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Editor's Notebook: To My Visitor in 6,470 A.D.

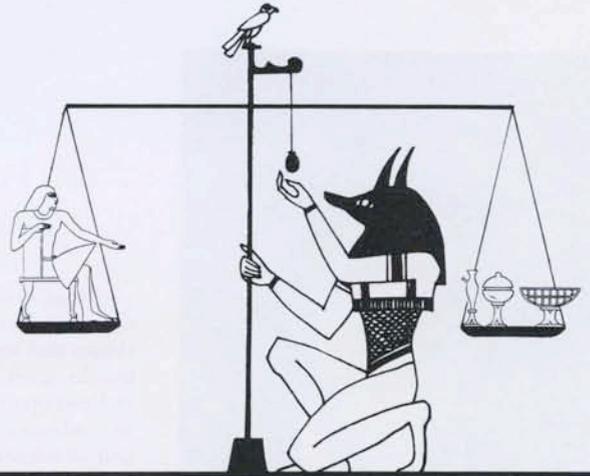
William C. Levin
Bridgewater State College

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TO MY VISITOR IN 6,470 A.D.



It can strike you at the strangest moments: that need to "figure things out," to "put them in perspective," to "decide what it means." If the existentialist never feels the need to evaluate the meaning of events, I am the opposite. I compulsively try to put things in scale. I am turning 40. For some of us, including me, this last event raises a very big question, the one about the evaluation of our lives. I cannot claim to have finished thinking about this, but I can report that a large part of my answer came out of recent conversations with two statues.

A larger-than-life stone sculpture of the ancient Egyptian King Mycinerus stands in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. His face and body are stylized, impossibly powerful and blank. Looking up at Mycinerus (one has to look up) I felt small and anonymous. What could there be in common between his life and mine? I knew what this king did some 2,500 years before Christ lived, what all such kings did to manage empires. He collected money, raised armies and had fashioned the buildings, tombs, statues, jewelry and other symbolic objects that would accompany him after his death. But what of the events of an ordinary life, the mundane acts and feelings that all humans have in common and which, since few of us are kings, comprise our legacies?

In a glass case not far from the sculpture of Mycinerus is an ancient artifact, a small (less than one inch tall) wooden figure of a servant with the carved facets of his hips still fresh-looking after nearly 4,500 years. He has a gaunt face and his ribs stick out. If you look closely you can see the marks where the edge of the artisan's blade turned in the wood to model those startlingly fine ribs. This object, which chance preserved, must surely be the one bit of evidence we have that its maker lived a life we might understand. Surely, he did a great deal more than sit at the door of his mud hut and fashion a single wood object. He had a

childhood, probably lived a life closer to the scale of mine (and yours) than his king did.

For us, the carving he made is all that remains by which we can make a measure of his life. It makes me wonder what might be found of my life in 4,500 years, and how I might choose to be measured. If anything is to be preserved, it might as well be this page of this magazine, buried in the collapse of a building and protected, miraculously, by a pocket of rare gases. When it hangs in a museum that will be built it explains to the reader:

I have not done a single thing that by itself deserves preservation. But the ordinary events of my life, the things seen and thought and done, would never have been had I not lived. The sum of these is the measure of my life, and I want you to understand my calculations. So, I will give form and scale to the bits of my life, the way a walk to the store can be measured by steps. If the sum of my life can be set equal to some physical volume of space then the events from it might be represented as follows:

For the fact that I made a living as a teacher and enjoyed the work, I give myself an amount equal to the volume inside an average horse or any other object of comparable size (that seems about right to me). For having made many good friends, and twenty or so dear ones, two more horses. For the furniture and guitars I built (did you find one of them?) the equivalent of a grapefruit. For the ability to recognize the Big Dipper and having seen (dimly) Halley's Comet, a radish seed.

For each of the following, the last joint of the thumb of a grown woman: that I read something every night, that I went fishing in the Rocky Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean, that I had a moustache which children up to the age of three seemed to find fascinating, that I succeeded only par-

tially in trying to keep new things from happening to me, and that I could not draw, play the piano or write poetry but would have given up a great deal for any of these (especially for the piano one).

I have been a chauffeur in Manhattan (a quail's egg), twice nearly killed in accidents (the root system of a rhododendron), six times a guest on local radio or television talk shows (another quail's egg), and countless times lost in imagining the details of complex plans of action or objects to be constructed (a walk-in closet).

Because I intend to continue living, I will not attempt a complete catalog of events to this moment. Instead, let's assume that the volumes accounted above cumulate to the equivalent of the space inside a suburban bedroom, then multiply that amount by a factor of seven for what I have been unwilling (or unable) to recall. This, then, can be labeled one unit of "Levin Life-Volume" (LLV). But I am not quite finished.

I feel a kinship with the person who carved the tiny servant sculpture, not only because I know how that ancient artisan used his blade to carve ribs in a block of wood, but because we have both lived ordinary lives in our times. I have visited his work several times now, and will continue to do so with that private feeling of knowing him. He is my link across 4,500 years of ordinary lives, and so I feel justified in claiming for myself an additional LLV, it being more than likely that the measure of his life, if I could know it, would be the equal of mine. And for imagining you and your children and the events of your everyday life, another 4,500 years into the future, I claim more LLV's and so on. And however bizarre the method of my measures, they are of some comfort to the owner of an ordinary life.

William Levin