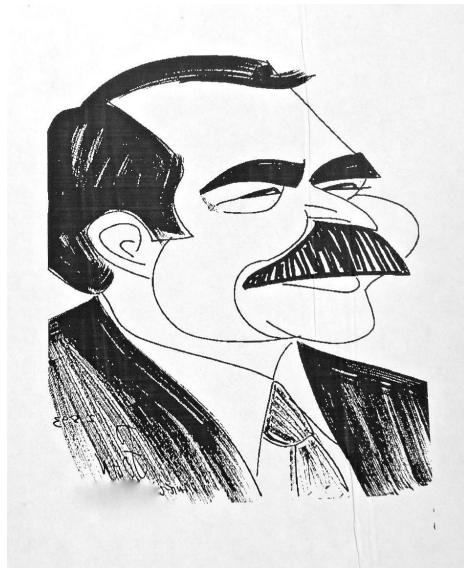


# C h r o n i c l e s

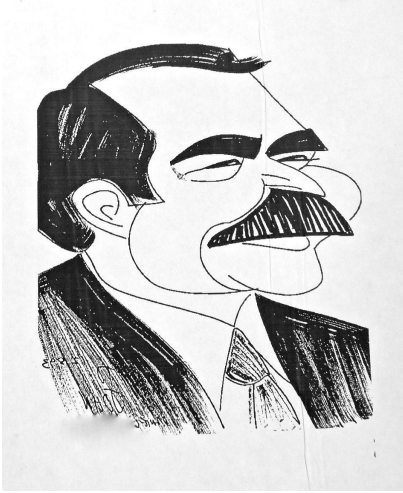
# **Jobfather Chronicles**



## **Breadcrumbs on the trail of Right Livelihood**

**A memoir by John Aigner**





# **The JOBFATHER CHRONICLES**

**Breadcrumbs on the trail  
of Right Livelihood.**

**Tidbits, ruminations and rants  
from an unorthodox  
career counselor.**

*A memoir by John Aigner*

## ORIGINS and SPINNING PLATES

My family is strewn with talented people. I am not at the top of that cluttered heap by any means, but as the eldest project starter, and plate spinner, like the fellow on the Ed Sullivan show, Erich Brenn, who could keep up to a dozen plates spinning simultaneously (I checked). I am very good at getting plates spinning. Perhaps not so much interested in keeping them spinning, often losing interest in my plates after a short while. Some fall to the ground and shatter, some just wobble, some just wane. It's always been easy to find new plates. On occasion, those plates have been people, with feelings, whom I have injured. I regret those actions, but it was never my intention to do harm.

One of my favorite early songs includes the lines, "Does your chewing gum lose its flavor on the bedpost overnight, if you put it on the left side, will you find it on the right."

Some might vouch that sums me up. When the chewing gum loses flavor, I have been known to move on. That moving on quality has led me through about ten careers, thirty (or more) jobs, three marriages, two relationships, dozens of interesting experiences, and two near-death medical crises.

Obstacles don't phase me. I don't go through them. I don't go over, I go around. One of my favorite teachers, Robert Fritz, called this "the path of least resistance". He wrote a valuable book by that title. Without thinking much about it, I have frequently taken the path of least resistance.

My life has been blessed, and I wouldn't trade it with anyone. Following my own weird, and helping others to discover the "why of their lives" has become my mission, and my reason for creating this Zoom originated memoir in the time of Covid 19. The process itself has been

fascinating, beginning with hiring an intern, Kenneth Johnson. Together, we then worked out the logistics of Zoom interviewing, transcribing the audio to text in an app called "Otter AI", learned to collaborate in Google Docs, and then edited nearly forty hours of recordings into a readable manuscript. Lastly, I hope, we will add images and finally publish a book. That is my hope and goal.

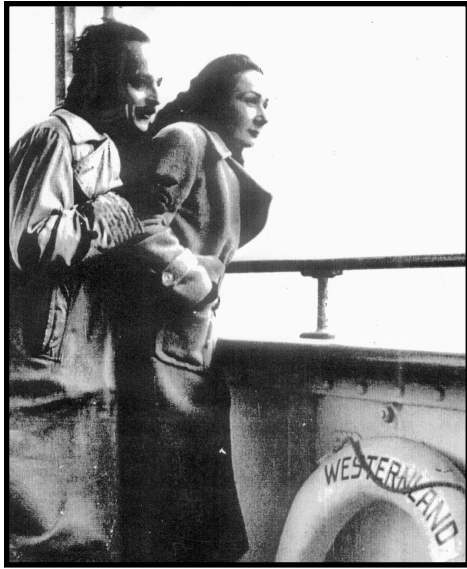
This morning in my Wise Aging group I participated in a lively conversation about the difference between persistence and staying the course, and how they differ, where it matters, and how that relates to my life.

Persistence has been a watchword of mine, but staying the course has not. For me, the difference is significant. Some people in the group couldn't parse that difference. Each of us needs to develop our own personal feelings or "weird" to figure out, "do I need to stay the course with one path?" Alternatively, can I give myself permission to pivot, find a pivot point, and change direction?

Another view of this: life as stepping stones, rather than pivot points.

Looking back, there has been no point in my life, with the possible exception of the last few years of my work life, where I felt unable or unwilling to pivot. If events warranted, I could always pivot and change direction. Some folks, for example, go to school and decide to be doctors or lawyers. Then, regardless of what happens, they stay the course. They plod along. They keep to that channel even if it has become a rut, until they arrive at some endpoint. Then they become doctors or lawyers for a lifetime.

My life hasn't been like that, partly because of events over which I had no control, and partly because I have always been comfortable with the idea that I could pivot, that I could change course. Even if I really was



**My parents arrival in US circa 1939. Mother and I exited and re-entered through Canada a year later**

good at something or I really liked it, I could always step from one stage to the next. There would always be the next stage...whether I expected it or not, and I would deal with it, as it presented itself.

In her masterful book “The Places That Scare You”, author Pema Chodron describes how much more perilous it is to cling to the shore of a raging river than to let oneself be carried by the current. This is a useful analogy. Pivoting is more a land-based analogy, and when I couldn’t pivot, or when there seemed to be no stones to step, I retired. I was wrong. That act of retirement in itself turned out to be a

stone, because in the nearly six years since retirement, I have continued to find previously undiscovered stones to step.

## **MY TALENTED FAMILY**

With the possible exception of my father. I think that women have played a much bigger role in my life than men, both in terms of relationships and in the simple fact of marrying three times and having three daughters. My relationship with my mother was deeply explored during years of therapy. My relationship with my aunt, who became a surrogate mother, was complicated by also becoming a business partner for a short period.

Having three daughters was indeed a blessing. A fourth child, a son, miscarried. If I had fathered a son, would life have been different? I

don't know. I'm happy with what I got. I never had much thought about "Oh, I wish I had a son."

At the top of my illustrious family list is, arguably, my father, Lucien Aigner, who became one of the landmark photo journalists of the 20th century. He is known for his iconic photographs of Europe in the 1930s, and 1940s in the US. He photographed many pre-eminent European politicians, like Hitler and Mussolini, celebrities like Sonja Henie, Marlene Dietrich, Haile Selassie, and others. Lucien Aigner immigrated to the US in 1940 and struggled for many years, though all the while taking countless outstanding photographs, in particular Einstein at Princeton. As one of the first journalists to carry a 35 mm pocket Leica camera, he was able to achieve many available light, so-called "grab shots," unattainable by his competitors, who used a large bulky camera with a huge obtrusive flash setup.

Next on my family talent list is my uncle Etienne Aigner, who built a huge handbag and shoe business based on a cordovan leather look. As a young man, he suffered from tuberculosis. After a long convalescence during which he was partially supported by his brother, Lucien. He moved to France and married a Parisian wife. He made his living variously selling light bulbs and working as a part-time designer. During WWII they left their Paris apartment and took to the French countryside, hiding from the Nazis. They came to the United States in the early 1950s. He was a designer and craftsman and they began from



**My father Lucien and his brother Etienne, had a mutually supportive relationship.**

scratch making leather belts in their bedroom. Lord and Taylor department store became a significant customer early on, and that launched their success. They built a multi-million dollar business, selling hand-stained cordovan belts and straw, leather, and jute casual handbags. Later they added sandals and shoes to the mix. My uncle had the amazing good fortune to sell his company twice. Once the US rights, and once the European rights. He lived his final decade painting and investing in Manhattan and Brooklyn real estate in partnership with his young French-born grandson, Thierry Bonnet.

My aunt Betty Zentall (originally Zweigenthal), worked for the Voice of America for a period of years, along with my mother and father. They were all on the Hungarian desk, broadcasting American propaganda to behind the so-called “Iron Curtain” in Eastern Europe. She, with her husband Bob, created a successful costume jewelry firm. In her later life, she authored a “vanity published memoir [like this one] detailing the remarkable story of her escape from the Nazis with her husband and their life as Jewish refugees in the European countryside.

My brother, Steven, became an airline pilot courtesy of the US Air Force and did a tour of duty in Vietnam, where he was shot down, while spraying Agent Orange, and was rescued by a Marine helicopter. After his release from the military, he pursued a career as a commercial pilot with great difficulty, persistence, and ultimate success. Initially hired by PanAm. He was furloughed after eighteen months when thousands of pilots returned from Vietnam. He flight instructed at Islip airport. He then went to work for Saudi Arabian Airlines, and lived in Saudi Arabia for several years. He returned to the US when recalled by Pan American Airways and then worked the rest of his career with Delta Airlines. He retired to Saint Augustine, Florida, on a golden parachute, as a result of a combat injury that affected his middle ear balance.

Karine Aigner is my niece, my brother's eldest child, one of many creative and talented persons in our family. She graduated from Boston University and worked as a Photo Editor for for National Geographic Kids before opting to freelance. One of her most notable images was of a bat in flight. It was featured in middle school textbooks. She also won an a \$100,000 prize in an international competition, for a photo of a chimpanzee and a young child. Another of my favorites is an incredible photo of a water buffalo with a tiny bird on its forehead. She Is presently shooting in West Texas where she discovered a blended family of Bobcats under her porch, two litters, one natural and one adopted, by a female and mothered as her own, an extremely rare occurrence in nature. She has filmed them for months now as they grew up and played with each other. This unique situation was recognized recently as her videos were featured on Ranger Rick, a kid's cable show. To my knowledge, nobody has ever filmed co-mingled litters of wild Bobcats from birth.

My oldest sister, Annemarie, eleven years my junior, went to Boston University and almost immediately became a local newscaster and minor celebrity. She then became a PR professional, founding Aigner Associates in the suburbs of Boston. In recent years, she started a national company that has sponsored and organized food truck festivals. She was building that into a national brand, very successfully, on college campuses until COVID. Then she had to reinvent herself and her company. She's currently restarting as a company that delivers menu-selected food truck items to local neighborhoods. The company is called "StrEats".

Annemarie's two children, Adam and Samantha are also successful. Adam is a CBS White House correspondent, and Samantha is the Commissioner of Early Education for the State of Massachusetts.

My own children are doing very well and a source of great pride. Lisa, the eldest, is a Southeastern regional Facilities Manager for an international benefits consulting firm. Robin is Copy Chief for a group of magazines published by Conde Nast. Alycen recently completed a Master's Degree in Social Work. She works for an agency and seeks to become affiliated with a university or medical setting providing educational services to the autism spectrum and/or brain-injured children and adults. She is currently preparing for her state Boards in Connecticut.

Brother Steve's oldest son Erik as an RN, serves as the Chief Medical Technician on an oil well drilling rig in the North Sea. He lives in Norway and is happily married to a partner in a consulting for Norwegian tech startups. He has two teen-age children.

My brother's youngest son, Kris is working in Chinatown, New York City, as a Drug Counselor . He is just finishing his CASAC, which is like getting a graduate degree in drug counseling.

Yes, I have a talented family. A younger sister Katherine died a few years ago. She mothered two super-achiever daughters.

So I have one living brother and one living sister. The dynamic between the siblings has been troubling. When my parents divorced my two younger sisters went to live in Florida with our mother. They were 10 years apart from their older brothers. Our lives have been essentially lived as pairs, two brothers and two sisters.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

OUR WEST SIDE STORY



I was born in Paris, France. My parents came here during the late 1930s at the time that the Nazis were invading France. My father had worked as a correspondent for a Hungarian news agency, and then as a freelancer in the U.S. around 1939.

My mother and I came the following year. Because we originally entered the United States on a visitor's visa, we had to exit and re-enter via Canada in order to gain immigration status.



**Mother and me with Sarah Delano Roosevelt, POTUS mother, at their Hyde Park home in 1940**

We were aided in this through the kindness of Sarah Delano Roosevelt, the president's mother, who at my father's request, wrote a letter of support, which certainly paved the way.

My earliest memory as a child is of our residence on Central Park West and 98th St. My brother was an eighteen-month-old toddler at the time. I was about four and a half. The building in which we lived fronted on Central Park West. On the southern side of the building was an empty lot and then the corner.

My brother somehow got his mitts on my mother's diamond ring. I don't know if it was her engagement ring, wedding ring, or some other

precious ring. He was about one and a half, and out the window went the ring.

Not him, just the ring.

We all trooped downstairs and spent hours looking for that damned ring. Symbolic perhaps of my parent's marriage. That's my earliest

memory. Shortly thereafter, perhaps a few months, we moved a few blocks, to 96th Street, and the building where I spent a glorious childhood. Our apartment building was in the middle of the block between Central Park and Columbus Avenue, beautifully located, six stories, with two apartments on each floor and an attractive bowed front to the building. It had an elevator which usually worked. We lived on the top floor in one of the two apartments. Below us lived Barney Toby who some may remember as a prominent



**Age three, warily welcoming a baby brother. Note that we wore masks in those days as well.**

cartoonist for The New Yorker magazine.

By my best estimate, I was about 4 1/2 or five years old when we arrived at that apartment and I have many fond memories of the time that we lived there.

I spent many hours on the roof with binoculars, looking at nude women across the street. Happy to report we were modestly successful. At times, we would entertain ourselves by dropping water-filled balloons off the roof. Thankfully, we never caused any serious damage. Our indoor play was confined to the likes of pick-up-sticks in the bedroom Steven and I shared. Our outdoor play had the roof, and the corner by the Presbyterian church, perfect for box ball and handball against that flat building wall. As we grew older, Central Park became our destination, just down the street. 96th Street, a two-way street, and the main thoroughfare was too heavily trafficked to be practical for stickball. 96th Street went across, through the park and all the way to 5th Avenue on the East Side, for us a foreign country.

