

QUOTIDIAN

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.”
—Henry David Thoreau, from *Journal*, August 19, 1851

“I am free of all prejudice. I hate everyone equally.”
—W.C. Fields

THIS WEEK IN HISTORY

DECEMBER 31, 1999: After 97 years under U.S. control, the Panama Canal is given over to Panama for the first time. The canal officially opened on August 15, 1914, when the steamer SS Ancon sailed through. Since then, over 922,000 ships have traversed the canal.

Although the canal was completed in the early 20th century, the desire to create a shortcut across the narrow isthmus was burning in men’s hearts as far back as the 16th century. In the early 1500s, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V commissioned a survey of the isthmus. Although several plans for a canal were produced, none were implemented. U.S. interest in building a canal was sparked in the 19th century by the expansion of the American west and the California gold rush of 1848, since a ship sailing from New York to San Francisco would shave about 7,800 miles off its trip by cutting through Panama.

A French company began construction on the 48-mile canal in 1880, but was plagued by tropical diseases (some 22,000 workers died) and eventually went bankrupt. It sold its project rights to the U.S. in 1902 for \$40 million. In 1903, Panama declared independence from Colombia in a U.S.-backed revolution, and signed the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty with the Americans. By the terms of the treaty, the U.S. agreed to pay Panama \$10 million for a perpetual lease, plus \$250,000 annual rent. Construction on the canal commenced in 1903 and continued until 1914. Between that time, some 56,000 workers were involved in its construction; an estimated 10% lost their lives.

In 1977, after 20 years of protests by Panamanians, president Jimmy Carter and Panama’s de facto leader Omar Torrijos signed the Torrijos-Carter Treaties. These treaties—narrowly ratified by the U.S. Senate—effectively abrogated the 1903 agreement and promised to transfer control of the canal to Panama at the stroke of midnight on January 1, 2000.

Some interesting facts: The average toll for a ship passing through the canal is \$54,000. In May 2006, the *Maersk Delys* paid \$249,165, the largest toll ever. American adventurer Richard Halliburton, who swam the canal in 1928, paid a mere 36 cents.

Sources: *This Day In History*, *Wikipedia*, *Canal History Museum*.

3 WORDS

Memorize these by week’s end and you shall quickly develop an enviable lexicon.

This issue’s theme: words related to cold and winter.

brumal (BREW-mul) *adjective*

1. *archaic* : indicative of or occurring in the winter; wintry

Ex. The **brumal** winds howled like a pack of wolves and sucked the warmth from my bones.

Etym. From the Latin *bruma*, “winter”

chilblain (CHIL-blayne) *noun*

1. an inflammatory swelling produced by exposure to cold, affecting the hands and feet, accompanied with heat, itching, and occasionally ulceration

Ex. After hours of camping in a damp chill, his hands were covered in gruesome **chilblains**.

Etym. From chill + blain

wassail (WAH-sul) *verb*

1. to sit carousing and health-drinking
2. to sing carols from house to house at Xmas
3. to drink to the health or thriving of

Ex. Our musically inclined neighbors typically **wassail** us with beautiful carols on Christmas Day, but this year they are out of town.

WELL I'LL BE!
THE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS YOU NEVER ASKED

What the heck is Boxing Day?

The few of us who are aware of Boxing Day probably associate it with pugilism. I was guilty of this until very recently, when someone told me it has something to do with boxes. *Ah*. So, what *is* Boxing Day?

Simply put, it is the first weekday following Christmas (typically December 26), and is celebrated predominantly in Britain and Commonwealth countries (i.e., former territories of the British Empire). In modern times, it is marked by sporting events (especially in Australia) and retail sales (many retailers use it as an opportunity to clear out unsold Christmas merchandise).

The origins of the name are unclear, but it is generally accepted that Boxing Day began centuries ago as an occasion for giving cash or durable goods to those of lower classes. Gifts to equals were bestowed on or before Christmas, while gifts to those less fortunate were given the day after.

One theory holds that members of the merchant class gave their servants boxes of food or fruit as a form of tip. Another holds that employees would arrive at work the day after Christmas with boxes, in which their employers would deposit coins—a sort of year-end bonus. Yet another asserts that the church donation box was opened on Christmas day and distributed by clergy the next day. In each theory, some sort of box is involved, and some sort of exchange benefiting those less fortunate takes place—and that's about all we know about the origins of the holiday's name. Today, such gift giving is overshadowed by year-end sales and the joys of a day free from work.

