

The Dirty, the Disgusting, and the Diseased

By Jerry Woodfill



The Slough of Despond, A.K.A. The Pond

“Your skin is ghastly!” Such was the pronouncement of the dermatologist. His tri-fold told the unhappy tale: “Youthful exposure to the Sun’s harmful radiation may lead to skin cancer in later life.” My blemish count eclipsed the most grotesque Halloween mask’s façade. (When I included face, forearms, and hands in the tally.)

Dark thoughts of those Japanese exposed to A-bomb fallout explained my dilemma. Encapsulating my body in a dermatological sun-protective wardrobe would be useless. Basal-cell *carcinomas* (my word - as in *gnomes*) would continue to decorate my face forevermore, i.e., eliminating added outdoor exposure would not stop the process. Those damnable vermin had already required planting a quarter-sized donor patch of cheek skin in the center of my nose. I was no longer an object of feminine admiration with such a disfigurement.

Yet, I’d earned a measure of respect. Jerry Woodfill was the “go-to-guy” at my NASA workplace for counseling colleagues about epidermal afflictions, mole pigmentation, and like epidermal threats. However, my greatest specialty was describing the characteristics of basal cells; especially, how mine had been treated. More than once, I’d provided my doctor’s phone number to the concerned among our kind. My quarterly visits for those liquid-nitrogen-cotton-cue-tip-freezings of suspicious facial flaws left me scab-faced for days.

This led co-workers to take comfort when I offered the encouraging words, “Your situation is not near as dire as mine.” Nevertheless, their dread of my fate soared when I applied a proactive basal-cell-killer-cream. It was altogether loathsome. This was the stuff which seeks and finds those *carcinomas* hiding among normal cells.

It then executes the hellcats before they perpetrate their epidermal crimes. The battle was fought on the field of my complexion. Unfortunately, the catch-22 of the skirmish is not only extreme itching. A police mug-shot would have my bilious face looking like a street-wino. Along with the itch came shocked stares from my office associates. Mercifully, after a month, the redness

left.

Like historians seeking the origin of ancient bones, I sought the source of my Sun exposure. Though a half-century past, at once, the cause came to mind,

“Too much GOLF.”

Sadly, I’d seldom worn my Sam Sneed Dobbs straw hat. Sam wore his to shield his bald head from the Sun’s rays. My full head of hair was protection enough. Besides, I’d caddied. No golfer’s bag-carrier dared sport headwear. Our naked heads segregated us from our mentors.

But then, it was like the plight of those 1950’s cigarette devotees, whose habit was deified by cinema stars of the era. No caveat warning was posted either on packs of Camels or the caddy shack. There was no “Solar Radiation May be Hazardous to Your Skin” warning sign. The five bucks I earned for four hours of weekend golf club carrying has become my 2006 quarterly \$300 visits to the skin-clinic. Thankfully, it’s not something more serious. Had I smoked, it might have been lung cancer.

However, among our kind, there was a greater health risk on Wicker Park’s links than sun burn. It was the illicit Moonlight trespass onto the grounds for what we called golf ball reclamation. The mischievous doing consisted of retrieving ball-booty, hidden treasure, submerged in the depths of Wicker Park’s water hazard, the par three third hole pond.

The ball-bounty was akin to how lottery jackpots grow. In early summer, there was a water-ball dearth. Nevertheless, day-by-day, duffers populated the depths of that sour smelling reservoir, making the end-of-summer harvest bountiful.

What assured the large prize? It was the unlikely prospect that any golfer would wade into that *slough of despond*, sock-less and shoeless, for a lost ball. Only the *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, a horror film shown at the Highland Town Theater, might dive to such depths to reclaim his \$1.25 Titleist. Seeing schools of threatening water bugs discouraged an outstretched hand from reaching beneath the dark gray liquid. And, yet, some braved the waters in search of their errant tee shot. As a result, more than one over 90s, forty plus handicapper fell prey to blood sucking leaches. Such creatures affix themselves to bare feet and hands.

Week by week until the onset of September did the water hole gather its collection. The well-healed ball-knockers, the affluent Brantwoodians of the kingdom immediately across Ridge Road, lost their pricy Spalding Top Flights. Likewise, the proletarian steel mill ball-toppers from afar, Hessville, dribbled their Sears Roebuck K-28’s and Podo’s into the pond’s deep. The former leavings were worthy of professional tournament competition and the latter - practice range dregs for honing ones swinging skills.

Remarkably, the spherical multitude, whether expensive or discount store stock, remained in pristine state, as though just removed from the three-ball-carton. This had to do with a golfer’s optimism at the onset of play. Confidence reigned supreme after the first two holes. “I will surely reach the green despite that pond, “ was the thought which kept the virgin ball in play.