Columbia Grammar School was around the corner. I was soon enrolled in Miss Halloran's class. I don't have much memory of that, but my dad did take some pictures which refresh my memory and which I treasure. After a year P.S. 93, a short walk away, became my neighborhood school.

Learning to earn my way in life and then sharing that knowledge with others has been a primary motivator in my life. It began on that stoop where I lived, selling used magazines. The mid to late 1940s was postwar, and the boys were returning from the front. No more Victory Gardens, no more blackouts. Things were booming or starting to boom. The nation was converting quickly from a wartime to a peacetime economy. From bombs, tanks, and weapons, to homes, automobiles, and dishwashers.

The golden age of magazine publishing, especially weekly news and pictorial magazines, was filling the need to advertise all those consumer goodies. There were Look and Life and Pix and Click. There was both Time and Newsweek. There were Saturday Evening Post, Reader's

Digest, and Coronet, Boy's Life, Mechanics Illustrated, and a dozen others. All now disposed of in the trash heaps and dustbins of history. All composting now in landfills. Back then, I entered the secondary market.

I became a specialist in Life, National Geographic, Reader's Digest, and Saturday Evening Post. At age nine or ten, I would visit all my neighbors, even in adjacent buildings, and collect their used magazines. Then I would sit on the stoop (a "stoop" is the set of entry steps that fronted all small city buildings in those days), a stoop was the building's community center.

For you suburbanites, stoops were also utilized for "stoop ball," where a "pinkie", a high bounce pink ball, sometimes called a "Spauldine", after the manufacturer Spaulding. was forcefully thrown against that step in many variations of base running games.

I would stack up all the Life magazines in one pile. National Geographics in a second pile and in the third pile would be Reader's Digest...and so on. All the issues of the day. I peddled magazines, to whoever walked by.

At one point, my father came by and he asked:

"How do you know so many people?"

My response was, "Well, I just talk to them, and then they are my friends."

That kind of sums up my pattern in life.

Another experience I remember about making money as a youngster is something that nobody does anymore. I “shagged” bags at the local supermarket. I would stand outside the supermarket and as people, mostly older ladies, came by with their shopping bags and their carts, I would ask “you want me to carry your bags for you?”

I would accompany them home. In those days people did not have so many shopping carts. Also, they did not have cars, and they walked home, and they weren’t suspicious of a “good-looking” 11-year-old boy in that neighborhood. It was surprising how frequently folks accepted my offer to tote bags for them. Those were more trusting times. Perhaps someday we can regain them.

A dime or quarter or, occasionally, a dollar was my reward. The tally could easily be up to \$15 on a Saturday. That was pretty impressive, especially as a 10 or 11-year-old. That would be like making an adjusted, \$50 today. As a kid, I was not a saver, but never a big spender either. I would spend my money on candy mostly in those days. Candy and “Spauldines” which wore out quickly, or rolled beyond rescue down a sewer drain. Fleers or Topps gum packages, with their accompanying baseball trading cards, were another major expense item in my young budget. Oh, that and movie tickets, and penny candy.

Those were the days when I started building model airplanes on the kitchen linoleum floor and became a regular customer of Polk's Hobby Shop, near the Empire State Building.

My neighborhood in the forties, was the promised land of movie theaters, during the heyday of Hollywood. The war was over, the boys were coming home. Jobs were plentiful and the nation was returning to a peacetime footing. Entertainment of any kind was welcomed. Television was emerging. Hollywood was booming. An era of double

features and newsreels. The baby boom was replacing the boom of bombs. I was really fortunate. In that neighborhood, there were at least seven movie theaters within six blocks.

There was the Park West, Riviera, Riverside, Midtown, Symphony, Uptown, and Thalia.

The classiest was the Riverside, a movie palace, with a balcony and only showed first-run films. My favorite was the grubby snake pit theater, the Park West on 98th Street, between Columbus and Amsterdam. All the others were on Broadway the main commercial drag.

The Park West had its attractions: three main features, six cartoons, serials and newsreels, and previews...four hours, more or less, of low brow entertainment. Admission was a dime. The floor was slippery with spilled soda, melted ice cream, and candy corn. Few parents, but the ParkWest had a matron, a hefty butch lesbian, with a powerful flashlight. And woe to the kid on whom she shined her beam. She patrolled the aisles, ferociously and took no shit whatsoever. If we wanted to be around until the end of the show, we had to be on our best behavior. But God forbid you should drop something on the floor. The floor was cleaned regularly, at least twice a year, whether it needed it or not. Also, if you kept your ticket stubs until you had a shoebox full, after a while you could earn bonus dinner plates.

The Park West never showed any of the movies that were playing at first-run theaters. But lots of newsreels, and lots of Lone Ranger. Hopalong Cassidy, Abbott and Costello, Tarzan, and maybe King Kong. At least four hours of entertainment for a dime. It was what you would expect. It was crap. Maybe I saw Bambi there. I don't know. Bambi might have been too high brow.

The cream of the crop for content was the Thalia, which played nothing but foreign films. All the rest were in between. No doubt that for film maniacs of any sort, ours was the neighborhood to inhabit. Better than Times Square for a youngster of that era. That was still like the golden age of movies, so to speak. We were seeing a lot of quality, the good stuff. I went to the movies in those days almost every weekend. At least one movie theater every weekend. The priciest theaters may have charged a quarter for kids.

### MY VENTURE INTO CRIME

I remember one incident regarding the candy shop around the corner. A tiny, hole-in-the-wall that sold penny candy like Mary Jane's, malted balls, strips of button candy, licorice sticks, ropes and flavored syrups in wax bottles. All those delights now history. The shop was run by an elderly couple. My venture into crime. They had a cigar box full of change hidden under the counter. I don't know how I came into the knowledge that it was there, but I stole it.

We went on a spending spree at the Park West Theater, and somebody got suspicious. We were gorging ourselves, one candy after another. I think it was my brother and one other co-conspirator. We were pigging out. Of course, we got caught. That was the one time that I remember that I got a hair brushing. I got acquainted with the hairbrush on my butt.

Did my parents believe in spanking? Yeah. Not much, but certainly when it was warranted, they spanked. I remember my mother spanked me maybe twice. I don't think my father spanked. That was not his style, but my mother had no hesitation about taking a hairbrush to us. It was like being taken out to the woodshed. When that happened, you knew damn well you deserved it. It was my version of Brighton Beach





**Mother, me and Steven in happier days before the deluge.**

Memories, with apologies to Neal Simon. Considering the context of the situation my punishment was warranted. Yes, it was warranted.

### RIDING THE RUMBLE SEAT

Speaking of Brighton Beach brings to mind our trips to the beach in summer. Steve and I rode in the rumble seat. How many people today know what a rumble seat was? The Ford of the late 40s was a coupe. Just a front seat. Two doors, two seats. But a few were made with a reverse trunk that opened to a convertible outdoor back seat. The trunk opened up with an extra seat. What fun for two restless boys. We would go to Jones Beach on day trip mini-vacations. Wow, my parents would ride in the cabin. Steven and I would ride in the rumble seat. It was better than riding in a convertible - no supervision.



Our beach trips alternated between Jones Beach, Coney Island, and occasionally Riis Park. I remember those trips fondly. Jones Beach was a long trip that took us at least two hours to get there, and two hours to get home. Once we arrived, the parking lot was a mile from the beach. That was a long trek for kids but the prospect of the beach as our destination made it worthwhile.

Going out and coming home the roads were always jammed. It was a slow go. My main recollection of traffic in those days was going to the beach. That's as true today as it was then, there was a lot of traffic.

#### MOVING TO 95th STREET

A bit later, at age 13, as collateral damage from my parents' breakup, we moved a block and a half away to 95th Street, a perfect block for stickball. It was a neighborhood that was slowly turning, Puerto Rican. I grew up pretty much at the beginning of that era. 96th Street was almost all white 97th Street was almost all Irish Catholic. And 98th Street was at that time turning heavily black. We were on the border, 95th, and 96th. It is interesting to note, in retrospect, how sharply the cultural dividing lines shifted, from block to block, even back then. That was a phenomenon that affected Steven much more directly than me.

#### GRANDPA AND GRANDMA

At one point, my mom's father, my grandfather, lived with us on 96th Street. He also accompanied us in our migration to 95th Street. I never made friends with him. My mother was his pride and joy. He and his son, my uncle, had placed my mother on a pedestal, where she remained throughout her life. My two sisters became his job to care for while my mother worked. I think he thought of my brother and me as Americanized roughians. He was a proper Hungarian gentleman. We had little use for him. He didn't have much use for us. Plus, we had a third child at that time, and then a fourth. So everybody in the

household was taken up with the new daughters. My mother, as soon as she was able, went back to work, because we needed the money.

My father's mother, my grandmother, lived with us for a short period. She was a sweet old lady But she was an old lady. Then she went to live with my aunt about a block away. They had two young children in need of caretaking. In that time, and perhaps even today, immigrant families tended to cluster near each other, particularly in their first, second, or third residence in the U.S I have fond recollections of my grandmother.

### FOODIE'S DELIGHT

The neighborhood was a great place to grow up. Relatively safe, though Steve and I had differing experiences of that. We had Central Park and a rich variety of stores and entertainment offerings. There were several upscale bakeries in the neighborhood, European-style bakeries like Babka, Eclair, and Cake Masters.

We also had a store called Daitch, an egg and butter and dairy store. They had wonders like butter in a tub and pickles in a barrel. Halvah by the pound. Fresh ground peanut butter. Those were all features of Daitch, one of my favorites. I loved going there.

Many days as a teenager I used to escape my parents fighting in the house, and I would walk, just wander, down Broadway, just hoping to get away from the domestic tumult.

Another escape for me was to build things. My favorites were model airplanes built from balsa wood and tissue paper, electronic amplifiers that required lots of soldering, and also stained glass projects (in later years) which also required plenty of soldering as well as glass cutting. Somewhere in my teens, I built my first amplifier from a kit. The fact that it was a kit only meant that all the parts were present (maybe) and a

supplied set of instructions. You had to cut all the wires and solder all the parts, You had to build it. It was a kit after all. You had to carefully read the color coding on the tiny diodes and make sure that you used the correct diode in the specified location, and cut the wires to the exact length. You had to make sure you “hot” soldered the connection and were not cold soldering. A cold solder immediately popped loose, or worse, popped loose later when the kit was functioning. And then once it was built, you had to go back and check every connection. Make sure that you've done it correctly. Finally, came the big test, plugin and turn it on. That was the showdown and things rarely worked the first time. You learned to check and to go back and check again. Eventually, it did work.

In contrast, the tissue-covered, rubber band-driven, balsa wood planes never quite worked the way they were designed. They always seemed to crash land, but they were fun to build.

When I wasn't building models and kits, I wandered the West Side in complete freedom. The West Side was a foodies' delight in those days. Much of it was mid-European ethnic. Chain restaurants were almost non-existent. I don't recall a McDonald's. The chains of those days were Horn and Hardardt, Nedicks, and Chock Full O' Nuts.

Relatively few people ate out. This was a neighborhood of immigrants who recently arrived in the states. Mostly they ate at home, family-style.

It wasn't until the next generation that franchises began to appear, and slow to arrive on the West side of Manhattan. I do recall Schraft's, not as a chain, but as a popular sandwich, cake, and ice cream place. It was a somewhat upscale, “ladies for lunch” place. So it wasn't the kind of place where we went frequently. And in terms of ice cream, I recall that



Howard Johnson's 28 flavors was the big number that ruled the ice cream world in those days.

Once upon a time in America, Howard Johnson was "the" roadside stop. As the interstate highway system exploded, so did HoJo's. And then just as quickly Howard Johnsons disappeared and became motels that just seemed to fade into obscurity.

As much as I loved the neighborhood bakeries and their availability of fresh-baked bread and European Sacher torte, my all-time favorite was my mother's apple cake. My mom would make an apple cake, upon request, for my birthday. Typical birthday cake I could live without.



**Dinner for seven at our house. No leftovers, and not much elbow room.**

However, my mother used to make a wonderful sheet cake, with a buttery cookyish dough, and with shredded apples, raisins, and chopped walnuts. Then she would take the dough and make rolled strips, almost like fat noodles. These strips she would lattice on the top. And that was my favorite cake.

Unfortunately, in our house, it only lasted about a day and a half. Despite the fact that she made it for my birthday, reality in a household of seven, dictated that nothing lasted very long. I got into the habit of wolfing my meals, so I could be the first in line to get seconds because leftovers were almost unheard of in our family. Plus we had a dog. A nasty little dachshund that could only tolerate my mother, so he was rough on everybody else, but he also stood in the line for leftovers.

96th Street was almost all white, as I recall, and almost all recent Jewish recent immigrants. 95th was mostly white with a scattering of Puerto Ricans. Most of my schoolmates were white. Steve had a very different experience.

### STEVEN'S WEST SIDE STORY

It was a different New York City and my memories involve third grade, where we would walk to school, first to PS 93 and then to PS 75, a little bit closer to the river at the corner of West End Avenue. I would walk straight down 95th to West End Avenue and then one block to the school. At first, we lived about a half a block off of Central Park on 96th, and that was a fairly middle class, Jewish neighborhood. So one walked west towards the river across Columbus Avenue and Amsterdam Avenue, a very Protestant neighborhood, then between Amsterdam and Broadway was a very Catholic neighborhood. So for a kid, starting in fourth grade, it was like passing through three worlds. And having to change or having to accommodate three different personas in order not to get beat up. So you left the house being a frog in the Jewish world and

the kids on the street who would expect you to be a Jew “shalom” or you are an enemy. I would cross Columbus and change persona to be a Protestant “how ya doiin” and finally across Amsterdam and change persona again “name a da fada”

My mother was baptized Catholic and she had me baptized Catholic so I could pull off most of the personal stuff and remain as a noncombatant, as it were, and avoid any kind of attack in New York streets even in those early days.

