

The Duchess

I am in a “caring” relationship – smile. Arguably, I am in a number of relationships, each different, but that is a digression (remind me to tell you about MOMA). Circa 2013, motivated by a combination of mortality and dissatisfaction, as well as a couple of dramatic health, and family events, it was time to make major changes in my remaining life including wrapping up my law practice, and my marriage (of 42 years). I was accused of being a quitter, but countered that I had made it to the very end. Until then, I had kind of settled in to the expectations of my culture, resignedly. During a period of insomnia in Paris, I found myself calculating my longevity and decided, because of the shared DNA and physical characteristics, the age at which my father died would be a reasonable expectation of my termination date, and that any quality of life beyond that should be a bonus to be used for fun and adventure ... and here I am. This is that year, yet I am high functioning cognitively and in surprisingly good health, and shape.

Regarding that “caring” relationship – let’s refer to her as the Duchess. We encountered each other over forty years ago in a business context, and then lovingly created havoc for a few months (I was in over my head), until the affair came to an abrupt end. We pursued separate lives, advancing careers, raising children, burying husbands, etc. She was a sigma-type becoming increasingly powerful. Getting the building in which I had been practicing law ready for sale, uncovered a piece of art that I had made for the Duchess, but had retrieved when we separated. I arranged a lunch meeting for its return. It seemed the honorable thing to do - smile.

The lunch was pleasant, and the Duchess appeared amused by the issues through which I was wending my way. I playfully shared that I might like to find women I had made love to when I was much younger to see if I could do a better job. It wasn’t a matter of feeling that I had not been good in bed so much as a generalized view, developed studying second wave feminism, that men should do better. I don’t recall if she rolled her eyes. This discussion led, eventually, to a sort of “friends with benefits” proposition, ruling out marriage, or cohabitation. The Duchess is a recluse who may enjoy, even love, but not need, a man. She may even find them useful. That works for me. So, over the years we have diddled with the nature of the relationship and the relationship to other relationships. You know, like high school.

Curiously, we have very little in common - different interests in almost everything. I soon found that she was sort of sizing me up with certain inquiries which I later learned were based on the underlying human capability assessment methodology of Stratified Systems Theory. She introduced me to the field, and over lunches, dinners or cocktails, introduced key consultants and writers. My response was to devour the science and developed the view that the practitioners were bogarting it in management theory while the developers had envisioned the application to include other fields. An outlier, I began writing challenging essays applying the methodology to fields outside of business and developing relationships within the group. She may have created a monster.

SST has provided a different lens through which I see virtually all of life – though I have some engagement with a few correspondents around the globe, the Duchess is the only person readily available for discussion using that lens and that lexicon. Ours is an unusual, but very special, relationship.

Then health issues presented themselves. The Duchess has lived with chronic pain and in 2018, back surgery resulted in an erector set bolted into her spine from stem to stern. It was appropriate for me to offer the needed weeks of 24/7 care. That was rough – we just can't live together. In time, she was able to ambulate with a wheelchair, a walker, a cane, then occasional counter surfing, but was never able to walk freely before she experienced a cancer diagnosis, and treatment complications, resulting in a series of hospitalizations and set-backs. The good news is the tumor is gone. The bad news is that she is really messed up. At the time of this writing, I am 63 days into the most recent of many 24/7 in-home care tours of duty, but able to slip out occasionally for a round of disc golf or a happy hour. My schedule is starting to loosen, and I will have more outings and time residing back at my apartment as recovery progresses.

When we first entertained the notion of friends with benefits, I had a somewhat limited idea of what benefits might be involved (smile), but it pleases me to be in a position to contribute. In the meantime, I remain single, like Denys Finch Hatton, and suspect I will resume my adventures later in the spring.

Epilogue: We did have Paris. I have visited Paris with my wife, with the Duchess, and a number of trips traveling alone. The Duchess, who can be very generous, likes to fund my unaccompanied trips (I would, of course, go without such gifts, duh). She has encouraged me to book another trip this year.

~Mark Goodall - April 11, 2025