

# THE VOICE

## MAGAZINE

Vol 20 Iss 26 2012-07-06

### The Artist's Mother

Tribute to Spalding Gray

### Don't Sweat It

Healthy in the heat

### Empty Stage

No room for us

*Plus:  
Maghreb Voices  
From Where I Sit  
and much more!*



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***The Voice  
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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We love to hear from you! Send your questions and  
comments to [voice@voicemagazine.org](mailto:voice@voicemagazine.org), and please  
indicate if we may publish your letter.



## EDITORIAL

Christina M. Frey



## Ghost House

Home selling is hardly a hassle-free experience. Gone are the days when one could put out a sign and hope for the best. But amid all our efforts to get things where they need to be, one thing has stood out—and it's not the paperwork or the market analyses or even the frantic calculations far into the night.

Rather, staging the home for the market has been an education.

Whether it's a result of shows like *The Stagers* or just the latest fad, home staging is no longer just for celebrity homeowners. We hired a professional to do the basic package: walk through the house and rearrange furniture, point out what needs to head to storage, and give tips on how to keep the house constantly showing-ready.

There's something to be said for the concept of home staging. After all, some of us have unique taste in decorating, and a very edgy paint job or old-fashioned wallpapered style will probably give potential buyers pause. Neutral-looking décor is easier for new homeowners to transform into their own space, so it's more attractive because of the possibilities it allows.

Rooms that have been overstuffed with furniture and knickknacks tend to look larger when some of the clutter's been cleared—and a trained stager can recognize what needs to go or stay. Moving furniture and pictures to create perspective and depth have a similar, and valid, purpose. And of course, keeping the house clean suggests that the place is well-kept, always a good impression to give.

At the same time, though, there was something that struck me as strange, off, just a little wrong about the whole idea of staging. And after weeks of living in a showing-ready home, I think I've finally figured it out.

It takes out the human factor.

We live in a time of tolerance—or at least, we like to say we do. We're okay with whatever people want to do, believe, or say. When it comes down to, it though? We'll tolerate anything we can talk about, sure. But God forbid we have to come face to face with evidence of *humanity*.

Because humanity isn't clean, spotless, sterile. We're not the cultured denizens we pretend to be when we place fingers to keyboard. In the reality of the everyday, we're loud, messy, and opinionated. We spill things and we scatter crumbs and we leave *People* magazine on the back of the toilet. We burn dinner and veg on the couch with takeout and sitcom reruns. We talk big, do little. We play video games instead of doing homework. We don't even smell good all the time.



But we're real.

Human.

Alive.

And yet, when confronted with each other's humanity—whether it's during house hunting trips, at Walmart, in the bus station, or while watching *Hoarders*—we can't handle it. We roll our eyes and shrug our shoulders. We shudder and mime gagging. We give the finger to the driver next to us. We know the reality of humanity exists, but we'd just as soon roll up our windows and retreat to our remote world of pretend and imagine it doesn't.

So every day, I sweep away life. I smooth out the beds, arrange the pillows just so. Countertops are cleaned, smudges wiped, the cereal box tucked away in the cupboard. I hide the hand soap from the bathroom counter and the dish soap from the kitchen.

I ignore my spice collection (70 bottles and counting) and make plain meals instead of the curry I'm craving. I hide my daughter's toys, spiriting away the beloved, beat-up stuffed animal and replacing it with the nicer-looking bear she never plays with. I give up scrapbooking and crafting because no one wants to see my projects when they're not quite complete and perfect.

Like the angel of death, I whisk away all traces of real, human dwellers.

And as I sweep away each vestige of humanity, I become a little less human myself.

*"We live in a time of tolerance . . . We're okay with whatever people want to do, believe, or say. When it comes down to, it though? We'll tolerate anything we can talk about, sure. But God forbid we have to come face to face with evidence of humanity."*

## DID YOU KNOW?

## Convocation Online



This month, thousands of AU graduates crossed the stage to receive their diplomas during the University's annual Convocation ceremonies in Athabasca, Alberta.