Later in the day, with the fatigue of sun, sand, and sloppy play taking its toll, a “water-ball” of lower pedigree might substitute for more expensive stock. But because hole one, a long par five, and hole two, a modest par four, posed little challenge, confidence reigned. No slashing machete-like-club-head-gash had wounded the dimpled skin. The ball of the same high-bearing launched heavenward on the first tee remained in play. Like those who matriculated into America from Ellis Island, those pond balls became the stuff of democracy,

mired together awaiting the providence of reclamation, new life in fairway pastures of *golfdom*.

Some kind of mysterious psychological phenomena had to be responsible for the host of balls swallowed on that third hole. Even the illicit *mulligan stroke* often drowned along with the first shot into the pond. As a result, the hapless player was facing a triple bogey with fifteen holes remaining, a sure end to improving ones handicap. Henceforth, when peril threatened, on those remaining holes, only the flawed dregs of the bag’s ball pocket were played. Happily, for us, the pond had claimed its prize, soon to be our spoils, a pirate’s purse of countless white dimpled loot!

Why had other marauders failed to raid our treasure? Surely, during scores of summer nights, some vagrant, an across the track interloper, might have collected our due. Remarkably, in the course of many summers, none had. The explanation has its foundation in a business practice known as *risk reward analysis*. Simply put, “Is the risk worth the reward?”

Our risk, though considerable, had built in safety factors. We were grade school youths within walking distance of the pond. There was no need to travel from afar, hide an automobile from the Wicker Park Police or the golf course’s greens-keeper. The pond was not illuminated, and, as caddies, our sure knowledge of its location, required no flashlights to find it. The end-of-summer pond heist was the perfect act of criminality. Besides, it wasn’t like a bank vault break-in where funds were missed. No one knew the ball count before and after our felonious raid.

But our greatest advantage was ignorance, specifically, ignorance of the risk of disease. We should have known that the pond’s water held grave consequences for those predisposed to disease. It was the era of pre-pollution-control. Any lake, creek, pond, or pool might serve as a neighborhood toilet for all manner of human and commercial excrement. Bordering the course, less than a hundred yards from our beloved pond, was the infamous CREEK. Tales were told of a vacationer’s discarded match igniting surface slime with a ghastly napalm-glow.

A puzzling creek phenomena confused me. Where its waters flowed over a make-shift dam appeared an enormous cloud of soap-like bubbles. My Dad explained the source, Mom’s detergent. Our bathtub, washing machine, sinks and toilets, along with the same from hundreds of neighbors’, flowed into the Creek.

“That’s one bubble bath, I’ll never take.”

However, most nauseating was watching and smelling the CREEK from its bank. I saw schools of oblong brown skinned fish-like masses flowing pass. Moments before, these creatures had flushed from Brantwood toilets into that ecological tributary flowing just yards from our pond. Once, I saw a strange tubular half-foot-long-jelly-fish-like skin deposit itself on the bank. I asked an older caddy about the creature. At once, he educated me on the biology of human reproduction in altogether non-medical textbook terminology.

Each of the course’s eighteen holes had a huge faucet on a pipe jutting from the ground. I’d watched the greens-keeper attach a hose and nozzle then spray blast water onto the green in fire-hose-like fashion.

“Where did the water come from?”

Fortunately, I never got an answer until long after I’d visited the pond. Both the pond and the green had the same source, THE CREEK!

Yes, ignorance was, indeed, an advantage. I knew not the risk, i.e., nothing of the pond’s contaminated contents, of its potential for contagion, how tuberculosis, polio, even typhoid and cholera might infect those who raked its

bottom for golf ball treasure.

I was amazed by my first voyage into its waters. Shoeless and sockless, I wadded forth, my feet sinking three to five inches into its muddy bottom. Often, rather than taking steps, I simply inched through the mire forcing my feet forward. Around my neck, I'd strapped Mom's laundry sack using its drawstring as sort of a hangman's noose. It draped down my back so I could bend at my waist, hands feeling along the muddy bottom for those dimpled white nuggets.

It was as though I was collecting balls on the practice range, each only inches apart. A better description would be catching a school of stationary fish, one at a time, and throwing each into the laundry sack. My excited greed overcame the fetid smell of the pond's surface. Besides, I had trained myself to breathe wholly through my mouth so that nausea seldom overwhelmed me. That had not been the case on my first visit. I'd almost vomited in the midst of that tepid slime until I discovered the mouth breathing alternative.

