

The Bane of Fame

John Major Jenkins. February 3, 2013

I decided to deal with this issue head on, although I shirk the perception that I am “famous.” But there are obviously degrees of notoriety and recognition that any author might reach. I never sought this, but it seems to come with the territory. And, yes, I’ve appeared on TV numerous times, have been interviewed for mainstream newspapers and news websites, have appeared in dozens of documentaries, have written eight books on a hot topic (2012), and am much in demand for conferences and radio shows.

Those are the facts of matter, which I tend to downplay in my own mind. I’m just a normal guy. I still respond to unsolicited emails and do not have a retinue of fans or a partner to assist me in the running of my career. I can be seen hanging out in coffee shops in Fort Collins, perusing used bookstores, getting movies at the public library, or having a beer at one of the local craft beer tasting rooms. Fort Collins is well known internationally for its high-end craft beers, and many local “bars” are more like family-friendly community centers. One of my favorites is CranknStein, where you can have coffee and a bagel sandwich, sample a beer from local breweries, get your bicycle fixed or get your ski-board waxed and tuned up. It’s a cool multi-use space with couches, tables, comfy chairs and Wifi. I’ve often hung out all afternoon, writing, with a beer or two and a sandwich.

CranknStein was the scene of my unfortunate encounter, yesterday in the early evening, with a man who fixated on me, became drunk and disorderly, attacked me, punched me, and stole my notebook. The details will be brief; I want to get at the underlying issue, as I see it.

I spent the day at a coffee shop in old town Fort Collins, designing a book project on my laptop. I nursed a cup of coffee for three hours after a bean burrito. My plan for the evening was to attend a play at the Lincoln Center, starring a friend of mine, Teal Jandrain. By 5 o’clock I was done with writing and laptops, and dropped by Jerry’s Art Mart to pick up some paper for a printing project. I still had 2 hours to kill, so I thought I’d have a beer at CranknStein and jot some notes in my notebook (as I writer, I feel naked without paper and pen on me at all times). Besides, although I’m friends with the owners of Crank and sometimes bump into friends there, it’s a pretty rare occurrence. So I expected another solo visit, the writer in the corner hunched over his notebook.

I arrived and they were moderately busy, it being a Saturday late afternoon. I tossed my notebook on a table and ordered a beer at the bar. Returning to my table a guy hailed me (who I will call RM). I recognized him as a local writer and activist who came to one of my talks a while back, and wrote an environmental piece for a local newspaper. I’d bumped into him a few months ago in town and we had exchanged hellos. Today, he was excited to see me, to talk about 2012 and things, so he invited me to his table. With him was a young man who I recognized because he worked at the library. A pretty non-threatening duo, and I already had a sense that RM was a good writer, with a concern for the environment, and a good guy. This report generally documents how good people can get ugly when alcohol is abused.

The inevitable questioning about “2012” arose, and I gave my standard quick response. RM launched into various things, said my work was genius, but I could see he

was a bit animated. His friend, who was totally sober, said that RM had had a few at the other bar, then another here. I tried to overlook the slight impairment and stick with having a conversation, so I asked the friend (let's call him BV) about his work at the library. The controversial topic of Fracking in Colorado came up, which RM jumped on, angrily, and started lecturing us on it. He'd alternate his adamant denunciations of corporate America with a fist-slam on the table or a demonstration of how to take a man down by hitting him in the Adam's Apple. There was a sense of urgency, frustration, and desperation in his voice that grew to anger.

I began planning a graceful departure, but things escalated quickly. As I spoke with BV, wondering if RM was okay, RM got two more beers (one for me), which he soon started drinking from. Within ten minutes I had had enough, as RM started saying that with my fame and my voice I could bring down the Frackers. When he learned I lived in Windsor, in Weld County, he got very animated and said that's where the whole thing was going to play out. And I needed to use, as he perceived it, my status and fame for the cause. Well, I was vaguely aware of the Fracking issue and tried to converse, but he somehow perceived I was resisting his effort to recruit me for his cause.

As gracefully as possible I excused myself and relocated to another table. Within two minutes he came and sat at my table and glowered at me. I was jotting in my notebook. To effect a departure, I said "well, I've got to go, why don't you give me your phone number and we'll talk more later." He started to give it to me but then suddenly he grabbed my notebook. I stood up, he stood up. I held an arm's length to him as he seemed ready to attack, and I said he should chill out, take a seat, and stop drinking for the night. He just glowered. I picked up my notebook and walked out of the place.