Yet not all graduates, families, and friends were able to attend the ceremonies. If you or a friend missed the event—or you want a preview of what your own graduation will look like someday—you can still catch all the excitement [here](#), as part of AU's live webcast of the Convocation ceremonies.

Coverage includes all three days of events: addresses, speeches, presentation of degrees, and more. Videos can be freely accessed via Adobe Flash or Windows Media Player.

## IN CONVERSATION WITH . . .

Wanda Waterman

**Hauschka, Part I**

*"I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones."*

John Cage

**Replicating Electronic Experimentation on an Acoustic Instrument**

Hauschka is the pseudonym of German pianist Volker Bertelmann. Classically trained from childhood, he used his percussive piano skills to

play whatever genre happened to appeal to him, even working with pop bands (most notably hip-hop group God's Favourite Dog). Eventually he launched a solo career, in which he has explored the possibilities of electronic and experimental music.

**Give Me a Bottle Cap A**

Hauschka recently recorded an album of improvised music with famed American violinist Hilary Hahn. Working with a world-renowned classical violinist was quite a change from the pop bands he'd once played with, and tuning up her violin to a prepared piano was, well, *interesting*.

"A funny thing . . . always happened when we were on tour," Hauschka says. "When we would go out on stage for sound check, Hilary had to tune her violin to an A on the piano and I always had some bottle caps on the A. So she would say, 'Can I have some kind of an A?' And then we had to laugh about it because it seemed so right."

So what, besides bottle caps, does Hauschka jam into the strings of his grand piano?

"I use all sorts of bottle caps, light filters, and papers on my piano strings for high-hat and tambourine sounds. To create bass sounds I use a lot of the kind of felt mutes that piano tuners use."

Hauschka adopted the practice of prepared piano not out of adulation for its originator, John Cage (about whom he actually knew little), but after his discovery that inserting objects between and around the piano strings could help replicate the sounds of many other instruments in a way similar to an electronic synthesizer.

*"Ideas are one thing and what happens is another."*

John Cage

"I actually was more interested in modern pop and electronic music, but did not want to leave the piano as an instrument behind," Hauschka says. "Somehow I couldn't accept that to do modern music I would

have to choose amplified electronic instruments like keyboards. So I tried to work on sounds on the piano that sounded like electronic music.”

### Village Life

“I grew up in a very small village in Germany called Ferndorf . . . it was a pleasure to be there, at least until I became interested in things in the outside world, like rock bands and travelling. The only thing you could do in a small village with no good clubs was to make your own music, and so at the age of 12 I rented my own rehearsal room. Me and my friends hung out there until I was 18.”

### Memorable Musical Encounters

“One of my most mesmerizing moments was listening to different trains by Steve Reich while I visited a lecture of Alvin Lucier at Wesleyan University. I had a concert there and the next day I sat in on this course because a friend had told me to check it out. Alvin Lucier was talking about the music of John Cage, Meredith Monk, and Steve Reich and it was the most wonderful experience . . . [I] heard music that felt very close, but it was already written way back in time, when I was starting with piano lessons.”

*(To be continued.)*



*Wanda also penned the poems for the artist book They Tell My Tale to Children Now to Help Them to be Good, a collection of meditations on fairy tales, illustrated by artist Susan Malmstrom*

### VOICE HOLIDAY

Summer is in full swing. How will you be spending your holidays? At the beach? Sightseeing in the city? Or just curled up with a cold drink and a good novel?

Here at *The Voice* we'll be taking a brief break, too, while we refocus, recharge, and get ready for the next step for *The Voice Magazine*. We're working to make some big changes to the magazine's layout and delivery to keep up with the latest developments in technology and news sharing.

*The Voice* will be on hiatus from July 23-27, so there will be no issue that week. We'll be back to our regular publishing schedule with the August 3 issue. Meanwhile, keep sending in your comments, letters, and submissions. We always love hearing from our readers!

## HEALTH MATTERS

Katie D'Souza

**Hot and Sweaty**

The summer is upon us, and yes, it's pretty warm out there. If you've spent any time outdoors—or you don't have access to air conditioning—chances are you've been sweating. But have you ever thought about sweat and the process of perspiration?

