fear you or I might feel knowing that the man charged with flying a 70-ton bomber plane (which we were aboard) had a drinking problem that showed no signs of slowing before a war-time departure for Korea. In a

\(^6\) Chuck still wishes he could find the name of this aircraft commander, a major who avoided Korea thanks to his chronic dizziness that he linked to flying. (Chuck wants to congratulate the man for avoiding the war successfully and commend him on his piloting competence.)
time when drunk driving enjoys no shred of sterling attached to its reputation, drunk flying seems unthinkable. Unfortunately, Chuck was forced to grapple with this in his mid-20s, in a time before M.A.D.D. or D.A.R.E., and at that time he had no role models for the mutinous notions he harbored regarding his new captain. While he feared that flying with this drunken, incompetent man over Korea would mean certain death, he also had no idea how to approach his superiors about his concerns because he had been taught to follow orders, not ask questions. And so he felt that he had been given a death sentence by the colonels at Randolph who, in their service to a military quota, sent Chuck and his crew to Forbes for final training with the intent that they would maintain their crew’s personnel’s integrity on into Korea.

 Luckily, fate intervened through the powers of an instructor pilot employed at Forbes. He removed the alcoholic captain from Overby’s crew and instated Chuck as the acting commander for their island-hopping flight across the Pacific to Korea, where they were assigned a new captain and began, in earnest, their contribution to the war effort. Chuck believes he owes that instructor pilot his life.

 But it was in Korea that Chuck first saw war up close and personal. Chuck has no essay on it, but he told me the story, and I verified its reality at his invitation in an article from the archives of *The New York Times*. On June 19, 1953, First Lieutenant Chuck Overby, the pilot of a B-29 bomber, was tasked with flying his crew into North Korea to bomb a target: The Toksang Dam, 70 miles west of Pyongyang. The dam was a vital piece of infrastructure for the area. It irrigated several square miles of nearby rice crops, and miles of highways and railroad tracks and a small local airfield

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62 Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Drug and Alcohol Resistance Education, respectively.
all sat in its floodplain. The decision to take out a dam dedicated to agricultural uses was not the first plan of action, as it meant limiting the civilian population’s ability to feed itself. It became a more legitimate move to military commanders only after North Korea began to use its rice crop to barter for military goods. Talks had stalled while working toward a truce, and Chuck believes that motivated the decision to carry out this mission as a way of breaking the North Koreans. As the Communists worked to keep their war effort financed, their Western invaders decided it was time for drastic measures to prevent just that. They determined that Scorched Earth was the best policy choice, and that impulse, along with the engines of the B-29 bomber he piloted, propelled Chuck through a dark and windy night over Korea.

B-29s were the first pressurized bomber plane, so Chuck’s flight might not have been unlike that on a commercial airline, except he was flying a war machine pregnant with 10 tons of bombs and nearing its due date. Piloting one of 15 B-29s flying toward the dam, he recalls the headwinds blowing in excess of 150 miles per hour, creating intense turbulence.63 Added to these natural difficulties were man-made ones: Flak from North Korean anti-aircraft weaponry lit up the night sky. Between the weather and the warfare, some pilots turned toward alternative targets, pre-stipulated in the event that the dam was unreachable. Each man had to make his own decision about continuing the run or not, and Chuck seems to think that a few them of them set their bearings for a secondary target based on readings of moral compasses.64 Those pilots let their conscience guide them away from the intended target, and Chuck says

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63 For scale, 150 mph winds are severe tornado- and hurricane-speed winds
64 I wonder how many of them might’ve been farm boys who didn’t have it in them to destroy such a major piece of agricultural infrastructure.
they faced disciplinary action, even court martial, for it. Chuck got his plane into position, though. And he helped to destroy the Toksang Dam. The damn’s destruction flooded the rice fields and hamstringed the agricultural potential of the area until repair was possible. It also destroyed the local highways, railroad tracks, and airfield.

This destruction, you might be thinking, seems unheroic, villainous even. It’s hard to reconcile our Hero with this history. Aside from blowing up that dam, I’ve shown you Chuck helping a friend into a dangerous situation and following orders against his own better judgment, only to find himself in the kind of dilemmas that I rejoice for never having to deal with. They’re real human drama invading Chuck’s life when he was about my age, which is important because I have no idea what the fuck I would do in any of those situations, and I don’t know that, barring some military training you haven’t told me about, you would either.

So I’ll offer that lots of good Heroes have checkered pasts, and that often enough, these incidents of Evil eat away at Heroes over time and drive them to do what makes them heroic. It’s clear how Chuck feels about Tor’s mountain kiss, about the Colonels covering their asses, and about that bombing run. He is in touch with the regret, the remorse, and the tragedy his own decisions created. But he doesn’t blame himself. What bothers him about bombing the dam especially, and what helped to turn him into Chuck Overby, peace activist, is a sort of logical loophole that the American actions in Korea slipped through. Chuck will gravely point out a double standard he sees based on a military’s destruction of a population’s ability to feed itself.
“When the Nazis did that in Holland in World War II,” he explained one day in the student center, referring to the German destruction of Dutch dykes, “the Nuremberg Trials declared that to be a war crime.” He spoke slowly, conveying his seriousness: “It probably helped to get at least one Luftwaffe or one Nazi general executed after Nuremburg. ... We did the same thing.” His voice was quiet, thoughtful and grim. “And I don’t know of any United States Air Force colonel or general that was executed for war crimes.”

