A case might be made that January is named after the various American demigods of tax calculation computer programs, weight-loss schemes, resolution daydreams, and instant makeovers of home, family, friends, wardrobes, exercise equipment, cars, relationships -- you name it.

All it takes is a little champagne and the turn of a calendar page: Presto, there goes another resolution. One year gone, here comes another. Up one minute, out the next. Now you see it, now you don't. It's the ultimate in on-demand convenience, good intentions, and the sort of regretful, pawing, nagging lapsed morality we've perfected hereabouts -- a real natural for Life in These Here Benighted, You-nited States.

Somewhere in here, in January's brittle fidgeting, is also the routine recategorizing of accepted presents from the joyful and effervescent into the ho-hum, yawning tedium of regiftable status. Here are stored captured holiday items once received with smiles, originally swathed in shiny paper, and are now framed with flat-lined lips and are swaddled in odious, future benevolence and stale, self-centered philanthropy to come.

January also means laughing at, and cheering on, gargantuan gladiators who bash each others brains out. It's a fine, high-spirited return to the Colosseum, where the display of a certain thumb toward the battlefield, from a cushioned throne, meant swift and instant death.

Today, instead of the stone amphitheater, we have the cushy home theater, where the display of middle fingers to big-screen teevees, from couches, Barcaloungers, and La-Z-Boys has no impact whatever on the inevitable outcome, let alone sudden death of any sort. (Talk about a demoralizing loss of power!)

Such is the state of our games, where thinly-disguised combat and war-based land grabs are accomplished a few bodies, and a few yards, at a time. The Superbowl is a veritable D-Day of preparation, a behemoth of a battleship requiring 36 to 48 hours to turn, according to the NFL, now pondering alternate sites in event of poor weather.

Plato nailed it a long time ago when he said, "You can tell more about a person in an hour of

play than in a year of conversation." The same can be said of the country at large -- that we can tell much about ourselves from our throbbing, torn gristle of a national pastime.

(I am a hypocrite, and am purposefully failing to tackle the sweetly hypnotic, pastoral laziness of half-watching a baseball game from the outpost of one's summer hammock and beneath an umbrella of sun-dappled trees.)

Through the lens of play, it's not difficult to see what we most value from our games: Brute force, animal cunning, single-minded stealth, and the conversion of individuals into a well-oiled, lock-stepping machine.

Republicanism aside, there's also the attendant thrill of stealing your opponent's land by way of forcing them from it, and physically punishing and humiliating them as you go, for daring to stand in your way, daring to squat on *your* land. *The* nerve *of some people -- we're trying to steal this fair and square!*

It should be no wonder why steroids and mega-protein drinks keep increasing market share by effortless leaps, bounds, and pounces. Also no mystery is why hyper-caffeinated beverages have shot through the roof in popularity, either: In this compulsively competitive culture, the phrase "I'll sleep when I'm dead" is more than a slogan or way or life -- it is a bleeding tattoo on the spirit, an infected piercing of the soul.

The national obsession with oval balls celebrates the still-unending skirmishes of European Visitors versus the Native Dwellers, announcing our desire to do it all over again, repeatedly, it was so much fun.

Of course, it's possible to see this event as just an opportunity for the poverty-stricken NFL to try to shake off its beleaguered state as a desperate, hanging-by-a-fingernail, non-profit entity, hoping to abandon a host of deadfall financial precipices and its woeful, non-moneyed state, and make a little cash. For a, uh, change.

You see: The NFL had only 10 billion or so dollars in profits, in American money, give or take a

few dozen pallets of hundred dollar bills stacked higher than you can stand, last year. Its commissioner made more than $29 million of those same dollars.

(You and I could work out what that comes to on a daily paycheck basis, but then, we'd have to go burn up the better part of a U.S. Grant or Ben Franklin at a bar, in an attempt to purge that memory, or else hurl ourselves down a long, painful set of stairs in a bid for amnesia.)

The NFL is a non-profit agency in the same sense that the United Way is run by caring, giving upper management who does all it can do to pare expenses to the bone, so that the maximum possible amount of donations might be given to its clients.

(Read up on that organization's operating excesses and the percentage of donations passed along, if you like, and ask yourself why it is that there is a national United Way campaign in every private and public office in the land -- and in American work sites overseas, both military and civilian. Please, don't get me started down that path right now. I've pledged this year to give the throbbing veins in my temples a break -- an easier go of it, I mean, versus an actual break, pop, or burst vessel.)