***The Basics***

Why do we sweat? Heat-induced sweating occurs when the body attempts to cool itself off—like generating its own sprinkler system. Sweating can release up to 580 kJ of heat from the body (that's a lot), which is a good thing when the temperatures are high. But in the process of releasing heat, sweat also releases several key compounds: water, electrolytes, and minor toxins. Let's discuss each of these.

***Water and Electrolytes***

Since the majority of sweat volume is water, it's incredibly important to keep adequately hydrated in the heat. During intense heat or hard physical workouts, your body requires 20 to 40 fluid ounces of water to replace what's been lost through sweating.

What about electrolytes? These are charged particles that are necessary to keep your body's cells functioning properly, similar to how motor oil is required for your car's engine to run smoothly. Electrolytes are responsible for muscle contraction, nerve signal transmission, body fluid regulation, and pH maintenance. Common electrolytes in your sweat include sodium, chloride, potassium, calcium, and magnesium.

Electrolytes are a bit trickier to replenish than water. Depending on the heat and the rate of your physical exercise, you may need to replenish up to 500 mg of sodium, for example (less of other electrolytes). How can you do recoup what you've lost?

Although what might come to mind is a colourful sports drink, these often contain unhealthy ingredients like high fructose corn syrup, sucrose, and artificial flavouring (not to mention artificial colour). If you want something pre-made, look for more “natural” options—drinks with few additives—at your local natural/health foods store.

But you don't need to buy something specialized; you can also make an electrolyte drink using common kitchen ingredients: Squeeze one lemon (or ½ lemon and ½ lime) into a litre of water, and add four shakes of sea salt. If you wish, you can also add ½ squeezed orange (or

***“Normal sweating . . . [increases] your metabolic rate and [cools] your body heat, but it also can leach out minor amounts of toxins.”***



1/3 cup orange juice) to your drink to flavour it. Another simple homemade electrolyte drink uses 1/2 tsp baking soda combined with a spoon of honey, in one litre of water.

### **Detox**

Sweating not only cools you off, it also offers another health benefit: detoxification. At the spa you might spend time in a sauna to sweat out some toxins, and this is a cheaper version of the same idea. Although detoxification is not the main purpose of sweating, it's definitely an added health benefit even though it is on a minor scale. Sweating can release nickel and lead as well as small amounts of other compounds.

### **A Final Thought**

Sometimes you might wonder whether sweating is a good idea, considering the water and electrolyte loss. However, normal sweating in response to heat is an essential bodily process. Not only does it increase your metabolic rate and cool your body heat, but it also can leach out minor amounts of toxins, and, if accompanied by proper hydration and electrolyte balance, can result in increased energy and an overall feeling of well-being. Start sweating safely today!

*Katie D'Souza is an AU graduate and a licensed naturopathic doctor. She currently practices in Ontario.*

*Disclaimer: The information contained in this article is for personal interest only; it is not intended for diagnosis or treatment of any condition. Readers are always encouraged to seek the professional advice of a licensed physician or qualified health care practitioner for personal health or medical conditions.*

## **GREEN LIGHT**



Headed out to the cottage? While spending the weekend a little closer to nature is a great thing, nature's often overlooked when we carry our city practices to cottage country.

Good news, though: the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society has put together an excellent resource in its [Green Cottager Guide](#), freely downloadable in PDF format. The Guide itself is on the longer side, but the page also contains a shorter, downloadable PDF list of tips.

Although some of the suggestions are basic enough—obviously, leaving empty beer bottles on the shore is a no-no—others might make us a little more conscious of resource use. A weekend at the lake is loads of fun. Who wouldn't want to preserve that for the future?

## **Cottage Time**

## MAGHREB VOICES

Wanda Waterman

## Well I'm Goin' to Souss, Morocco, With a Banjo on My Knee

Album: Izenzaren, *Akal* (2012)

Gnaoua music developed when members of black sub-Saharan tribes were forced to assimilate as slaves in urban post-colonial Morocco. The word “Gnaoua” refers to both a specific black Muslim spiritual sect and its music, and was derived from the medieval Maghreb belief that their slaves originated in ancient Ghana.

