

Fragile And Fifty

How deep can an aging fellow sink? By Michael H. Levin

Turning 50 is the pits, if you ask me. I no longer know if I'm coming or going; I feel constantly assaulted by children, pets, colleagues, and fate; each unplanned surprise from life's little bag of tricks raises fresh doubts about my own competence, worth, or direction. I mean, it was bad enough when my A.A.R.P. card arrived in the mail (unbidden) and I felt anything but "chronologically gifted." But the worst part was when my law firm chose to have its annual retreat on Friday the Thirteenth—two weeks before my birthday—and I went and discovered in one awful

moment new meaning for the term "plumbing the depths."

Skip over the front end of that terrible week, the avalanche stresses of parenting, middle-class spread, and middle-age angst. Fast-forward past my wife breezing out of Washington on a six-day business trip, leaving behind a dozen yogurts, our sled-dog Sam, and Danny—a high-school senior with raging hormones, primed to party the second his father's back was turned. Trip lightly by the battles with Dan over taking the car when he was uninsured; over the size of his allowance; over trusting him when he insisted on showing the brains of a snow pea and the judgment of a gnat. Forget Sam running away just before parent-teacher conferences, or the housekeeper's failure to appear, or

Dan's constant grouching over "no food in the house." Forget, too, Sam catapulting me face-first off the front step into wet pachysandra one morning.

Begin instead with Thursday night. By then, I was more than ready to leave town for a retreat. Though I tend to equate retreats with root canals, in my state of mind, flip charts and facilitators sounded better than the Bahamas. The two-day affair began at dawn Friday. Forty environmental lawyers were converging on a Rochester airport motel, lugging materials on client satisfaction and Total Quality Management, ready to debate where the group should be in five years. But to leave Dan home for the weekend risked sanctioning a two-day party with a population surpassing Connecticut's. Thus, Plan A called for me to fly and return Friday. There was, of course, no Plan B.

The next morning was a blur of rushing Sam through traffic to his sitter,

barely making my plane, and scrambling through materials before I arrived at 11:00. I hurried through the motel lobby into a hall full of lawyers, bejeaned and split into small groups, scribbling on easels the values they held dear. The decor was equally disorienting: dank paneled walls, mustard curtains, a rug out of Escher, cleverly patterned to conceal every object on its surface.