What does "auld lang syne" mean?

While many of us sing "auld lang syne" (pronounced *auld lang sign*) first thing after midnight on New Year's Eve, very few of us actually know what it means, let alone what words to sing.

Auld Lang Syne is actually an 18th century poem written by Scottish poet Robert Burns, and translates as "old long since" or, more idiomatically, as "days gone by" or "once upon a time." The lyrics to the first verse and chorus are:

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
and auld lang syne?*

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
for auld lang syne,
we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
for auld lang syne.*



Sources: *Urban Legends Reference Pages*, *Wikipedia*

TRIVIAL TIDBIT
Where LEGO got its name

I've always loved LEGO bricks. For me, there was little more exciting than receiving a set for Christmas and spending all day assembling it. As a kid, I never wondered why those interlocking plastic bricks were so named, but years of adolescence and a chance encounter with a magazine article prompted my search.

LEGO originated in 1932 in the town of Billund, Denmark. In that year, master carpenter Ole Kirk Christiansen started a business making stepladders, ironing boards, stools, and—presumably—wooden toys. Within two years, the toy part had grown successful enough that he named his business LEGO, from the Danish words *leg godt*, meaning "play well." Incidentally, *lego* is also Latin for "I put together."

In 1949, LEGO began making plastic Automatic Binding Bricks. Curiously, at their international debut at the 1955 Nuremberg toy fair in Germany, they received a lukewarm reception.

Despite this first reaction, LEGO went on undeterred. Since 1949, LEGO has manufactured some 327 billion bricks—enough for every person on earth to own more than 50. In terms of sales, LEGO is the world's 6th largest toy company.

The brick in its present form was launched in 1958.

Sources: Morris, Evan. *From Altoids to Zima* (2004), LEGO®.

LITERARY GENIUS

I found the following selection in William J. Bennett's *Book of Virtues* in the "self-discipline" section, and—given that this is the time of year we all make resolutions to better ourselves—thought it was a great story for the coming new year. It is adapted from a French tale, and teaches the value of patience. In Bennett's words, "[t]he irony of...impatience is that only by learning to wait, and by a willingness to accept the bad with the good, do we usually attain those things that are truly worthwhile."

THE MAGIC THREAD

ONCE THERE WAS A WIDOW who had a son called Peter. He was a strong, able boy, but he did not enjoy going to school and he was forever daydreaming.

"Peter, what are you dreaming about this time?" his teacher would say to him.

"I'm thinking about what I'll be when I grow up," Peter replied.

"Be patient. There's plenty of time for that. Being grown up isn't all fun, you know," his teacher said.

But Peter found it hard to enjoy whatever he was doing at the moment, and was always hankering after the next thing. In winter he longed for it to be summer again, and in summer he looked forward to the skating, sledging, and warm fires of winter. At school he would long for the day to be over so that he could go home, and on Sunday nights he would sigh, "If only the holidays would come." What he enjoyed most was playing with his friend Liese. She was as good a companion as any boy, and no matter how impatient Peter was, she never took offense. "When I grow up, I shall marry Liese," Peter said to himself.

Often he wandered through the forest, dreaming of the future. Sometimes he lay down on the soft forest floor in the warm sun, his hands behind his head, staring up at the sky through the distant treetops. One hot afternoon as he began to grow sleepy, he heard someone calling his name. He opened his eyes and sat up. Standing before him was an old woman. In her hand she held a silver ball, from which dangled a silken golden thread.

"See what I have got here, Peter," she said, offering the ball to him.

"What is it?" he asked curiously, touching the fine golden thread.

"This is your life thread," the old woman replied. "Do not touch it and time will pass normally. But if you wish time to pass more quickly, you have only to pull the thread a little way and an hour will pass like a second. But I warn you, once the thread has been pulled out, it cannot be pushed back in again. It will disappear like a puff of smoke. The ball is for you. But if you accept my gift you must tell no one, or on that very day you shall die. Now, say, do you want it?"