The Gnaoua genre brings with it sub-Saharan musical modes, a whiff of pre-Muslim Arab paganism, a Sufi predilection for inducing trance states, and a sense of alienation from centuries of being uprooted, disenfranchised, and oppressed.

None of these elements can really be separated from Gnaoua music, although different groups will sometimes emphasize one element over the others. The Master Musicians of Joujouka, for example, tend to centre their performances around the chanting and trance rituals, while Izenzaren, like Nass El Gawan, focus on the political sensibility.

Izenzaren (Berber for “ray of sunshine”) is part of a more recent tradition of Gnaouan-influenced Moroccan popular music, a tradition that includes the iconic Nass al-Ghiwane and Jil-Jilala. But Izenzaren sings not in Arabic but in Berber, the language of the large ethnic group indigenous to Morocco and portions of Algeria.

The Berber language is one in which words have the stronger, magical significance one finds in ancient tongues. Berber is concrete and poetic, the expressions full of tenderness. A mother will call her son “my liver” as a term of endearment. The word *henna* is a Berber word meaning “sweet,” “gracious,” or “loving,” and on this album lead singer Igout Abdelhadi sings “*Immi henna*”—“gracious mother.”

The word “Akal” means “earth,” and the songs on this album express a tenderness for nature. At the same time, it serves as a metaphor for indigenous peoples, or people of the earth; in one of the songs, Igout sings (with a sidelong glance at the plight of marginalized peoples of the Maghreb), “*All the trees are being removed; those that are not burned are thrown in the river.*”

If you wanted to find a comparable genre in North America, the closest match would be early gospel and blues music. For one thing, there is much stylistic common ground: call-and-response, a loose but salient rhythm structure, repetition, soulful delivery, coexisting spiritual and secular subject matter, expressions of intense emotions, crude and rustic instruments, and often illiterate musicians. There are also spiritual similarities. Like blues, Gnaoua has roots in pagan mysticism but at the same time upholds monotheism, paying homage to the Abrahamic God.

Musically, Gnaoua is closest to the blues of North Mississippi, also a throwback to the modal roots of the sub-Saharan slaves brought to America. Like the blues singers forced to sing in the language of their captors, the Gnaouan slaves traditionally sang in Berber, French, and Arabic, the languages of North Africa.

The members of Izenzaren aren't descended from slaves; they're Berbers from the village of Tazanzaret in the Souss region of southern Morocco. Like the rest of Morocco, the region has its own style: *Ahwach*, a celebratory genre to be played at weddings and other special events. The Tazanzaret style is a further specialization of that.

Recently urbanized young Berbers, the musicians of Izenzaren adopted the Gnaouan musical tradition to form their own unique pop sound in much the same way that white American youth adopted black blues and rhythm-and-blues to develop rock-and-roll—and for mostly the same reasons. Youth in patriarchal cultures tend to feel hopeless and excluded and often identify with marginalized groups, which also helps them to break away from their own cultures and form new identities. Under these conditions, groups as culturally vibrant as African-Americans or Gnaouans seem very attractive.

*"Igout is . . . an utterly engaging singer, delivering the songs in a throaty, homespun tenor."*

The musicians of Izenzaren met in the '60s but officially formed in 1972 and began performing, recording, and even making television appearances. After a disagreement the group split; there are currently two groups laying claim to the moniker, Izenzaren Igout Abdelhadi and Izenzaren Shamkh. The first is the better-known, and is named after its iconic lead singer and banjo player Igout Abdelhadi.

