

## FRANK CONROY

*FRANK CONROY (b. 1936) grew up in the East, mostly under conditions of poverty, then attended Haverford College in Pennsylvania. He is a jazz pianist, and from time to time has supported himself as a musician. In 1982 he became director of the literature program at the National Endowment for the Arts, and in 1987 director of the writing program at the University of Iowa.*

*Stop Time (1967) was the marvelous memoir-as-novel by which Conroy entered the literary scene, writing a reminiscent prose rich with detail, exact and bright though miniature with distance, like the landscape crafted behind model trains. For a long time he published no further books, but then in 1985 he collected his short stories in *Midair*, and in 1994 he published a novel, *Body and Soul*.*

*“Think About It,” has an unusual provenance. In a letter, Conroy writes that soon after he arrived at Iowa, “the dean asked me to address the graduating class of the College of Liberal Arts. Now like every writer I loathe writing for free. ...I read it at an indoor commencement at the huge basketball arena – so big the words echoed back at me while I spoke, like some political thing. Ifelt like Mussolini.” Later a friend showed a copy to Lewis Lapham, editor of Harper’s, who printed it, whence it was reprinted first in a Best American Essays volume and now in The Contemporary Essay.*

### *Think About It*

When I was sixteen I worked selling hot dogs at a stand in the Fourteenth Street subway station in New York City, one level above the trains and one below the street, where the crowds continually flowed back and forth. I worked with three Puerto Rican men who could not speak English. I had no Spanish, and although we understood each other well with regard to the tasks at hand, sensing and adjusting to each other’s body movements in the extremely confined space in which we operated, I felt isolated with no one to talk to. On my break I came out from behind the counter and passed the time with two old black men who ran a shoeshine stand in a dark corner of the corridor. It was a

poor location, half hidden by columns, and they didn't have much business. I would sit with my back against the wall while they stood or moved around their ancient elevated stand, talking to each other or to me, but always staring into the distance as they did so.

As the weeks went by I realized that they never looked at anything in their immediate vicinity – not at me or their stand or anybody who might come within ten or fifteen feet. They did not look at approaching customers once they were inside the perimeter. Save for the instant it took to discern the color of the shoes, they did not even look at what they were doing while they worked, but rubbed in polish, brushed, and buffed by feel while looking over their shoulders, into the distance, as if awaiting the arrival of an important person. Of course there wasn't all that much distance in the underground station, but their behavior was so focused and consistent they seemed somehow to transcend the physical. A powerful mood was created, and I came almost to believe that these men could see through walls, through girders, and around corners to whatever hyperspace it was where whoever it was they were waiting and watching for would finally emerge. Their scattered talk was hip, elliptical, and hinted at mysteries beyond my white boy's ken, but it was the staring off, the long, steady staring off, that had me hypnotized. I left for a better job, with handshakes from both of them, without understanding what I had seen.

Perhaps ten years later, after playing jazz with black musicians in various Harlem clubs, hanging out uptown with a few young artists and intellectuals, I began to learn from them something of the extraordinarily varied and complex riffs and rituals embraced by different people to help themselves get through life in the ghetto. Fantasy of all kinds – from playful to dangerous – was in the very air of Harlem. It was the spice of uptown life.

Only then did I understand the two shoeshine men. They were trapped in a demeaning situation in a dark corner in an underground corridor in a filthy subway system. Their continuous staring off was a kind of statement, and kind of dance. Our bodies are here, went the statement, but our souls are receiving nourishment from distant sources only we can see. They were

powerful magic dancers, sorcerers almost, and thirty-five years later I can still feel the pressure of their spell.

The light bulb may appear over your head, is what I'm saying, but it may be a while before it actually goes on. Early in my attempts to learn jazz piano, I used to listen to recordings of a fine player named Red Garland, whose music I admired. I couldn't quite figure out what he was doing with his left hand, however; the chords eluded me. I went uptown to an obscure club where he was playing with his trio, caught him on his break, and simply asked him. "Sixths," he said cheerfully. And then he went away.

I didn't know what to make of it. The basic jazz chord is the seventh, which comes in various configurations, but it is what it is. I was a self-taught pianist, pretty shaky on theory and harmony, and when he said sixths I kept trying to fit the information into what I already knew, and it didn't fit. But it stuck in my mind – a tantalizing mystery.

