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Author(s): Nisly, Hope.

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Nighthawks: Puzzling Through Life¹

HOPE NISLY

Order out of chaos – that’s what’s so deeply satisfying about piecing a jigsaw puzzle. If you look at my office, you’d think order wasn’t important to me. But at the jigsaw table I can achieve order.

–Pamela Johnston

On a folding table in my dining room, taking up space that might be better served as a walkway or plain open space, are the scattered pieces to yet another jigsaw puzzle. This is one in a line of puzzles that I keep moving through its paces: turn all pieces right side up; sort out edge pieces and piece the border; and then, finally, begin work on the juicy core of the puzzle. I use the term “work” in the sense that it is a process, but not because it is a chore. Piecing a jigsaw puzzle is not hard labor, but rather a peaceful process.

This jigsaw puzzle, however, is more recalcitrant than most, if I may anthropomorphize it. The picture, while fascinating, is a bit drab and has a relatively limited palette. The process is complex and sluggish. And still I plod on in my quest for the satisfaction that comes when a piece finds its home and a picture emerges. This puzzle is Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks*. I like pictures and puzzles that let me look into other lives: the glow from someone’s kitchen at dusk; a hint of the conversational buzz emanating from a restaurant on a Paris street with the Eiffel tower in the background; or, as with my current puzzle, four lonely figures in a late-night, urban diner.

Appearances can be deceptive. This puzzle does not look particularly difficult, but I know, from my effort to put it together several years ago, that it is. With that attempt I did the unthinkable; I plowed my way through about eight-five percent of *Nighthawks* before I irritably disassembled it and returned it to its box. A jigsaw puzzle seldom stymies me. In this particular puzzle brand, however, too many pieces are so similar in shape that they appeared to fit when they do not. One wrong placement threw the entire process off balance, turned

it into a struggle. I would finally concede that something was not right, lean in close to find the offending piece, and begin again. Finally, I became tired of the guesswork. No longer fun or relaxing, it became hard work. With several hundred pieces remaining, I quit. *Nighthawks* waited on the shelf until this year when I began to write this essay on jigsaw puzzling.

With my previous failure haunting me, I reopened Hopper, spread out the pieces, and assembled the border. I promised myself – and the three diners and the barman -- that this time I would complete the puzzle if it took me all year to do it.

I have a fascination with words and with etymology, how words are put together. You might say that putting a jigsaw puzzle together is an extension of my love of words. – Pamela Johnston

For several years I have considered writing an essay on puzzles and puzzling. (Puzzling can be a verb, but usually in the terms of “her attitude puzzles me” and not “tonight I will be puzzling at home alone.” Even so, I use it as such.) The essay keeps nudging me, in part because jigsaw puzzles evoke intense memories.

Despite a slow start to the essay, I persist for numerous reasons. Puzzling gives me a warm sense of nostalgia for my siblings, my mother, and my childhood. In addition, I credit puzzles with holding my marriage together – my Swiss sense of time has always clashed with my husband’s attitude that “he’ll get there when he gets there” and puzzles often fill those interminable minutes that I spend waiting for him with increasing irritation. Jigsaws also sustained me through many sleepless nights when our teenage daughter would disappear for days at a time. Puzzles have been relaxation, therapy, meditation, companionship, and playfulness. But beyond those external issues, puzzles provide the intrinsic satisfaction that comes when a picture forms out of nothing more than a pile of colorful pieces of cardboard. Order from chaos; life pieced together

from scraps of nothing. Where else could I find one lone activity that has functioned in so many ways in my life?

As I worked on the essay, I would jot down notes on slips of paper, later to transfer them to a word document. It kept growing until it was over ten pages, but it continued to meander aimlessly. I would write a little some afternoon, get discouraged when it did not flow easily, and put it aside. For some reason, the ideas simply did not transition well between concept and page.

Writing, which is usually a pleasure for me, became a chore. At the same time, my friend Susannah, a poet and novelist living in upstate New York, was sending me emails detailing the flowing of her own muses. She was finishing the third book of a trilogy set in the depression years on an Iowa farm. I read her drafts, garnered pertinent information from my parents (Iowa farmers in the depression) to pass on to her, and kept hoping that this would help jump-start my own essay or, if necessary, give me permission to drop it altogether.

Discouraged, I would leave the essay and pursue other things: working on other stories, researching information on Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina for an upcoming vacation, watching episodes of *The Wire*, or hunting for a good recipe to make for dinner.