For me, the streets were not the safest. Kids on the street were pretty much on their own. Mostly we were latchkey kids. Our parents worked. We lived and played in the street. We played punchball, slap ball, bounce ball against the side of a building. We were half a block from Central Park where we would wander off on our own, ride our bikes on our own. And when one does that one tends to become a bit street-smart at least in terms of survival. And those early memories of cheating what totally went on the street and out of the house totally free. No controls. No real rules.

My memory of New York City was formed when we moved our apartment to 95th Street. We played stickball and punchball in the middle of the street. The kids that would come to play there were a collage of different backgrounds. It was at a time when on 95th Street there was an influx of Puerto Rican citizens who were coming from the island. And right away of course, if you're a kid on the street, you learn all the worst words. I became proficient in that and learned the perfect pronunciation of all the street slang as a survival technique. If I could swear properly in Spanish, with the proper accent, then I must not be the worst person for them to encounter.

I really had a good time growing up in New York City because it was so free. From the time we got out of school until the time mother came home. We were pretty much on our own. The only rule was “be home by dark”.

Good news, bad news. It could become quite dangerous. I've got a couple of permanent scars here and there, as a result of my unsuccessful Superman attempts but that's part of growing up and I survived that. I think it made me a good deal more capable of insuring my own survival.

## INCONSPICUOUS JEWS

I do not recall my friends as coming from particularly religious families. Mostly, they were culturally Jewish, and not strongly practicing Jews, because their parents just had come out of Europe and the Holocaust. In many cases, I think that they were trying to bury that part of their background. Many were not conspicuously Jewish.

That certainly occurred in my family, which was quasi-Jewish. As far as I know, the primary contact my parents had with Jewish immigrants was with my father's family. My mother's Catholicism was gauzy at best and I have a feeling that she was a closet anti-Semite. I never was sure of that. My mother's father was a railway official in Hungary. Very middle class, very prestigious occupation. As a government functionary, he was used to being an administrator and in charge. He had the bearing and look of a military officer. My mother was a lovely, very attractive, slender, athletic woman. One summer we spent in Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey, where she worked as a lifeguard. I think she and her family had intentions of climbing up the social ladder. My mother's brother, uncle John, was a travel agent who consorted with wealthy families. He would come to the states on the ocean liners of the





My aunt and mother on a wind sail in Le Touquet, France, circa 1935. My aunt Betty idolized my mother, who live much of her life on a pedestal of adoration.

day, Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary, or leave and go on vacation. I remember once accompanying him to one of those ocean liners. He seemed to be well known and he knew his way around. He could get on the ship early, during pre-boarding. He apparently had some inside connections. I wouldn't be surprised if he was known as a big tipper.

Just to give you an idea of who my mother's family liked to hang out with, my uncle was married to a Dior model. My memory of her was that she spent her whole life lying on a lounge chair and doing some artwork. I don't know what else she did. But she was definitely a trophy for my uncle. My impression, she was very indolent.



As a family, our connection was with other Hungarians, most of whom lived on the East Side in Yorkville. Both my parents at one time worked for the Voice of America

Many of my friends at that time lived in a couple of big apartment buildings directly across the street from us on 96th Street. Those were 10 story (or more) buildings. My first impulse was to say they were not luxury buildings, but on second thought, I realize they had a doorman and elevator man. So that's luxury in my book.

My first school was Columbia Grammar School, on 95th Street. I went there, I think for two years, first and second grade. And then I went to PS 93. The neighborhood public school, four blocks away. We would walk to school as a group. PS 93 was a classically good public school, but it was an old school built in the late 1800s. Imagine a school without an auditorium. In order to make an auditorium, all the classrooms had rolling doors, rolling walls, on tracks built into the floor, and they opened up the wall, forming one, huge, maybe four or six classroom-sized room, forming the auditorium. Then after the ceremony or event was completed, they would roll the walls back. It took just a few moments to reconfigure. Then we had classrooms again. A very practical solution, but a little clunky.

The school was definitely an old school. My teachers were also "old school". They were consummate professionals. Miss Murphy, my third-grade teacher, and Mrs. Smith, 5th and 6th grades.

I remember my two teachers there, where I spent three happy years. Third grade skipped fourth, combination fifth and sixth grade. And then, seventh grade was junior high, but I only went to junior high for two years. And senior high for three years. It's confusing but the bottom line involved arriving at college when I was 15 1/2. I was tracked with a

group of very bright kids and we traveled through school together for five years. It was a fabulous experience. We played together, we studied together, we all lived close by. My friends lived across the street or around the corner. Central Park was our playground and our countryside, all four seasons.

#### THE U. N. AND ME

A highlight of my Father's career at that time was to attend the first United Nations General Assembly meeting in San Francisco. In junior high school, we celebrated that event with a pageant at our own assembly. A feature of that assembly was a group sing of the UN song. Sixty years later, I may be the only person alive who remembers the words:

“The sun and the stars are all ringing,  
With song rising strong from the earth,  
The hope of humanity singing,  
A hymn to a new world in birth.  
United Nations on the march,  
With flags unfurled,  
Together fight for victory,  
A brave new world.

In life, memories are made up of little things. This little thing has gotten stuck in my memory bank for a lifetime. But there's more... perhaps 30 kids on the stage singing “United Nations on the march”, and there's a skit that accompanies the song with the line “When I was a little shaver... So we're going through rehearsals as we arrive at the line “When I was a little shaver.” From the back of the group comes another voice “now you're an electric shaver”.

It broke us all up. And ever after that, we could not get through another rehearsal without the cast breaking up in eleven-year-old giggles. That's the kind of thing of which lifetime memories are made. They're not the big stuff. They're the small stuff. Enjoy the little things.

From there it was off to high school and the halcyon days were over.

#### CHAOS AT 14

At 14, I was plunged into chaos, engulfed by tumultuous home life, traveling two hours daily to high school and a part-time job. I really lost my bearings that year. My dad moved out of the house and was living in Yorkville. I finished high school in a blur, just scraping by. I spent the summer working the truck garden at Gould Farm, near Great Barrington, losing my virginity at age 15 to a “Mrs. Robinson wannabe”. I don’t remember how I got through that year. I think I may have lived for a while with my Aunt Betty. I lost touch with all my schoolmates with whom I had traveled through five years and made no friends worth mentioning throughout high school except perhaps George Redlich, who lived in the neighborhood and shared my interest in airplane model building.

College was definitely not on my mind. Nor in my parent’s mind. We were immigrants. They were struggling. My Mom was working part-time, and traveling to Reno, Nevada as the only way to secure a divorce in those days. My parents knew they had a bright kid, but I was just one of four, and college prep was not on their priority list.

Perhaps if I had gone to high school with some of my neighborhood friends, things might have been different. They went mostly to Bronx Science and Music and Art. I went to Stuyvesant, an all-boys school, where I knew no one. I probably would have been much more comfortable in a co-ed environment.

I got my first real job while I was still in High School. As soon as I was 14 I applied for working papers. Until 13 or so I was still doing the “supermarket bag gig”. At 14, I started working on 42nd Street in the Lincoln Building, where I ultimately spent two important parts of my working life. The first was for the American Pulpwood Association, a trade group that serviced the pulpwood industry. I have no idea what else they actually did. I was a mail boy, I always went to the mailroom. I remember updating mailing addressing records. I sorted mail, I opened envelopes. I was a 14 year old with a 14-year-old’s job.

I don't have a clue about what I got paid. It might have been something like two dollars per hour. The second Lincoln Building experience was much later when I had a resume business and I had an office in The Lincoln building. The mailroom was my first instance of a responsible job.

I actually started working and earning my own money when I was 10 or 11 years old. By the time I was in my forties, I felt as though you could drop me anywhere in the world, and in two weeks, I'd have a job. I worked my way through high school. Then started college and remembered working, often multiple jobs, all the way through my college years.

My brother and I are three years apart. I was the firstborn. So I was the one that everybody pinned their family hopes on. During my early years, I was the star, or the Golden Boy, the one in whom all expectations were vested.

Steven, on the other hand, was the athlete. He got the short end of the stick, IMHO (in my humble opinion). He was three years younger. In order to keep pace, he had to run faster, jump higher, and take greater

physical risks. He was smaller. But he developed perhaps in self-defense, a physical presence that allowed him to keep up, and often successfully challenge. We developed an intense rivalry playing tennis. We would be fiercely competitive with each other. I recall once when we were about 11 and eight respectively, we sparred with boxing gloves in our shared bedroom, and the exchange got heated. I landed a lucky punch and Steven was semi-conscious for a few moments. Of course he doesn't recall that. We never fought physically again. But we sure argued a lot.

So it seems I was the brains and Steve was the athlete. Those labels dogged us until we were both senior citizens. In our teens and median years, we led very different lives, each in our own direction. The tension between the four siblings was not apparent then, but later, when we were negotiating (or arguing) the disposition of Lucien's archive around a table, the resentments, long-buried, became bleeding sores. This was especially apparent between Steven and Annemarie, who came close to declaring war and expressing reluctance to visit each other's homes, claiming that they didn't trust each other. That caused long-simmering tension in our later relationship as Steven felt that no one was paying attention to what he had to say. His opinions were discounted, he felt, and he was probably mostly accurate in that belief. More of that tale later.

Steven and I ended up living with my father when my parents divorced. I was about 16 at the time and Steve was 13. Both parents moved in opposite directions. My mother moved to Florida with my sisters. The two brothers moved to the "countryside" with Dad.

## DYSFUNCTION IN THE BERKSHIRES

My recollection is that we probably saw each other once every couple of years. They spent some summers in Great Barrington. Steve saw more

of the girls than I did. He later went to college in Florida. He was down there while they were growing up. I had very little contact with them until they were adults,

Everyone in the family believes my younger sister was my mother's second husband's child. She was born while my parents were still married and she may have been the proximate cause of their ultimate breakup. I will never know for sure.

Neither she nor my mother ever acknowledged Arpad (her second husband) as her father, though she did grow up with him in Florida.

Everyone in the family believed that Kathy was my mother's second husband's child. She was the spitting image of her “stepfather”. Both had a long horse-face, shaped like no one else in the family. She did grow up with him, but until her death, she steadfastly maintained that Lucien was her true Dad.

Upon my parents' divorce, my brother and I moved in the opposite direction with my Father to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a charming New England town of about 5000. For my brother, it was a tough transition. Really a tough time for both of us, actually. I had started college the year before at 15. And now I was 16, and for all intents and purposes, was now a college flunk out. Not quite, but about as close as you could get.

So the three of us, an “odd couple” trio for sure, moved up to Great Barrington, which is about 100 miles north of NYC. I decided to take a year off from college. It was not fully my choice at the time, but given the timing and circumstance it proved to be a practical choice. I became the chief cook and bottle washer. If I say that my father literally “couldn't boil water” it wouldn't be an exaggeration. I soon got a job at

the local supermarket as a cashier and enrolled in the local high school French course for the Fall semester.

Steven spent his high school years in Great Barrington, as a “chameleon” city kid trying to fit in and later reinforced this fish-out-of-water scenario by attending college in Gainesville, Florida. As Steven recalls, “Thirty-five thousand undergraduates and not one face of color. Steven was a trumpet player and Louis Armstrong fan. Satchmo appeared at Gainesville during Steven’s undergrad years and Steven approached the musician after the concert to ask where in the area the performers were staying. Satchmo told Steven he had to drive 70 miles to Jacksonville to lay over with his band because “no nigras stayin’ in Gainesville tonight”.

While in Florida, Steven reunited with our mother and sisters. That never was an option for me. I was pretty much “persona non grata” for many years since I had expressed the inability, and unwillingness, to take her side in the divorce wars. We never had much of a relationship after that. I will; give my mother full credit for one great gift she gave me, however unknowingly, my love of reading. She was a long time member of the Book of the Month Club and an avid reader of quality popular fiction of the day. Our living room held several bookcases filled with contemporary and classic best sellers. Her taste was good and she permitted me full access to her library. From about the age of five I regularly poached from her collection, enjoying the likes of Faulkner, Hemingway, London, Ferber, Buck, Schulberg, Hershey, Dos Passos and others. She opened the world of reading for me, a gift which has kept on giving until the present day. My father’s bookshelf, on the other hand, never held anything I truly wanted to read, but he did have the darkroom, a place of photo magic and creativity where I learned to develop images. Words and images, were my legacies from my parents.



Much of my life has been occupied in learning the emerging tools of my generation to combine those words and images.

I did visit my mother a couple of times in Florida, but it was always strained. Steve became her favorite son. Paradoxically, he also became my Father's number one, during Lucien's declining years. This came about partly, I believe, through Steven's eagerness to achieve that role, and partly because it was a role I was more than ready to relinquish. In the end, he and Annemarie jockeyed for decision control over where Dad would find nursing home accommodation. The Boston area, Annemarie's turf, was ultimately the choice. Steven would have preferred Connecticut.

My mother, In Florida, needed a lot of stroking. Steven and my two sisters were quite willing to accommodate. She was a guilt tripper and guilt passer. If my siblings didn't call her for a few days she would complain "it's about time you called". They put up with that all their lives. They dealt with it, I couldn't. So I stayed away, pretty much.

#### ANNEMARIE'S VIEW

**"I think my mother needed somebody to blame, " said Annemarie. "Also, if you didn't play by her rules it was not acceptable. And John definitely didn't play by someone else's rules. So even after she passed, in her will, she made it clear, very clear to punish him. Typical of my mom."**

My father was an artist, he had the soul of an artist, and in addition he was an under-earner. He was also a sweet, gentle, self-absorbed man. I really respected him. I believe my respect for my father was the source of the rift between my Mom and me. During their tumultuous days just months before her divorce trip to Reno, my mother came to me and asked me to take her side against my father. I couldn't do that. I felt I had two parents and felt equally loyal to both of them.



Like my Father (regarding his archives) many years later, it was a choice I couldn't make. She never forgave me. She even, upon her death, disinherited me, I believe in large part, for that single fateful decision.

I think my father harbored hopes, when I was living with him in Great Barrington, that I would become his apprentice, in effect following in his footsteps.

Though I did some work for him, and ultimately, in my early 40's edited the book he authored for the International Center for Photography, "Life With A Camera", I had no intention to follow in his footsteps. Even back then, I was following my own weird, though I could not have labeled it as such at the time.

During that year in Great Barrington, as a college dropout, I worked in the local supermarket, as a cashier. Even then, I realized that I couldn't walk in my father's shoes. Some people do, I know, but as much as I respected him, and what he was doing, I would walk my own path, follow my own weird.

