

Our New Plumbing

BY BENJAMIN J. STEIN

WEDNESDAY

To begin at the beginning, this morning my wife told me that her bathroom toilet was running and would not stop. “I jiggle the handle,” she said, “but it doesn’t help. You fix it. You always know how.”

BEN STEIN’S DIARY

I dragged myself from my computer to the toilet, took off the top, saw that an arm that lifts up a ball cock had somehow gotten separated from a little chain, and then attached it again. I dutifully pressed the flushing lever and sure enough, the thing flushed. “My hero,” my wife said. “How do you always know how to do that?”

“Because my father was always fixing the toilets,” I said. “He hated to pay a plumber, so he learned what the basic machinery in back of a toilet is, and he learned to fix it. I can’t recall a plumber ever coming to our house. Same with the TV. He would just take the tubes in and test them and buy the one that needed replacement, and next thing, the TV was working.”

I thought about this for a while, and I realized that I had not quite given my wife the full answer. It’s an answer of some note for us dads, so I’ll pass it on. Most of the toilets in our crushingly expensive house in fact are not the old-fashioned kind. They have something called a “turbo flush” mechanism (I’m not kidding). It’s totally different from what I am used to, and it’s also housed under some kind of drum. But when it breaks, I can almost always fix it, too. I just putter around with it, and I assume I will be able to fix it, and by Jove, I do.

So the real point of the story begins with the truth that I am confident I can fix the toilet almost solely because my father could always fix the toilet. I figure if he could do it, so could I.

Many people ask me how I began as a writer who got paid for his work. The answer is about the same as the story about toilets. In 1972, I had a theory about why movies always had the same kinds of depictions of businessmen and military officers. (Because the writers in Hollywood were usually anti-business, anti-war types who expressed their feelings in their words.) I wrote it down in about twelve hundred words and sent it in to the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, which immediately bought it and asked for more.

Why did I think I could write it and get it published in the *Journal*? Simple. Because I had seen my father write essays and send them in to the *Journal*, which published them for years, and so I figured I could too.

Or one might take an even more basic issue. My wife and I got married

Most kids can absorb the example of their father’s competence in an area and more or less by osmosis come to believe they can do it, too.

when I was still in school and she was really just beginning school. Why did I think I would be able to go to school and also support my little family? Well, partly because I got an allowance from my parents, but it was a small allowance, and mostly because I knew my father and mother had gotten married while they were still in school, and that was during the Great Depression. I figured that if they could do it, so could I. And I did, although modestly.

About fifteen years ago, I started writing for *Barron’s* about financial fraud. Why did I think I could do it competently? Because my father had been writing about financial issues for decades. Right after that, I was asked to testify before a Senate committee about leveraged buy-

outs. Why did I have no hesitation about it? Because my father had been doing it since the 1940s.

More to the point of my life now, why am I fairly sure I can appear before an audience and make them laugh? Because my father had been doing it on TV and in person while discussing taxes and deficits and budgets for time out of mind.

Unless there is some major disconnect within a family (and that surely happens), I believe most kids can absorb the example of their father’s competence in an area and more or less by osmosis come to believe they can do it, too. The example of the father is taken in almost as air and water as part of what makes up the day and the experience of the child. The more competent the father, the more sure the son or daughter is of having some similar competence.

Obviously there are exceptions. The children of Mario Lemieux might not automatically become great forwards on the ice. But they surely will know how to

skate. I knew the daughter of John Von Neumann, inventor of the computer. She had no inventions comparable to his, but she certainly knew her math.

On the other hand, children without a father seem to me to have less confidence in what they can do. They can and do develop abilities and skills on their own, but they do not go out the door to adolescence and young manhood or womanhood simply assuming they can get along in life because, after all, Dad gets along and brings home the bacon or fixes the toilet.

This extends even to some fairly small details. My father always did his own income tax return, even when he got to have a fairly complex time of it. I am myself far too lazy to do what he did, but

I do collect all of the data myself, and I go over the return—and almost always find mistakes. My son, age thirteen, while amazingly uninterested in most calculations, can in his head figure out the California sales tax (eight and three-quarters percent) on everything he buys.