My car was right across the street. Before I reached it, I was grabbed from behind in a wrestle hold. I threw him off and said "get the fuck off of me!" I didn't make eye contact and fumbled with the door handle, but within a split second he was grabbing my notebook again, which I had a good hold off so he struggled, his arms flailing, and he ripped it away from me. He started to run but I tightly grabbed his sweater and he fell down. Getting up, he struck out twice and hit my face, and my glasses went flying. This drew my attention away, to check if they'd been broken, and he fled with my notebook.

By this time --- which was really a matter of 20 seconds since I had walked away from him --- people had come out of CranknStein. The barista noted that I'd been hit, and was calling the police. I sort of pleaded to not have the police involved, but people reminded me that I'd just been assaulted and robbed. Yes, I suppose that was true. RM had fled around the corner by the car wash. BV had come out, and we decided to see if RM was nearby; I wanted to get my notebook back. The police were there soon and we walked around and into Washington's, and by the bus station, but RM couldn't be found. Meanwhile, RM had returned to CranknStein to get his belongings, but the guys in there said he needed to stay put. He became belligerent toward them, and that's when the police arrived. Returning with the officer to the "scene of the crime," I was saddened to see RM on the sidewalk being handcuffed. That really sucks, and I didn't want any of this to happen. I had no animosity toward RM, in fact I admired the piece he wrote in the newspaper.

And so, what can be made of this? It is, I feel, a combination of two things. One is, obviously, how ugly and stupid a person can become when alcohol is abused. The key here is *abuse*. Hey, I enjoy a beer or two or a drink with friends. Almost everybody does.

But there's a HUGE difference between drinking within your limits, responsibly, and pushing yourself over the edge like an idiot. And yes, we've all done that once or twice. So, I'm saddened by what unfolded for RM. The second thing is how my presence, and a distorted perception of who I am seemed to precipitate that craziness in RM's behavior. I want to explore this a little, if for no other reason than trying to make some sense out of a senseless event.

I've already had some experience with being attacked by cyber-stalkers online, and I've written strong critiques of popular writers and professional scholars on a controversial topic (the 2012 "end" date of the Maya). This probably galvanizes attack-energy, but my position has been to offer clarifications and discernment in a very messy field of study. Other people's bad research or flawed models have been exposed. It feels at times that I've been in a trench war with stupidity and ignorance, in the media, in academia, and in the marketplace. I've even had a few death threats, and much vitriolic abuse heaped upon me in public online forums and by lying scholars in peer-review journals. My Wikipedia name-entry page was hijacked in 2010, and my Wordpress site was hacked and destroyed, from which it has not yet recovered.

Perhaps RM has felt this way with the Fracking issue. But I was not countering his views, I was offering to learn more, but nothing I could say would appease his escalating projections onto me. I became a scapegoat in his mind, a source of his troubles, a dumping ground for his anger and frustration. I became, in his imagination, a person who could magically solve the problem --- due to my perceived fame and power status --- but for some reason I refused to do so. Such perceptions, which I suspect were swirling around in RM's liquor-bathed head, are totally devoid of any semblance to reality. But this is how it happens, and real superstars, our beloved and behated Movie Stars, are painfully aware of it, having to deal with fixated fans and stalkers all the time. They even get bodyguards. I'm not even close to being in that league, but clearly something like it has plagued my career. It's probably a madness associated with 2012, a much distorted and confused topic, combined with a perception that I can just call Barack and pull some strings with my contacts in high places, and all the problems will go away. But that's just not the way it is.

So, I did not demand a felony Assault and Robbery charge be made against RM. The officers would have done so if I requested it. Instead it defaults to some lesser harassment charge, with a fine and nothing on permanent record. He needs a wake-up call. Although my cheekbone still hurts and a bruise appeared, and my glasses were slightly bent, I have no interest in retribution. I am at heart a pacifist, true to my Quaker ancestors. RM should consider himself lucky, and should get a handle on his drinking and behavior. Things could have ended, last night, very tragically. My notebook was returned, damaged and with RM's scribbles on the back cover and on a page inside. Sadly, it was something about how his heart aches for the world. I can sympathize --- he's probably a sensitive person who can't stand all the bullshit and corruption that is ruining the planet. But it's probably not a good idea to punch and rob your potential allies.

After shaking off this ordeal, I did go to the play with friends, and tried to re-pattern my brain away from the trauma of being assaulted and robbed. I laughed at the antics in the play, at Teal's gifted performance, saw a few old friends and made two new friends. It sort of worked. Then I drove home.