My father occupied a lot of real estate in our lives. He had been born a Jew in the Jewish culture, became a Protestant In order to attend school in Europe. When he moved to Great Barrington, and even before that, when he was having marital difficulties, he became involved with some ultra-Christian mentors. At that time he developed a strong Christian faith. During my very early teens, I accompanied him to the Presbyterian Church, on the corner of 96th Street and Central Park West. Across the street was another church that believed in faith healing, Christian Science. It was a very popular church. It wasn't spooky, but it wasn't mainstream either. We occasionally attended there as well.

He pinballed between conventional Christianity, the power of positive thinking, missionary Christianity exemplified by Dr. Glenn Clark whose spiritual philosophy was “each one, teach one”, a mantra I much admire. He also hung out with some Christian fringe-ers, whom my mother probably viewed as cultists. Those experiences in early churching with my Father had a residual effect on me later in life. I also explored some unconventional spiritual pathways, including American Buddhism, at one point referring to myself as a member of the “Heinz” faith, 57 varieties. He definitely had a very strong moral streak. Not my mother, as much.

I remember a story that my brother tells about that ethical attitude of my Father.

Steven discovered that Dad was paying some money that he questionably owed in Federal income taxes, and Steven asked him during a conversation why he was paying this money that he questionably owed to the government.

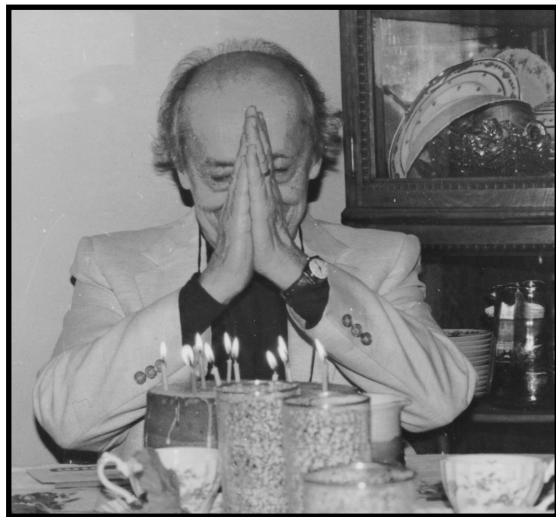
My Father’s response to him was, “Hey, I've had a good life. I'm really grateful to this country. I don't mind paying my fair share”.

#### DAD’S DECISION-MAKING DILEMMA

His decision-making, however, was less admirable. In the latter years of his life, when he was in his nineties. We knew that his time was limited. He was suffering some memory loss and the onset of dementia. His thinking may have been a little disoriented, and we actually begged him to make a decision regarding his extensive photographic archives. I remember sitting in his living room. Steve and one of my sisters were also there, begging him to make a decision regarding what he wanted us to do with his collection when he died. He couldn't do it.

"You decide, it will be your choice, when I'm gone" he kept saying.

Decide? No, it was like, having to choose the fate of his fifth (and perhaps dearest) child, and he couldn't decide. Poor soul, despite our urgings, he couldn't. It reminds me of biblical Abraham, being asked by the Lord to sacrifice his eldest child. Looking back, I think for my Father it was that kind of decision. He couldn't decide, he couldn't let



**Lucien Aigner, celebrating, at a guess, his 90th birthday. Note nine candles.**

go...whether he wanted his collection exploited for commercial purposes, which we could have done, or he wanted it donated to an institution.

Some of his work, a few pieces, was already represented in major museums, the Museum of Modern Art, for example. Mass MOCA, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, was in a formative state at that time, and for them to add his work to their permanent collection would have been a major coup. In addition, they were local as was he, a significant plus. They were super motivated to make a deal.

They had been recently chartered, and they were deep in the process of raising funding. They eventually became a very popular and well-respected Museum of Contemporary Art. Located in the southern Berkshires, Mass MOCA was on the New York State Massachusetts line, up near Williams College, in that area. As I recall they offered him a quarter of a million dollars to become the permanent home of his collection, with a dedicated “Lucien Aigner room”.

He couldn't say yes to that either.

Shortly thereafter he died.

Then the trouble began, between my sisters, and my brother and myself. It took us an additional 10 years to resolve. I spent much of that time trying to play middleman, attempting to bring both sides together. My brother and my older sister fell out. Their division was over commercial exploitation led by Steven's daughter Karine (who was not even a legal beneficiary but was nonetheless pulling my brother's strings) and the Annemarie/Kathy faction, mostly concerned with preservation. I was the swing vote. The futile attempts at resolution had been going on for years.

Eventually, we met in Boston, for a final try at reconciliation. We came a hair's breadth close.

We scheduled a family council meeting with the intention of finally coming to a resolution of the estate. As part of our ground rules, and before we started the meeting, we agreed that we would meet until we reached a decision. Just the four of us, no outside advisors. We agreed on that point, but Steven pulled a Shark Tank. If you are a fan of the TV show Shark Tank you'll know what I mean.

He said, Can I make a phone call? He called his daughter for advice. She said, “I don't think you should do it”. That ended that. Everything



collapsed in shock and bitterness. It took us several more years, and plenty of hard feelings to resolve the disposition of my Dad's archives.

I spent much of that time trying to play middleman and to bring both sides together. My brother and my older sister fell out badly.

We grudgingly agreed, at that point, to appoint Annemarie as the sole negotiator. Due to our past track record, what with various family factions trying to set up contacts, we were all going in different directions. The word leaked out that dealing with the Aigner family was a virtual poison pill in the photographic collecting field. Years later Yale became the final repository, thanks to Annemarie's valiant tireless efforts.

#### STEVE'S VIEW of the Aigner Collection

How Yale University became our solution for the collection.

It was my feeling, when my father was alive, that we needed for him to tell us what he wanted to be done with his collection, and G—

knows, we tried. His response was always, "Well, it's going to be yours when I'm dead anyway, so you figure it out." Rather than say to us, I would really like it to be in the Massachusetts Museum of Art, or I would like you to give it to the Getty Museum, or offer it to so and so or whatever, he would never say what he wanted to be done with it. He would always say, it's going to be yours so you four decide, well, the four of us could never agree on what time of day it was, we'd always have different points of view and opinions.

I remember there was a celebration of my father's 80th birthday in Great Barrington. John and my sister Annemarie and I were there, and we took him out to eat. At the end of that day, we were on the porch, the three of us. My sister Kathy lived, I think in Reno at that time, so she wasn't available. We were discussing, what are we going to do with this father of ours, who just will not make a decision? My recollection is that my sister said, "Well, if it comes to that, we can just have him declared incompetent, and then force a decision".

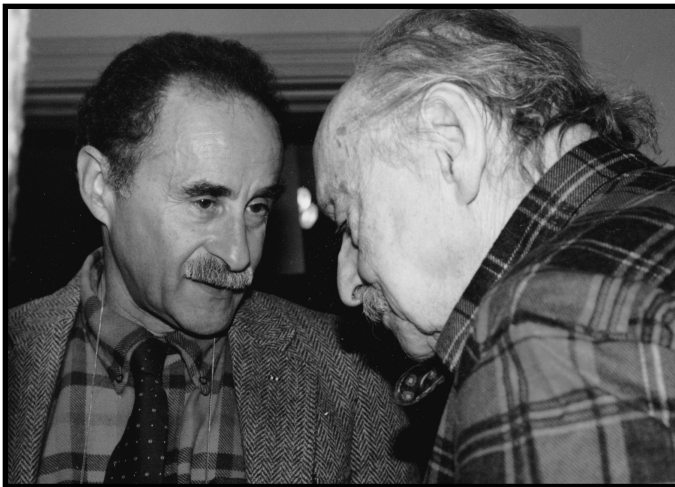
I had come back within the last year or so, from 12 years as an expatriate where I was working abroad. My reaction was "whoa, timeout".

I lived closer to Great Barrington than either John or Annemarie. I thought perhaps I could work out something with our Dad to get him to make a decision. John had done some work with him with Polaroid, the company that introduced the photograph that developed itself. Polaroid was interested in using one of their products to attempt to make copy negatives of Lucien's iconic images but the relationship soured. I believe Lucien decided he was not happy which kind of turned John off because he had done a lot of groundwork. So here I was, trying to persuade my father to do something.



During that period, he managed to create a 501 c three Corporation, the center of which was his collection, which then allowed him to donate it or to sell it but Lucien just could not give up control of his one and only sweetheart, his collection. You want to buy pictures. I'll sell you pictures. We went out to the Getty Museum in LA and schmoozed with Weston Neff at lunch. We arranged a gallery exhibit where his whole collection of black baseball leagues of New York City were displayed.

There were negotiations, ad infinitum, with the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, up in North Adams Massachusetts, which had offered to house the collection to give him a separate named room for the Lucien Aigner collection. But he couldn't give up control. The Getty Museum offered to buy the images but also wanted the negatives. Do you want the negative? That's an entirely different story. He would set



**Steven and Lucien conferring in the days before Dad entered a nursing facility near Boston.**

up criteria that no one could accept. He just couldn't let go. Fast forward to Lucien dying. The collection was left out of an evaluation of his estate, the over 100-year-old house was his only valued asset. The collection was placed in a storage facility in Great Barrington for which we were paying a monthly fee.

Lucien became incompetent due to a stroke, about age 95.

He died at 98, after a year or two at a full-time facility outside of Boston. The collection in the meantime remained in the lock-up self-storage facility in Great Barrington. He had authorized the sale of his house to me for \$1, in order to decrease his assets and qualify for Medicaid. So I

owned the house. After he died, the house was sold in order to get the funds to pay the monthly fee for the storage. We also paid maybe six months of nursing home fees. I don't know if you've ever priced 24/7 nursing home fees. The monthly cost was significant. The remainder of those funds after Lucien died, was meant to be used to take care of the collection. Each of us had a different idea of how it should be done. The girls originally did not want it to be sold.

They wanted to create a museum. John and I would have been satisfied to sell it to a photo gallery or a collector or a museum or whatever. We were four siblings who couldn't agree on the time of day. So we all met up in Boston, and hired a mediator to try and help us come to some sort of agreement. We came razor close to deciding. My sister had been in contact with an investor who wanted to buy the collection and market it. Which to me was all of a sudden, wait a minute, you didn't want it marketed. You wanted it on display. So I kind of had a sour taste in my mouth about that. At the very last moment, I backed out. I said okay, I'm done. No, I'm not going to agree. That was my fault. In hindsight, it would have been a lot easier and would have created far fewer hard feelings, between John, my two sisters, and myself, had I just gone along with it.

The history of why I changed my mind is another long story. About a year or more later, my sister Annemarie came in contact with the Addison art gallery in Massachusetts. They promoted a successful exhibition and then Yale University offered to purchase the collection and give it a permanent home. At that point, my attitude was sure whatever you want to do, go ahead and do it. Just let's get it off my plate, his plate, your plate, let's do something so it doesn't continue to sit in this lock-up facility. So we all agreed. That's finally what the Yale connection produced a sale of the collection lock, stock, and barrel. The remainder of that money after reimbursing my sister's expenses,

probably between \$30-40,000. So that had to be paid first. And since I didn't have any control over the money, John didn't have any control over the money. It was my sister who said, Okay, well, firstly, you've got to pay for this. And then we got to pay that. So in the end, the balance was split four ways, which meant that we all got a paltry sum. Much less than we would have gotten had we settled it years earlier.

Ultimately, my fault that the agreement didn't go through. In hindsight, if I could do it over again, I wouldn't do it the same way. Since my sister Annemarie being the take-charge organizer that she is, she said, Okay, here's what I've got to offer you. And at that point, I was ready. I was involved in other things I was no longer interested in following the trail of my father's collection, so wherever it would be, you got a place for it, fine, put it there.

## MY SISTERS AND ME

My relationship with my younger sister was almost always quite troubled. I often felt like she was a creature from another planet. There was one period though when I was practicing some heavy meditation, levitating and reading auras, where I was able to connect with her in a time of her need. A few months later at the time of her college graduation, unfortunately, we had an incident where all those good feelings completely unraveled, never to be fully healed. We had a major confrontation, which semi-permanently polluted the swamp of our relationship.

As part of the graduation weekend, we rented a hotel suite. My brother was flying in from Saudi Arabia, and brought with him a quantity of Lebanese hash. He and my sister secretly made hash brownies. They left them on the table in the hotel suite and didn't tell anybody. Nice surprise, folks.

People were freaking out. My mother was blotto. She was hallucinating. She thought she had been poisoned. Even Annemarie's husband, Steven Rowan, a seasoned CBS correspondent, reported later that he was hallucinating. Even he didn't know what was going on.

No one could figure it out. I didn't have any of the brownies. Not out of principle or anything like that, I just arrived late, and they were gone.

Everyone else was wiped out, and clueless, and I got righteously furious at my sister and my brother. I read them out. I was indignant. And my sister never forgave me for that.

That incident caused a split, which we never fully reconciled. We eventually made it three-quarters of the way back together again, when we were negotiating my dad's collection, but we never had a close relationship after that. On the other hand, I had a pretty close relationship with my older sister.

My relationship with Annemarie has been close but fraught. Most of that closeness came after her divorce when she needed some family support. I did a work project for her around that time, which was probably a mistake. I didn't feel like she treated me well over it. I did my job and did it well under constant duress, but I never felt like she really thanked me. I had contracted with Annemarie to develop an in-office network of her three PCs. To my recollection, this was the early 80's. in the beginning days of personal computer networking. I had a tough job to do. The tools at that time were quite primitive. The system worked, but the task proved to be both painful and painstaking. The boxes were huge by comparison to today. No Mac's at that time. These were the early days of Windows.

When you talk about technology and computers in the early '80s overall, that was like the stone age of desktop computing. DOS was the dominant operating system at the time. I will be ever grateful to IBM for giving me the equivalent of an advanced degree in my six months of training. That led to an intense interest in personal computing, post-IBM, and some early involvement with PC networking.

## COLLEGE YEARS OF CRISIS

Stepping backward through time to my teens. My first year in college was a disaster I nearly flunked out. After a year hiatus in the Berkshires, I returned to college at age 17. First stop was living with my aunt in Washington Heights for a few weeks while I found my own place.