But the pieces of the essay remained scattered and vague. And then began my rerun of *Nighthawks*.

The two hardest puzzles I ever did were not large. They were each only five hundred pieces. One was called "Close-up of Three Bears" which was all brown; the other was "Close-up of Snow White" and it was all white.
– Susannah Loiselle

As I laid out the pieces for *Nighthawks*, I remembered from my previous effort that, after the monochromatic edge, the next part was not so challenging. The interior of the puzzle contained several spots of bright contrast: the

blue-white of the diner light spilling out onto the street, the yellow-white of the interior butting up against the mysterious dark surrounding it, the jade-green of the window ledge edging the bottom of the window. This contrast lends itself well to working a puzzle. At the outset, at least, I would not run into too many problems.

When I got to the people and urns, however, I ran into my first snag. The individual puzzle pieces refused to relinquish the requisite information that aids identification and placement. I could, however, begin with the most apparent lines of *Nighthawk*. The jade that delineates the bottom of the window soon reached a finger into the interior of the puzzle. In a touch of surprise, the easiest objects to cut from the herd are the stool tops hovering above the low window sill like UFOs in an Ed Wood film.

Each day, Doug watches my puzzle progress while he gets ready for work. Our morning rush to get out the door and on our way to work (on time), which used to be one of our points of contention, now provides a moment of meditative labor for me. I blithely do my puzzle and Doug can take as long as he likes to get ready. This morning, between breakfast and the shower, he tells me that the French word for jigsaw puzzle,

Casse-tête, means “head-breaker”. Doug is fluent in English and German and he knows enough French to get by in Strasbourg, if not Paris. He has an endless fascination with word origins and meaning.

“Head-breaker,” he repeats, “seems kind of appropriate for your puzzle.” I agree. It threatens to be a head-breaker even though I am momentarily satisfied.

I tell him that I think this puzzle is going to be hard work. “I’m still enjoying it, but I’m not sure I’ll still be saying that at the end of the week. That interior looks pretty foreboding. Not so playful.”

“Schiller talks about play,” Doug continues. “We read *Wallenstein* in high school and talked about his ideas. He says that play reveals a person’s true nature. But, if I remember right, he’s not talking about something like a jigsaw puzzle with a rigidly prescribed course of action. He’s talking about the play-

fulness of decision-making that comes before a specific path is chosen, points where there are options to consider and weigh.”

The mention of Schiller sends us to our German language bookshelves in the piano room. Doug grew up in Germany where he studied (and retained) many of the German classics. He did not read Hemingway or Baldwin or Fitzgerald, but we still have a shelf full of Schiller and Goethe, Bretano and Böll. He is certain that he has *Wallenstein*, but a perusal of the German shelf reveals only one Schiller, *Don Carlos*. There goes that part of the research -- at least for now.

Even though assembling a jigsaw puzzle might be a prescribed process and even if *Nighthawks* is not relaxing, I plan to keep working on it to the glorious finale. *Casse-tête* or no *casse-tête*.

By this time, we are running late for work. Both Schiller and Hopper will have to wait.

We like a puzzle that is not too easy and not too difficult. We have learned that we do not like anything over 1000 pieces and not ones that are all the same color. But pretty hard is good. – Jill Miller

The piecing of *Nighthawks* continues in fitful starts and stops. The snags are constant; the times when it flows are far between. With less challenging puzzles, it is fun and satisfying to pick out a piece with a vase in the window, the tail of a dog, or a lawn chair on the far end of a beach. In *Nighthawks*, however, I cannot trust the details. Ears are not ears when isolated on a puzzle piece. Spigots are not quite spigots. A salt shaker is merely a splotch of white. I spot the woman’s face, but can find little of the rest of her. The men’s hats blend into the background with only a narrow ridge of light to help identify them.

There is a flourish of black on one particular puzzle piece that I keep trying to analyze; no matter which way I turn it I see the wing of a raven. For the life of me, I cannot determine what this shadow might be in the grand scheme of

the diner. I know that there is no bird in this puzzle; I know I must alter my perspective, but my brain is doggedly persistent with this errant tidbit.

My mind is playing a game with me and there is nothing I can do. Perhaps this is where “play” comes into play. Much like Lewis Carroll plays with us in his tales of Alice or M.C. Escher twists our perception with unending stairways and paths, my mind toys with, and refuses to surrender, the image of a raven. What portion of the whole does this piece represent? My “bird’s wing” remains a bird’s wing until, a half hour later, the piece slips into place at the tip end of the diner window jutting into the pale blue-ish light of the street.