I think it’s important to interrogate this parallelism between the Nazis and the Eisenhower administration because Nazi parallelisms have become the sort of easy-to-make grand statements that elevate things like Barack Obama and grammatical sticklers to the same level as our culture’s most continuously relevant and purest embodiment of Evil within the last century. Whenever I hear the word Nazi, I see swastikas and goosesteps, the smiling young girl in the photo from the front cover of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Hitler pounding on a podium, and the footage, shown to me twice in grade school, of naked piles of human beings being bulldozed into mass graves because the sheer volume of lifeless flesh (coupled with sanitation’s imperatives) made it impractical to bury the dead one by one. So any use of the word Nazi needs to merit this flashing slideshow of images in my mind, which is why the occasional strict grammarian or even the President’s more nationally socialistic policies never bother me as much as the first asshole who throws out that N-word.

But it seems that, despite the rampant casualness of its use in the cultural milieu, Chuck has a legitimate case of Nazi parallelism here in which a national
government used its impressive military force to annihilate the lifestyle of a populace it wanted control of. This is a commonality that feels hard to ignore if we can leave out of consideration the kind of jingoistic reasoning that is exactly how the perpetrators of acts like these get away with them. In my head, how can I justify this action when it’s American but not when it’s German? Granted, it’s not a perfect one-for-one comparison: Hitler’s Germany lusted after land and Eisenhower’s America was keen on an ideological victory. But this is a split hair that has its own harrowing impact in the realization that the United States government perpetrated Nazi-level war crimes for the sake of freedom and democracy; this is a contradiction of terms that’s hard to stomach. As Americans, we like to imagine a sizable gap between Nazi actions in World War II and United States actions in Korea because of the belief system motivating each set of actors. But even this one parallel is unsettling, especially in the effect it’s had on a man who took part in it. Chuck may not see himself as a war criminal, but he lives with the knowledge that he was involved in what some might construe as a war crime.

So maybe that explains why Chuck writes in his book that soldiers are victims of war just as everyone else is. Reprogrammed to know what to do in combat situations, soldiers lose their humanity in the usage they experience at the hands of governments. Maybe they signed up for an opportunity, whether it was to fly, to travel, to work, or to learn, but the access to that opportunity comes at a moral price, and it’s hard to imagine 18-year-olds who understand that. As Chuck writes:

“In most places on Planet Earth we live in militarized milieus where words like ‘honor,’ ‘glory,’ and ‘noble’ are strongly associated with the
words ‘military,’ ‘war,’ and ‘patriotism.’ In such cultures, to think of war, destruction, and mass slaughter as ‘not honorable,’ as ‘non-glorious,’ and as ‘ignoble’ ... is to incur the wrath of the gods and much of the culture upon oneself.”

This is the real danger of warrior cultures to Chuck. They reinforce their own standards, perpetuating models of identity, social interaction, and geopolitics that have lost their vitality to human survival. Even if my generation of men won’t go to war in the way that others have, we’ve collectively spent enough time on Call of Duty and Halo to think headshots are badass and killing is fun. When it gets to the level of national government, like with the dam in Korea, there’s a real temptation to believe that conflict, violence, and war are innate parts of human nature that we need to allow. It seems that it is a temptation many Americans can’t ignore. This assumption is a manifestation of our national inability to ask ourselves what the hell we’ve been doing in almost every armed conflict since World War II.

Despite its past failings, Chuck still believes in the power of government to give people the methods to provide for and take care of themselves without violence, and this kind of institutionalized method for peace operates within his faith in humanity. Chuck is, among other things, faithful in the human race and what it can do if it does it right. His Exhibit A in this case is Article 9: A government document, a national Constitution no less, that promises one nation’s commitment to non-violence. It’s a model he’s tried to use. For years, he’s waged a coordinated campaign to provide the spark for a constitutional amendment to the United States Constitution that would reflect the same principles as Article 9. Chuck wants to convince America to renounce war. I know what you’re thinking: How beautifully naïve, how tragically impossible,
how brilliantly foolish it must seem to make your goal the eradication of offensive American military power. It must be some kind of golden-hearted hubris to imagine a means of pacifying America’s foreign policy. I’ve struggled with this, too, this notion that Chuck is wasting his time and mine. So I’ll offer you some of the facts that have kept me in Chuck’s corner.

First of all, despite his idealism, Chuck’s tempered his expectations. The 535 hand-addressed envelopes he sent to every member of Congress in 2007 did not ask for a constitutional amendment. They asked only for this message of peace to be read into the Congressional Record, a document that's meaning is entirely symbolic. Members of Congress can use it to publish apologies for missed votes, grumblings about new laws, and congratulations to local high-school volleyball teams. Congresspeople can also use it as an opportunity to revise and edit their own on-the-floor remarks for posteritiorial considerations. It’s like the Legislature’s Facebook news feed, where people can post statuses about any noteworthy thing without worrying about having to deal with the consequences of their actions. That’s why Chuck set it as his goal. He figured if extraordinary high school sports teams could make their way into this bureaucratic laundry list of complete legal insignificance, then certainly an honest attempt at World Peace could do the same. But six years after his letters were sent, the Congressional Record does not include anything about Chuck’s request.

This is my big silencing for this section. It’s on Chuck’s list, and I’ve written it up here because its tragedy feels so much bigger than me, Chuck, or the American
Congress. Here is the most powerful nation in the world, with an unprecedented economic and cultural reach, historic advances in human rights, and public education for its citizens, but its 2012 defense budget—the biggest in the world—is bigger than the budgets ranked second through tenth combined.65 This is, ultimately, exactly what Chuck is up against. He wants to solve this problem, but first he has to convince everyone that it is a problem.