After an hour's wading, the catch weighed heavily on my back, perhaps, a record. However, the prescribed reclamation was a two-fold process. Most balls lay undisturbed on the mucky bottom mire. Like an open fairway lie, a swift sweep of the club, my hand in this case, lofted the ball upward into my bag. These were the so-called "give-me" grabs, akin to a sure-thing putt to "hole-out." A novice water-hole sleuth might conclude his venture with these *gimmies*, ignoring the white-dimpled gems imprisoned beneath the muck. The imbedded jewels covertly dwelled only inches beneath the quagmire.

Their recovery from the bog tested the meddle of water hole felons. Though naked feet often mistook lumpy stones for these projectiles, the accomplished ball-gleaner never failed to pause for these *muddies* (as we called them). Extracting them from their cocoon-like environs validated our art.

Truly, this was not unlike the experience of Neil Armstrong's first steps on lunar firmament. Geologist insisted he immediately grab a "contingency sample", a moon rock conveniently collected and deposited in his *laundry sack*, not hung about his neck as mine but a leg-pouch sewn onto his space suit. His was altogether like my plight. Should an unexpected malfunction of his space suit or *Eagle* lander ensue, the aborted mission could bring at least one moon rock home.

However, like Neil's acquisition of lunar regolith, no abort appeared imminent such that both *gimmies* and *muddies* had become a heavy but welcome burden. Perhaps, several hundred Podos, Spaldings, Wilson K-28s, Titleists, and Ben Hogans were among the collection.

Even the loathsome bare-handed extraction of those slime covered muck-balls was proving tolerable. These, I washed in the pond's liquid drool, a cleansing agent of sorts for both hand and ball.

Ignorant of myriad microscopic vermin contained thereon, I wiped sweat from my forehead with that contaminated hand. Likewise, it served well as a mosquito-swatter, combating the swarming beasts attached to my forearms, neck, and face. The risk/reward ratio was growing with each potential injection of malaria, encephalitis, and dengue fever.

Capture of perpetrators of my kind was unlikely. This was before the advent of video surveillance, motion detectors, golf-course night watchmen, and roaming herds of Dobermans intent on seizing golf-links trespassers. And who really cared? This was mischief not the felonious theft of pro-shop merchandise.

However, there had been occasional acts of vandalism, i.e., ripping off a tee-box ball washer, or inadvertently strolling over a rain softened green leaving trench marks. For these nefarious deeds, park police maintained vigilance. From the road, they swept the dark void with a floodlight attached to the patrol car's frame. But the encircling park road was just distant enough

from the ball reservoir to obscure exposure. Besides, our ball seining stoop-labor posture hid us beneath the pond's raised banks.

All these factors lowered that risk/reward ratio. No clandestine "look-out" accomplice was needed. A gang of one sufficed. (*Thinking of the experience, it was usually a gang of one person, only me.*) I don't recall often dividing my ill-gotten cache with others. However, this night, an alarm to "cut and run" might have saved me.

My later NASA career dealt with Neil Armstrong's spacecraft warning system. Aborting a Moon mission in response to an alarm would save an astronaut's life. The Apollo alerts came in two categories: a *caution type* alarm that danger was likely but not imminent and a *warning type* that peril was imminent requiring immediate action.

I'd always wondered why Wicker Park's greens had such a foul odor early in the day. It was as though an unseen load of barnyard manure covered the manicured blades of Bermuda grass. My guess had its origin as a mysterious rancid morning mildew. In a moment, I was to discover its true cause.

Approaching the green side of the water hazard, I looked toward the outlying road whose path between the Creek and golf links defined the perimeter of the course. A slow moving vehicle ambled along, certainly, not a patrol car, judging from its height, length and tire complement. The front wheels were dwarfed by the rear tires.

"How can this be?" I wondered.

"A tractor?"

The only farm nearby was Vandermollen's rhubarb patch across Ridge Road from Wicker Park. A wooded picnic area with playground equipment, bathroom facilities, and brick barbecue pits separated the golf course from Ridge Road. The same road which encircled the golf course crossed Ridge Road into the Vandermollen farm. This was the road patrolled by park police. Apparently, Herr Vandermollen was on his tractor simply enjoying a slow joyride around the golf course. In a moment, I planned to walk that route home.

"My heist was complete." My coffers were overflowing with ball-booty. Still at ease, I glanced at the tractor. Hopefully, Mr. Vandermollen had not recognized me or my wicked act of golf ball reclamation. That would not be good. Unexpectedly, instead of passing along the boundary road, the head lights of the mechanical barnyard beast shined my way.