A couple of years later, when I began playing with a bass player, I discovered more or less by accident that if the bass played the root and I played a sixth based on the fifth note of the scale, a very interesting chord involving both instruments emerged. Ordinarily, I suppose I would have skipped over the matter and not paid much attention, but I remembered Garland's remark and so I stopped and spent a week or two working out the voicings, and greatly strengthened my foundations as a player. I had remembered what I hadn't understood, you might say, until my life caught up with the information and the light bulb went on.

I remember another, more complicated example from my sophomore year at the small liberal-arts college outside Philadelphia. I seemed never to be able to get up in time for breakfast in the dining hall. I would get coffee and a doughnut in the Coop instead – a basement area with about a dozen small tables where students could get something to eat at odd hours. Several mornings in a row I noticed a strange man sitting by himself with a cup of coffee. He was in his sixties, perhaps, and sat straight in his chair with very little extraneous movement. I guessed he was some sort of distinguished visitor to the college who had decided to put in some time at a student hangout. But no one ever sat with him. One morning I approached his table and asked if I could join him.

“Certainly,” he said. “Please do.” He had perhaps the clearest eyes I had ever seen, like blue ice, and to be held in their steady gaze was not, at first, an entirely comfortable experience. His eyes gave nothing away about himself while at the same time creating in me the eerie impression that he was looking directly into my soul. He asked a few quick questions, as if to put me at my ease, and we fell into conversation. He was William O. Douglas from the Supreme Court, and when he saw how startled I was he said, “Call me Bill. Now tell me what you’re studying and why you get up so late in the morning.” Thus began a series of talks that stretched over many weeks. The fact that I was an ignorant sophomore with literary pretensions who knew nothing about the law didn’t seem to bother him. We talked about everything from Shakespeare to the possibility of life on other planets. One day I mentioned that I was going to have dinner with Judge Learned Hand. I explained that Hand was my girlfriend’s grandfather. Douglas nodded, but I could tell he was surprised at the coincidence of my knowing the chief judge of the most important court in the country save the Supreme Court itself. After fifty years on the bench Judge Hand had become a famous man, both in and out of legal circles – a living legend, to his own dismay. “Tell him hello and give him my best regards,” Douglas said.

Learned Hand, in his eighties, was a short, barrel-chested man with a large, square head, huge, thick, bristling eyebrows, and soft brown eyes. He radiated energy and would sometimes bark out remarks or questions in the living room as if he were in court. His humor was sharp, but often leavened with a touch of self-mockery. When something caught his funny bone he would burst out with explosive laughter – the laughter of a man who enjoyed laughing. He had a large repertoire of dramatic expressions involving the use of his eyebrows – very useful, he told me conspiratorially, when looking down on things from behind the bench. (The court stenographer could not record the movement of his eyebrows.) When I told him I’d been talking to William O. Douglas, they first shot up in exaggerated surprise, and then lowered and moved forward in a glower.

“*Justice* William O. Douglas, young man,” he admonished. “Justice Douglas, if you please.” About the Supreme Court in general, Hand insisted on a tone of profound respect. Little did I know that in private correspondence he had referred to the Court as “The Blessed Saints, Cherubim and Seraphim,” “The

Jolly Boys,” “The Nine Tin Jesuses,” “The Nine Blameless Ethiopians,” and my particular favorite, “The Nine Blessed Chalice of the Sacred Effluvium.”

Hand was badly stooped and had a lot of pain in his lower back. Martinis helped, but his strict Yankee wife approved of only one before dinner. It was my job to make the second and somehow slip it to him. If the pain was particularly acute he would get out of his chair and lie flat on the rug, still talking, and finish his point without missing a beat. He flattered me by asking for my impression of Justice Douglas, instructed me to convey his warmest regards, and then began talking about the Dennis case, which he described as a particularly tricky and difficult case involving the prosecution of eleven leaders of the Communist party. He had just started in on the First Amendment and free speech when we were called in to dinner.

William O. Douglas loved the outdoors with a passion, and we fell into the habit of having coffee in the Coop and then strolling under the trees down toward the duck pond. About the Dennis case, he said something to this effect: “Eleven Communists arrested by the government. Up to no good, said the government; dangerous people, violent overthrow, etc. First Amendment, said the defense, freedom of speech, etc.” Douglas stopped walking. “Clear and present danger.~~

“What?” I asked. He often talked in a telegraphic manner, and one was expected to keep up with him. It was sometimes like listening to a man thinking out loud.