Regardless of his success, Chuck’s efforts mean something very important. He’s breaking a mold for a good reason. Serving when he did, in a war that came early in America’s tenure as a world superpower, it might’ve been tempting for him to celebrate American dominance. But instead of glorifying the American might that he participated in by embracing some war hero status, Chuck’s chosen to work to prevent that might’s further exercise. His message and the ways he’s tried to spread it define him as something different, and upon inspection, it appears to be an important difference. Like other veterans of his generation, Chuck has war stories, but his war stories are not pride-soaked assertions of American superiority because, straight up, Chuck is 100% anti-war. Or maybe, more positively, he’s straight-up, 100% pro-peace. In his words: “There are no military solutions for many of the problems we as a species face on planet earth.” Chuck Overby said that to me once in an interview at the student center. He’s repeated it a few times since then, when the issue arises. Normally, I hate the grand all-or-nothing statements that ideologies produce, but that one actually sounds like something I could believe in. Because Peace, to Chuck, isn’t

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65 In 2012, the United States’ 711 billion dollar defense bill accounted for 41% of total global spending on defense.
some golden state of utopia where everything solves itself. It’s a rational decision, based on empirical evidence, to operate our new global system of human life along rules of order that don’t recognize the legitimacy of violence to generate power. This is Chuck’s spiel, and he spreads it. He doesn’t like to miss an opportunity to do so.

When the Occupy Wall Street movement started to expand across the country, a group of Athens liberals set up some tents in an empty lot down the street from the university’s library. I remember sitting in my morning Arabic class, seeing the camp out a window on cold spring mornings when the grass still frosted. I always stared, watching people wake up and come out of the tents, because I’d gone to their opening ceremony with Chuck, who, for the occasion, dressed as Uncle Sam. That day, all the event’s participants circled up, and as order was called, the organizers opened the grass (read: floor) for speeches and discussion. I journalistically skulked around the outside of the circle, taking notes and enjoying the kind of weather flannel shirts were made for. Chuck waited patiently for his turn to speak, sore-thumbing out of the crowd in his red, white, and blue suit and top hat. He had signs with him, hanging off him on a sandwich board and printed with slogans about Uncle Sam’s willingness to engage in war. There was no one his senior in the crowd, and the younger any on-looker was, the longer they seemed to study Chuck with earnest curiosity. Chuck was patient, but eager to speak. After missing a few opportunities, his eagerness finally boiled over into a brief discourse on his service in Korea, his work as a scholar of engineering, and his encouragement of the young people there that day. His few words were punctuated by so much applause that it reminded the organizers to institute the Occupation
movement’s standard applause-by-jazz-hands rule when he finished. As he was leaving, a motely mix of the assembly’s gray-pony-tailed hippies and ironic-hat-wearing hipsters wanted to shake his hand.

Chuck likes these sorts of public events with opportunities to speak. It’s like the first day I met him, at that film screening: If people will listen, he will talk. He likes writing letters-to-the-editor, too—long, well-argued tracts appear in Athens newspapers every once in a while. For Chuck, this is all about reaching people in the “cultural milieu” we exist in. He sees the vast amounts of information pressing against each individual American consciousness, and he picks his punches when he’s trying to stand out of it because he’s got things to say. That’s the reason he folds the cranes, makes the oratories, wrote the book, and started the Article 9 Society. Because this is the life Chuck’s chosen to live: Dressed as Uncle Sam in public and stopping by the library regularly, taking advantage of primo parking opportunities for both motorcycles and the handicapped (but not at the same time). He’s made a life of great peace for himself in this part of the world, and as a citizen representative of America, that’s the cultural product he wants to export. If you buy into the Think Globally, Act Locally prescription, then Chuck is a powerful example of what it can look like. The Chuck Overby who exists right now, today, is aghast at the military’s influence over its soldiers and the American government and populace. And he vocalizes these feelings about the “gross obscenity of war” frequently and with spastic gesticulation.

His hands speak, too, when he talks about flight. As his voice takes off, his fingers soar out in front of him with emphasis. But he is chagrined to remember the
things he once did in flight. He wants to take responsibility for his actions, like the model member of the Greatest Generation he seems to be, like the decent American who is supposed to admit his mistakes and work to fix them. He knows what he did was wrong, but also knows that there’s very little he can do now. So he takes a hard look at the organization that ordered him to do it, at the institution that gave him the opportunity that he wanted—that chance to fly—but used the power of his eagerness for something that feels so Evil now.

Chuck is not an inconsistent man. His love of flight still comes out of him in little ways, like his modification on the paper cranes he folds that lets him make it look like they’re flying. But he didn’t stay a pilot after he left the military; he became an engineer. And he didn’t stay a warrior after he rejoined the civilian population; he became a peace activist. War’s power in today’s world seems to come from its place in tradition, its ties to convention, and its roots as an institution. For thousands of years, humans have been fighting each other over land and resources and imaginary concepts called beliefs. Chuck wants to see that change. If he can do it, why can’t the rest of us?
Conclusion

We’re nearing the achievement of this Quest. Any string of words, however else divided, has two actual edges where it reaches a limit. And endings can make and break stories. If a beginning needs to draw you in, an ending needs to push you out. If a beginning is a story’s first impression, its ending is its last words. Last words, of course, get imparted special meanings because they represent the last possible moment of experiential accumulation that an entity can articulate. So you’ll understand when I tell you I struggled to compose a sense of finality for this piece because this is kind of a big deal, what with the end-of-the-world, sky-is-falling themes I’m trying to tie up here. Ultimately, though, endings are necessary. Nothing is eternal of infinite.