Peter seized the gift from her joyfully. It was just what he wanted. He examined the silver ball. It was light and solid, made of a single piece. The only flaw in it was the tiny hole from which the bright thread hung. He put the ball in his pocket and ran home. There, making sure that his mother was out, he examined it again. The thread seemed to be creeping very slowly out of the ball, so slowly that it was scarcely noticeable to the naked eye. He longed to give it a quick tug, but dared not do so. Not yet.

The following day at school, Peter sat daydreaming about what he would do with his magic thread. The teacher scolded him for not concentrating on his work. If only, he thought, it was time to go home. Then he felt the silver ball in his pocket. If he pulled out a tiny bit of thread, the day would be over. Very carefully he took hold of it and tugged. Suddenly the teacher was telling everyone to pack up their books and to leave the classroom in an orderly fashion. Peter was overjoyed. He ran all the way home. How easy life would be now! All his troubles were over. From that day forth he began to pull the thread, just a little, every day.

One day, however, it occurred to him that it was stupid to pull the thread just a little each day. If he gave it a harder tug, school would be over altogether. Then he could start learning a trade and marry Liese. So that night he gave the thread a hard tug, and in the morning he awoke to find himself apprenticed to a carpenter in town. He loved his new life, clambering about on roofs and scaffolding, lifting and hammering great beams into place that still smelled of the forest. But sometimes, when payday seemed too far off, he gave the thread a little tug and suddenly the week was drawing to a close and it was Friday night and he had money in his pocket.

Liese had also come to town and was living with her aunt, who taught her housekeeping. Peter began to grow impatient for the day when they would be married. It was hard to live so near and yet so far from her. He asked her when they could be married.

"In another year," she said. "Then I will have learned how to be a capable wife."

Peter fingered the silver ball in his pocket.

"Well, the time will pass quickly enough," he said, knowingly.

That night Peter could not sleep. He tossed and turned restlessly. He took the magic ball from under his pillow. For a moment he hesitated; then his impatience got the better of him, and he tugged at the golden thread. In the morning he awoke to find that the year was over and that Liese had at last agreed to marry him. Now Peter felt truly happy.

But before their wedding could take place, Peter received an official-looking letter. He opened it in trepidation and read that he was expected to report at the army barracks the following week for two years' military service. He showed the letter to Liese in despair.

"Well," she said, "there is nothing for it, we shall just have to wait. But the time will pass quickly, you'll see. There are so many things to do in preparation for our life together."

Peter smiled bravely, knowing that two years would seem a lifetime to him.

Once Peter had settled into life at the barracks, however, he began to feel that it wasn't so bad after all. He quite enjoyed being with all the other young men, and their duties were not very arduous at first. He remembered the old woman's warning to use the thread wisely and for a while refrained from pulling it. But in time he grew restless again. Army life bored him with its routine duties and harsh discipline. He began pulling the thread to make the week go faster so that it would be Sunday again, or to speed up the time until he was due for leave. And so the two years passed almost as if they had been a dream.

Back home, Peter determined not to pull the thread again until it was absolutely necessary. After all, this was the best time of his life, as everyone told him. He did not want it to be over too quickly. He did, however, give the thread one or two very small tugs, just to speed along the day of his marriage. He longed to tell Liese his secret, but he knew that if he did he would die.

On the day of his wedding, everyone, including Peter, was happy. He could hardly wait to show Liese the house he had built for her. At the wedding feast he glanced over at his mother. He noticed for the first time how gray her hair had grown recently. She seemed to be aging so quickly. Peter felt a pang of guilt that he had pulled the thread so often. Henceforward he would be much more sparing with it and only use it when it was strictly necessary.

A few months later Liese announced that she was going to have a child. Peter was overjoyed and could hardly wait. When the child was born, he felt that he could never want for anything again. But whenever the child was ill or cried through the sleepless night, he gave the thread a little tug, just so that the baby might be well and happy again.

Times were hard. Business was bad and a government had come to power that squeezed the people dry with taxes and would tolerate no opposition. Anyone who became known as a troublemaker was thrown into prison without trial and rumor was enough to condemn a man. Peter had always been known as one who spoke his mind, and very soon he was arrested and cast into jail. Luckily he had his magic ball with him and he tugged very hard at the thread. The prison walls dissolved before him and his enemies were scattered in the huge explosion that burst forth like thunder. It was the war that had been threatening, but it was over as quickly as a summer storm, leaving behind it an exhausted peace. Peter found himself back home with his family. But now he was a middle-aged man.