“Clear and present danger,” he said. “That was the issue. Did they constitute a clear and present danger? I don’t think so. I think everybody took the language pretty far in Dennis.” He began walking, striding along quickly. Again, one was expected to keep up with him. “The FBI was all over them. Phones tapped, constant surveillance. How could it be clear and present danger with the FBI watching every move they made? That’s a ginkgo,” he said suddenly, pointing at a tree. “A beauty. You don’t see those every day. Ask Hand about clear and present danger.”

I was in fact reluctant to do so. Douglas’s argument seemed to me to be crushing – the last word, really – and I didn’t want to embarrass Judge Hand. But back in the living room, on the second martini, the old man asked about Douglas. I sort of scratched my nose and recapitulated the conversation by the ginkgo tree.

“What?” Hand shouted. “Speak up, sir, for heaven’s sake.”

“He said the FBI was watching them all the time so there couldn’t be a clear and present danger,” I blurted out, blushing as I said it.

A terrible silence filled the room. Hand’s eyebrows writhed on his face like two huge caterpillars. He leaned forward in the wing chair, his face settling, finally, into a grim expression. “I am astonished,” he said softly, his eyes holding mine, “at Justice Douglas’s newfound faith in the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” His big, granite head moved even closer to mine, until I could smell the martini. “I had understood him to consider it a politically corrupt, incompetent organization, directed by a power-crazed lunatic.” I realized I had been holding my breath throughout all of this, and as I relaxed, I saw the faintest trace of a smile cross Hand’s face. Things are sometimes more complicated than they first appear, his smile seemed to say. The old man leaned back. “The proximity of the danger is something to think about. Ask him about that. See what he says.”

I chewed the matter over as I returned to campus. Hand had pointed out some of Douglas’s language about the FBI from other sources that seemed to bear out his point. I thought about the words “clear and present danger,” and the fact that if you looked at them closely they might not be as simple as they had first appeared. What degree of danger? Did the word “present” allude to the proximity of the danger, or just the fact that the danger was there at all – that it wasn’t an anticipated danger? Were there other hidden factors these great men were weighing of which I was unaware?

But Douglas was gone, back to Washington. (The writer in me is tempted to create a scene here — to invent one for dramatic purposes — but of course I can’t do that.) My brief time as a messenger boy was over, and I felt a certain frustration, as if, with a few more exchanges, the matter of *Dennis v. United States* might have been resolved to my satisfaction. They’d left me high and dry. But, of course, it is precisely because the matter did not resolve that has caused me to think about it, off and on, all these years. “The Constitution,” Hand used to say to me flatly, “is a piece of paper. The Bill of Rights is a piece of paper.” It was many years before I understood what he meant. Documents alone do not keep democracy alive, nor maintain the state of law. There is no particular safety in them. Living men and women, generation after generation, must continually remake democracy and the law, and that involves an ongoing state of tension

between the past and the present which will never completely resolve.

Education doesn't end until life ends, because you never know when you're going to understand something you hadn't understood before. For me, the magic dance of the shoeshine men was the kind of experience in which understanding came with a kind of click, a resolving kind of click. The same with the experience at the piano. What happened with Justice Douglas and Judge Hand was different, and makes the point that understanding does not always mean resolution. Indeed, in our intellectual lives, our creative lives, it is perhaps those problems that will never resolve that rightly claim the lion's share of our energies. The physical body exists in a constant state of tension as it maintains homeostasis, and so too does the active mind embrace the tension of never being certain, never being absolutely sure, never being done, as it engages the world. That is our special fate, our inexpressibly valuable condition.

#### AFTE RWO RD

*Frank Conroy is a story teller, and Stop Time is memoir salted with fiction. People tell stories to entertain, to brag, to complain, to preserve – and also as tools for thinking. “Think About It” tells anecdotes, with the skill of a novelist, about delayed perception, about moments when “the light bulb went on.” Conroy’s efficient and deft storytelling allows us to experience understanding in the author’s mind, first by action, then by puzzlement – the beginning of thought – and finally in an epiphany of insight. This essay provides a model for learning the world through experience and questioning – by thought, in effect – and generalizes by the variety of its contexts: race and society, jazz music, law and social prominence.*

*He doesn't sound like Mussolini. Because this is an essay of advice, it partly resembles the traditional commencement address, but in its language it is intimate rather than cold and public. Compare this essay with Ursula K. Le Gum's commencement address on page 329.*

**BOOKS AVAILABLE IN PAPERBACK**

*Midair*. New York: Penguin. *Short stories*.

*Stop Time*. New York: Penguin. *Novel*.