That’s why there’s an easy analogy to make between this piece and its subject. Humans’ lives, like their stories, end. Because of that, humans place a special meaning on these cessations. Death hangs over the human mass constantly, no matter the security of its throne. Many major ideologies in the world have structures for rationalizing this yin to life’s yang. Chuck is 87, 12 years past the average life expectancy for an American male. And he’s not ignorant of what his age means. He sees, in himself and in his wife, the signs of age, usually as he fiddles with his hearing aids or when he chooses the elevator over the stairs. Chuck gets around pretty slowly now in his later years. So far, this has been the story of Chuck’s life as he’s fiddle and elevated. I’ve dealt with who he is and some of the things he’s done which I feel best illustrate the character of that identity. I’ve told you about his childhood, his

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66 And, really, any- and everything.
adolescence, and his life’s work in American engineering’s academic realm. He’s a veteran, a professor, a father, a husband; he’s earnest, compassionate, concerned, motivated, and frustrated. I’ve offered Chuck here as an example of what one person can do with something as ambiguous as a lifetime.

In one sense, the answer is everything. Consider what Chuck has accomplished. He grew up poor, went to war, stayed in school, married his true love, achieved professional success on the national stage, raised three exceptional children, and fought for what he believes in the entire time. And those are just milestones from across 87 years of good and bad, empowerment and limitation. This is a catalog of the legacy Chuck seems destined to leave. Not bad for a farm boy from Montana. And speaking personally, Chuck’s legacy means a great deal to me because I feel that I have an opportunity to use this piece of writing as a manifestation of it. Part of what drew me to Chuck from our first contact was the analytical power of his mind. I struggle with analytical powers on a daily basis because they’re useful tools to keep in the box, but if I can’t cut the power on them, the whole world around me will break down into meaningless randomness. It’s a lot easier to distract myself from nihilistic doubt than it is to confront it head on, so I remind myself that analysis needs to have a point, and I consider myself lucky that Chuck found one in engineering.

Engineering, after all, is the study of dynamic structures’ designs, and the world, if nothing else to me after a long day, is a dynamic structure—a sort of high-speed machine where input becomes output as a factor of time, space, and energy. In engineering calculations, energy is harnessed as power that can generate force which
can do work, all of which is done with the end goal in mind of maximum efficiency. The true power of a machine is to reduce the amount of resources needed to a point of non-stop work with no waste. What I mean here is a dream of a global utopia where the lines between nations dissolve and everyone (and I mean everyone) is moving in the same direction, or at least along complimentary paths. This is a vision of one big Parade with an unlimited, possibly circular route to move down. Who’s in front isn’t important, and there is no destination, just perpetual motion, sustainable progress, and a unified sense of Us, of Humanity, of our one global similarity as Earthlings. This is a system that aims for efficiency, but not at any human cost. Rather, the point is to manage the vast population of potential-full human beings and give them all the opportunity to pursue happiness, contribute to society, and be a part of something bigger than themselves. This is my great hope because Chuck has shown me that it’s one we can take seriously. He’s changed the way I look at the world. I’ve set him up as a Hero and a role model because that’s what he is to me.

But I’m hardly a global civilization unto myself. And even though a wasteless system is hard to argue against, the bigger the picture you try to apply this noble goal to, the easier it becomes to write it off as idealistic fancy. Sometimes, it feels impossible to get any of the humans I know to stop what they’re doing for just a second and think about what it would mean to run tis massive global system at 100% efficiency. So every day, it feels like things get worse. Always, there’s more garbage, more pollution, and a never-ending supply of entropic waste littered across the streets.

If science were prone to mythologizing itself, I might be able to invoke the legendary Perpetual Motion Machine as the ultimate embodiment of this ideal.
where the Parade has come and gone. So, in a sense very different from that hopeful one, it feels like everything Chuck has done could amount to nothing. All his thoughts and words and work and love could, in effect, mean nothing in the four human dimensions. This isn’t a put-down on Chuck; it’s an attempt at an honest appraisal of one element of the human condition. History only tells us stories of documented greatness, and not everyone’s legacy gets cemented for the future to see. Statistically, it’s not impossible that for every Galileo, Newton, or Einstein, there were a thousand other geniuses that never had the right set of circumstances to blossom and therefore never earned their way into relevancy. And as the human population continues to inflate at a record-shattering pace, an easy fiscal analogy dictates that the value of each unit of currency in a pool decreases as more units are added. A single dollar is worth more on its own than it is as one of seven. A hundred years ago, there were hardly one billion people on the planet; now there’s almost seven billion. If there are more people alive today than have ever died, then is one human today worth less than one a century ago?

That’s why I’ve also set Chuck up as a sore thumb, a loose end, and a free radical. That’s what his work has made him. I’ve been hesitant to deal with this because it could undercut a lot of the work I’ve done here. But Chuck gets written off by lots of people, mostly strangers, around Athens. Maybe it’s his age, but the general sentiment I’ve gleaned from conversations with his acquaintances is a perception of

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68 If you want to feel this way, try to think about how much discarded plastic there is in the world at this moment. (See also: Your local dump.)
69 I.e., height, width, depth, time.
70 Cosmic note: On the universal scale of space and time, Chuck’s insignificance is granted like everyone else’s. Even if he had changed the world, he couldn’t hope to change the universe.
kookiness. There’s some eye-rolling here and there, the sort of knowing us-vs.-them smiles intended to bring me in on a joke at his expense. It’s all very frustrating for me, and I’m not the one that has to work around these preconceived notions of himself in public settings. So it makes sense that one of Chuck’s ruling passions is frustration. Who could blame him? He’s struggled for decades to effect the change he wants, and he’s still unsatisfied with the results. Certainly, Chuck takes pride in all the good that he’s done. He even recognizes how the bad turned him into who he is by forcing him to reckon with the Evil in the world and inside himself. But he’s not satisfied or he wouldn’t still be trying. If the Silencings List is evidence of anything, it’s frustration.

