

COUNTRY OF THE SECOND CHANCE

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There are two alternative versions of America, it has sometimes occurred to me, and they begin, as you approach my age, to offer radically different outcomes.

The first was proposed by the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, creator of that mythic American anti-hero Jay Gatsby, some seventy years ago. “There are,” Fitzgerald wrote in his notebooks, “no second acts in American lives.” And for Fitzgerald—dead at the age of 41 by way of drink and dissipation—indeed there weren’t.

But there’s also a second vision of America—one which I myself prefer and which, if you drink a bit less than Fitzgerald did and get at least eight hours of sleep—you may yet come to appreciate. And that is that America is also the country of the second—and sometimes, even, the third and fourth—chance. That, rather obviously, is a far more consoling—and, I believe, far truer—vision of our country than Fitzgerald’s, and it may, I would suggest, even serve you in good stead as you contemplate—or dread—your own future.

I was a law student and a lawyer once—a smart, combative, argumentative and, I have no doubt, rather annoying law student—who, for many of the same neurotic reasons I am currently teaching law students about in my Psychology for Lawyers class at West Virginia University, “bailed out” of the legal profession rather early and went on to a not entirely unsuccessful career as a writer. That’s a trajectory, I know, that might be the envy of many of those now practicing law and who are chomping at the bit to get out to what they envision as greener, or at least more glorified, pastures.

Nor am I complaining about my fate. Quite on the contrary, I’m here to celebrate it.

The fact is that, despite my love of writing and literature, the law and its intellectual, real-world allure never quite left me: I continued to dream of law school and lawyering, it seemed to me, almost nightly and—while still in the to-many-people enviable position of being Director of Creative Writing at Harvard—even went to see the Federal District Judge in New Hampshire who had offered me a clerkship fifteen years earlier to ask him if he might consider doing so again, which he did, and I—still perverse and confused to the core—turned him down once more.

But now it's many years later, and—by way of one of those propinquitous quirks and detours that makes America a kind of psychological nirvana for those who want to re-invent, or re-imagine, themselves, I find myself, of all things, a law professor . . . and a happy one at that. The fact is, I adore my colleagues and students. I find teaching and thinking about the law at least as inspiring as reading the poems of eighteen-year-olds, and—full disclosure—even relish the somewhat more substantial paycheck my efforts are met with.

So what I've found is that—despite the more frequent aches and pains it entails, and the occasional chemically-induced assistance it may require with your love life—growing older, if you can manage to hang on long enough, not only gives you a second chance: it teaches you humility.

What you once detested, you may even find, should longevity bless you, you may yet grow to love; what you once avoided like the plague may yet prove the cure for many of your ills.

Though I am hardly an unquestioning American patriot—*au contraire*, as the French would say—I cannot also fail to acknowledge that it was this country, when my parents and my entire family were at the door of Nazi Germany's ovens, that gave them a second chance . . . and that it's also given one to me.

This may not sound like patriotism to some, but it has, at least, the virtue of truth. And it's a truth that, if you're lucky and long-lived, not only won't bang a door shut in your face, but, you may yet find, will even open some windows.