I make a living by making people laugh at me on my TV show. My son, darling boy, makes friends at camp or at his video game parlor by making people laugh (often by imitating yours truly). He is often so funny that he gets free games out of it. But it is the imitation that is key here. He has learned that he can get somewhere by doing something I do, and he believes he can do it because I do it.

There's a big fat lesson here. Show your kids what you can do. Let them know how you earn your living. Let them see how you gather the material for your taxes. Let them see how you fix a toilet. Let them share in your competence.

My father is no longer with me on earth. It's a pain I feel keenly every hour of every day. But he left me with some tools for getting along, most of which I just picked up by way of daily living.

God help the child whose father will not share his strength and his ability. The world is the oyster of those who inherited the confidence to do what their dads could do.

WEDNESDAY

Uh-oh. This is far more trouble than a broken toilet. This is real trouble. My show has started. And, as always, I am putting up five thousand dollars that some braino can take away from me if he or she knows more than I do—for sixty anxiety-wracked seconds in the isolation booth. I have been dreading this moment, and here it is. I get cheered and cheered by the audience, get away with jokes and gibes and merriment, and then, whaaam, I get asked who the author of the “Harriet, The Spy” books are. Or I get asked who was somebody's sidekick in a series of detective novels I have never even heard of. It's torture.

Then if I lose, I walk out of my booth to watch the winner get showered with fake money falling from the ceiling. He or she is beaming, grinning, holding up two

hands clasped like a winning prizefighter. And I am eating crow. I don't like it.

I walk back to my little dressing room trying to be happy, trying to be cheerful, acting philosophical, explaining to Yaniv, my bodyguard, or Susie, the makeup girl, that I can't win 'em all, that it's all fine—but inwardly I am *seething*.

Why? Why do I, of all the “stars” in Hollywood, have to put up my own money to play this game? I don't see Jack Nicholson putting up his own money. I don't see Alex Trebek putting up his own money. How come I have to?

It ain't fittin', it just ain't fittin'.

However, today was a low point. This was one of our many costume shows, and I was dressed as a clown, with a bright orange Bozo wig. Somehow, wearing the clown suit made me play like a clown. I failed to answer even very easy questions in the booth. A young woman beat me badly. I was in shock. In despair.

Maybe I should take my marbles and go home. Or maybe be grateful as heck that I have a show at all, and that I have a big house and a son and a wife and live in America and enjoy the best society of all time.

Nahh, I think I'll whine some more.

I always have a fascinating experience when I leave my show. I feel as if something amazingly important has happened when I am there on Stage One, win, lose, or draw. Then when I drive out past the guard gate, the guards all wave at me, but rather absently, so I feel as if I am a little bit important. Then, when I get out onto Sunset, no one pays any attention to me at all. I am suddenly just another little fish with his hopes and fears out in a big ocean. It gives me a certain perspective.

But then I get home, and I am important again. My son is resisting his homework. My wife is exhausted from her very hard work. The dogs are jumping everywhere. I am needed to help restore order.

By the time I am in bed, the shows seem far away. Maybe they never even happened. Maybe I am back at the Federal Trade Commission with my pitiful dusty files. Maybe I am back at home on Harvey



“We no longer need men.”

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Road in Silver Spring, ready to go off and play army with David Scull. By the way, when David and I were kids, we would wander around the neighborhood with toy machine guns and pistols, hiding behind hedges and rocks to ambush any Germans or North Koreans who happened to come to the Washington, D.C., suburbs. We also played at being Davy Crockett in a log house behind Barry Kalb's house. My son's world is far bigger—all of the universe—but also far smaller—a video screen. It breaks my heart, but I do understand it well. If he wandered around here with a gun-shaped toy, he would probably be arrested or shot. Still, it is sad that his life is spent indoors before a video screen. How much better life is when lived at least occasionally out of doors.

At the end of the day, when Alex and Tommy are asleep, I usually take out one of my Civil War history books and read it. Right now I am reading an 800-page abridgment of *Lee's Lieutenants* by Freeman. What a work of genius. At first I did not like his writing style, and I still don't. But the man's scholarship and originality are amazing. His knowledge of every site, of every hillock and ridge, of every tree, is amazing. His explanation of how difficult it is to get an army, or even a small unit, in place for battle, how impossible to make large groups of infantry and cavalry

This battle was slow in starting because a general had an attack of diarrhea and took paregoric. That battle was poorly run because the men had eaten green apples and suffered from indigestion.

and artillery all show up where they are supposed to be—this is detailed, persuasive, and eye-opening in a huge way.