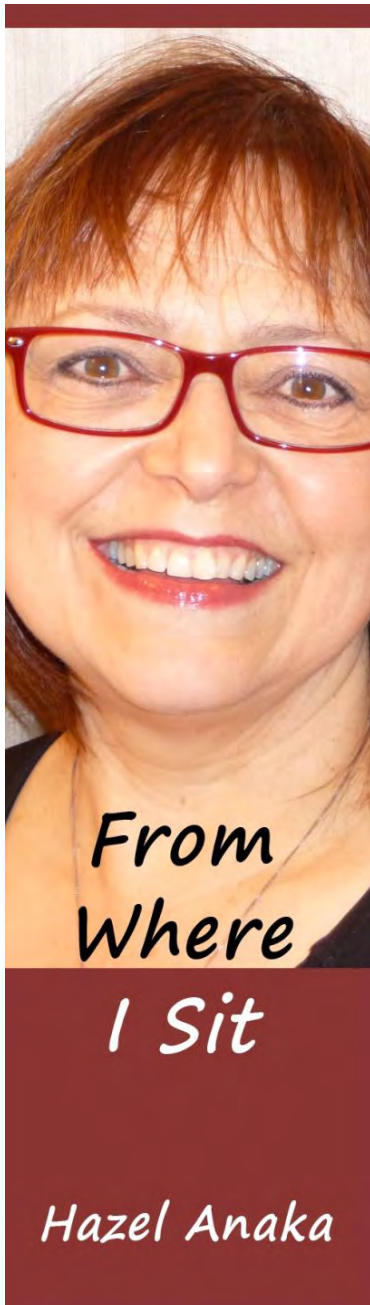
Igout is a renowned master musician who makes the banjo sound like a combination of mandolin, *sentir*, and *gimbri*. He's also an utterly engaging singer, delivering the songs in a throaty, homespun tenor. The rest of the band is a mix of traditional and modern instruments. The musical structure is in keeping with African and Middle Eastern music in general; it's highly modal with mounting repetitions of musical motifs that end in thrilling crescendos.

In addition to sharing some of the historical origins of blues, Gnaoua has had the same leavening influence as blues, galvanizing the development of many other genres. Gnaoua informs rap in Morocco, and Moroccan rap is among the best in the world. It also uses blue notes (the third note of the scale is flattened slightly to make that soulful dissonance).

An important difference is that Gnaoua has strictly spiritual origins, whereas the blues can be seen as profane but with a nod to religion and an anxiety about fate which readily embraces superstition. For example, the common blues song subject Johnny Cockaroo refers to the use of a magical root called High John the Conqueror to bring good luck.

A good listen to this marvellous set of tracks will convince you of one thing: as varied as it is, the music of the African diaspora is all of a piece, a testament to the remarkable enduring power of African culture.

*This article would not have been possible without the assistance of Abdellah Hazzam of Taghijit, Morocco and Driss Akjij of Meknes, Morocco. Chokran jazeelan.*



## Celebrating Canada

No one would dispute the merits of mindfulness any more than we'd argue against motherhood or apple pie. What's not to like? It promises us serenity, gratitude, awareness. It forces us to slow down despite the push and pull of our daily responsibilities. It ensures that we stop the insanity long enough to notice and appreciate the blessings in our lives.

That's how I felt on Saturday. It was day two of Andrews, Alberta's annual fair, Sportoff Days. As county councillor, Roy had to ride on a float in the parade. Blessing number one was that Greg, Carrie, Hilary, and Grady all came out for the day. It's amazing what we all do for the love of that little boy.

Parades take on a new significance. Not that we were agog admiring the creativity of the floats; on the contrary, we were scurrying to collect the candy thrown into the street. We dodged horses and vehicle tires to fill the ice cream pail I had brought for Grady.

Next we killed some time at the school playground, as Grady and Hilary swung and dangled. The rest of us felt the heat on our skin and thought about searching out some shade. Then it was on to the arena to check out the ball hockey tournament. How did Grady manage to leave home without his hockey stick?

Before we headed to the fair grounds, I made the mistake of telling Grady that the replica hockey rink would be there for kids to play in. Can we all say "non-stop pestering" until it finally arrived? He could barely pull himself away long enough to pet a rabbit in the farm petting zoo.

Through it all, my kids reconnected with former classmates and caught up on the news of others' careers and kids. Roy talked to constituents. I observed it all and floated from one group to another.