I spent a short period in an apartment of convenience on 137th Street, off Convent Avenue, located almost across the street from the school. It was a rented room from an elderly couple who were constantly having medical emergencies. The apartment was a cockroach nest. I didn't last there very long. Perhaps a few months, and then I moved to an apartment on 83rd Street in the basement of a six-story building. Another cockroach nest with water pipes running overhead, but with the saving grace that EMT's weren't showing up regularly.

I met my first wife, Sheila, in Economics class. We sat in the back of the room. Professor Taffet occasionally would comment on how we weren't paying attention. He was a nice guy, but we didn't take him very seriously. I remember one of his favorite quotes, "It's not that the figures lie, It's how the liars figure". Though Sheila and I sat in the back of the room and paid about half attention, I still remember that quote. He was a good teacher and I enjoyed economics as a subject matter, but Sheila, honestly, was a more interesting subject at the time.

The most revealing or interesting course that I ever took, was a course in Economic Geography, taught by Kenneth Clark. What I appreciated about that course, was that it took a very global view of things, with the intention of showing how a country's geography affected its politics, its relationship to its neighbors, its economics, and its culture. So it was a course that seemed to tie together a number of disciplines. That umbrella viewpoint, that desire to establish connections between disciplines, follow threads and ferret out relationships, politically, economically, and even personally, is something that I've attempted to do throughout my life. I have always sought to find connection, to tie loose threads together, and gain what might be called an umbrella view of events in our lives. This has been my attempt to look beyond minutiae and gain a more bird's eye view. Though I never got particularly good grades in high school, or in college, for that matter, I am grateful that I got an excellent education. Essentially I taught myself how to learn.

## FIRST MARRIAGE

It didn't take long for me and Sheila to move in together. We were both at a point in our lives where we needed a relationship. We started hanging out together by spending Saturday nights in Greenwich Village. We'd stop by at a newsstand and pick up the Sunday New YorkTimes early edition on Saturday afternoon, and proceed to Cafe Rienzi. We'd get a cup of espresso or coffee and perhaps a cannoli and we would do the crossword puzzle together, Sheila was, and I believe, is still, a crossword puzzle devotee. As a result of her interest, I became really proficient in crossword puzzles as well. About half the time, we would be able to finish the puzzle by Tuesday morning.

Those puzzles can be pretty daunting and they're always themed, which makes them even more interesting. We also spent time together, going to many folk music concerts in the village. We didn't see Bob Dylan. But



we saw a lot of the Irish groups like the Irish Rovers or the Clancy Brothers.

We went to the Village Gate, sometimes we went to Circle in the Square, which had wonderful theater events. We did some hanging out in Washington Square Park, which was one of my favorites because they always had plenty of folk music at the fountain. I think we may have gone to see Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins, and Theodore Bikel. Sheila took me out one time to Paramus, New Jersey..and there was a young man performing who later became very well known. He was the piano man. We saw Billy Joel, in what might have been one of his first concerts off Long Island, shortly after the release of “Piano Man” album. I became a lifelong fan.

Around that time I developed proficiency in two oddball techniques: “second acting” and “fading”. “Second acting” allowed me to witness two-thirds of a large number of Broadway plays. I would mingle with the crowd taking a break between the first and second acts. As they returned to their seats I entered the theater and used the men’s room. By that time everyone had found their seats and I located a vacant seat and enjoyed the final two acts.

“Fading” was the term for unobtrusively sneaking into movie lines, which otherwise would have been sold out, before my date and I otherwise would have gotten to the front.

Not long after we started dating, Sheila and I talked about moving in together. She had been living either with a roommate or with her parents not very comfortable situations. At that time I was living in what could only be called a hovel. I was renting a room in the basement and it was just that, it was a room, perhaps a storage room. There were pipes decorating my ceiling. Probably pipes for the heat and the water

supply. The room came complete with a huge family of the largest water bugs I've ever seen. I guess they were just giant cockroaches.

It was not fun living with them. Other than that, the one-room basement apartment was livable. I had a hot plate. Sheila stayed over now and then. After six months or so, we decided we'd like to get married. Looking back 60 years, it seemed like it took a New York minute to decide to get married. It was not very romantic. We were two lonely people.

Sheila was one of the most loyal and hardworking people I have ever met. Too bad for me that I never fully appreciated those qualities. I asked her to get married, she said yes. I don't remember it as being super romantic. She came from a Jewish background and wanted to get married by a Rabbi. I didn't identify as Jewish, though that was my heritage. I had no objection to that, but I wasn't willing to convert to Judaism. In those days we couldn't find a willing Rabbi. Eventually, we got married at Ethical Culture, on Central Park West. It's a secular spiritual group, based on humanism.

The wedding was attended mostly by close family. My mother was there. My father, his wife, maybe my aunt and uncle, her parents, her sister, and uncle. It was a small wedding, very simple. I think it might have been a total of 10 people. I recall we went out afterward for brunch at nearby Cafe des Artistes.

Sheila came from a modest background. Her father was a route delivery man, a decent hard working man. Her mother had died years earlier and her father had remarried. Her stepmother was what you might call a super bargain hunter. Her hobby was to uncover bargains, buy multiples and then come proudly home and give some of them away to family and friends. Anne and Irving were uncomplicated, basic people.

Sheila's most interesting relative was her Uncle Harry, an artist, perhaps a cartoonist, but he was definitely an artist. He lived in southern Jersey near Fort Dix. We went to visit him a couple of times.

She also had an uncle who lived nearby, with his family and was a very sweet guy with a sweet family. He ran a soda fountain/luncheonette in Clifton, New Jersey. We used to get together with them occasionally for Sunday dinner, which was almost always at a Chinese restaurant. That was the tradition, in those days, a Jewish family went out on Sunday for Chinese food. The Chinese food was always Cantonese because that's all that there was. Chop Suey, chowmein, and maybe spareribs.

I was still in school. Sheila was working. I think she might have been doing some substitute teaching. And then started working in the advertising department of a major department store or a men's store.

## CAPE COD ADVENTURE

Immediately after getting married, we took a few days off, as a mini honeymoon to Cape Cod. There we discovered Provincetown, a tiny arts and artist community at the farthest tip of the Cape. Also the summer gay mecca of the East coast LGBTQ community. Less than two hours from Boston, in off-peak traffic, the Cape was missing one secret ingredient which we had enjoyed in the Village, and which was very popular at the time in the Boston and New York areas, a coffee shop. We saw a potential entrepreneurial opportunity. I guess we saw it as a way to extend our vacation potential while earning extra income. Sheila had just graduated and I was scheduled to finish my studies the following spring. We soon discovered a vacant shop on Commercial Street, the main drag. Well, sort of vacant. Over the course of several months we negotiated with the motivated owner and finally came to terms. Then came the colossal task of converting the plumbing supply

store into a home for a coffee house space. No mean feat since we did not have a car at the time.

## PROVINCETOWN

### *Sheilas view*

*Yes, that was the summer after we got married. We had decided when we were up there. What this place really needed was a coffee shop, because we were used to hanging out in the coffee shop in the village. You know, when we were dating and when after we got married. We used to go on Saturday nights and do the New York Times Sunday crossword puzzle on Saturday night at the coffee shop. So when we were up at Cape Cod we really stayed in Truro, but we went into Provincetown all the time, which was the next town and there was no place to just sit and have a cup of coffee. Many bad restaurants and galleries and shops but no coffee shops. So we started planning to have one. We found a place to rent. We bought used Bistro tables and chairs down on the Bowery and schlepped them up to Cape Cod, which was no mean feat since we didn't have a car. We borrowed a car. So it was 1959 that we had the coffee shop.*

*We had a lot of fun. We didn't make a lot of money, we would have made more money had we continued it the following year. I remember working like 15 hour days and being exhausted and we lived in the back of the coffee shop. So it was pretty hard. I think I came away with \$15 somebody once left me a big tip. I didn't spend it. I saved it and I had \$15 when we left the coffee shop. There was a great musician that came by and just played. Actually, there were three guys that came by and stayed and we would feed them spaghetti because that's all we could afford. Bruce Langhorne was a three-finger guitarist, a great guy, a wonderful musician. He went on to really bigger and better things, too. He had quite a noted career as a studio guitarist for a lot of singers, the best known was Theo Bikel. So he would play in the coffee*

*shop and we would feed him coffee and spaghetti. We also had Tony Maffei, an artist who would sit either outside the coffee shop or inside doing his paintings. He did fantastic oil paintings very quickly. So he could complete, you know, oil painting in an hour. He was very good. And the third guy that came was Gordon Parks Jr., the son of Gordon Parks the photographer. He came up there with them. He came to visit once or twice after that. Unfortunately, he was killed a few years later in a plane crash. When we went up to Cape Cod, I was out of a job. I had been working for an advertising agency. And they fired the two guys that I worked for, so I had no job anymore. So when I came back from Cape Cod, I found a job teaching.*

*They really didn't like us in Provincetown. We were outsiders. And we were hippies. And you know, that we were not well received by the people who lived there, the native sons, and the police. And they're always watching us. I felt that they were always like, outside the door, watching what was going on. Nothing was going on, except we were trying to make a living. It was a good experience, and I'm glad we did it. And I'm glad we didn't repeat it. Although I wouldn't mind living up there*

## IN THE HEIGHTS

When we returned from the Cape, my priority was to find a job. We had earlier found an apartment in Washington Heights, on Bennett Avenue and 183rd Street, a short half-block west of Broadway.

Our apartment was on a fairly steep hill on the fourth floor. And all night long, we would hear the airbrakes of the buses and the trucks going up and down that hill. It was the kind of thing that over time you get acclimated to... air brakes, and fire engines. It was typical Broadway, New York City living. That said, our apartment was very livable, not fancy, but very nice. It was a very middle-class neighborhood. The

buildings were pre-war, the 1930s, maybe post-depression. As you entered the apartment, on your left was the living room. A wrap-around hallway circled the living room. In the back corner of the living room. There was a doorway, the entrance to the bedroom. The bathroom was somewhere in the middle. It was a very liveable apartment with parquet floors. The bedroom faced Broadway. I think the rent was \$110 a month, something like that.

Washington Heights at that time had not yet flipped to the dominant Latino population. It was in transition, no doubt. But it was still largely Jewish immigrants, who later would move en masse to Westchester. It was still a very pleasant neighborhood where my aunt lived five blocks away on 177th Street. She too later joined the migration to Westchester.

These were early marriage days. Much of our energy and enthusiasm was focused on setting up our apartment, shopping for furniture. We both loved Danish modern. That was in vogue at the time. We invested maybe \$150 which at the time was a major investment, to purchase a Danish modern chair, a teak wood chair, which I loved. It was typical of the time. Much of our shopping was done at a place called the Door Store. We bought other outstanding pieces of furniture, but I remember that chair was a big deal.

We also joined a bowling league, and together went bowling once a week at the local bowling alley. I think we went occasionally to the theater, and we spent many Saturday nights down in the village.

We did a fair amount of Village concertizing because, in those days, it was quite affordable. I finally eked out my degree and started looking for full-time work.

## HARLEM BOUND



I had plenty of prep for my first job out of college. I had worked for Hagedorn Press and House Organs Inc. I had worked for Flatbush Life and the New York Post as a copy boy, and I spent more than two years working for the CCNY student papers, Campus, and Observation Post, writing, reporting, editing, trips to the printer, layout, the whole nine yards. Yes, I was ready.

The student employment office had set up two interviews for me. One was with TV Guide, a national weekly small-format guide to the upcoming program offerings. My role, it was explained, would be to write the one-sentence summaries of the plot, or offering each week. The pay would be \$65 per week, with no benefits.

The other interview would be in Harlem. Was I OK with that? On 125th Street.

I showed up at the given address looking for the newspaper just off Fifth Avenue. Not too shabby. But the name on the door was Fuller Products. Not as I expected, The New York Age. I walked up to this storefront, which had a window full of hair care products, hair straighteners, and complexion lighteners, African-American cosmetic-type stuff filling the store window. As I prepared to walk through the door I heard what sounded like gospel singing.

“What the f...” This isn't a church.

Not a church, a sales meeting. A real rousing sales meeting, testimonials, and all that. Oh my God, what have I gotten myself into here?

I almost ran out of the door. Fortunately, the meeting ended a few minutes later and I explained that I was looking for Charles Sumner Stone.

“Oh that's the newspaper, they are in the rear” came the reply. I didn't bargain for this. I had visualized a typical newspaper editorial office, a nice quiet office, and some black guy interviewing me.

Then Mr. Stone appeared. A cheerful, enthusiastic African American who looked like a recent Ivy League graduate. Mr. Stone, Mr. Charles Sumner Stone,

The first conversation was something like, “We've got funding, we are starting a paper and are looking for a staff writer.”

I didn't care about their finances. All I knew was I would get paid 65 dollars a week. That was the same as the TV Guide was offering to pay me. The decision was a no brainer. I wasn't particularly interested in TV Guide. And if the money is the same, man, this is for me. \$65 weekly. for a college graduate in those days, was not bad. No, it was good. At the time our apartment was something like \$120 a month. Sheila was working, and it all sounded good to me. Much better than TV guide, which I assumed would have bored me to tears.

I believe that Fuller was an early investor in the paper. His firm was Fuller Products which I believe later became Fuller Brush an early multi-level marketing firm.

I really enjoyed working in Harlem. Might have stayed there indefinitely if we hadn't run out of money. Working on 125th. Street, our office was between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. Around the corner on Fifth Avenue, was a restaurant called La Famille. As I recall, it was run by a Haitian couple as a semi soul food restaurant, a combination of soul, and Caribbean food. The newspaper staff would go there a couple of times a week to eat lunch. That was always a wonderful experience. They had the best sweet potato pie I've ever eaten, then or since. So anyway, that was my food experience. I thoroughly enjoyed and was ever grateful for my time working in Harlem.

Charles Sumner Stone, the Editor in Chief, became a leading light in black journalism. They called it African American journalism. He later became the editor-publisher, I believe, of the Chicago Defender. He was wonderful. He was enthusiastic. Good-natured, and passionate about what we were doing. He mentored me as a younger buddy. He was perhaps ten years older than me but always treated me as a professional colleague. He was a passionate man with a lovely wife and family. The entire staff treated me as a colleague. That was a wonderful experience. I wasn't competing with anybody there. It was a true team effort. I also did stuff that most of the other staff didn't want to do. My beat was a feature writer. I covered many old ladies who had gotten evicted.