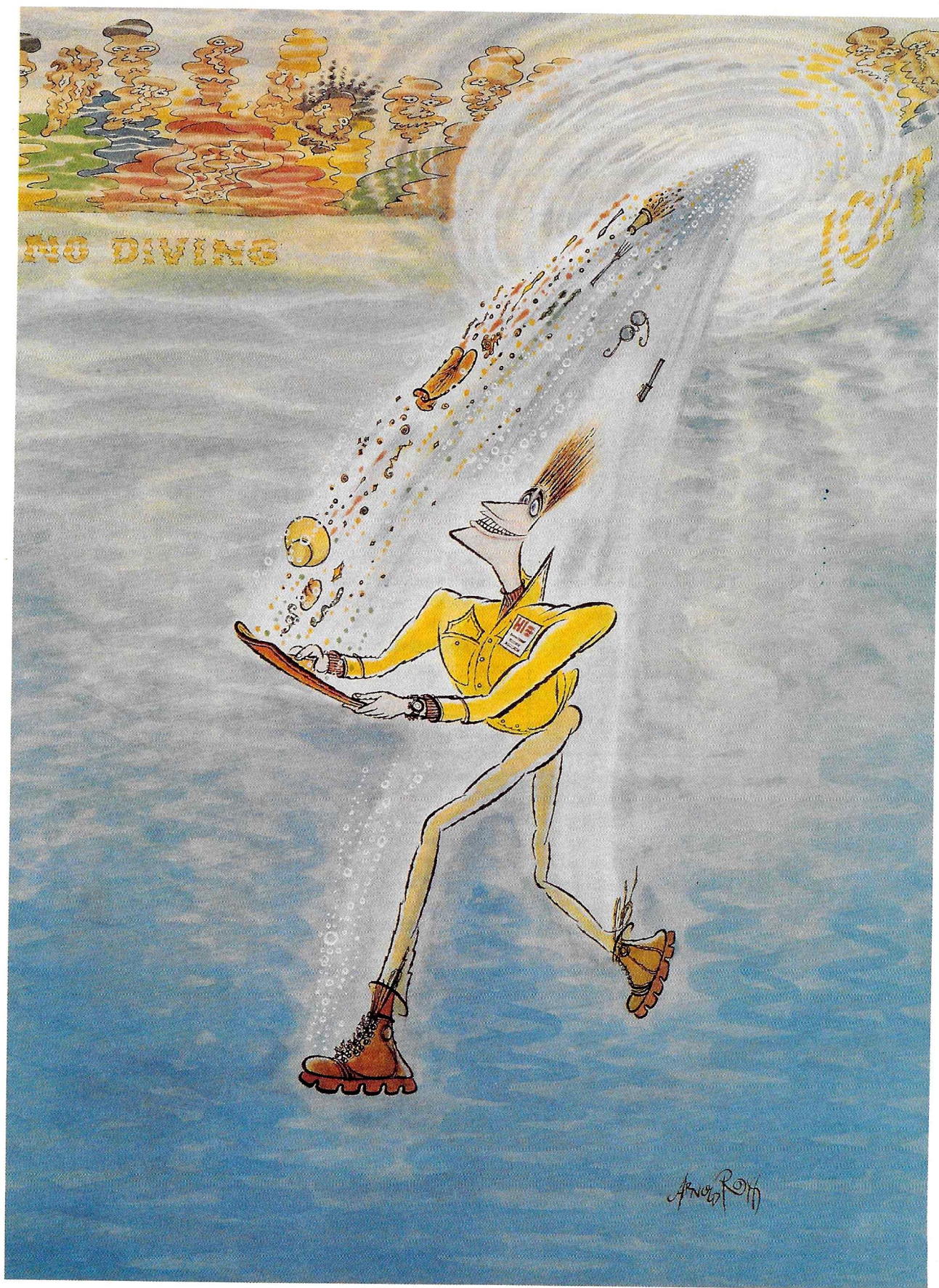
Undaunted, I kicked over two coffee cups and pulled up a chair to Group Six, which was hotly debating the usual tensions. How could new associates learn broad areas when narrow client-needs drove the agenda? How shape the practice, when billable quotas overrode other goals? Within an hour, we had summarized our issues, established priorities. I even remembered to call the housekeeper with a reminder that the front door be left unlocked, so Dan could enter when he forgot his keys. Hanging up, I headed for lunch with a sigh of relief: things were O.K., under control.

That was when I fell, fully clothed, into the indoor swimming pool.

Lunch had been set up poolside, the buffet table a scant two feet from the water. There was open seating at big oval tables beyond the pool. Late as usual, I hurried through the queue, balancing my plate on one hand while attempting to fill tacos with the other. Rounding the chili urn, loaded with unstable crockery, I spotted a vacant seat at the room's far end, zoomed toward it—and stepped briskly out onto Olympic blue.

Warm water closed immediately over my head with a bubbling *thwoop*, engulfing hiking boots, moleskin pants, flannel shirt, wallet and all. Fishtailing toward green light through wakes of disbelief, I hauled myself out and stood squelching on the splashguard, rolling

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up my sleeves and wringing my sweater with myself still inside it, in an absurd attempt to get dry. That scramble to the surface was pure reflex: blind with shock and chlorine, I did not fully appreciate what had happened. I would have stayed safely on the bottom if I had.

Now I grew aware that the clatter of cutlery had died away, that everyone in the room was carefully gazing in other directions. One junior colleague later told me she begged her table-mates not to look at her, for fear she would spew food like Vesuvius. Out of sheer shame, I burst out laughing, my giggle rising through the super-sonic. Then I stood grinning like an idiot, wagging my head as though I had merely stepped in dog doots rather than covering myself with them.

I was amazed how much water hiking clothes could absorb; my arms and legs felt like lead. That was as nothing compared to the embarrassment which crushed me. I had done stupid things before. But this, I realized, surpassed them. It might not be fatal. But watching me, gimlet-eyed, were ambitious associates, Pavlovian litigators, and a president-elect of the New York State Bar. Escaping would not be a mere grin-and-wave, either.