Eventually we managed to drag Grady away from the mini-rink by bribing him with the promise of sand races. We found seats high in the bleachers and watched heat after heat of stock and modified trucks race each other on the sand track. We covered our ears during the deafening roar and got Grady to predict the winner in each match. We enjoyed it more because of his unabashed delight at the spectacle. Beer was downed; ice cream was consumed; sunscreen was reapplied; even a nap was squeezed in.

Even with all the running around, for the better part of the day we were simply "there." We soaked up the sights, the smells, the warmth, the conversation and the knowledge that we were making memories. We

ate at a Chinese restaurant before heading to the farm for a short visit. By then everyone was spent, and our people headed home.

Roy and I got our second wind and went to my sister's for a bonfire and conversation. The fireworks display at 11 capped off a wonderful day. It doesn't get much better than celebrating our precious Canada with people we love, from where I sit.

*Hazel Anaka's first novel is [Lucky Dog](#). Visit her [website](#) for more information or follow her on Twitter [@anakawrites](#).*

## CLICK OF THE WRIST

1812

**This past week saw the celebration of both Canada Day and the Fourth of July, and many border cities combined the two holidays into one big celebration. Yet two centuries ago both countries were at war—with each other. In honour of the bicentennial of the War of 1812, this week's links dig more deeply into the battles and beyond.**

### Secret Stash

There are countless historical treasures dating from the war era, but not all are easily accessible; for heritage conservation purposes, many are kept in a secure location and rarely prepared for public display. This CBC video takes viewers behind the walls of one of these conservation centres for a peek at some rarely-seen artifacts.

### When and Where

If your history is a bit rusty, check out this interactive timeline/map of the battles of the War of 1812. Its time slider and clickable map make it easy to navigate and figure out what happened when.

### First Nations

The War of 1812 wasn't just a fight between white armies, but history books have traditionally glossed over First Nations involvement. This CBC article and video shed light on the untold stories.

### Today

Want to know what special exhibits, commemorations, and events are going on in your local area? The Government of Canada's War of 1812 portal links up by region.





## THE MINDFUL BARD

Wanda Waterman



### Books, Music, and Film to Wake Up Your Muse and Help You Change the World

**Film:** *And Everything is Going Fine* (Washington Square Films 2010)

**Director:** Steven Soderbergh

**Genre:** Documentary

*"Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows . . . It's not desiring the fall; it's terror of the flames. And yet nobody down on the sidewalk, looking up and yelling 'Don't!' and 'Hang on!' can understand the jump. Not really. You'd have to have personally been trapped and felt flames to really understand a terror way beyond falling."*

David Foster Wallace

### Not With a Whimper, But a Bang

As the film begins, Spalding Gray, middle-aged now, is visiting his father and stepmother. Years before, his biological mom had suffered a long, slow, and tortuous nervous breakdown during which the young Spalding had so exhausted himself trying to save her that he'd finally gone away for a vacation. She committed suicide in his absence. This event forms the central theme of much of Gray's work; it's both the progenitor and the guiding light within the sense of chaos to which he so often refers.

*"And everything is going fine except this particular day, it's summer, and we're eating outside, and the only problem is flies. There's a fly, look out, a fly. Close the door, get out the bomber. My father got out this big fogger and set it off by the picnic table out back, and my stepmother, who collects antiques, got out the antique fly gun, and you pull it back like this, and you line it up a certain distance from the fly, and if you're, if you're all right, the thing goes . . . [makes noise]"*

Spalding Gray made an artistic career out of long, minimalist stage performances that were essentially confessionals. Yes, in today's cultural climate we are fair sick of this sort of thing; nonetheless, if done well, it can be one of the most effective vehicles for conveying the meaning and tenor of postmodern life. It has become our equivalent of Greek tragedy and has the same transformative power for individuals and society.

How did Gray make it work so well? How did he make his stage monologues so engaging, so *entertaining*? Ordinarily, listening to someone talk about himself is boring and irritating, and not just because it's become so common in the arts and media these days.

But there's just something about Spalding's gentle face and voice, his timing (he's dyslexic, which helps), his classic East-coast American accent, and his general air of openness and innocence. Perhaps if one had to pinpoint what really propels his monologues, it might be the trauma that informs everything; the fact of his mother's suicide created a great convoluted knot that he spent his whole life trying to untangle, and an untangling such as this requires witnesses.