So much of life and history are in getting things orderly.

How rarely it happens.

Then there is the matter of health. I am endlessly struck by how often the outcome of a battle depends on the health of the men and the generals. This battle was slow in starting because a general had an attack of diarrhea and took paregoric (my



“We’ve taken a severe loss in the last quarter, Edwards. We’d like you to jump out of the window.”

own favorite drug) and was allergic to it and became agitated. That battle was poorly run because the men had eaten green apples and suffered from indigestion. At Chancellorsville, supposedly Robert E. Lee had a heart attack and the congestive heart failure linked to it dogged him at Gettysburg and caused an early death.

Men at war are not machines or stones. They are just as sensitive as men at peace, and health affects them deeply and with gigantic consequences.

(By the way, my spell check did not recognize Chancellorsville. Amazing.)

By the time I am ready to fall asleep, I am swimming with the idea of my own lack of importance compared with the men who fought in the Civil War. That is a good feeling. Life is better for me when I do not feel very important.

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Late, late, late at night this morning, I awakened and called a number for a store in the East that sells Civil War flags. The owner recognized my voice and we had a fascinating conversation.

"Do you know what the amendment is that freed the slaves?" he asked.

"Thirteenth," I said.

"Do you know what that 13th amendment was originally going to be before the fighting started in Virginia? It had been passed in the Senate and the House, and do you know what it provided for?" asked my interlocutor, to whom I was speaking in New York.

"I guess I don't," I said.

"It provided for making slavery permanent," he said. "It provided a guarantee that slavery could not be changed and Lincoln sponsored it."

As he said it, I recalled reading about it in McPherson's fine book, *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Yes, it had been planned to make slavery permanent in the South and the amendment carried the further proviso that it could not be amended. Ever.

So much for Lincoln's claim at Gettysburg that he was fighting the war to provide "a new birth of freedom." He blun-

dered into the war, and then he sought a rationalization for all of the deaths. That rationalization made ethical and moral sense. Slavery was horrifyingly evil. But for Lincoln to claim he was always fighting to end it—as he later did—was a cruel hoax.

I was amused that my phone correspondent in New York spoke of McPherson

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as "that Yankee historian." McPherson is at Princeton, a lot farther south than my flag man in the Empire State.

My pal John Coyne, a smart man on every subject he discusses, pointed out to me recently that the best writing on the Civil War was from the Southern point of view. I would have to make some exceptions for Walt Whitman and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., but in general, John is certainly right. Why? I think because, as my assistant Tina says, "the South was wiped out" and we feel sympathy for anyone who is "wiped out."

There's more to it than that, though. Americans, despite being on the winning side in history, feel sympathy for lost causes. ("I've always had sympathy for lost causes," says Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* when he's asked why he helped the French and the Republicans in Spain—or maybe that was Rhett Butler, or

maybe both, which sort of proves my point.) Plus, there is something warm about the Southern character. I often look at my Presbyterian Southern in-laws and wonder. They have been through so much and yet are so open and loving. Plus, they have that carelessness I love so much. Jordan Baker, in *Gatsby*, said, "I hate careless people. It takes two to have an accident." But I love careless people. They don't hold grudges. They don't keep track of every wrong or right. They don't count pennies. Their feelings are closer to the surface. I love Southerners. My father attended college at Williams in the majestic Berkshires of western Massachusetts. It's staggeringly lovely country. But for open, loving hearts, take me down to Dixie. But then there is the appalling mistreatment of the blacks. Well, that's in the past and there's a miracle.

MONDAY

As usual, I am driving along Fountain over to the set on the lot at KTLA. It's cold this morning. I'm yakking on my car phone (a hands-free model) to my pal, D. He's a genius of about fifty who comes from a distinguished Midwestern family. He inherited a fair amount of money—he has an income about ten times the average family wage for a family of two workers. He had been a sociologist at a university in the Midwest, but he came out here to try his luck as a writer of screenplays. That was roughly six years ago.



"They call it an on-line service, but can it bring you a drink?"