For a time things went well and Peter lived in relative contentment. One day he looked at his magic ball and saw to his surprise that the thread had turned from gold to silver. He looked in the mirror. His hair was starting to turn gray and his face was lined where before there had not been a wrinkle to be seen. He suddenly felt afraid and determined to use the thread even more carefully than before. Liese bore him more children and he seemed happy as the head of his growing household. His stately manner often made people think of him as some sort of benevolent ruler. He had an air of authority as if he held the fate of others in his hands. He kept his magic ball in a well-hidden place, safe from the curious eyes of his children, knowing that if anyone were to discover it, it would be fatal.

As the number of his children grew, so his house became more overcrowded. He would have to extend it, but for that he needed money. He had other worries too. His mother was looking older and more tired every day. It was of no use to pull the magic thread because that would only hasten her approaching death. All too soon she died, and as Peter stood at her graveside, he wondered how it was that life passed so quickly, even without pulling the magic thread.

One night as he lay in bed, kept awake by his worries, he thought how much easier life would be if all his children were grown up and launched upon their careers in life. He gave the thread a mighty tug, and the following day he awoke to find that his children had all left home for jobs in different parts of the country, and that he and his wife were alone. His hair was almost white now and often his back and limbs ached as he climbed the ladder or lifted a heavy beam into place. Liese too was getting old and she was often ill. He couldn't bear to see her suffer, so that more and more he resorted to pulling at the magic thread. But as soon as one trouble was solved, another seemed to grow in its place. Perhaps life would be easier if he retired, Peter thought. Then he would no longer have to clamber about on drafty, half-completed buildings and he could look after Liese when she was ill. The trouble was that he didn't have enough money to live on. He picked up his magic ball and looked at it. To his dismay he saw that the thread was no longer silver but gray and lusterless. He decided to go for a walk in the forest to think things over.

It was a long time since he had been in that part of the forest. The small saplings had all grown into tall fir trees, and it was hard to find the path he had once known. Eventually he came to a bench in a clearing. He sat down to rest and fell into a light doze. He was woken by someone calling his name, "Peter! Peter!"

He looked up and saw the old woman he had met so many years ago when she had given him the magic silver ball with its golden thread. She looked just as she had on that day, not a day older. She smiled at him.

"So, Peter, have you had a good life?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Peter said. "Your magic ball is a wonderful thing. I have never had to suffer or wait for anything in my life. And yet it has all passed so quickly. I feel that I have had no time to take in what has happened to me, neither the good things nor the bad. Now there is so little time left. I dare not pull the thread again for it will only bring me to my death. I do not think your gift has brought me luck."

"How ungrateful you are!" the old woman said. "In what way would you have wished things to be different?"

"Perhaps if you had given me a different ball, one where I could have pushed the thread back in as well as pulling it out. Then I could have relived the things that went badly."

The old woman laughed. "You ask a great deal! Do you think that God allows us to live our lives twice over? But I can grant you one final wish, you foolish, demanding man."

"What is that?" Peter asked.

"Choose," the old woman said. Peter thought hard.

At length he said, "I should like to live my life again as if for the first time, but without your magic ball. Then I will experience the bad things as well as the good without cutting them short, and at least my life will not pass as swiftly and meaninglessly as a daydream."

"So be it," said the old woman. "Give me back my ball."

She stretched out her hand and Peter placed the silver ball in it. Then he sat back and closed his eyes with exhaustion.

When he awoke he was in his own bed. His youthful mother was bending over him, shaking him gently.

"Wake up, Peter. You will be late for school. You were sleeping like the dead!"

He looked up at her in surprise and relief.

"I've had a terrible dream, Mother. I dreamed that I was old and sick and that my life had passed like the blinking of an eye with nothing to show for it. Not even any memories."

His mother laughed and shook her head.

"That will never happen," she said. "Memories are the one thing we all have, even when we are old. Now hurry and get dressed. Liese is waiting for you and you will be late for school."

As Peter walked to school with Liese, he noticed what a bright summer morning it was, the kind of morning when it felt good to be alive. Soon he would see his friends and classmates, and even the prospect of lessons didn't seem so bad. In fact he could hardly wait.