Understandably, nobody else really wanted to do that. They were mostly focused on politics and name brands like Adam Powell, Jr., and Mohammed Ali, Elijah Mohammed, and Fidel Castro, Hulan Jack, and all the celebrity preachers. All the high-profile stuff.

Adam Clayton Powell showed up at the office occasionally. It was a small staff, my job was basically to write one or two feature articles a week. I also spent one or two days laying out the paper and spent one day at the printer. That filled the week. I was a full-time staff member, but not a full-time reporter. The entire staff was eight people and maybe some stringers and freelancers. Rhea Callaway did all the society stuff, Carl Rowan did all the political reporting. There was John Twitty, the copy editor Chuck Stone did all the editorials. Ralph Matthews, Jr. was the General Editor. That was pretty much it. The advertising person was the other white guy.

I was treated like an equal, a professional equal. But I definitely was a minority. That was the first time in my life I had the feeling of being a minority. However, at one point I was made acutely aware of being in

the minority. At the time, my manner of dress was neat and casual. I don't know why but I tended to wear raincoats. Anytime I would walk into a bar wearing a raincoat all the women would scatter. And many men too, like they thought I was a cop, an undercover cop.

Although I didn't walk into many bars, when I did, it was really freaky to watch the crowd scattering.

The New York Age lasted about a year and was quickly followed by The New York Citizen Call. Not long after the New York Age went out of business we got the word that the same staff would be hired by the successor, the New York Citizen Call, a startup tabloid. Combined, the two papers lasted perhaps a year and a half.

They were pretty much the same staff, definitely the same editor, and definitely the same relationships. So I went directly from the New York Age into the Citizen Call, seamlessly. This too was a valiant effort, but pretty much doomed to fail due to under-financing and entrenched competition.



Great excitement as Fidel Castro and his army invaded Harlem

A highlight of the time, though regrettably I was not heavily involved, was Fidel Castro's visit to Harlem and the Hotel Theresa. Castro arrived with his whole entourage, including heavily armed male and female freedom fighters. With them they brought their own food, including chickens and other animals, crowding the halls of the stately Hotel Theresa, Harlem's premier hostelry. They were a rowdy bunch, to say the least.

As a community weekly newspaper, our

coverage was very New York-based, not national. Weekly papers tend toward being hyper-local. Part of our problem was that we were in competition with the Amsterdam News, which was really well established and well-financed. We were in competition for a limited amount of advertising. The business community in Harlem in the 1960s. wasn't exactly a vital force.

I really enjoyed working in Harlem. Might have stayed there indefinitely if we hadn't run out of money. A significant thing I learned while working on the paper was how to do interviewing and take pictures at the same time. Another skill I learned was editing and proofreading. Some copy editing. So I would proofread other people's materials. My favorite area of responsibility was laying out the pages. I really enjoyed that. I spent at least a day, probably a day and a half each week, doing page layouts.

## BROOKLYN BOUND

For my part, it was no harm, no foul. All said and done, they did right by me. Jobs were plentiful. My next job was in Brooklyn Heights. I became the editor of a community weekly paper, I was interviewed by the owner and immediately got the job, a real step up the ladder.

A short-lived step up the ladder. Castro pointed missiles at Florida in 1962. The draft was very real. I got drafted and fell off that career ladder.

Just to be clear, very little of my life has been planned or pre-determined. That was not conscious. It was just the way my cookie crumbled.

Brooklyn Heights Press was an upscale neighborhood weekly in Brooklyn, overlooking Manhattan. From the Brooklyn Promenade on

the East River, a famous walkway, one used to be able to get a fantastic view of the twin towers pre 9/11. The publisher's name was Robert Feemster. He was a big stockholder in the Wall Street Journal and an inductee in the Advertising Hall of Fame.

I had my own paper, for the moment. There I was, just barely 23, and the Editor of a weekly newspaper in one of New York's premier neighborhoods. My resume now featured three papers. I was on top of the world.

That seems more impressive in retrospect than it was at the moment. At that moment I was just living my life, I wasn't thinking about how amazing a feat that was. I was grateful to have the experience and was glad to be enjoying a responsible job.

Feemster, my new boss, was an interesting guy. This was a side gig for him, a plaything. He just put me in there and turned me loose. All my life I have flourished when turned loose.

During the period I worked there, I might have met him maybe four or five times. He was doing his thing, and I was doing mine. He had lots of money and this was a toy, He was an absentee landlord. The advertising manager and I ran the paper. We had the keys to the kingdom and the office. I did not look at it as a leadership role. I just looked at it as a job. A job that I enjoyed, and that gave me plenty of room to run. Because of my experience in Harlem, many of the stories that I featured were about elderly ladies getting evicted. There was plenty of that because the neighborhood was gentrifying, consequently, there was a lot of turnover in properties. There was a lot of social unrest. It was a very active, upscaling, mostly brownstone community.

It was half traditional Italian and half yuppie. The Italians were the ones on the exit ramp, heading perhaps to Westchester. Few black



people scattered here and there and scattered yuppies coming in. An increasing number of Wall Streeters were discovering Brooklyn is directly across from Wall Street.

In particular, they were discovering the overlook on the East River. There's a walkway on the Brooklyn side, which looks across the river directly facing Wall Street. Until 9/11 you looked at the imposing Twin Towers. Reachable by ferry from the Brooklyn waterfront, or you could just walk across the Brooklyn Bridge and be at Wall Street in about fifteen minutes. At the time I went to work for the Brooklyn Heights Press I was still living in Washington Heights. Sheila and I were negotiating a lease on an apartment on Cobble Hill, adjacent to the Heights. Then I got my draft notice,

And that ended that.

I got friggin' drafted. It was out of my control

I was pissed (as it pertains to the draft notice). If I had been Donald Trump or Muhammad Ali, I might have found a way out of it. I never tried. I just felt like, okay, I'm being drafted. I gotta go.

I went to Mr. Feemster saying, "Listen, Sir, I'm sorry, I've been drafted. I can't be the editor any longer. He graciously promised me the job back when I finished my military service.

"Come back to me. And we'll work it out," he graciously promised. Whether I would have actually gotten the same job back I will never know, but I believed him and anticipated that when I finished my military service, there would be a spot for me. It didn't work out that way. Before my service was completed, Feemster was killed in a private plane crash.

There you go, the John Lennon line, "Man plans God laughs".

It wasn't like I chose it. Those were the days when that's what happened. You get drafted or you didn't get drafted. I was one of the last people to get drafted. Maybe the last. I will never know. I accepted it. Fidel Castro was aiming missiles at Florida, 90 miles away. Who was I to say "no" to my country?

## US ARMY DAYS

I did boot camp at Fort Dix, a barren wasteland in Central New Jersey. In those days boot camp was 12 weeks or so of government sanctioned purgatory. I hated every minute of it and struggled through, trying to keep my profile low and my ass covered, CYA (cover your ass). I don't remember any of the guys I went through basic with. I don't remember much about basic except being on the firing range and trying my best to avoid being mistaken for the target. Struggling just to qualify. I was always one of the last people to come off the military training drills. I was not a target of the sergeant, a big black guy from the South. I remember him saying "you 'menses' you are going to do it my way. And my way is the "onliest" way."

I remembered that all my life. He was a decent guy, He had a job to do and he did it. Sure he was hard on us, but he wasn't mean.

After basic, I got assigned to AFIS, Fort Holabird Maryland. Now for those in the know, Fort Holabird is the Intelligence Center. But I wasn't intelligent. I was attached to a completely fenced, separate compound, enclosed with a chain-link fence. The Armed Forces Induction Station (AFIS), where every draftee and every enlisted person in the region came for processing. That's where they got their health exams and intelligence tests. We worked in a converted barracks. The second floor of the barracks was set up like a classroom. Every morning, five days a week, we'd show up around eight o'clock. There were four of us, all privates, a Marine Gunnery Sergeant and a green as grass Lieutenant

who had recently graduated from ROTC. He was a Mormon, who had just finished his year-long mission. There he was, the head of this unit. In reality, the Gunnery Sergeant ran the unit. He was a 20-year vet, Marine spit and polish, but a decent guy. The lieutenant was raw, so he smartly let the Sergeant run the show. We were the staff, four of us. Me and Moberg and Slanicky and Don Dailey. All of us draftees, either college students or college graduates.

It was a civilian job In uniform. I came in at eight o'clock in the morning and was done, end of the day, by three o'clock in the afternoon. I didn't mind being in the military, once I got out of basic training. It was like a low paying civilian job with good co-workers. Nobody messed with us. We knew what we were supposed to do. We were test proctors. We made sure nobody was copying from anybody else. We scored them. And then, if somebody got a result that was suspiciously low, a suspected malingerer, our job was to interview them and assess, come up with an opinion. For example, many of the young men that were processed through that center were potato farmers from the Eastern shore of Maryland. They were country boys. No doubt they were what we called "category fours". The test results produced categories 1-2-3-4 and 5 . Most fell into the first three. No doubt there, but when we discovered a college student who came from Towson, Maryland, who scored as a category four, we suspected something fishy and investigated further. Malingerers were reprocessed through the system and were not our concern once we identified them. That was our job. We wore uniforms during the workday which generally ended around 3 pm. Once we were not working, we could do whatever we wanted. We didn't have to stay on post, or at the base.

## DOOR TO DOOR

I had plenty of time on my hands and a car, so I decided to try something to supplement my income and also fill the time. I started

selling cookware. It was what was called “Door to door” and also known as presentation party selling. I was fortunate, to have gotten involved with a really dynamic team in a company called Wearever Aluminum. They operated from a tiny sales office in central Baltimore. The operating mode was similar to selling Electrolux, or Britannica, just the product and the targeted customer were different. We were focusing mainly on single working women in the Baltimore area. These were mostly recent high school graduates from blue collar families. They lived at home and had just started their work lives.

The managers of this group, the midline managers, were all ex-Navy Chief Petty Officers, the equivalent of Master Sergeants in the army, high as you can go as an enlisted person, These were all responsible guys, retired from their service and in second careers. There were three of them in the Baltimore office, in hot competition with each other to be top dog. On top of them was Greeny, a Mr. Greenstein, a Jewish guy from New York. This dynamic combination in Baltimore was what I walked into, off the street, just looking to escape the boredom of my circumstance and perhaps put a few extra bucks in my pocket

Joe Mulhern was a rail skinny, high energy. Irish Catholic, straight shooter with a flock of kids, a lovely family, a lovely wife, who proved to be a very good leader.

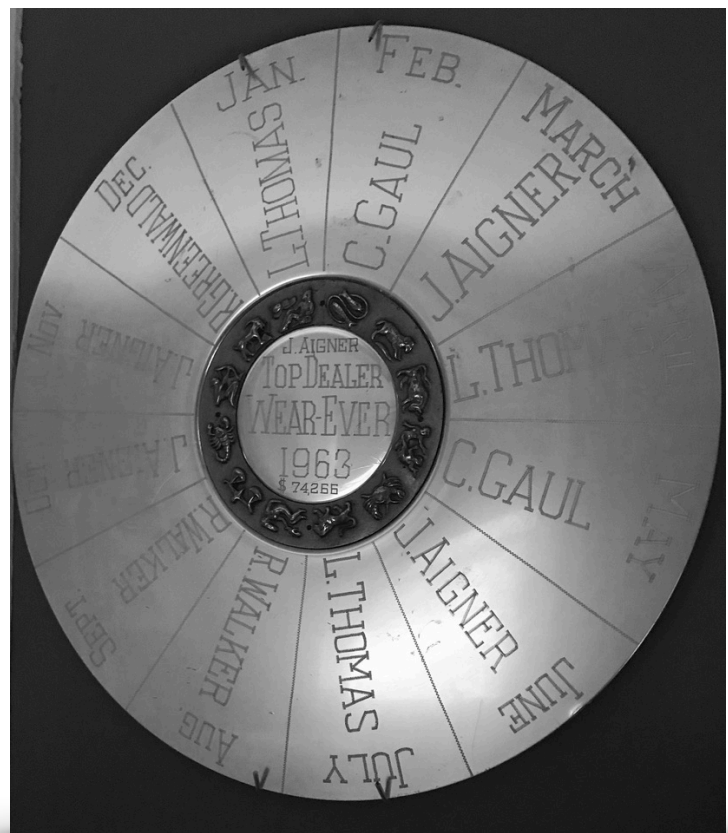
He trained me well, and I started selling cookware, as a “lark” at first. Just for something to do. I wasn't a great salesman. I wasn't particularly ambitious. I just wanted side money. But then I got involved with recruiting and training and discovered that I was a very good trainer. As it turned out, if I was training someone and took them into the field with me, that was my motivation to sell more, because I couldn't sit on my ass and say “Eff it” today because I don't need the money. If I was training somebody, I had that responsibility. It was a strong motivator.

Within a year I built a group that led the nation. I learned to become a good motivator and trainer.

Sheila found a job in the advertising department of an upscale Baltimore area men's store and we became a suburban family in Landover, Maryland, about 20 minutes from my army job..My first child, Lisa, was also born during this period. Fortunately, as I recall, Sheila was able to basket carry Lisa to work with her.

### LEADING THE NATION

I have a huge, "zodiac" trophy, still hanging on my wall 50 years later. We led the nation. That was a real accomplishment in an extremely competitive environment. My team was competing not only with a strong rival group in our office but also a group in the Philadelphia area. The three-way competition came down to the wire during the final month. We won and I have the trophy to this day, on my bedroom wall. In today's terms our office tallied nearly a million dollars in sales for that year.



**Zodiac trophy for Wearever sales leadership 1963**

That experience was the equivalent of an MBA in sales and motivational psychology. The first thing to learn was the script, then technique, then





**Sixty years later, still an example of quality, and commands premium pricing on Ebay.**

attitude. I became a strong believer in the power of attitude, another breadcrumb. These were valuable lessons that served me well throughout my life.

The first, as I said, was the script. That involved learning the product. Inside and out. The same principles could apply to any product.

The second was the technique. Learning how to ask the right questions, how to qualify a prospect, how to answer objections BEFORE they arise, how to listen, and how to stop selling and wait.