Of course, we're all paying taxes, including the NFL, goes the defense here for its nonprofit status. *Well, good.* Further, the thinking goes, they're not taking the deductions that corporations usually do. *OK, fine.* All this means, basically, is that corporations are simply shafting us more than the NFL is able to do in its current, weakened, bed-ridden, subsidized-by-taxpayers state.

When you arise from your impulsive, hapless crumpling into an exhausted, laughing, heap at such notions, one thought might occur to you: This might be where you are starting to think that you, yourself, could greatly benefit from such taxpayer-subsidized, non-profit status, NFL-style.

Why, you might even be able to cut a deal with your city, forcing them to build you a spacious, brand new home, sparing no expense, if you were to, say, threaten moving to another city. There could even be some income tax waivers headed your way for the next decade or so, too. You could probably learn the ropes on this angle in no time and really milk this trend, probably forever.

Yes, you could -- if you had the same brigade of lawyers and battalion of bean counters weighing in on your side, in local back-slapping contests and in Washington strong-arming festivals of tax code committees, under the guise of mutual back-scratching.

Good luck with all that.

Unless you bring it with you, on a boombox, I suspect you'll be hearing no hearts-and-flowers music anytime soon -- unless you count as music the percussive sounds of your flung body hitting the stone Capitol steps on your way down them, and to your sudden peaty arrival, and deep planting, in the surrounding lawns and flower beds, when you finally come to a full stop.

You know, there's also the possibility of seeing Game Day as a National Day of Worship and Thanksgiving for TeeVee. This is especially true in the advertising arenas of our modern-day amphitheater culture, where a 30-second opportunity to shout at, annoy, and potentially alienate your audience will set you back 4 million pigskins.

This is providing your audience has remained attentive, susceptible, and in-place for your imperative, imperious imagery, and they have not, in fact, already vaulted the furniture in a dead run toward the porcelain suite -- thereby voiding their moment-to-moment, only-by-mouth, beer rental agreement -- in a single-minded determination to make their bladders gladder.

This one event creates a crate load of critiques, winks, nods, and excuses. It's a lightning rod for the culture. Why, there's something for everyone here -- which, like so many things, is the reason for it to occur, and why it continues: Everyone gets a little piece of the pie, a cut of the action, a little something from the deal. When the world runs on grease, greasing the wheel ensures *everybody* stays nice and focused on the wheel.

There's fun to be had all along the spectrum, too. There's the elitist joy and bragging rights of the private skybox, the thrill of paying thousands for a ticket to an exclusive event, the exquisite contentment of travel to the stadium location via your private jet, and so on.

And, on the other end of the scale, for the folks back home, there's always the opportunity to revel in, and gee-whiz at whatever celebrity personality will be pulled out of the hat and trotted out at half-time for the Big Show (TM), which is, of course, the only acceptable interruption for The Big Game (TM).

Consider it a splashy, overblown USO production, in the middle of a war zone.

Which celebrity? Well, actually: Unless you're getting a cut, who really cares who's caught in the foamy, frothy, tepid, rabid rapids of current persona manufacture and marketing?

Dumb and Dumberer? No, more like a kindly, fanciful tale that might be titled *Hollow and Hollower*, from where I sit. But, just as french fries provide a good excuse to eat ketchup, malt vinegar, or both, such activities give us all excuses to gather in groups, bolster the Avocado Growers Association's bottom line in yet another record-breaking, chip-crunching, guacamole consumption fest.

There's also the bonus excuse of powering down a range of sweetened fizzy waters and hoppy, happily fermented goods -- be these latter items lovingly hand-crafted, small-batched, tastebud exciters or bulk-rate, mass-produced, factory-stamped swill.

The Even Bigger Game (TM) afoot here is capitalism, of course, the ultimate board (or *bored*, your choice) game of chit-counting, piece-moving, dice-throwing, bean-counting, and other psychotic forms of amusement on the berserkly tilted landscape so many get a chuckle and kick out of calling
the flat playing field of business
.

I know, I know -- *Heresy!* *Sacrilege!* *Blasphemer!* At this point only two viewpoints are likely or probable now: *I am a pinko-commie creep with no understanding of how the real world works...*

... or, perhaps: *Bravo! Speech! Encore! It's about time someone pointed out, with a smile, the folly, foolishness, and foibles of human, and American, fun!*

In a world where *50 Shades of Grey* is the accepted highest-ideal rule, and where there are very few black-and-white situations left in the world, you're bound to be closer to one end of the scale or the other, and pretty unlikely to be lallygagging in the shrugging middle.

Yep: We talk about a lot of things in emails, my friends and I. On this one, we all seem to be bunched up at one end of the spectrum where we *understand* it, but, simultaneously, just don't *get*
it. Such is life.