Frustration means more than anger or discontent, although those are elements of it. Anger is a bursting gut reaction to something in the world hitting you the wrong way. Discontent is an accumulated sensation of the world not being up to your par. Anger and discontent can both grow alongside frustration. Anger and discontent can be frustrating and frustration can be angering or discontenting. But true, pure frustration is about more than gut reactions or observed failings. It implies past action. Frustration is the precipitate of trying to do something and being stopped. It’s not always a bad thing; murders, adultery, and other ill wills can be frustrated. But when good will is frustrated—as in when a helping hand up off the ground is slapped away—it can be the sort of emotion that changes someone’s course. Frustration can push people into corners they make for themselves and then it can block their paths out, back to meaningful contributions to society. Hitler, for example, was frustrated as both an artist and a German citizen, so he invented his way out of insignificance with

71 I barely have the mental capacity to understand what a decade can really mean.
some of the most successful villainy in human history. I don’t use him as an example to rationalize his actions or assert some Nazi parallel. Rather, I include a mention of him to demonstrate a Nazi contrast in the fact that frustration can be a very ugly thing, and to evoke a sense that there’s something about Chuck’s frustration that doesn’t push him towards lunacy, fanaticism, or any other perversions of thought that justify Evil.

Chuck’s method of choice for pushing his agenda—what makes paralleling him with the Nazi high command impossible—has been the free speech guaranteed in the First Amendment.\textsuperscript{72} The reason people remember him is because he tries to use the communication of knowledge to change the world. There’s a lot of ways human interact with each other. In grand schemes of human conflict, basic linguistic communication is an underutilized method of resolution. I don’t think the pen is inherently mightier than the sword, but it definitely can be, and the keyboard can definitely be mightier than the semi-auto (if it’s used right). The downside of verbal expression is that it’s not as imposing as martial action. Anyone can get attention with a gun, but getting that kind of attention with words takes time, energy, luck, and another party who can hear, listen, understand, and respond, which is a lot more than somebody on the other side of a gun has to do for an enraptured audience.

Taken this way, Chuck’s lack of success is the result of a breakdown in communication between him and his audience. After interrogating Chuck’s reasons and methods, the question I’m left with is: What is it about Chuck’s audience that’s

\textsuperscript{72}Certainly, the Nazi propaganda machine is a example of practiced speech, but its nature was to limit democratic discourse, not guarantee its freedom.
prevented his work? Why do people write him off as a crazy old man? I ask because even if Chuck comes off as a kook when people meet him, he is not a lunatic for seeing the end of the world as an imminent possibility. If anything, we are all lunatics for believing we can continue to perpetrate deliberately wasteful lifestyles on a finite planet where war is still a legitimized method of conflict resolution. But questions like these call into question Chuck’s whole life work. And for rhetoric’s sake, I think questioning the Hero is essential. We might ask if Chuck hasn’t been too bold in his idealism, too unforgiving in his compromises, and too entrenched in his frustration. Looking at his life, it looks like decades of struggle and suffering, and to what end? Alienation? Pariah status? The embattled publication of one radical book that made a foreign student who could read the title’s Japanese translation on its cover give me a dirty look one day on a sidewalk?

Chuck’s provided us with answers to our questions that we don’t have the means to evaluate. Even if there were a laboratory that could set up an experimental model of planet Earth, there’d still be a lot of grant proposals to write in order to get the resources needed to test Chuck’s hypotheses. There’s no way to guarantee that a world that had taken to Chuck’s prescriptions would be any better than the one we have now; there’s only the hypotheses he’s researched and left behind, and until we can run the necessary tests to evaluate their accuracy, we won’t know if he was right or wrong. So, what can I do in the milieu of right/wrong, right/left, red/blue? What will it take to unite humanity and will it come before we run out of planet to live on?
Before somebody kills us in an act of violent unification? What would it take? Is this even a group of individuals that can be united? Logically speaking, it seems like an impossible delusion.

But that logical incompatibility is why I’ve made an appeal based on emotion, which is outside of my stoicism-is-the-only-valid-philosophy comfort zone. I’m still not sure there isn’t something wrong about making an emotional appeal to sell the story of a man dedicated to logic, science, and reason, but I’m not sure how else to package it. Chuck’s worldview and the practices that he advocates from his position there are about making sense, but he delivers his words with passion. The union of logic and passion I noticed that first day I met Chuck is what I’m trying to capture. But emotions can do funny things to logic, and really, if there’s anything that’s held Chuck back in his mission, it’s emotions. The average American, odious as he/she might be on the global scale, is only pursuing happiness in his/her day-to-day American existence, and it’s good that our Founding Fathers thought of that as an inalienable pursuit. Happiness fucking rules.

But the America where they guaranteed our right to chase joy is not the same as the America of today. I could laundry list how for you, but only one big difference matters right now. Our pursuit of happiness is no longer self-contained. In a globalized economic and political sphere (like the one we live on the surface of), the objects of happiness that Americans pursue have been supersized, value-packed, sale-priced, and turbocharged before getting budget cut, downsized, outsourced, and imported. Part of

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73 If that happens, there might not be anything we can do.
74 I’m sure we could laundry list ways it’s the same, too.
the problem with our current pursuit is a material culture that we’ve raised and have subsequently been raised in, but it’s an oversimplification to rail against materialism. Humans need materials: Food, water, and shelter, especially, but sturdy shoes, warm clothes, and soft places to sit and sleep aren’t unreasonable demands, either. There’s no reason we can’t love our things, but we need to love them for the right reasons. Colors, tastes, and comfort can’t take priority over sustainability, morality, and basic decency to our fellow human beings on the planet. With our great power to pursue happiness comes a Spiderman’s Imperative: A responsibility to ensure that our pursuits don’t cut off the others’ paths toward happiness on the Earth. America can’t be a world unto itself anymore. Chuck is a Hero because he sees this, and he wants Americans to see it and adapt to their surroundings.