He's a friendly, amazingly witty man with a staggeringly lovely wife. He works like a Trojan on his screenplays every day except Sunday. I cannot even keep track of them any longer. I loved the first few and even optioned one with my own money. But it's been years since he sold anything. He has no agent. He does have a lawyer who says he's selling things, but the checks never come. Still, D. labors daily in his little home office. He is filled with witticisms and anecdotes. But he sells nothing. Luckily, his parents made provision for him. But how does he survive psychologically? He has a great wife and he has faith as a Christian. I guess that's what does it.

But what I wonder more is this: Why do some people make it in Hollywood and some not make it? I keep going back to the men and women I know who made it big and those who fell away. I still have not figured it out, but it mostly has to do with luck, connections, extreme, extreme, extreme ambition, but also something else. The Hollywood business is not like applying to college. It's not about aptitude tests. It's not about extra-curricular activities. It's about co-optation. The ones who are already here choose the ones who join and succeed them. The choosers like to choose men and women who are just like them.

I have often said, and I'll say it again, Hollywood is like a park where the dogs go up and sniff the other dogs' rear ends. If the smell is right, they'll play. If not, they stay apart. D. just does not smell Hollywood. He's too much of a gentleman, too much of a Princeton man, too much of a prince, not enough of a *shtarker* (tough guy). The guys who succeeded are in a line from the furriers who started the business, and D. is no furrier.

How did I do it? Extreme, extreme, extreme ambition and a lot of luck.

SATURDAY

And speaking of luck.... Here I am at the Bush inaugural. Wife and I flew in on the red-eye Wednesday night. We've been sleeping and going to parties ever since. The weather has been awful, but we have been dolling ourselves up in our glad rags and off we go.



"Wait, Bill—I think Lassie's trying to sell us something."

To a party given by GM where we talked for a long time to Mike Gerson, the new chief speechwriter for Mr. Bush, and to his lovely, shy wife. Where we saw and tried to talk to Mrs. Graham, publisher of the *Post*, who seemed to be a bit unwell.

To a party given by socialites Nancy Brinker and Buffy Cafritz, where we saw Colin Powell, Bill Safire, Sen. Fred Thompson, Sen. Bill Brock, Fred Malek, my new best pal Chris Matthews, and more others than I can shake a stick at. Plus Mrs. Graham, still looking under the weather.

To the "Today" show, where I saw Sally Quinn, Sen. Lieberman, Secretary William Cohen (a really friendly great guy who recalled my father very fondly, a sure way to my heart), my fellow Republican campaigner Bo Derek, and many others of note. I recalled a line from one of Nicolson's diaries about being "a national figure, though of the second rank," and I thought that might apply to me.

To the Inaugural Parade, where I was trapped next to thousands of demonstrators. They were amazingly friendly. They even chanted "Ben Stein for President," which I liked. Only one guy said anything really bad. He said, "You think you're so great but your

show is only a little better than 'Jeopardy.'" Not so bad, especially since I am the world's number one "Jeopardy" fan. One of the demonstrators cursed at me, but I cursed back at him and he shut up.

To MC an Inaugural Ball at the Convention Center. I greeted V.P. Cheney and his lovely wife Lynne, and Ron Walker and his lovely wife. Then the president came in along with his dreamy wife, Laura, by far the most charming and beautiful first lady I have ever known of. They both took my hands. Mrs. Bush said, "Thank you, Ben. We couldn't have done it without you."

Mr. Bush hugged me and pressed his cheek to mine. "Thanks for all your help, Ben," he said. "We wouldn't be here without you."

As he left, he said, "You have to come visit us real soon. I think you'll approve of the accommodations."

My wife and I went out into the snowstorm on New York Avenue. The snow was swirling inside and outside our heads. Our companions, Barron, Steve, and Suzie, were likewise in shock. We love George W. Bush, who knows how to get along with people and how to make friends.

Why Was This Movie Made?

BY JAMES BOWMAN

Besides the money, I mean. In the absence of any obvious candidates for Movie of the Month, I thought it might be an idea to run through a selection of the movies I saw with a brief explanation of why, I think, each fails through one vari-

THE TALKIES

ety or another of self-indulgence, the besetting sin of our movie culture. For reasons too complicated to go into here, moviemakers have a freer hand than ever before in history to please themselves, or a narrow sect of like-minded people, rather than a mass audience. And the fatal temptations of the in-joke, the political tract, the self-consciously arty bid for Great Director status—or of just showing off—are so rarely resisted these days that the supply of movies worth seeing seems unlikely to increase any time soon.