"Had I been seen?" I wondered.

"Perhaps, I had."

The tractor was now off the road, trekking across the adjacent fairway toward the polluted pond where I knelt. Suddenly, the bag of balls felt like a hangman's noose about my neck, choking my anxious breathing. There was no doubt I was being pursued by the farming Dutchman. His were a moral people, members of the Christian Reformed sect of Protestant kind. He would certainly report my wrongdoing to the Brantwoodian community. I would be excommunicated from the Walther League, Redeemer Lutheran's society of sinless youth. The church elders would advise my mother how best to punish her incorrigible child for his mischief.

The pair of round lights failed to hold a steady beam, illuminating the pond. The irregular terrain jarred the tractor causing the lights to beam upward and downward, often far above or below me. If I could slither from the pond bank across the twenty yard grassy expanse between the pond and the green, I might not be seen. And this I did as the tractor neared the water hazard. Finding refuge in the grassy frog-hair slope behind the putting surface, I heaved deeply, exhausted from the squirmy, belly waddle, handicapped by a rucksack of hundreds of golf balls.

Crickets chirped wildly, my heavy breathing alerting their legions to an unwelcome presence in their wooded laird. But the tractor's motor had ebbed into an idle. It no longer stalked me. My Dad's World War II Field Manual served me well. I recalled the sketch of an infantryman peering at the enemy, postured so that his presence was undetected as he peaked over an embankment at the opposing army.

"Yes, it was a tractor but not Herr Vandermollen's."

"Much, much worse...it was the greens-keeper!"

"Why was he here? It was long past night fall."

He was not someone a mischief maker would want to encounter even in daylight. I'd heard he had chased a pair of teen-age vagrants off the course. He pursued them across the seventeenth hole. They only escaped his wrath by catapulting the barb-wired fence. On the run, they disappeared beneath the Highway 41 viaduct bordering the eastern reaches of the course. Screaming expletives, he'd threatened those delinquents with the sickle he'd been swinging to chop weeds surrounding the refreshment stand.

Apparently, he hadn't seen me, or I'd be joining those miscreants, dashing for the barbed wire fence separating the picnic area from the third hole links. Again, I peaked. There was a four wheeled open cart attached to the tractor. He had dismounted and was pulling some kind of apparatus from the cart's bowels. It appeared to be a long python-like snake, perhaps, thirty feet in length. Dragging it over the green, he placed one end of the mechanism near the hole. What he did with the other end of the serpentine-like device was hidden.

The noise of the tractor's engine combined with the chirping crickets muffled the distinctive sound which was forthcoming. It wholly revealed the source of the wretched morning odor of Wicker Park's greens. As I heard the tractor's engine throttle open, a torrent of fetid Creek water blasted skyward from the orifices of that green-centered device. Like a fire-engine's water pump, the tractor motor augmented the process so that the liquefied contagion increased in pressure, volume and force. Not only was the green inundated but all life, animal, insect, and, yes, human within twenty yards.

I had become a dog's urine drenched fire plug, an outhouse's one-hole excrement, the flushing refuse of Brantwoodian toilets, the vial drool of used washing machine detergent, the slimy residue of discarded neighborhood oil changes, the companion of those oblong brown Creek aquatic species, the substance of life defined by my caddy friend, and, one from whom even the Creature of the Black Lagoon would flee. No skunk would have me. I had become Jerry, the loathsome CREEK BOY, never to return to the scene of his crime.



Creature From the Black Lagoon

The Dirty, Disgusting, Diseased Comprehension Questions



The Slough of Despond, A.K.A. The Pond

(Enter answers on the line to left of each question.)

- _____ 1. Jerry's skin cancers were caused by the pond water.
(T)rue or (F)alse
- _____ 2. Jerry did **not** compare himself to:
a. *Neil Armstrong*
b. *A pirate*
c. *A fisherman*
d. *Elvis Presley*
- _____ 3. The vehicle Jerry encountered was:
a. farmer Vandermollen's tractor
b. a Wicker Park police patrol car
c. The greens-keeper's tractor
d. Teenager's OTV
- _____ 4. Jean Shepherd and Jerry Woodfill attended high school together.
(T)rue or (F)alse.
- _____ 5. The third hole pond was:

- a. ideal for swimming.
b. a winter ice hockey rink.
c. used to water the green grass.
d. a children's wading pool.

- _____ 6. What was good about retrieving balls?
a. The sweet smell of pond water.
b. The interesting aquatic life.
c. The diseases one might catch.
d. The valuable golf balls recovered.