Nighthawks must be one of the most spoofed pieces of art. Everyone, it seems, takes a crack at playing with Hopper’s painting. It has been recreated in numerous movies such as *Glengarry Glen Ross* or Wim Wender’s *The End of Violence*. It has shown up in *The Simpsons*, with Eddie and Lou at the counter. A Simpson’s poster (not in any show) places Homer in the diner with a platter of doughnuts, sitting across from Chief Wiggums and Mrs. Krabapple. *That 70s Show* seats Red and Kitty in the diner. If you google “Michael Bedard Window Shopping” you’ll find Bedard’s painted parody of *Nighthawks* with an alligator scrutinizing ducks through the diner window. Poverino *Peppino’s Boulevard of Broken Ducks* parodies Bedard’s parody: he places the ducks outside eying the alligator in the diner.

If you google just “nighthawks parodies” you’ll find more parodies than you can imagine: Star Wars, the original crew at Christmas, Easter rabbits (Peeps) at the counter, Nightmuppets, aliens, Marilyn Monroe/James Dean/Humphrey Bogart, Breakfast Hawks (a place called Molly’s, of course), and zombies. There are more – so many artists and jokers playing with *Nighthawks*. Something about this painting intrigues us enough to toy with it endlessly.

And the painting intrigues me enough to make a second attempt at completing the jigsaw puzzle version of the painting.

What is funny about us is precisely that we take ourselves too seriously.

– Reinhold Niebuhr²

Talk about Schiller and play piques my curiosity (a little) about the meaning of play – philosophically, theologically, or psychologically. A preliminary search in the research databases at the library brings up articles on Schiller, child psychology, sports, biology and play behavior in animals, and on Huizinga and *Homo Ludens*, to name just a few. That small foray into research satisfies my curiosity; this is not what interests me most. A trip down this path will take most of the fun out of both the essay and the puzzle.

I find, however, a reference to the “puzzle women” of Germany. From Amazon, I download a book by Anna Funder that details the lives of East Germans during the forty years of communist control. Employed by what is now called the Stasi File Authority, these women sit in rooms with bags of documents that the Stasi (East German secret police) shredded in the final days of their power. In the panic surrounding the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the ending of the regime, the officers burned, pulped, and shredded as much evidence as they could. When their frenzied efforts burned out all available shredders, they continued to rip the documents with bare hands.³ These documents were bagged, but they never made it to the landfill.

In a building near Nurnberg the puzzle women, as they are known, are slowly, painstakingly piecing these documents back together. They do it, one of them told Funder, for the satisfaction of providing the possibility of someone’s peace of mind: that this person might discover why s/he was fired from the university or what happened to a loved one.⁴ This monumental task could be accomplished by a computer program, but the original document is desired.

Funder describes their work as “something between a hobby farm for jigsaw enthusiasts and a sheltered workshop for obsessives.”⁵ Several of the women admitted that, even after a long week of piecing together documents, they go home and do jigsaw puzzles. Indeed, they approach the documents in much the same way that they would work a jigsaw puzzle. Utilizing clues from the paper weight, paper type, and the typeface or the handwriting, they find corner pieces

and work their way into the center. By the most generous calculations, it would take these thirty-one workers almost four hundred years to piece together the documents in all fifteen thousand bags.⁶ Despite the odds, the “puzzle women” continue to reconstruct the lives of East Germans as recorded in the shredded Stasi documents.

And still they go home to work on jigsaw puzzles.

Oh ick. Jigsaw puzzles! How can you stand them? If you really need a hobby or something to kill time, knit an afghan or bake some cookies. Do something useful -- or tasty. – Barbara Nisly

[Puzzling] is not work or play. It is contemplation and satisfaction. If it begins to feel like work and stops being fun I go away from it. I think of it like a Japanese tea ceremony: the cracking open of the box for the first time, the smell of the paper, the order that emerges. Even finding the right puzzle at the right time is part of the relaxation and contemplation. –Pamela Johnston

On the American Jigsaw Puzzle Society’s website, Daniel McAdam presents a brief history of jigsaw puzzles. He concludes with this defensive statement: “Jigsaw puzzles are a pastime, and I will make no nobler claim for them. But they are a healthier pastime than watching inane (and occasionally vulgar) television shows or playing inane (and occasionally vulgar and/or violent) computer games. And if they are addictive - and they are - they are a harmless addiction.”⁷

Puzzlers can be a bit defensive about their love of jigsaw puzzles. Perhaps that is because to non-puzzlers, the pastime appears meaningless. Perhaps it is a defense for a hobby that is neither work nor play, that does not accomplish anything useful or create a work of art, and that consists of a prescribed process with only one possible ending.

