

Civilization Versus The Full-Body For-Keepsies Panty Raid... and The Survival Value of ADD

written by Holly

September 19, 2022

By Holly Lisle

When I was a kid and my family lived on the western tundra of Alaska, my dad took me hunting and fishing with him. We were bringing in food for the table in a place where agriculture was impossible.

I loved tagging along and helping out. I was nine, so for hunting I was just a pair of extra hands carrying stuff home. I actually got to participate in fishing, and was pretty good at it. In later years, in Ohio, I fished in a nearby lake for bass and bluegills, right up until I turned sixteen and would have needed a license.

I inherited certain traits that made me a good hunting and fishing companion, the primary one being the ability to sit still and quiet for long periods of time without falling asleep – a survival skill that with fishing requires you to keep a tiny portion of your attention on a single spot of undercut at the outward bend in a river or stream under which a big bass is probably waiting, watching for food to drop into the little corner of the waterway he's staked out for himself. (Or to sit utterly still in a boat over crystal clear water while waiting for one of the shadows moving beneath it to hit your bait.)

To maintain this necessary stillness, you have to set the bigger part of your mind adrift, letting it wander wherever it will and entertain itself as best it can, while you keep just the tiniest bit of your awareness hooked through your

fingertips to the rod and reel, and your vision aimed at the tip of the rod, so that when you see the twitch and feel the first tentative nibble, you bring your awareness back to what you're doing. If you're quick enough, when your prey takes the bait, you can set the hook and reel it in.

(I'll note that if you're sitting in a kayak, and you pull in a Northern pike, see two rows of dagger teeth coming at you, and flail your fish and all those teeth straight at your dad, the danger of the kayak tipping and dumping both of you into permafrost-chilled water is extreme. We did NOT tip the kayak, so we also not freeze to death and drown the day I did that. However, it was a near enough miss that I also did not get to go fishing in the kayak again.)

Hunting for your dinner (at least the kind of hunting you can do with a nine-year-old in tow) is the same process. Both of you mark the point in the sky where the ducks or geese will come from. And then you sit utterly still and silent behind the cover of overgrowth, set most of your mind adrift while staying awake, and keep the pinpoint of your attention on the direction from which you expect incoming motion.

Hunting (or at least being a good hunting companion) and fishing and the fact that even at the age of nine, I was good at these: That's Exhibit One.

* * *

Exhibit Two is civilization as embodied by five hundred years of representative government in the Roman Republic (and the additional two hundred years of the increasingly awful Caesars of the Roman Empire). These are the origins of my husband's people. Germans and Romans, the rule of law, a long and impressive representative government that deteriorated into god-kings and debauchery, as republics tend to do when people forget why representative government has to actually BE representative.

My husband's ancestors were Germans and Romans. They had a civilization that was agriculture-and-domesticated-livestock-based, so that food grew on patches of ground that folks owned and tended, and it didn't try to get away from you (or kill you), or in the case of livestock, could at least could be herded by shepherds and dogs. There was no need for the hunter mind, for the long stillness and the utter silence of waiting, for the need to set a tight focus on the single point of your objective while letting the rest of your mind float around, entertaining itself with amusing thoughts and daydreams.

My ancestry is Scots and Vikings.

The Scots are descendants of the blue-painted Celts who were so terrifying the Romans ceased their northern expansion and built Hadrian's Wall so they could sleep nights behind something sturdy...

My ancestors are also the inventors of haggis. You win some. You lose some.

The Vikings were poets, explorers, and inventors of the full-body, for-keepsies panty raid, in which they went viking for wealth and replacement women. Some bits of it might have been heroic. Some bits were horrific.

Down at the baseline, though, it was a necessary population replacement maneuver essential to their continued existence.

Childbirth is a deadly bitch for mother and child alike in pre-medical cultures, and when you throw in the long winter darkness of high-latitude Scots and Viking terrain, inevitable food shortages, and brutal vitamin D deficiencies, you're going to need to get replacements for the women and children who don't survive.

My ancestry, and that adaptation for grabbing all possible Vitamin D during the short sun season has left me with practically transparent skin, and a tendency to burn, blister,

and peel even in even relatively moderate latitudes. I sunburn in OHIO.

* * *

But my forebears also gave me the hunter adaptation. The ability to focus long... to set a tiny attention flag on the object of my interest, and then to disappear into stillness while waiting for my future meal to trigger the flag I set to bring me back.

Which was great when I was in a world that needed hunter skills.

When I came back to civilization— to riding a school bus and sitting still in a box for a bunch of hours a day, and being talked at by people who insisted that I not fidget, not talk, and not get up and run around, the adaptive stillness of the hunter kicked in, my mind set its tight focus on the object of my captivity (the teacher in charge of the class) and the rest of me went Viking through the realms of my imagination. When I got the inevitable sigh, the “Earth to Holly” remark from the teacher, and came back, I’d answer the question (after it was repeated, anyway)... and then vanish again back into my own much more interesting world.