The last and perhaps most important lesson was how ALL selling is about attitude and the law of averages. The idea that if you get 10 leads, you'll get three sales calls. If you make three sales calls, you'll get an average of one sale, maybe or one out of four, depending on how good you are. So it's a numbers game, and you can treat it as a numbers game. This means that if you strike out 10 times in a row, you're likely to have a streak coming. Because it's always a numbers game. It's absolutely a numbers game. Perhaps you'll hit one where you'll sell three sets in one call, but over time, it is a numbers game. We were selling expensive cookware. It was a well-designed, stylish quality product that I was proud to sell, and I believed in it. I sold some to my family in the beginning days and they might still be using it, I know I am sixty years later.

We also had access to Cutco cutlery, which is still in business. As a division of Wearever at that time we could give Cutco knives and scissors as bonus gifts, or we got them as awards, one or the other. So there was plenty of motivational goodies available. I still have a pair of Cutco shears, which when I got them could cut pennies. Fifty years later, they still can. My Cutco knives are still serviceable, and command premium price, even when sold used on eBay.

## SALES LESSONS LEARNED

I learned many valuable lessons, but the Law of Averages was the most valuable. The more doors you knock on, the more people you talk to, the more leads you get, the more sales you make. Simple numbers. A simple philosophy to teach to recruits in my group.

The second thing I learned is basically how to do outreach, otherwise known as prospecting.

.Free carding was the technique we used to develop leads and set up appointments. We would travel in pairs, to a local shopping center.

There we would approach young women who seemed to be of working age with the opening line “have you received your sample gift from Alcoa yet?” The gift was real, a pie pan. Then would proceed to make an appointment to drop off the gift and show them a new product that Wearever was introducing. It worked about half the time. And about half the appointments proved valid. The law of averages again.

The third thing I learned was that I was a good trainer and that I was a better trainer than I was a salesman because I wasn't really ambitious as a salesman, but I liked training. I liked motivating. And when I was training somebody, it kept me on the ball. That was a valuable lesson, which I learned back then and carried with with me through the rest of my life.

Another valuable lesson was how to ask the right questions, in life, but particularly in a sales call. It is not about persuading somebody to buy, Rather it's about finding out what a person wants, and then showing them how to get it. Thus making them your ally rather than your opponent.

We were selling in some very challenging situations. Our specialty was selling to recently graduated high school seniors. And all the while we were selling to young women, mostly from blue-collar homes, working class. This was in Baltimore, Maryland. And also Western Maryland, which was really rural, We'd go on field trips, day trips as a group, and we'd do what was called a blitz of a town where we would go in pairs and head in different directions. The idea of blitzing from a standing start, and then returning home, with orders in our pockets, was a powerful, ego building experience.

In fact, in most instances we were selling to two people this young woman, who had just graduated, just started working in her first job,

and her mother. Now, that was a challenge. But when you learn how to do it, as with most challenges, it also became an opportunity.

First of all, we were selling quality, well-designed products, and a savings plan. We were selling both the sizzle and a concept, to a generally unsophisticated population.

Here's a condensed version:

“Mary, you're just starting out in life, right. And most people's tendency is to spend their money. And then maybe a year or two or three or four or five later, you end up saying, what have I got to show for it? Isn't that right, Mrs. Jones? (She's saying, yeah, yeah.) So what we're trying to do, Mary is to, to show you a savings plan. Which, you know, eventually, you're going to get married, I don't know if it's going to be next month, next year, or three years from now. Right? And you want to have something to show for that time when you were working? Can you think of anything better to show than something like what we're dealing with?

“What do you think Mrs. Jones?”

“Don't you wish that you could have started out with a set like this, Mrs. Jones?” And so on. Then when you got to closing, it was, “Here, Mary, this is how it breaks down. This is the set you picked, right? This is the total price. These are the monthly payments, which you said you could easily afford now that you're working, and you barely notice that amount out of your paycheck. Right? That right, Mary? Yeah, we might correct that. Did I get everything right? Okay, well here, and I would drop the pad and the pen. And Mary would reach for it.” And then I would say, Fine Mary, put your OK on the bottom line. And we're all set”.

Now it is my turn to shut up.  
Shut up. Shut up.

Wait and wait.

And wait. And wait, and see what happens? The most valuable secret to sales closing is when to stop talking. This theme is repeated frequently on the TV show “Shark Tank” It is as relevant today as it was 50 years ago.

Oh, no, Mary turns to Mrs. Jones. She says, Mama, what do you think? Well, most of the time, I know what mama thinks.

So I don't have to say anything, right?

This is the point at which, if there's a problem, I keep reminding them what they had said earlier. And now I start the bribing Mrs. Jones, I know that you think this is a good idea. But perhaps you think it's a little bit too early, for Mary to start with this. But she can't go wrong with it. So I'll tell you what, I'm in an office contest, and it means a lot to me to win it. So you know that coffee pot, you said you loved? Well, if you help Mary, to go ahead with this, I'll make sure you get a coffee pot for yourself. That's when you start working, and that was the essence of our presentation.

Immediately after I got out of the service I continued working with the same company. We bought a house in Virginia and I buddied up with Dave Stevenson, a dynamic but erratic partner. He became my star salesman, but he also became my main problem. The two of us would do parties with young women who had come to Washington DC to work for the government. These were young women from West Virginia, or down south someplace They mostly were on their own for the very first time, very unsophisticated, low hanging fruit, so to speak. They were working for the government and sharing an apartment. We used pretty much the same pitch, except that we baked a cake for them in a frying pan.

Present and demo it in 12 minutes. And since we'd fed them it was a piece of cake. Pineapple upside-down cake in a frying pan. I did that till

I got out of the service, and then for almost a year afterward, for a total of three years. I recall being in the Wearever office in Baltimore one afternoon and hearing the news come over the radio that Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. Like most of us, it was a day I will remember forever. It was a huge shock. It was on November 22 of 1963 and it was certainly significant, but it didn't change anything for me.

I was honorably discharged. I was going to spend two years in the reserves. As I recall, my first year of reserve duty amounted to a couple of days, twice a year, in training. The rest of it was nothing. The second-year required no duty at all. My military service was completed.

## THE IBM YEARS

So, coming out of the military, I had a ready made hustle that was starting to mature into something bigger than being a cookware salesperson. I decided that I didn't want to be selling cookware for the rest of my life. What were my other options? Out of the blue, IBM became an option. I learned through a recruiter that IBM was starting a new division in the Washington/DC area.

We had recently moved to Falls Church, Virginia from Baltimore. Baltimore was not my favorite place to live. Sheila found a job in Washington, DC, one of the department stores.

I was making decent money, what with commissions and override, but it had lost its flavor. I didn't feel the need to hang on. I had learned a lot there. I gained a lot. And it was time to move on. IBM was my stepping stone. They were just in the process of announcing their 1401 computers, the first generation of computers, away from accounting machines.

That was the era where they sold a lot of tapes. A big tape, an eighteen-inch reel and billions of punch cards, and miles of continuous form



paper, like checks and billing forms. They were forming a new division called the Information Records Division, which would handle all the supplies and all the paper handling equipment. I joined that division. I lasted almost two years. One year of it was training. Second-year I was in sales. And I got out before anybody noticed that I wasn't selling anything.



**My IBM training class circa 1963. I received a great training but the psychological straight-jacket was too constricting for me. I got out before I was found out. I am 4th from left middle row.**

The problem for me was that my customers were data processing managers. I didn't know what to say to them. I couldn't talk to them. They were hugely boring technicians. They were corporate. We were in a highly competitive environment with other giant tech companies, and it just wasn't my life. It wasn't my world. My colleagues were in a group of five former Army helicopter pilots. They were weird, guys. At least for me, they were, and they hung out together. I was definitely more of an outsider in that group than I had been in Harlem, or than I had ever been in my life. I lasted just long enough not to get found out. Know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em. That's a bread crumb.

I lasted two years with IBM. One of those years was spent in training, for which I am ever grateful. I got the equivalent of a master's degree in computing. I just didn't have a successful selling experience. It took me about a year to reach the conclusion that this was not for me. I got out before others discovered it. I still wake up these days with nightmares about that period and feeling like I was a fraud wearing a proper blue shirt. A blue shirt was questionable, in that uniformly white shirt environment.

## LIFE IN VIRGINIA

My first daughter was born in New York, while I was in the service, and the second while we were in Falls Church, and just around the time I began working for IBM. I don't think it made me particularly excited. I didn't feel too strongly plus or minus about it being cool. And then there were two. And that was fun. I had a lot of fun with my kids during that period. In Falls Church we lived in a wonderful inexpensive contemporary house in a community of maybe 100 plus houses that all were built as a kind of post-war mode Prefab. My neighbors were mostly military or ex-military and government employees because it was in the Washington area. Mostly young families and we had a community swimming pool. In Virginia, you could use a swimming pool seven, eight months a year. That was my social center. I became the de facto social leader of the community, the unofficial organizer of poolside barbecues and social gatherings.

We didn't finance the house through The GI Bill. We just got a regular loan, not a VA or anything. The house was modest and affordable. The area was still pretty suburban, way out there near what was Five Corners, the second ring of the Beltway. And it was 20 minutes or more from DC in good traffic, in bad It was 40-45 mins at that time. Now it would be an hour and a quarter. Dulles Airport, still a concept was another half hour further out.



I had done a semi-professional job of improving the look of the property. I planted a stand of Asian-type bamboo. I don't know if you know anything about bamboo. It's a weed that spreads like crazy, which I encouraged it. Over time, we had a nice little, quasi windscreen of bamboo. I also planted cudzoe, again, a rampant, invasive weed, cudzoe is what was often used to line the roadbeds on the sides of the road in the South to retain the soil so that it wouldn't all be washed away. I planted a cudzoe outside my bedroom window, and it formed a screen. As a replacement for blinds, it was attractive and effective.

The house was contemporary. We'd done some work. It was pretty and very sale-able in a high turnover neighborhood. A lot of government employees, a lot of middle to ex-military or current military, and a very attractive fast-growing area. This was to become the area where they built a shopping center Five Corners, and then Dulles Airport later on. So it was an area that couldn't go wrong, a prime location called Annandale. We had purchased the house fairly cheaply, I think it was \$20,000 or something like that. And I think we sold it for \$30,000, four or five years later.

Sheila was working on and off at that time. I was making enough money. So she didn't have to work much. I don't remember exactly what she was doing during those days. At first, we had one kid and then we had two kids. She was mostly at home. We didn't need more money at that point. But I desperately needed to get out of IBM, before I was fired.

## ON THE ROAD AGAIN

My uncle was retiring, and selling his successful company. At the same time, a sales rep who had been with them from the beginning was wanting to retire. His territory was everything from Delaware south to Florida. The whole southeast. The purchaser, a corporate entity named

Villager, was a women's ready-to-wear conglomerate. The line was a favorite among college girls.

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It proved to be a fortuitous pairing. He was selling out to them. He knew that I was looking for work. He said something to his attorney, Milton Keen, who was able to make me part of the sales contract. My deal was, I had a four-state territory, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. The key was that I also had a contract. And my job was to sell the line in those four states. It wasn't much else to the contract. Except for the rate of commission that they were paying me, which was really good.

I began traveling in four states. I would be out on the road for four to six weeks, paying my own expenses. And then I'd come home for two to four weeks.

I was a yo-yo, I was yo-yo-ing, in and out from home. I was on the road, selling handbags and shoes and making a ton of money. I was a good breadwinner. I just wasn't around much, perhaps 30% of the time. When I was around, off the road, I was fully there, playing with the kids at the pool. I was hanging out, working around the house, and social directing at the community pool.

The line was hot, a really hot line, and to some extent it sold itself. My job was primarily to earn the trust of the buyers by never misleading them. I was selling handbags and shoes. There's a big difference between them, like selling both cats and dogs. Each requires a different sort of retailer and a different selling approach. Handbags, you sell two pieces of this and three pieces of that. Shoes, on the other hand, are purchased by a different buyer, who buys a style, in a run of sizes, so one is not selling \$50 or \$75 at a time. I'm selling maybe \$500 for each style. That adds up quickly. I recall I was making about 7% on shoes and sandals, and perhaps 12% on handbags.

The line was contained in the trunk of a monster Noah's Ark size Oldsmobile, a Mafia sized three-body trunk, Actually, what I was putting back there were 100 bags, and 30 pairs of shoes. And with room left over for my luggage and whatever else I was carrying around with me.

On the road, I soon discovered that most of the sales lessons I had learned with Wearever didn't really apply. The biggest skill that I needed to sell this line on the road was to be friendly. I learned to talk with the store owners, and department store buyers. And I traveled with a dog named Sassy, a Miniature Schnauzer

The dog went everywhere with me. The dog hopped out of the car and came into the store with me. He was such a good travel companion. He even accompanied me on many sales calls. The buyers loved him and he proved to be an effective sales tool. I was also able to sneak him into most motels in a satchel. He only weighed about three pounds

Well, it was more than one dog. I am partial to dogs and over my lifetime I have adopted perhaps six dogs, all very different and all good friends with a single exception. The exception was my mother's dachshund. We never bonded. When we got to New York, we acquired a new, different dog. I made a business trip to New England and upon my return, on a whim, I adopted a dog from a shelter. That dog named Friday became a whole different person. He became a real family dog, however, he was a wanderer, and he used to disappear for days at a time. I've had a series of dogs in my life, several were rescues.

My selling experience has taught me many things. One is when to stop talking. I learned to listen better. I'm not a great listener, but I'm a decent one, I think. Over time, I learned to listen to people and to get a sense of where they are coming from in their thinking, and to

understand them and their motivations. I learned to intuit what makes people tick. I learned to ask a lot of good questions and listen deeply to the answers.

I learned to shut up more. Many of my listening skills., I've learned more recently, but certainly, back then, that was an important lesson . If you can't listen, you can't be a good salesperson.

I also learned how to motivate others and work in a team.

I learned what my customers needed or wanted from me. Many of my customers on the road needed one of two things. One is to never mislead them. In other words, never sell them a dog (puppies excluded). If I'm going to recommend something to somebody, it better be good. Don't try to give them or sell them something that I wouldn't want for myself or my family. Never be afraid to say don't buy that one In the words of Gordon Gekko, don't sell them a dog with fleas. Give them a good value. Always be straight with my customers. It is easier, I learned, to tell the truth than to lie. Not only because if you lie, you have to remember what you said. The truth is always a lot easier to remember. A lesson I wish I had learned earlier in my marriage. Bread crumbs again.