Doug tells me that he finds the process to be a bit annoying. “I spend my life looking for things: my lost keys or comb or glasses. Why would I want to spend my leisure time searching for little cardboard pieces of a puzzle?” He might be irritated by the process, but he is not upset by the fact that I have a puzzle on the table, interfering with our meals and bill paying sessions. To be sure, he is quite pleased that a puzzle helps me maintain my patience when he does not want to hurry or be hurried. More to the point, he views the persistence that it takes to piece a puzzle to be a tad pathological. I remind him that he can get downright persistent to the point of pathology when he decides, for example, to study the federal deficit or to scrutinize the hidden costs of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. “Persistence and it’s pathology,” I tell him, “is all in the eyes of the beholder, is it not?”

I use puzzles a bit like the philosopher Hume approached games. He said that when he finds himself thoroughly confused and depressed by his musings on the meaning and nature of life he would “dispel these clouds” and cure his melancholy by dining or playing a game of backgammon. “... and when after three or four hours of amusement, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.”⁸

Rather than defending jigsaw puzzles to their detractors (defense being useless in most arguments anyway) I will simply try to describe the satisfaction. I find it almost as difficult to describe the feeling that goes with puzzling as it is to complete *Nighthawks*. There is an intensely visceral nature to puzzling that draws me in, time after time. I love the feeling as a piece slips into the tessellated whole. (One positive characteristic of online jigsaw puzzles is that the designers often include a sound effect to enhance the “feeling” of placing a piece. It is a resoundingly delightful “clunk” that cannot be replicated in real life puzzling.) All satisfaction can be lost if the puzzle is cheaply made and does not fit together nicely. There are some brands I steadfastly refuse to buy; others that I buy no matter how schmaltzy the picture. I am looking for a certain feel and I will not settle for less.

As a general rule, I place the pieces by color and design; shape is secondary, although not inconsequential, to the process. I find a piece and examine the picture on the box to figure out where it goes. (And a curse on the puzzle company who puts its logo over any part of the face of the picture.) There is, at times, a risk in doing it this way. Sometimes what looks like a dog's hind leg turns out to be a crack in the sidewalk; a horse's mane is actually a tree branch; or a raven's wing is really the edge of the window ledge.

Much like the proverbial lost coin, there is much joy when a long-hunted piece is located, when the picture is one step closer to its entirety. I relish the slow disappearance of the brown surface of my puzzle table as its surface is steadily replaced by an emerging photo or a painting. Sometimes I work by sections, sometimes I tackle a building, sometimes I hunt down all pieces in a specific range of the color wheel. When I need a challenge I begin with the most difficult segments of the puzzle and leave pieces of the house or barn (buildings being the easiest to reconstruct) for last. At times I try to form a single line of pieces between sections. When I want to slow things down (as I often do when I am nearing the end), I limit myself to the bottom four rows, insisting that all gaps must be completed in those rows before I go on to the sky or to the roosters beside the barn. But most often, I just have fun and work the puzzle in a free-flowing, organic way--whatever makes me feel good at that moment.

Doug tells me that what he does not like about a puzzle is that there is nothing open-ended about it. "There is one piece that fits in one place and you can't creatively rearrange those pieces," he states. That may be true, but the process is still mine to do in any way that I prefer.

I will not defend puzzles or pit them against television shows or video games or even reading, but I will say this: puzzling is release from the stress of life, a sanctuary without going on a retreat. Like Schiller's idea of play, it is in puzzling where I reclaim my true nature. In puzzling I have all the patience and perseverance that I so sorely need, calmness in large portions, a playful spirit that I do not always reveal to the world around me. I am confident and happy to be here, ready to face the worst of days and most difficult people.

Omnia apud me mathematica fiunt. (With me, everything turns into mathematics.) – Rene Descartes in Discours de la Méthode. 1637

Perhaps watching me struggle with *Nighthawks* brings out the empathy in Doug. Or perhaps he is just tired of the puzzle. Most likely he thinks he is amusing. Tonight, over biryani and aloo ghoobi at The Curry House, he tells me that because this puzzle is so difficult, perhaps I need to try a different approach. I concede that traditional approaches have not worked well and I might want to look for another way.