THAT is ADD. It is an adaptive survival mechanism that does not mesh well with “Everybody stand, everybody sit, everybody watch this board, everybody pay attention to these boring-ass numbers...”

It is not a disorder.

It is not a fucking disease.

It does not mean you’re broken, damaged, or an object to be pitied.

It is just Hunter Brain, and it means that **if** you’re in an everybody-stand-up, everybody-sit-down, everybody-be-the-same

situation, you're in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing – that you need to change the kind of work you do, the kind of play you do, the kind of life you're leading to give yourself things that you can focus on in stillness, in quiet, away from the constant low-level chaos that is “Multitasking, Bells, Stand-Up, Sit-Down, Everybody Do Everything All at the Same Damn Time in the Same Damn Way Because We Said So” bullshit that is most of education, and most of life outside of education.

Hunter Brain is really, really useful for writing fiction. Total body stillness, focus on that one pinpoint of attention (the plot, the character, the conflict – whichever one is at the forefront at the moment), the patience to let let that idea come, like the shadow of a fish under the water moving toward the lure, like the shadow of a V of ducks coming in over a lake, with the one that will keep you from starving for another couple of days somewhere in that aerodynamic formation swinging around to land.

It's a good brain for folks who like to work alone. Forestry, Fish and Wildlife Management, or exploring.

It was pretty good for nursing when I was working ER (it was great for emergency situations), and not too bad for Med-Surg while having a single set of patients who were mine for twelve hours.

It's not so great for office jobs, for water-coolers, for constant interruptions, for multitasking.

It's not, in other words, the best brain for most modern-life jobs.

But for sitting in silence plotting fiction, for finding the story, for spotting that shadow beneath the water that is your plot, and luring it in, being still, being patient, letting it come to you...

Fucking awesome for that. For that, it is a significant advantage, and not a deficit, and not a disorder. It is, in fact, a damned useful tool.

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To 169 on the write-in of Ohio 2

written by Holly
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A lot of stuff is going from this part, to be replaced by some significantly better stuff following a line of thought my editor pointed out to me.

I'm excited by how things started coming together here.

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Replotting Ohio 2... The Experiment that Went BOOM!

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Book 2 has a lot of salvageable material. A lot of awesome world stuff, some wonderfully funny scenes, some pretty scary scenes.

It was fun for me to read, and I made myself laugh a bunch of times, got a little teary-eyed, did a light revision and passed it off to my Editor.

Matt, however, is really, really good at what he does.

And he discovered that while the story is a lot of fun, what it doesn't have is a strong story through-line.

Here's the thing...

I had a line-for scene plot for the book built out.

It, however, lacked the sort of *epic sense of wonder* that made my heart beat faster while I was writing it.

So... when Epic Sense of Wonder crept past me while I was being a good girl and following the plot, my hunting brain caught the scent...

...And chased.

I got some great stuff out of the chase. The plot, however, got eaten by volemarines and vile scunners in the process.

So now, I'm going back and figuring out how to keep all the epic stuff, the *sensawunda* stuff, the glorious terrifying magic and the really creepy evil...

WHILE STILL HAVING A DAMN PLOT.

Today... plotting worksheet and tight focus.

There are folks saying, "But you teach classes on how to write novels."

Yup. **I also invent and test new processes**, because if you do

the same thing every time, you get the same results every time. And to get BETTER results, and consequently better novels, you have to experiment.

Many experiments... um... explode.

And the person looking at the new processes, and experimenting, is the one upon whom they explode.

SO...

THIS process is not going to be in any new class coming your way from me. You can thank me later.

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And more of the same... OHIO 2 (NO... THREE) Revision

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I'm going through all five novels.

At the moment, I'm tearing apart Book One, which I got right, to find out *where I need to take Book ~~Two~~—THREE in the revision.*

It's a complicated process, and I'm managing to give myself regular headaches going through it. And all of this is my own damn fault.

I have a good process for plotting and writing novels, but

somehow, I was having so damn much fun with these that I didn't use my process. I essentially pantsed my way through Books 2-5, having built out my four line-for-scene outlines for each of the remaining four books... and then ignoring the damn things to chase "better ideas."

Well, if you know what works for you, and you decide to ignore your proven process to go rabbiting after "Ooooh, SHINY!!!", you deserve what you get.

And here I am.

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Still replotting, still restructuring on Ohio 3

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There's damn little I'm going to be able to save. Ohio 3 is lost in the weeds.

So at this point, I'm barely even looking for things to save. I'm just looking for the story I wanted to tell but didn't, and if I can use any of what I already wrote, great. If not... well, that's okay, too.

This. **THIS** is what happens when, *instead of using my system*, I go chasing after that alluring "ooh, awesome" better idea.