We have the right to protect our happiness and its pursuit, and we have a right to ensure its existence for those that follow us. It’s inevitable that human definitions of happiness will conflict on the global scale due to the finite nature of resources that provide for our vitality. Sometimes it’s hard to get even two close friends to agree on which restaurant would make them happy. But conflict doesn’t have to involve violence. Chuck believes that through the powers of language and empathy, we can negotiate our conflicts with each other on every level of human interaction. This belief is why war is obscene to Chuck. It’s why the continued glut of money being dumped into the Department of Defense disgusts him and it’s why he’ll calculate how many OU-sized universities that money could go to. As long as any nation engages in war, Chuck’s idealism is unrealized. And America, as the most powerful nation on Earth,
has a responsibility in Chuck’s eyes to promote this non-violent conflict resolution. Abdicating this responsibility will only enable the denial of happiness for our fellow humans we dub enemies and for ourselves.

War and peace, of course, is a simplistic dichotomy. But it’s an important one. As long as war is still around, there can’t be real World Peace. What Chuck really wants—to use another powerful dichotomy—is for us to reevaluate which option in fight vs. flight we think is preferable. It should come as no surprise that Chuck prefers flight, but not just in the run-away sense. What Chuck’s really arguing for is the ability to rise above the influence of war and have a bird’s eye view on the globe so that the folly he perceives is visible to everyone. Every day that goes by where we can’t see what he sees is another day where blood is spilled in the name of competing ideals.

To call the American way of life Evil is reductionist. Reality isn’t a Disney movie, and America, for all its wrongs, has done plenty right. Ultimately, we don’t live in a world of Good and Evil. We live in a world of Power. Good and Evil only become relevant in the application of Powers. The best or worst human on the planet is irrelevant if he/she never has the resources to do Good or Evil. America’s got power in excess, superpower even. Every day, that huge pool of energy gets drawn from to run a nation. In a system operating on this scale, it’s inevitable that 100% efficiency is a fantasy. But that can’t be an excuse for acting like it’s not desirable. Chuck doesn’t have an approach to that level of efficiency, but what makes Chuck a Hero is that he wants to harness the wealth of American power to design a new system around it that at least recognizes liberated, democratic societal efficiency as a desirable aim. Look
around and tell me how well you think he’s succeeded. In the big picture, it looks like we’re in a world of shit and if it keeps shit-raining, the shit-levees are going to break. It’s cause for hopelessness.

Speaking of hopelessness, as I worked to finish this piece, I had a series of troubling dreams every night for a week. In each of them, I was somewhere innocuous, minding my own business, when I saw something bad about to happen. The details of each vision are locked in my sleep, but the dreams were always something like a person headed towards a cliff’s edge or an attacker moving in quickly on a helpless target. I would always see these potential tragedies with enough time to stop them, but in every dream, I would open my mouth to shout a warning and nothing would come out. I would desperately try to push words out of my mouth, but I could feel them stuck on the back of my tongue, and each dream ended just as I could see that I was too late to stop whatever bad was obviously going to happen regardless of my frantic efforts. I pride myself on staying anti-Freudian, but it’s hard to miss a connection between the fear that gripped my throat in my sub-consciousness and the worries I have about whether or not this piece will actually matter. Either way, it can be hard to get out of bed in the morning when I feel completely ineffectual in my own dreams, especially when the knot in the muscles of my back feels like it’ll never come untied.

Once, on another day when I was feeling drained of optimism, I asked Chuck why he keeps going, why he hasn’t given up; basically, why bother? We were in plush chairs in an out-of-the-way room in the student center. The room’s overhead
fluorescents were off, letting the natural light passing through the translucent window curtains fill the room with a cool white glow. I didn’t lead off with the Why Bother? question. It sat at the top of the open page in my notebook while I worked up the nerve to toss it out to Chuck. When I did ask him, he was quiet at first, pensive. He looked at me cocked his head, and with the same pride I’ve seen in old dogs that don’t know what it’s like to not have any fight left in them, he said, “I can’t just shut up and die.”

That right there is why I stuck with this piece even during the conceptual suffering it caused me, even through the rampant doubts of self and others and the world as we know it. Because at the end of it all, behind the hope and fear, is the fact that This, all of This, will keep going, with or without us. The Parade marches on. And if we’re not going to keep trying to make things better, then there’s no point in sticking around. If you believe in virtue, this is where it is: In struggles, not in prizes.

I didn’t set out to write the Gospel of Chuck Overby, our Lord and Savior. On a scale this size, it’s hard for one man to save the world. And Chuck is no saint, no prophet, no salvation. He’s a man with some hazy vision of the world where humans don’t live in fear of each other. And if years from now, people still read this and feel the same distant spark of hope I do when I imagine that world, then maybe we’ll still be able to take the steps in the right direction. Because in that world, the sky’s the limit.

But the mere fact that you or I or Chuck can imagine that world—can even see ways to build it—doesn’t necessitate its impending reality. The whole system

75 In fact, the whole concept that salvation will come from gods doesn’t fit within Chuck’s or my framework.
fluctuates too dynamically, and we don’t need more answers to questions that are no longer relevant.76 The point being that believing in any answer is potentially foolish. But this is, after all, the story of a question because all the answers are up in the air.