If illness is metaphor, as Susan Sontag suggested, what is the significance of the mentally ill mother? There are a number of cultural icons whose lives were scarred by the experience of growing up with a mother who was suffering from mental illness—R. Crumb, Allen Ginsberg, and Marilyn Monroe, to name a few—and their art was clearly affected by this experience. At the risk of minimizing the very real pain and suffering caused to children when the most important person in their lives is not quite all there, what does the archetype of the mad mother mean as a symbol of the existential condition?

Mental illness is one thing, but when a person upon whom one is heavily dependent is suffering from the condition, it feels like there's no bottom to reality; anything can happen, and probably will. From moment to moment we're never quite safe. This sense of essential insecurity is not just part of growing up with an unstable parent, but it often manifests in the artist's deep dissatisfaction with the world, leading to the impulse to recreate it.

First, let's ask where her illness originated. In ordinary life, we know that's it's an unlucky combination of heredity and environment that cook up just the right brain chemicals to push someone over the edge. However, in a work of art madness always means something: Someone or something is to blame and is now on trial.

I'm not going to trivialize this film's achievement by suggesting that it blames anyone or puts a finger on a solution to either mental illness *or* socio-cultural dysfunction. Neither am I going to suggest that Spalding—or the filmmakers on his behalf—are trying to rationalize away his personal accountability. But his art as such points the way out of the forest, leading Hansel and Gretel safely away from the gingerbread sugar high.

Gray's great achievement was how he used public performance as an opportunity for self-analysis, by asking the audience (standing in for the culture at large) to participate in his therapy. We're not made to feel that as a society we broke it and now we have to fix it; rather, we're simply the silent hearers whose listening facilitates his healing. We're free to mull over what he says and to vicariously experience his pain and even to consider a cure, but are not given an opportunity to offer him solutions—he has a proper therapist for that—and so we're spared a sense of guilt if things don't go well for him.

Gray invites us to sift through mountains of words, not so much to find a solution as to place some level of order and meaning on the chaos of confession. We cannot let it simply fade out before we find some truth in it, leading to a fulfillment of T.S. Eliot's pseudo-prophetic lines from his poem "The Hollow Men":

*"This is the way the world ends*

*Not with a bang but a whimper."*

*Everything is Going Fine* manifests eight of the Mindful Bard's criteria for films well worth seeing: 1) it poses and admirably responds to questions that have a direct bearing on my view of existence; 2) it is about attainment of the true self; 3) it inspires an awareness of the sanctity of creation; 4) it displays an engagement with and compassionate response to suffering; 5) it gives me artistic tools; 6) it makes me want to be a better artist; 7) it enables me to respond with compassion and efficacy to the suffering around me; and 8) it makes me appreciate that life is a complex and rare phenomenon, making living a unique opportunity.

## AROUND AU

Karl Low



**YouTubing AU:** As I've mentioned before, AU's YouTube channel houses videos from AU Press. But it is also home to a video channel for Athabasca University itself.

While the AU Press channel has been dormant for the past two years, AU is continually updating the Athabasca University channel, with content added just last month. The most recent addition is the fourth part of a series supplementing a book looking at the energy industry in Northern Alberta. Unfortunately, the book itself is not freely available to students.

The Athabasca University channel also offers a variety of videos: lessons on how to operate stereoscopic and compound microscopes, a short introduction to the theory of learning called connectivism (and an interview for one of its originators, Dr. George Siemens), and a number of advertisements AU has produced about itself.

While there is not a lot of material here, the book supplementary series is very interesting, and it would be good if AU continued to produce more material like this and the work on connectivism, to show the kind of research and thinking that the University can promote.

**PLAR Portfolio Examples:** The Centre for Learning Accreditation site has been upgraded and now includes an example of what a completed portfolio for Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition (PLAR) should look like. If you have been working at a specific profession for some time and wish to have your experience and knowledge in your field recognized, you might want to investigate creating and submitting a portfolio for PLAR. With the right experience, you could significantly shorten the time and effort required to get a certificate or a degree.