I personally find myself at such head-shaking, bewildering crossroad locations dozens of times each day. If they gave Coke or Pepsi points for every one of these, I could be pondering such things from my hot-tub-sauna-spa-wet-bar-salad bar-jacuzzi-wave-machine-pool complex at one of my sunnier compounds in Tahiti, and not plopped down in a North America winter, scooping compressed sawdust pellets into a rebellious, foul-tempered, cast-iron, miniature heating plant...

... nor would I be clacking away on an ancient, kerosene-fired iMac on whose defective display more and more vertical lines keep randomly appearing, and, *unwelcomely*, staying -- forcing me to look between them as a prisoner tries to wangle a view around the bars in a window. (Thanks, Apple. Thanks, made-in-China.)

No, the twenty-first century isn't quite what I had expected. It's not just that flying cars never panned out -- a crime by itself, you ask me -- but it's nowhere near the whole deal.

See: I grew up on clunky, but hopeful, *Star Trek* idealism -- trying out a sense of reach, in imagination -- and on the desire to serve one's country -- trying out a sense of grasp, in uniform.

Somewhere along the line, the American Dream got outsourced, along with our manufacturing base. The CEO no longer makes 4 or 5 times what the average worker makes -- the CEO now

knocks down 600 times, 800 times, a thousand times the average salary, astronomically higher than anywhere else on the surface crust of this finite planet.

The CEO no longer lives up the street, on the same block, with you and me. The CEO, when residing at any of a passel of homes, does so in a gated community, protected by armed, roving guards.

The wealth of the country no longer comes from the sort of real, tangible wealth created in the conversion of raw materials to finished goods -- it comes from moving numbers around on a screen, from herding consumers from one shopping event to the next, from bundling along chumps up hill and down dale, from one manufactured, hair-trigger market boom and bust to the next.

And on and on and on.

But, please, let me be clear: I begrudge no person their enjoyments. This is a short, hard life, and whatever laughter, love, and amusement we can coax from it, and smuggle into it, the better.

Where does all this land us? I guess this must be like the feeling you have when you get passed over for promotion. Or, when your child marries into a situation you're certain will provide many uphill struggles. Or, when you count the number of years behind you, and attempt to estimate the number that may yet be ahead...

No: Bigger, *broader* feeling somehow.

Maybe it's like the time the country decided it no longer needed a space program, regardless of its multiple rewards, paybacks, incentives, and inspirations. Or, when pure R & D not linked to new ways to kill humans and ecologies was all but discontinued in the U.S. Or, when payment and profit virtually ruled the ability to receive care for one's body and mind when injured, damaged, or gone haywire.

Or the simple human right to a daily portion of clean water and unspoiled food -- and realizing a growing number of people didn't believe in simple human rights anymore.

Or, where you see the bankrupting, honorless, gut-shredding direction our country took in Vietnam, and again, taking psychosis to new extremes, in Iraq. Or, where the unproductive Kabuki theater of the TSA reminds you of two smoldering towers in New York, and what all of that might really mean, if you're honest, and if you really thought about it...

Or, when you get reminded of the need to plant countless forests to offset your own personal, commercial plane travel, knowing it is not being done, not for you, not for any member of your flight -- and while knowing the number of people on your flight, and flying each day, and knowing the number of planes and trips each day has been steadily ballooning since begun.

Or, when you hear people laughing about that so-called global warming *thing*, and its clear impossibility, since it's been so
cold
lately. Or, when you hear people duped by Fox, thinking they are watching news, facts, truth, reality. Or, when Teabaggers misquote and misinterpret, over and over, perpetually, the nation's founders.

Or, when people dodge and avoid and refuse the question, "What have Republicans ever done for the common, everyday American?" Or, when people insist the Earth is 5-thousand years old, and that dinosaurs, the Grand Canyon, and people all simultaneously existed, in the same time period. Or, when...

A whole pile of feelings, misgivings, suppositions, short-circuited fragments: These things all just periodically shift and lurch around in my mind, avalanching, and finally resettling into one, small, particular fold in the spongy meat of my brain -- an area that could be called:

I'd just had higher hopes for us, you know?

Assorted flavors of remorse and regret are available in the lobby, and at refreshment stands, all over the stadium grounds, served ice cold, all day, every day.

I hear it might snow. Happy Groundhog Day.

Your non-profit NFL: http://www.mediaite.com/online/level-playing-field-nfl-scores-billions-annually-while-still-enjoying-“non-profit”-status/

... with $25 billion to go: http://www.forbes.com/sites/monteburke/2013/08/17/how-the-national-football-league-can-reach-25-billion-in-annual-revenues/

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