76 Say, e.g., an answer to the question of our global habitat crisis if scientists are right that we’ve already passed some point of no return.
Critique

When I began in the HTC journalism program, I wanted my thesis work to consist of an immersive professional project because I thought it would afford me the opportunity to practice journalism that could make me proud. I batted around ideas like spending a summer in a coal-mining ghost town, but nothing inspired a streak of passion in me that made it an obvious choice. It was only after some earlier work with Overby that I approached him about being the subject of my thesis project. But this piece was more than three years in the making.

When I first met Overby my freshman year at OU, I never expected to be searching for a meaning to his life in order to graduate. Even as I got to know him, spent hours interviewing him, and did some earlier writing on him, it didn’t cross my mind that I would or even could explore his life and work as an exemplar of the existential questions I ask myself about the nature of our reality. It was through writing two pieces about him that I came to this project. The first piece, a New Yorker-style profile, explored Overby’s peace activism as it related to a contemporaneous report tracking the increasing number of veterans returning from Iraq or Afghanistan who felt the wars weren’t worthwhile. This allowed the piece to grapple with what it means when soldiers turn anti-war, but only in a limited, contemporary, American context. At roughly ten pages in length, the angle it necessitated—as a story of Overby’s life as it pertained to being an anti-war veteran—blocked it from being the story of his ideas, of his ongoing struggle. The second piece, a 25-page biographical essay about Overby’s environmental concerns, allowed for more exploration of his
ideas but was still disabled by imperatives of simplicity for an audience seeking journalism. I was able to include myself as a narrator, but not to the degree I wanted to. The piece was focused on Overby, but was still limited by its privileging of his environmental concerns.

Those earlier writing projects about his life didn’t begin to explore the issues I really felt pertained to my questions about Overby’s life and work. Produced for journalism tutorials, they adhered too much to conventional journalistic standards and prescribed generic expectations to address issues similar to those analyzed in this project, but on shallower levels. Imposed upon by what Ward calls “the norm of reporting impartial fact,” (139), they were accurate pictures of Overby’s life and work, but not meaningful in a way that this project enabled. Dedicated to reflecting the world like a metaphor for passive objectivity (Meyer 131; Mindich 7), the conventional nature of the journalism in the early pieces did not enable the level of questioning upon which I wanted to operate. However, they were good building blocks for the professional project portion of this thesis.

I used both of these pieces in the construction of this project; they were the basis for the two body chapters “World” and “Peace.” That’s not to say that these two sections resemble their old forms. Both were gutted to leave a skeleton of facts upon which I could hang new bodies of text and meaning. My dissatisfaction with the portrayals of Overby in both of those early pieces manifested in the way he seemed too neat, too simple, and too compromising. Overby was none of those things; he seemed cluttered, complex, and principled. I wanted a way to blow open the image of
Overby on the page so readers would appreciate him, his ideas, and their significance in the way I did, and traditional journalism couldn’t allow this. My issue was with the objective standards placed on me by the journalistic nature of the two pieces. Effectively, I felt forced to make an objective judgment call on Overby’s life and work, and this all-or-none interpretation of his success or failure missed so many important aspects of the story that I felt as if traditional, institutionalized journalism couldn’t express what I really felt was important about his story. I was intent on making more sense and grander sense out of Overby’s life.

I requested his permission to do this larger project on him, and he granted it. Given this power to present his life’s story, I wanted to assume the responsibility of the task. Anticipating Merrill, I struggled with whom my responsibility was to (90). Should I write the piece in Overby’s honor? In my interest? In the public service? I felt a responsibility to all three of these elements—Overby the subject, myself the author, and the audience—and decided that the best way to fulfill all three responsibilities was to transparently approach the story from as broad a perspective as I could achieve and directly address each of these narrative elements as they became relevant. If I was to make sense of Overby’s life for an audience, I wanted to make it as meaningful as possible for the readers, for Overby, and for myself.

So, I asked myself—as a human first and a journalist second—what I really wanted to know about Overby’s life. I wanted to understand the reason why this guy’s ideas were so important to me and why his continued belief in and service to them mattered. What I discovered was that the question of Overby’s success or failure
wasn’t what mattered because Overby hasn’t succeeded one hundred percent, but he hasn’t failed either. Rather, he exists in a gray area between success and failure due to the size of his goals. In this respect, two questions mattered, and neither could be answered through a simplistic objective lens that was only concerned with a successful or failed conception of Overby’s efforts.

My first question was: Why hasn’t Overby succeeded? When it comes to this question, the definition of success is what matters. Overby has led a great life but still feels unsatisfied. It’s hard to write him off as a failure due to the nature of his thoughts and the dedication he still exhibits in pursuing his goals. So, my second question was: Why hasn’t Overby failed? Taken together, these two questions represent the conundrum that made me dissatisfied with the earlier pieces. They didn’t operate within a mode of rhetoric that allowed both of these apparently contradictory questions to be asked simultaneously.

The irony I felt in the unsatisfactory questioning these two pieces enabled was that journalism has always been about questions. In this sense, it is a powerful symbol of human consciousness. Hartley calls journalism a body of “human sense-making” (3), and this was the canon I wanted to contribute to with this work. The ability to reflect on and interrogate the world around us has enabled our growth and development as a species. This is what makes journalism special: Journalists are allowed to ask questions we all want answers to. What made Overby such compelling subject matter were the questions he wanted to ask that I wanted answers to. But, as he demonstrates, often enough, the person asking a question is just as important as the
question being asked; it’s a simple issue of considering sources. Journalists have special privilege when it comes to asking questions because the social responsibility of the press dictates that they ask questions with answers that will make the world a better place for the populations they serve. This is at once a blessing and a curse. While it grants journalists the power to ask tough questions, it also demands that they get answers, even if they’re tough, too.