“My idea is this,” Doug continues. “Because *Nighthawks* provides so few visual clues for placement, why don’t you try a mathematical approach? All you have to do is figure out how many pieces need to be tried in any given open spot. It might be less than desirable, but what do you have to lose?”

My blank look prompts Doug to reassure me that it would get easier with each placement. “But isn’t that how it always is,” I reply? “With each placement I have one less option for the next space – and that goes for either calculating it mathematically or just doing it. The calculations just make it take longer.”

“Yes, but it would give you a clue to how long it will take to complete the puzzle,” he continues. “With 1000 pieces, the first one has not only 999 other pieces, but several ways to place each one.”

I remind him that I already have about one-quarter of the pieces placed so we do not need to start at the beginning. “Let’s just keep it at 1000,” he tells me. “Easier to figure that way. It’s just $999 \times 1000 / 2$.”

I like math problems, but not when it interrupts my puzzle or my curry. Now if we could find a way to work this into a geometrical problem, I might be interested, but I am less sure about delving into statistical probability.

“We all know...” Any statement from Doug that begins with those three words usually denotes the polar opposite. He continues, “We all know that

there are half a million tries to make and four rotations for each attempt. Of course, that's if you're extremely unlucky."

"Unlucky?"

"Of course," he continues. "The chance that you'll have to try all 999 tiles is extremely unlikely. Now we're working in the realm of statistical unlikelihood. And each successive time you could not possibly choose every single wrong piece before you find the correct one. So the equation is theoretically the sum of all numbers from 1 to 1000 (1 plus 2 plus 3, etc.) But it would never be how it works in a real life."

Sometimes I enjoy these theoretical/mathematical conundrums, but tonight I want to savor my curry and rest my brain. There may be people who find a mathematical approach playful and scintillating. I am okay with it at the theoretical level, but when it comes to my puzzle it merely make my brain hurt. I suggest we drop this approach and move on to something else. Like the biryani.

Doug says fine and that he was just trying to help. We finish off the meal with kolfi and head off to the evening's harpsichord concert.

I like it when you do puzzles; you're never as anxious about time when you have a puzzle on the table. – Douglas Kliewer

It is no small surprise that, in the history of jigsaw puzzles, the times when puzzles sold at the heaviest rate were during times of national anxiety. The first puzzle craze began during the 1907 recession and Bankers' Panic. Prior to that, puzzles were mostly small and made for children. The recession precipitated a change and adults began to do jigsaw puzzles for the first time. Even financier J.P. Morgan (blamed and credited with both precipitating the recession and fixing it) and President Roosevelt joined in this national obsession.⁹ Again during the first years of the Great Depression of the 1930s, puzzle sales spiked. Aided by a simultaneous manufacturing change where jigsaw companies could mass-produce puzzles at a much cheaper price, people across the United States took

up jigsaw puzzles with a passion. Libraries even began to loan jigsaw puzzles along with books.¹⁰

My mother, who grew up doing puzzles during the depression with her family, used this stress-reducing method when raising her children in the 1950s and 60s. With a puzzle she could take her mind off the constant financial problems precipitated by the changing winds of farm markets, while simultaneously keeping her children entertained. For most of the year, my mother was a relatively unflappable woman. Along about January, however, even she began to look a little frazzled and crazy-eyed. In a blustery Iowa winter, one could not have, as she did, eight children in a three-bedroom house that was heated only on the first floor and not go a little stir crazy. There is a limit to the number of times you can send your children outside to play when the temperature hovers at ten below zero.

When the bickering began, she would gather us at the front door with instructions to stand outside and take deep breaths of the frigid air. When we straggled back inside shivering and gasping for breath, she would say, “There. Now that you got rid of all that stale air in your lungs, perhaps you can settle down and put a jigsaw puzzle together.”

And so our jigsaw marathon would begin. After we pieced all our puzzles, Mom would trade with her sisters and we would begin again. Those five hundred piece Whitman Guild jigsaw puzzles with their banal scenes relieved our boredom and helped us skate happily through the icy winters of childhood.

Or, perhaps more accurately, they helped Mom get through our winter boredom.

Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life. – Pablo Picasso

The paintings on the puzzles we put together as children (in the 1950s and 1960s) were of the bucolic sort and it would take a stretch of the imagination to call them art: villages in the Alps, fields full of corn shocks, lakes in national

parks, English gardens, the village smith at work, deer standing at the edge of a woods. In reflection of the post-war zeitgeist and self-perception of many middle-class, white Americans, the scenes oozed tranquility.

In the upheaval of the 1960s, puzzles began to change. Jigsaw companies did not halt the production of tranquil puzzle scenes, but their new creations moved far beyond traditional halcyon landscapes. They, too, tried to keep pace with the pop art scene and the mass culture of the time. In homes across the country, it became cool to spread out puzzles consisting of hundreds of bars of chocolate, a sea of pennies, thousands of lady bugs, or sea shells from frame to frame. The truly pop art-ish ones featured different puzzle shapes; square was just too – yes, square. One Christmas Mom’s friend gave her a puzzle of a tennis court seen from the air; it was entirely green with a few white lines.

In 1964, Springbok made the first move to new shapes – round and octagonal. Within the following year, Springbok’s owners, Katie and Bob Lewin, came up with the idea for fine art jigsaws and created a puzzle from Jackson Pollock’s *Convergence*. This change, as inconsequential as jigsaw puzzles might seem, was duly noted in *Time* and *Business Week*.¹¹ The Lewins began to search through museums and shops in a quest for anything that they could use in puzzle designs. Everything was fair game: peacock’s feathers, dice, colorful marbles, astronomy charts, and Kabuki embroidery. They even managed to convince Salvador Dali to create an image just for Springbok. He created a work that included scattered “missing pieces” painted across its face.¹²

With this knowledge, I google “vintage Springbok puzzles” and find two puzzles for sale: “Millefiori Paperweight” and “The Language of Computers.” Both are round and evoke the 1960s. When I google “Dali Springbok 1965” I find his commissioned work; I am not sure it is one I would want to piece.

At the time, my mom, my siblings and I delighted in these new-fangled puzzles. The old scenery was yawn-inducing and out-of-style. While I have once again come to enjoy some images and styles of earlier years, I am afraid that I can never quite bring myself to piece together a Kincaid scene. It is just too warm and fuzzy.

*Weathered faces lined in pain,
All soothed beneath the artist's loving hand.
-- Don McLean ("Starry, Starry Night")*

Several years ago I put together only puzzles of fine art paintings: Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*, Bruegel the Elder's *Children's Games*, Heironymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Dali's *Persistence of Memory*. That was the same year I first attempted to do Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. For a truly eerie experience, try piecing a puzzle of a Bosch masterpiece where you can examine each square inch of the painting, scrutinizing every weird little creature. Bruegel's *Children's Games* only fares slightly better in close detail. Not all of the activities of those little medieval children at play appear to be innocent and pure!

It was late spring that same year when we got the call in the middle of the night from Doug's sister telling us that his seventeen-year old niece had, after numerous attempts, succeeded at taking her own life. Teresa was a poet, a reader, and an artist. Over the years, she had sent us her artwork and writing, introduced me to a world of fantasy stories and graphic novels, and enquired about the books I enjoyed. At Christmas the year before she died, she gave me a jigsaw puzzle and we spent a delightful vacation together talking and working on our puzzle.

Teresa had little fear and approached life with uncommon fervor and joy; she was a great soccer player and never walked when she could run; and she had lots of pets and loved her family. But she also lived with a world of internal pain and walked in a place where the voices tormented her. She finally halted the voices; the midnight phone call froze us in place and silenced our world. At the funeral, Doug's sister produced a beautiful video collage of Teresa's life set to the music of Don McLean's "Starry, Starry Night."

Van Gogh's *Starry Night on the Rhone* had been waiting on my puzzle shelf. After the funeral I looked at the box, not yet ready to open it. I was too tired and cold and immobile. A few months later, in the heat of late summer in the San Joaquin Valley, with the thermometer climbing to 110 and 112 degrees (as difficult to brave as sub-zero cold of my Iowa winters of my childhood) I brought out Van Gogh and began work on *Starry Night*. There was a perverse and bittersweet joy in the struggle it took to complete this difficult task. With the yellow bands of light spreading slowly across the river and Ursa Major finding its place in the sky, I plodded on even when the tears dimmed my sight.

As *Starry Night on the Rhone* came together, I thought of Teresa's body which had been dismantled and flown across the country: her heart to an aging foster mother in Virginia; her kidneys to several recipients in the Midwest; her pancreas and lungs further west.