- _____ 7. What was the ball bag not like?
a. a hangman's noose
b. a laundry sack
c. Neil Armstrong's space suit pocket
d. Superman's red cape

- _____ 8. Creek water did not include:
a. detergent
b. urine
c. feces
d. napalm

- _____ 9. The balls found were classed as:
a. *gimmies*
b. *muddies*
c. practice range *dregs*
d. all of the above

- _____ 10. What diseases were a threat?
a. Malaria
b. Encephalitis
c. Dengue Fever
d. the golf bug

- _____ 11. What increased the risk/reward ratio?
a. a sickle-swinging-greens-keeper
b. mosquitoes
c. microscopic pond contagion
d. all of the above

- _____ 12. Did lower the risk/reward ration?
a. lack of watch dogs
b. no night watchmen
c. no get-away car needed
d. blood-sucking-leaches

- _____ 13. What movie is like the account?
a. *Rebecca of Sunny Brook Farm*
b. *Lassie*
c. *Creature From the Black Lagoon*
d. *It's a Wonderful Life*

- _____ 14. Jerry is an amateur expert on skin cancer.
(T)rue or (F)alse

- _____ 15. Jerry risked the pond because?
a. it was too dark to see him
b. he knew exactly where it was
c. the pond was near his home
d. all of the above

- _____ 16. Why did balls end up in the pond?
a. squirrels put them there.
b. the greens-keeper planted them to catch golf ball-thieves
c. duffers (lousy golfers) hit bad shots
d. none of the above

- _____ 17. How did Jerry seine for balls?
a. with a cat-fish net
b. using an underwater rake
c. scuba diving
d. using his hand like a rake

- _____ 18. How did Jerry deal with the odor?
a. wore an Army-surplus gas mask
b. by breathing through his mouth
c. vomiting to empty his stomach
d. wearing a perfumed painter's mask

- _____ 19. Jerry escaped by:
- going unseen under water
 - hiding in his ball-bag
 - crawling behind the green
 - asking the greens-keeper if he'd seen Jerry's lost dog
- _____ 20. The bad morning odor was?
- the Gary steel mill smog
 - marauding nocturnal skunks
 - the golf course "out-house"
 - the nocturnal green watering

- fetid fowl smelling
- tepid lukewarm
- covertly secretly
- quagmire swamp, bog, slough
- regolith covering substance
- myriad immense number
- excommunicated cast out of, removed, purged
- incurable rebellious
- expletives curse words
- miscreants villains, wrongdoers
- seining netlike catching
- clandestine secretive
- coffers treasure chest, strong box

retentive comprehension, both by knowing it will be given and through recollection as each question is addressed. *The Dirty, Disgusting and Diseased* offers such a two fold exercise, i.e., a spelling vocabulary list as well as a retention test given immediately following the oral dramatization. To demonstrate the value of oral-dramatized reading, another group can be given the same test after silently reading *The Dirty, Disgusting, and Diseased*. Test scores can then be compared. The test questions are listed above:

The Dirty, Disgusting, and Diseased Vocabulary List

<u>Word</u>	<u>Synonym</u>
1. dermatologist	skin doctor
2. encapsulating	enclosing
3. proactive	planning ahead
4. devotee	follower
5. illicit	wrongful
6. reclamation	recovery, restoration
7. dearth	shortage
8. affluent	wealthy
9. proletarian	working-class
10. pristine	new, unblemished
11. dregs	residue, sludge
12. pedigree	origin, heritage
13. matriculated	enrolled
14. providence	divine guidance
15. host	multitude, large group
16. spoils	loot
17. marauders	pirates, looters
18. vagrant	hobo, tramp, street person
19. host	multitude, large number
20. interloper	invader, intruder trespasser
21. predisposed	prepared, ready
22. excrement	waste, fasces

Audio Dramatization as a Reading Comprehension Enhancement Tool

What value does listening to an oral recitation have for reading and writing? Does retentive listening benefit rhetoric? Perhaps, the most obvious proof is the use and abuse of pronoun forms. Children raised among parents and siblings whose conversation *butchers* the use of "I", using it as an object or "me" as a sentence's subject, do likewise. Hearing correct pronunciation along with proper word usage tends to replicate itself among hearers.

Who has not cringed hearing a friend say, "Me and my brother went right home." Or the pastor deliver a Sunday morning sermon with the appellation, "That snake fooled Adam and Eve, both of them, he and she." The following dramatic reading has two goals: to acquaint the student with vocabulary words in the context of a narrative while encouraging retentive listening skills. Both aims are reinforced by testing the extent to which the hearer listened. Actually, the test augments



Jerry, the loathsome CREEK BOY