However, creating a full portfolio for PLAR is not an easy task, as looking at their example portfolio will show you. Additionally, the cost of a PLAR is \$750, so you'll want to take a careful look at what type of credits you can expect to get from a PLAR and whether you really think you've gained the experience to warrant it.

## INTERNATIONAL NEWS DESK



### At Home: Angry Birds

An app came to life recently as angry birds descended upon a Winnipeg neighbourhood, alarming residents and even affecting the delivery of the mail. There were no pigs or space goggles involved, but experts think the attackers may have been protecting their eggs—just like the birds in the popular game.

As the CBC reports, aggressive black birds—“crows or ravens”—were dive-bombing the residents and mail carriers. Residents were “unable to receive their mail,” as safety concerns caused Canada Post to place mail delivery on hold until the situation was resolved.

Several of the residents themselves had been attacked, and pets and vehicles were also targeted. One resident told reporters that a particularly persistent bird “came after” her, “[following her] all around.”

According to conservationists, the birds were probably “[defending] their young while they [were] vulnerable to predators.” Residents were advised to “avoid the area if possible, for a day or so, until the young birds can fly away.”

Some 30 houses were affected by the strange behaviour.

### Around the World: Tasteless Mutation

Ever bitten into a big, juicy tomato and been disappointed at the blandness of what seemed to be a rich, red treat? Or do you have fond memories of the tomatoes of your youth and wonder why today’s varieties don’t measure up? It may not be in your imagination, a new study suggests.

As the CBC reports, the study discovered that a genetic mutation “introduced into tomatoes to make them ripen more uniformly might have inadvertently reduced some of the sugar content that makes them taste good.”

The mutation was originally intended to aid harvesters in “improving harvesting techniques.” Since traditionally tomatoes will ripen at an uneven pace, breeders developed a variety of tomato that would be uniform at the green stage. The end result: a fruit that would ripen evenly, beginning with a “uniform light green at the time of harvesting” and later “[ripening] to an evenly distributed red en route to the grocery store.”

A consequence, though, was that scientists “inadvertently disabled a protein that . . . helps optimize photosynthesis.” This means a reduction in “the amount of sugars and lycopene . . . which are produced during photosynthesis.”

Now scientists are seeking to reincorporate those protein levels to improve the tomato’s flavour once again.

## AUSU UPDATE



### AU Students urge candidates to improve university funding

AU students are concerned about the financial health of Athabasca University and the effect of recent news stories on the reputation of the AUSU membership.

A recent CBC report notes that in recent years the university has made a series of reserve draws to cover budget shortfalls, draining the once \$30-million reserve fund.

Tuition and fees at AU, meanwhile, continue to increase despite the concerns of AUSU that education is becoming increasingly unaffordable in Alberta.

“I’m very concerned about AU’s financial situation,” says AUSU President Bethany Tynes. “AU is increasing student fees, observing hiring freezes, denying sabbaticals, delaying projects, and downsizing their offices due to a lack of available funds. We don’t want to see the quality of our education diminish.”

“At the same time,” Tynes continues, “I am confused by AU Board Chair Barry Walker’s comment to the CBC that AU is ‘in a very sound financial position,’ as the concerns we’ve noted do not support the notion that we’re financially sound.”

Chronic underfunding of public post-secondary education is a factor in AU’s financial stress. AU students have lobbied Alberta in recent years to address the shortfall; our members call on the candidates in Alberta’s provincial election to make post-secondary funding a priority in their platforms and to ensure that all Alberta universities are funded equally and sufficiently. Public post-secondary institutions need a reliable, predictable funding model that provides sufficient base operating funds to support a world-class education.

Athabasca University Students' Union is the largest students' union in Alberta, representing nearly 40,000 undergraduates annually.

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*This column is provided by AUSU to facilitate communication with its members. The Voice does not write or edit this section; all content has been exclusively and directly provided by AUSU, and any questions or comments about the material should be directed to [ausu@ausu.org](mailto:ausu@ausu.org).*



# CLASSIFIEDS

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## THE VOICE

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