The following winter I brought out the Van Gogh again. This time I could piece it without crying, but realized that dry eyes did not facilitate the process.

I'll have to admit that I'm a bit of a jigsaw puzzle Nazi. First you open the box, then you turn over every single piece, find the corner and edge pieces, connect the frame ... and then the puzzle begins. –Pamela Johnston

Usually Noelle helps me turn over all the pieces. As we turn them over, we put the edge pieces to the outside, so that by the time we are done turning them over we have almost all the edge pieces to the side. By unspoken agreement, we are required to put the outside edge together first. When that is done, each of us picks what we want to work on. – Jill Miller

Most puzzlers, or at least the ones I talked to for this essay, agree that there is a way to put puzzles together. We open the box and put the pieces right-side up on the table; we sort out the edge pieces and form the frame; then we start on the inner parts. Growing up, if we wanted to work on the puzzle, we had

to help with the first part of it (sorting and framing), the less scintillating part of the process. “Work before play,” my mother would say. And if that sounds legalistic, it was because one or two of my siblings (I’m not telling on the culprits) would wait until the initial layout was finished then try to get in on the fun part. Who knew that there could be rules to putting a jigsaw puzzle together? My Swiss/German mother, who was not rule-driven in most of life, became a bit of a martinet at the jigsaw puzzle table. But who could blame her. With all those small bodies jostling for room at the table, she had to maintain some sense of order. I still do puzzles with an orderly precision even when I am the only one doing them.

The one I hold responsible for the rules is my brother Wendell. He had a fascinating need to hold a puzzle piece in his pocket to confound us all. While it was not a rule, we each wanted to be the one to put the final piece, to bring it to its official close. When Wendell held onto one piece, he accomplished several things. With glee, he could watch the rest of us crawling across the floor in search of the missing piece, and he could guarantee that he would get the joy of placing the last piece. And he would place it with a flourish, producing the piece and tapping it triumphantly into place, ensuring that we all knew that he had “won” this round. We all frowned on Wendell’s shenanigans. No we did more than frown; we would elbow him out of place and with the first hint that a piece was lost, we would descend on him en masse to turn his pockets inside out and to pound on him a little.

As I said, there might have been a reason for Mom to impose rules on what should have been a joyfully rule-free, anarchistic family project.

Hard core puzzlers have other rules and quirks. Pamela Johnston’s step-grandfather would put puzzles together upside-down to heighten the difficulty. My great aunt Ellen insisted on working a puzzle without looking at the picture; she tried to make us do it that way too. Aunt Ellen declared it to be a form of cheating if we tried to utilize the picture on the box. “A puzzle,” she informed us, “should be pieced without this crutch and with only our own observations of shape and color.”

That was her rule, however, and we only had to follow it at her house.

For me, [puzzles] are a way to have companionship without a lot of intensity . . . you don't have to look anyone in the eye or make conversation. Sometimes it occurs. Or it doesn't. – Jill Miller

Puzzles are more fun with others. You can say, "I'm looking for this piece that should have a bit of a lamp on it," and then everyone digs in to help you find it. – Pamela Johnston

By default and not design, puzzling has become a solo event for me. It goes against my idea of the true nature of puzzling as a community event. It is meant for families and friends to sit around a wobbly-legged card table, working together and humming strange tunes, making idle chit chat or discussing big ideas. When our children were younger, my son would join me, but not my husband or daughter. As a solitary event, it does not provide quite the same charm, unless you count the ability to reach across the puzzle for a puzzle piece without someone growling, "Get your arm out of the way. I can't see through you."

I have one brother who refused (and continues to refuse) to do puzzles or play games. "Such a monumental waste of time," he declares. "It's what people do when they don't know how to talk to each other." We, in turn, make fun of him for not knowing how to relax. I could blame it on his being a pastor and a peace activist, two groups that are a bit stereotypically known for their lack of a sense of humor. Except I do not hold to stereotypes and he has a decent sense of humor. Plus, he is an avid fan of Indy Car racing. My question in reply to his aversion to games is, "What could be a greater waste of time than racing?" His retort is that racing is cutting edge art and a great spiritual discipline.

At family gatherings, while the rest of us play games or do puzzles, my brother walks around the room engaging in conversations on politics and theology. What he does not understand is that the best conversations can happen over a puzzle, but minus the fervor and intensity.