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Here's that Wrong Left Turn In Albuquerque... and it's as bad as I dreaded.

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The first sixty pages of Ohio 3 held up fine.

Starting on manuscript page 61, I went in *exactly* the wrong direction, dropped the really good local character I had in place for one who broke my otherwise tight worldbuilding through two novels and the start of this one all to shit, threw in a bunch of stuff that widens the scope of one small, tightly bordered town by five... count 'em... FIVE whole planets.

And while it doesn't QUITE go as far as "anything can happen, so nothing matters", it sure a shit doesn't stay inside the original premise of the series, which is that the things that happen in this one small town **can affect the universe**... BUT *they can only EVER happen inside the physical boundaries of this one small town.*

So now I'm going to read the rest of what I've written in this book with an eye toward finding anything I can save.

I'm going to assume there will be nothing. But I'm going to do a complete read through, just in case.

And then... oh, yippee... I'm going to pick up the plot I started on page one, and broke on page 60, and I'm going to replot.

And then rewrite.

And then be grateful that I did not pursue any of the new characters or worldbuilding in the latter part of this novel in either Book Four or Book Five.

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Starting the Ohio 3 Read-through/Revision

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Okay. I have the manuscript printed out.

I did some brainstorming in the shower on how I can save as much of what I remember of the story as possible WITHOUT breaking what I did in the first two books, or the last two.

Worst case, I'll end up writing a completely new novel. That's about as bad as fiction-writing worst cases get, though, and I'm not eager to do that.

So while I was letting the shower pound on my head, I figured out some ways I might be able to keep a lot of what I did in Book 3 WHILE working in the Primary Five-Book problem (which I didn't figure out until I was about halfway through Book Five).

The primary problem is evident in the first chapter of Book One. I just didn't extrapolate from RESULTS backwards to CAUSES to identify the problem until I started thinking through this massive revision.

It became clear there, it's BEEE-Y000-TEE-FUL!, and mostly my Muse/Gut/Subconscious Mind got all the stuff I needed into the books without me identifying why I needed them.

Not, though, in this book. In this book, I ran off chasing wild Scots, and as a result, I face a lot of work to get things on track.

However, post-shower, ***I don't think I'm going to have to throw this book out and start fresh.***

That's big. From what I remember of the book, there's a lot in it that still fits the later books, and that can be saved.

SO...

With under four-hundred manuscript pages now sitting on my desk, I'm going to do one no-touch read-through just to reacquaint myself with what's in there. I'll take notes in my series notebook.

THEN and ONLY THEN, I'll brainstorm solutions to the question: What's worth saving, and what has to go?

Wish me luck.

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Good news, BAD news on the Ohio Novels.

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Finished up the type-in revision of Ohio 2 yesterday, and I love the book. Printed out the revised manuscript this morning, and have it set up for Matt to edit when he has time.

And then I opened up Ohio 3.

<cue theme from Jaws: beat head repeatedly on desk with vigor and frustration... but in time with the music, because at least I can do this with a little style>

Boy, oh, BOY did I go off in the wrong direction with that novel. I'm torn between:

- Spending the paper and printer toner to print it out, and trying to revise it into a keepable novel
- Exporting it as a pdf I can read off of my Kindle, just to get a read-through to see what – if anything – I can salvage
- Shoving it into the Dead Zone on my hard drive (projects over the years that I've killed off for being unworthy, unfun, or just bad...), and writing a new Ohio 3
- Deleting the thing unread, and doing a brand-new Book 3

Today, however, I'm going to do nothing.

I'm just off the pretty-tough revision of Ohio 2. I have to concede that my objectivity is not at its highest.

Also, I'm kind of queasy, and I don't think it's entirely from that first encounter with Book 3.

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Ohio 2 Revision: To page 398 of 431

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Pretty decent day. This part of the book took significant reworking, and I'm betting this is going to be one of the places where my editor finds out I struggled a bit.

But I love what I finally ended up with.

And I stand a pretty good chance of finishing the revision on Monday. I am, of course, taking the weekend off. Sanity requires down time.

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Revised Ohio 2 through page 369 – and very happy with my progress.

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Today was one of the weirder parts of Book 2, and it's been a while since I've seen it. I was afraid it might not hold up.

But it did. I found myself laughing in the right places, and

getting choked up in the right places, and while there were some story issues I had to fix, this section was overall pretty clean.

Tomorrow, I'll pick up on manuscript page 369 with Chapter 23, and I should be able to finish most of the rest of the write-in revision. If not all of it.

The last page of this manuscript is page 431.

That's less than a hundred pages of write-in – should be doable if everything else goes smoothly.

It would be pretty cool to have the type-in revision finished this week. I'd then be able to start fresh on the read-through of Book 3 on Monday.

I'll see how it goes.

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