Consider *Spring Forward*, written and directed by Tom Gilroy and starring Ned Beatty and Liev Schreiber. This is a movie that started out to be made, as all movies and all works of art should be made, as a beautiful object. But Tom Gilroy didn't know how to make something beautiful. He had a few half-good ideas to start with—for instance, showing suburbanites in the four seasons of the year going about their familiar tasks as if they were figures on a medieval calendar. But when it came down to the representation of character he let political slogans take over, proving the basic decency of his pair of municipal groundsmen from Connecticut (Beatty and Schreiber) by showing them with enlightened attitudes towards work, class differences, meat-eating, premarital sex, Eastern religions, drug taking, wife-beating and above all, naturally, homosexuality.

Folksy Ned has a gay son, Bobby (whom we never see), suffering from AIDS. He says to folksy Liev that he felt

betrayed because “Don Regan from next door says Bobby can't be scoutmaster for cub scouts because he's gay.... Bobby cut his lawn for six years!” Needless to say, Liev is a much more understanding type of guy himself. And even Don Regan apologizes when Bobby finally dies. An almost Wordsworthian belief in the basic decency of the suburban peasantry shines through this boring film—which is boring because, ultimately, it was made to show us what a decent guy Tom Gilroy is—and what skunks social conservatives are. Well, we already *knew* that...

At least politics does not disfigure *Shadow of the Vampire*. Written by Steven Katz, directed by E. Elias Merhige, and starring Willem Dafoe and John Malkovich, this movie too may have had a serious purpose to begin with, but ultimately it was made for fun. Parts of it really are fun too. There are some excellent jokes, for instance, as when Malkovich in the role of F.W. Murnau on the set of *Nosferatu*, soothes his leading lady by saying: “In this scene you make the ultimate sacrifice for love...all you have to do is relax and the vampire will do all the work.” Malkovich and Dafoe are both excellent in their roles and well worth watching, but we can't take them seriously when we know they are only having fun.

This is a shame because at times the movie comes close to saying something serious and interesting about the point at which the psycho-sexual significance of the vampire, Hollywood, and history all come together. But then the habits of the slack, undisciplined post-modern era kick in. The filmmakers know that the audience knows that it's only a movie, so they don't make any real effort to make us believe that the vampire is *really* real. The vampire, like the other spawn of Hollywood's great era of horror, has long since become a figure of fun, not taken

seriously, and this movie makes no attempt to make him frightening again, even though he causes several deaths. They are only movie deaths—like those of the scores of anonymous Arab “terrorists” in a Schwarzenegger movie: dehumanized and therefore without human dignity.

Because the movie wasn't made for anything but fun, it soon degenerates into that most tedious of “satires”: Hollywood satirizing itself, which is really just another way of saying the same thing. Movie people's idea of having fun is making fun of movie people as being totally *outrageous*. Being *outrageous* is a good thing, in case you didn't know. The same impulse to satire spoils *State and Main* by David Mamet. It was made specifically to satirize Hollywood even though Hollywood is long past being satirizable, at least in the movies. Any movie which sets out to criticize the excesses of Hollywood is immediately co-opted by Hollywood.

Just look at Mamet's, in which the two movie stars are a brainless, talentless child-molester, played by Alec Baldwin, and a neurotic slut, played by Sarah Jessica Parker. Did either of them pause to think: Wait a minute! This role ridicules my profession. It may even be getting close to being a parody of *me*! Not at all. Being at least somewhat like that themselves was part of the charm of playing these roles. People who are delighted to satirize themselves are far gone in self-satisfaction, and self-satisfaction is the natural enemy of satire.

It is also the enemy of intellectual honesty and historical accuracy, which is what ruins *The House of Mirth*, written and directed by Terence Davies from the novel by Edith Wharton. This was made for the same reason that almost all of Hollywood's costume dramas are made these days, namely so that a comfortable, wealthy, and individualistic audience of today can feel good about itself by looking back on the people of a hundred years ago with a sense of superiority.

Gillian Anderson gives a fine performance as poor, doomed Lily Bart, the beautiful free spirit with whom we naturally identify ourselves; but the cartoonish-