In my twenties, when I lived with my cousin Lorraine for a few years, we often had a puzzle on the table. A college guy who lived nearby would drop in to help us. They have now been married for more than thirty years. He says that it was socializing over the puzzle that helped him summon his nerve to come see us – and learn to know his future wife.

There is a lot one can learn about a person over a jigsaw puzzle. My solo stints of jigsaw puzzling are good for relaxing, but it is not quite the same. Puzzling is community at its finest.

It seems that puzzles go poorly for a while and then all of a sudden, I can see things and they come together. Maybe I finally see the variation in color that is barely there. Or sometimes I will get up and move to another spot, and all of a sudden see a whole bunch of pieces that fit. When that happens, it's hard for me to quit. –Jill Miller

The saddest thing in the world is when you get to the end and a piece is missing. – Pamela Johnston

I've now reached the stage where the progress on the puzzle has slowed to less than a crawl. In a surprising move, Doug joins me. He keeps me company, places a few pieces, and asks about the essay. By this time, the puzzle image of *Nighthawks* is missing only the darkest spots on the picture: the window behind the diners, the space below the cigar sign, and the shadows below the front window. There is almost no variation in shape or color. My method-of-last-resort is in full-swing. I am trying every piece in every spot. Slowly our eyes adjust and together we determine that there are several barely-noticeable color variations. The filmy black pieces are part of the window above the people's heads and we start with that.

Doug tries once again to tempt me with the mathematical approach. Despite his claims to the contrary, I insist that statistics and reality do not always mesh and I send him to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

When we finish the window, there are exactly sixty pieces remaining (yes, I counted) scattered outside the border awaiting placement. It is faster only because there are fewer pieces to try and not because placement has become any more apparent. I am still trying most pieces in every open space. There are two basic shapes to the pieces, what I call the squat pieces and the skinny pieces. I sort them into piles based on this minor shape difference. Then I pick out a stair-step of open spaces, a series of three or four spots of the same basic shape and I try every piece from the corresponding pile. As each piece slides comfortably into its home, my satisfaction rises.

This is the point of the puzzle when, if doing it with family, the fingers, hands and elbows are flying across the board in each other's way and the jostling for the last piece begins. When I finally place the last piece and not one is lost, I breathe deeply. I will not have to get on hands and knees, search under the microwave cart, sweep under the table, empty the vacuum cleaner all in search of that one lost sheep. (Another positive aspect of online jigsaw puzzles is that no piece is ever lost.)

I do not like the end of the puzzle no matter how gratifying it is; beginnings are far more fun. But *Nighthawks* is now complete. I stare in the puzzle window from the eerily empty street. I will let the people sit with their midnight coffee for a few days before I put them to bed in the box.

As if reading my mind, Doug asks if I am going to put the puzzle away or let it on the table for a few days. "I can't help but think of Sisyphus," he says. "You worked so hard to roll that boulder up the hill and now you're going to let it roll back into the box."

This is a jigsaw puzzle that I will give away, never to try again. The next puzzle I have in mind has lots of color, lines and variations, but it must wait while I enjoy this moment before I work on the essay, arranging it.

NOTES

- ¹ A special thanks to my cousin, Jill Miller, from San Diego; my friend and writing companion, Susannah Loiselle, from Ithaca, New York; and a colleague at Fresno Pacific University, Pamela Johnston, professor of history and classics. All three women love jigsaw puzzles, answered my questions about their enjoyment of them, and allowed me to quote them for this essay. And, of course, thanks to my daughter Barbara Nisly who hates puzzles, and my husband, Douglas Kliever, who (this one time) allowed me to record our conversations on paper, something he usually resists.
- ² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 54.
- ³ Anna Funder, *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011) 67.
- ⁴ Funder, p. 266.
- ⁵ Funder, p. 265.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ “History of Jigsaw Puzzles,” Douglas Adam, American Jigsaw Puzzle Society, Accessed January 22, 2013, <http://www.jigsaw-puzzle.org/jigsaw-puzzle-history.html>.
- ⁸ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 269.
- ⁹ Anne D. Williams, *The Jigsaw Puzzle: Piecing Together a History* (New York, NY: Berkeley Publishing Groups, 2005) 65-93.
- ¹⁰ Williams, pp. 49-51.
- ¹¹ Williams, pp. 101-105.
- ¹² “Springbok Puzzles 50th Anniversary,” Springbok. Accessed March 2, 2013, <http://www.springbok-puzzles-50th-anniversay>.