For some bizarre reason, I thought the most logical response was to go through the food line again. Was the senior environmental lawyer in the Washington office fazed by a bit of dampness? Would he let colleagues think him a poor sport? Would he reveal he longed to dissolve like the puddles at his feet, for fear no one would take him seriously again? No, sir — before pneumonia and terminal humiliation set in, he would get a hot meal. Like a fly on paper, he would twist and turn, getting more and more stuck on his wounded dignity.

So I hung my sopping sweater on a deck chair, refilled a new plate, navigated — very slowly — to the nearest table, and began to field questions about my swimming abilities, noticing how glad my companions seemed not to have fallen in themselves. The tacos were less than satis-

fying, especially because I baptized them each time I leaned over for a bite. But at least they let me avoid others' eyes.

Suddenly, I felt movement behind me. It was six members of the motel maintenance staff, forming a practiced brigade of long-handled nets, mops, and sponges. They had cast a boom around my first lunch and were busy skimming the surface for globs of cheese and taco sauce, like the Coast Guard attacking an

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oil spill. No *Exxon Valdez* saw more professional work. The chili was giving them trouble, however. Heavy with fat, it had congealed in its bowl and sunk to the bottom. Would they dive for it? No — maneuvering the net gracefully, they whisked it away with the rest of my contamination. Only after they marched off like Nibelungs did the motel turn its attention me-ward. The P.R. risk of future swimmers colliding with a pinto bean apparently outweighed one woebegone retiree beginning to chill in his chair.

There followed a parade of desk clerks and conference coordinators, offering pro forma assistance mixed with fear for their jobs. Did I have a change of clothing? Neither did the motel, though a robe was offered until substitutes arrived. They did not stock slippers; would sneakers from the lost-and-found serve? A local cleaner had guaranteed to dry my duds in an hour. Meanwhile, they offered a free room. They could not rope off the pool because someone who fell in might get tangled and “really drown.” Was my situation not drowning? O no, grinned the young woman who directed the catering service. It happened all the time.

Somehow, I managed to join my colleagues for most of the afternoon sessions, shuffling like Chaplin in borrowed pants, outsize tennis shoes, and my maiden sweatshirt from Slippery Rock University. What I really wanted was to crawl into bed. But I'd be damned if I'd act like a victim, though I felt like an inmate at comedy camp. I was accused of trying to become a wetlands lawyer, of thinking I could walk on water. I received compliments on my synchronized swimming

with knockwursts and jalapenos. My partners smirked despite themselves whenever I asked a question. “Don't listen to him — he's all wet!” one cackled. “Our water law expert!” another repeated ceaselessly. The desk clerks rolled their eyes each time I waddled out for a laundry report; anyone dumb enough to fall in the pool, their glances said, shouldn't add insult to injury by disrupting their routines. The clock crawled past 5:00. My flight left at 7:00.

Of course, a blizzard then blew up out of Lake Ontario, threatening Plan A. Of course, no earlier departures were available (my dear dried clothes sat unannounced at the desk while I fruitlessly dialed airlines). Of course, the concierge had placed my frayed underpants on top of that freshly folded stack, for every registrant to examine. And of course, all flights were flying — except mine, which was delayed and delayed, and finally canceled. For over an hour, I sweated at the check-in counter, invoking emergencies, explaining I had a child alone at home. Images of Danny carousing, of Budweiser trucks rolling up to our door, filled my mind. His voice when I said I would not be arriving was rich with undisguised glee.

The good news, I guess, is that I survived the Retreat from Hell. I'm not in Sarajevo; I didn't lose a kid or an election. Not even my sweater shrunk. My pride doused, I've been reminded that the assaults of colleagues, fate, and family are also ties that bind. I woke the next morning to orchards transformed by ice-fans, in which a red-bellied woodpecker perched, buzzed cheerfully, and flew. Our house, when I returned, was still standing; Dan had even washed his dishes. The next week, my colleagues moved me with a surprise birthday celebration. A week later, I began to giggle with new appreciation at the Puritans' use of ducking to enforce humility.

I've started wearing my snorkel to meetings — it's hard to talk through the mouthpiece, but people pay more attention than before. Best of all, I have a letter from the airport motel, hoping I “found the staff accommodating” and asking me to rebook for “the very best in personal service,” while requesting a liability release.

Meanwhile, I'm attempting to make my peace with 50, though we're still negotiating terms. It helps that I've always liked odd numbers: Gracie Allen, the Seventh Symphony, *The Seven Samurai*. For after 50, there's always 51. END