If this is truly the Information Age and my eighth grade English teacher was right in claiming that ages are named after what their weapons are made of (e.g., bronze, iron, steel), then tough questions and their answers have implications on conflicts all around us. The fact that we as free, democratic people are floating in an unprecedented flood of information seems to predispose us to speak in absolute all-or-none statements (like the one of Overby’s success/failure) to compensate for our exploded consciousness of the world. As simple an assumption as it is to make that a piece of journalism will operate in statements, the work of Sommerville that constitutes other assumed elements of the new media as biases (11) showed me that if there is a good reason to problematize a media production assumption, then it merits articulation and demonstration. This led me to contend that statement-driven rhetoric is, to borrow a term from journalism, a bias, and absolutist claims only highlight this tendency to believe that, ultimately, every thing can be articulated. Because journalism operates primarily in statements as its practice is presented, journalistic works incorporates this bias into its production.
If journalism wants to be unbiased, as powerful conceptions of objectivity claim it aims to be (Ward 74; Mindich 10), it needs to account for this fundamental slant on its product. Most biases can be countered, and in the case of statement-driven rhetoric, there is a rhetorical device that is designed to do exactly that. Rhetorical questions present an opportunity to incorporate uncertainty into a piece of writing. They represent a recognition that we don’t (and probably can’t) know everything. They act as a way to balance the certainty that statements represent because the building blocks of questions are uncertainty, and there’s plenty of that to go around. That’s why I tried to be open about all the questions I asked in my project, especially the ones without apparent answers. Rather than excluding that which was not objectively verifiable, I intentionally included rhetorical questions and other unverifiable concerns as a means to contest the statement-driven bias with, to borrow another term from journalism, transparency.

To this end of transparency, my means were self-consciousness and subjective inclusion, hallmarks of literary journalism as defined by Sims (33). His list also includes this active presence of the author in the narrative, as well as immersive reporting techniques and literary tools and tropes borrowed from popular fiction styles to convey the story (33). All of these criteria are present in my work. I worked with Overby for years to prepare this project. I use scenes and thematic repetition to characterize Overby and make sense of his life and work. The piece is focused on a simple man and is intended to form a big picture, not a series of small pictures like conventional journalism provides. Therefore, it was useful to be able to approach it as
a literary work of journalism because my responsibility was not to an editor, a publication, or a standard. My responsibility was to the power of the story and conveying it fully.

That being said, there is a clear conflict of interest at work in this project. As Wasserman defines them, conflicts of interest are, “...instances where undeclared obligations or loyalties exist that might plausibly intervene between journalists or journalism organizations and the public they principally serve” (229). The danger of these conflicts, to Wasserman, is the threat they pose to the implicit trust that must be erected between journalists and their audience members. To be specific, the conflict here is between my loyalty to Overby as subject who deserves fair treatment and my obligation to the reader as an audience who deserves the truth. Because Overby’s story is one of injustice to me, it was difficult to approach writing about him with an unbiased lens. But journalism has not been and is not now bound to a narrator’s objective removal to tell its stories. Wasserman addresses how other members of the New Media conceptualize conflicts of interest as a “...chronic refusal of traditional journalists to own up to biases they are prone to and help propagate” (238). That is, by operating from a level of objective removal, the conflicts of interest that are presented by traditional journalists in traditional journalism are just the manifestations of unaddressed biases on the part of the journalists themselves.

Just as I attempted to own up to the bias of statement-driven rhetoric with rhetorical transparency, I attempted to own up to the bias implicit in writing about Overby by giving the reader reasons for my writing. I explicitly declare that Overby is
a role model of mine in order to make my relationship with my subject known to the reading audience so that their judgments of my judgments of him proceed from this knowledge. In doing so, I hoped to turn what traditional journalism would call a conflict of interest—due to my bias—into a transparent engagement with that bias, thereby resolving the conflict and allowing myself as author, Overby as subject, and the reader as audience to move forward in the story with the knowledge that there is a level of advocacy as work. This advocacy felt natural to me due to the power of this story, which I was able to address only through transparently describing my admiration for Overby.

In grappling with this story’s power, literary journalism showed me a means to address that grappling by writing myself and my own perceptions into the story. I made a point of including myself in the story, often through playing with the narrative as an active participant, even one who is open with the reader about his struggles with the piece’s significance. I intended to embrace the medium between Overby and my audience so that it serves as a thorough journalistic interrogation of a human’s life and work and not as a simplified story of a hero’s glory or defeat. It a personal response to an institutional problem, one designed to innovate on journalistic practices in the hopes of expanding the discourse about what journalism is and can be. It is not designed as an argument against objectivity or for subjectivity, but as a testament to the power both sides of this false dichotomy of human perception have when combined.
It will always be important to give audiences objectively realistic perspectives on the world, but it is now just as important to ground those perspectives in larger, subjectively meaningful contexts of which I, as a journalist and a human being, am a part. This was a conscious choice I made given the freedom I had in pursing this project. Embracing this freedom—as Merrill advises (66)—allowed me pursue the project without worrying about giving the audience what I thought they might want. Instead, I was able to focus on giving the reader what I wanted to give them. This is the power of the freedom of choice if journalists can embrace it (Merrill 82). In doing so, I wanted to operate from my own philosophy of journalism—another position advocated by Merrill (xiii). This philosophy is one that considers all the elements of the story and tries to balance them in a meaningful way.

Given the Information Age’s nature, these kinds of balancing acts are a useful exercise. As the world continues to complicate and we find ourselves with more questions regarding the ultimate nature of our world, our lives, and ourselves, being able to articulate the right questions will be vital if we ever hope to find answers.
Works Cited