I doubled the territory in a year. Then Villager management came to me and they said, John, you did a nice job. Thank you very much. But why are you spending so much time at home?

My response was, : “I go and I make my swing. I make all the stops, and I take the orders. And then I come home and I spend four weeks at home or so waiting for you to fill the orders I’ve written”.

Villager execs have their own notions of how I should cover the territory.

“ You should be out there for goodwill,” they claimed.

“ If I go out there for goodwill, you haven't shipped my orders yet, I mean, who's paying my expenses?”

“Well, you are paying your own expenses.”

“When you pay my expenses I will go out there”.

” What do you mean? How can you say that to us?”

I replied, ” Look, I can't break even going out right now, because I just took the orders. And you haven't shipped them yet.”

“We want you out there,” they demanded.

“ I'm doing a good job. I'm doubling the territory. If you don't like it, buy me out.” So, they did.

At that point I was only about 28 years old and preparing to leave Virginia. We were ready to head back to the Big Apple with a sizable bankroll, two young daughters, a loyal creative wife, and an immature ego inflated by too much early success and a lack of humility.

END of Chapter

## CHAPTER 2

### A SERIOUS MISTAKE

Villager Inc. had just bought out my contract with Etienne Aigner and handed me a sizable chunk of money. More money than I had ever had in my life. As much as I liked traveling on the road, I had no particular reason to stay in Falls Church, Virginia. The next step emerged during a conversation with my father's sister, aunt Betty and her husband Robert Zentall, my uncle, who lived and worked in Mount Vernon, New York. An idea emerged.

At that time, they were trying to expand their costume jewelry company and were looking for a sales manager. My uncle was a goldsmith and a craftsman. Half of the company's line was assembled. Betty, known in the family as Baba, designed most of that. She had served, up to that time, as de facto sales manager and it was getting too much for her to both design and sales manage. We entered into negotiation. As a result, I became a partner and sales manager, directing the growth of sales.

It proved to be a big mistake for both parties.

They were lovely people. I loved them dearly and still do, though they both have since died. However, there was a cultural dissonance at play. He was a goldsmith and a craftsman. He wanted to make one of a kind items, handcrafted items if he had his druthers. That was fine, in and of itself. Baba was a bead designer. She favored assembled objects. The main portion of their line, their staple, was castings of early Americana that paired very well with the line that I had been selling for Villager at Etienne Aigner. Those three types of jewelry were, at best, an awkward combination. It was like the old expression about a camel, being a horse



designed by a committee. There was also a cultural dissonance. We had unintentionally created three differing versions of a sales manager's role...his, hers, and mine. So it seemed we had two sources of misfit. First a mismatched line, and second a mismatched partnership.

It didn't cause a lot of personal misunderstanding, but it wasn't a good fit for any of us. Rather than let it spoil our relationship, we just decided, after a short year, to dissolve the partnership. We came to a friendly mutual understanding and we reverse-engineered the deal.

### NAIVETE COMES HOME

Overnight, it seems in retrospect, I decided what to do next. I would return to my roots in community weekly journalism. I would become a crusading journalist in the town where I lived, and where my two young daughters would soon be enrolled in public school. It was a challenge I couldn't resist. Talk about naivete.

A word about Mount Vernon at that time. These days Mount Vernon is a bit rundown and saddled with a history of negative politics. A politics of corruption. It's not a great place to be right now. In hindsight, one might have correctly predicted Mount Vernon's dismal future outlook.

Mount Vernon is the first stop out of the city. It lies at the North rim of the North Bronx, a spillover. In the post-war years, that spillover tended to be part Jewish immigrant, part Italian American immigrant, and Increasingly, as we entered the 60s, African-American. When I arrived in Mount Vernon, it was about one-third of each. The neighborhood I moved into on Lenox Avenue, near the Cross County Parkway, was mostly white, and maybe 60% of that was Jewish, perhaps more. That was the default Jewish neighborhood. Mount Vernon wasn't very affluent. There were a few upscale areas. The area where I lived was very middle class. It was certainly not affluent, at least not by my standards. Ours was a modest faux Tudor house. Small family lots, about fifty feet

wide. About 8 to 10 feet on each side of the house separated it from the property line. We had a pleasant back yard and a postage stamp front yard. Most of the houses on my block were what I would call “pseudo tudo”.

The neighborhood school, Traphagen, about two short blocks away, was an excellent school. There were some well preserved older garden apartment buildings nearby. At the corner, Columbus Avenue ran north-south, from the Cross County Parkway all the way down into the Bronx, always cutting across all the streets and neighborhoods from north to south in Mount Vernon.

Commercial Mount Vernon was mostly small businesses. Barish, the local stationer, was a mainstay of the Chamber of Commerce. There was little manufacturing, few corporate businesses, and almost no industry, a paltry tax base. There was also a Gannett chain daily newspaper, quasi-local, the Daily Argus. Not only was the advertising potential limited, but the competition was also overwhelming. In retrospect, I seemed to be ever tilting at economic mega windmills.

The one major shopping center, Cross County, was for all intents and purposes out of town and not available to us for advertising.

#### MY GRASS, BUT NOT MY LAWN

Permit me to digress for a moment. The house in Mount Vernon was built kind of in a U shape. One entered into a center hall, staircase on the right, going up to the second floor. On your left, as you walked in, was the living room. Behind The living room, the dining room. The kitchen on the right behind the stairs. The floor plan was kind of a U shape, facing the back of the house, this space contained a TV room/study. There was a protected sheltered U space which was empty right outside the window, and that's where I planted my marijuana

crop. Looking back, it is clear that I decided to go back to my journalism roots. Mixing MJ with J so to speak.

Sheila was working for a New York department store, in the advertising department, doing in-house advertising, signage, sale announcements, weekly specials. She specialized in doing graphics, layout, and art mechanical work.

I wanted to return to my journalism roots There was no local community journal, and I decided in my foolishness and innocence, to start a community weekly paper. It was called the Mount Vernon Forum. I had the naive notion of becoming a crusading small-town newspaper editor. I still have a complete set of copies. The eventual outcome was some small political success and near financial disaster.

Sheila became a minor partner at first. The idea evolved. It was a free tabloid newspaper, eight to sixteen pages weekly. We did have a subscription for mailed copies, but we delivered it free, to about maybe 5000 residents in Mount Vernon. I hired a gang of kids who, every week, would distribute the paper throughout the city. Sometimes I would supervise them personally, but mostly they supervised themselves. They were pretty conscientious. We got very few complaints about piles of newspapers being left. Our distribution was good. The problem was that I never hired an advertising person. And I couldn't do it all.

I tried, but it almost burnt me out.

Looking back, I honestly, wasn't that interested in selling advertising. I should have hired an advertising salesperson. I saw myself at that time as a crusading journalist. We did accomplish some very interesting things, which I'll get to, but I never was successful in developing enough advertising for us to break even.

## A SAVING GRACE

One unique and ultimately game-saving advantage that we had at the time, was that we were setting our own phototype. In those days that was very unusual for a small firm. Because of my knowledge of computers, I quickly and easily became familiar and knowledgeable about emerging phototypesetting technologies and cold type computer photo composition. This was the beginning of what was called photo mechanicals. A revolution was occurring in the way type was being prepared for publications. I was up to my elbows in that revolution.

During my late teens, I had been actively involved in a number of publications and was fortunate to participate in the emerging days of phototype composition. While much type was still set in individual letters, or letter set, the emergence of the Mergenthaler Linotype machinery enabled the use of lines of fixed type. These were castings in lead bars, called slugs. The linotype came into widespread use in the early 20th century and was a huge advantage over previous forms of typesetting which required each letter to be hand inserted into a line, and then locked into place to form the page.

The New York Post, where I worked one night a week during my college days, as a copy boy, used linotype machines, a technology version of hell. Linotype, now extinct, used molten lead to form bars, individual lines of type. Driven by a clanky keyboard the molten lead was formed into miniature typebars or slugs. Operated by a union operator, a single linotype was enormous, about six feet wide and eight feet high. The Post composing room contained perhaps six of these monsters. The individual type bars, the width of one line of type, were ejected into a tray to cool. They were then inked with a rubber roller and proof was taken. After allowing for correction, these columns of type were laid into a wooden frame locked into a page layout along with advertising

blocks and images.



The addition of punch paper tape driven linotype was a big improvement since it allowed the casting to operate at maximum speed, not limited by the vagaries of a human operator. Lead type, cast from an alloy of molten lead, and antimony was still being used in the composing rooms of daily newspapers until late in the 20th century. Very noisy, very stinky, very noxious. It was a journalistic version of hell. And I worked there. My job, in addition to being coffee “go-fer,” was to rush the proofed galleys back to the editors, so they could proofread, and then I would return the proofed galleys to the linotype for correction. This went on all night until the 5 am deadline. Then I would await the first copies off the press of the early edition, and race them back to the editorial room for review, correction, updating, and insertion of updated articles into the second edition, all the while dodging lighted cigarettes being carelessly tossed by the editors onto the concrete editorial room floor.



Around the same time during my college years I also worked at Flatbush Life and Town and Village, and House Organs Inc. They were pioneers during the transitioning stages to computer phototypesetting.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF PHOTOTYPE

Early contenders were Friden Justo Writer, or later, an IBM Selectric. These were beginning to use a punched paper tape as input to a modified typewriter that could justify or letter space to create columnar type. In 1973 the Correcting Selectric was announced. It added an internal correction feature to the Selectric intended to eliminate the need for typists to use cover-up tape, "white-out" correction fluid, or typewriter erasers. Though this was a big step forward, the Selectrics were principally office machines. We used them later in resume composition. However, the typesetting field was still awaiting its "holy grail".

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The Friden Flexowriter was a teleprinter used by Courier Life Publications and House Organs, Inc., where I worked during my college years. The Flexowriter was a heavy-duty electric typewriter and a forerunner of modern word processing capable of being driven not only by a human typing but also automatically by several methods, including direct attachment to a computer and by use of paper tape.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s IBM came a step closer when it introduced the Selectric Composer. This highly modified (and much more expensive) Selectric produced a camera-ready justified copy using proportional fonts in a variety of font styles from eight points to fourteen points. (NB This text is produced at an 11 point size.) Material prepared on a properly adjusted machine by a skillful operator and printed onto barium sulfate-coated paper "would take an expert to tell that it was not the product of a Linotype or Monotype machine" Note



the words “properly adjusted and skillful operator”. It was a tricky process to get right, and in my experience went wrong more often than right. But it was another step forward.

Then came Photon and Compugraphic. The Photon was a big step forward. Linotype was known as “hot type”. The emergence of cold type paralleled the development of web offset presses. Web presses allowed high-speed newspaper printing from rolls. There was another company that competed with Photon, Compugraphic. I think they're still around today as part of Agfa. Possibly the reason that Compugraphic survived may have been that they produced an all in one desktop system. The keyboard and processor were all together in a single unit. Whereas with the Photon, the keyboarding was punched tape, and it was offline.

I acquired one and then a second phototypesetting machine produced by Photon. The machines involved a spinning glass typeface disk, about the size of a dinner plate, on which there were typefaces imaged. Each disk held a different family of faces, like Helvetica or Times, and the disk was spinning in a closed box. There was a strobe light that flashed through the disk, imaging onto photosensitive paper. This paper progressed, on four or eight-inch width paper rolls. Built into the photon box at the end was a small tank of liquid developer. The paper would come out imaged, but dripping wet, and then we had to run it through a fixer and dryer. Next, we would trim the edges with a steel ruler and a single edge razor or an Exacto knife, run it through a waxing machine that applied hot melted adhesive wax to the back of the paper. Then we would adhere these “galleys” onto a sheet of layout paper and create a page. This was pretty innovative at the time.

## THE RAZORS EDGE AND TECHNOLOGY

During this period I lived, most of each day, with a single edge razor hanging from my mouth like a sharp tongue. Though I cut my fingers several times over the years, I never cut my mouth.

I am certain most people don't wake up every morning thinking about how technology has changed over their lifetime. Show and tell, over morning coffee, about how their drive has shrunk and their prostate has grown? Or what it means to contemplate a change in orders of magnitude? Such thoughts don't pair well with Starbucks. Star Trek, perhaps, but not Starbucks. Sometimes, however, it's what I think about.

I often am conscious how many services we take for granted today, and assume they have been with us for ages, are really recent introductions.

The earliest hard drives of the 1960s were of industrial scale, about the size of an automobile tire, and minimal capacity, measured in megabytes, a teaspoon full compared to multi-gallon drives in your phone right now.

My first hard drive was an add-on to my Eagle 2E computer. I was probably the first person I knew to have a hard drive back in 1982. My lord, it was big, about the size of an average small drum or giant birthday cake. It was heavy, as a boat anchor. And think of all the data it could handle...5 megabytes. That's about three minutes of video. I recall that it cost near a thousand dollars. Oh my, how things have changed in only 40 years. Today's drive fits inside your phone, costs maybe \$100 and holds 1000 times more data. And speed comparison would be a bicycle compared to a Formula 1 race car. We have come a long way, baby. That's what's meant by "orders of magnitude". During the latter part of the 20th century, the combination of cold type and offset presses dramatically reduced the expense of publishing a newspaper, especially labor costs, for small and mid-size newspapers,

and they frequently bought Photon or Compugraphic typesetting equipment at that time.

When Compugraphic machines, and their counterparts, came to market, it represented a dramatic leap forward in speed and cost-efficiency and quickly made hot type technology obsolete. Cold type itself would become obsolete less than a generation later with the advent of desktop publishing and the graphics capabilities of Apple Macintosh, Commodore Amiga, and Windows PC computers and the software that was developed for them by Adobe, Pagemaker, Aldus, and others.

In the 1980s the Teletypesetting Co. developed a hardware and software interface that allowed Compugraphic phototypesetting machines to connect to personal computers such as the Macintosh.

I purchased my Photon machines in the aftermarket. I bought them cheap, through an advertisement in the New York Times auction listings. There were many jewels, I discovered, hidden in those advertisements, buried in clouds of tiny type. You could find gems, often procured at 10 cents on the dollar, from firms going out of business.

That was how we obtained two Photons. The problem was that they were second-generation machines. They had served their useful life in the United States and were now destined for shipment to South America. I interrupted that destination and acquired the machines. They were fine machines, with one small caveat. Photon provided neither support nor any documentation. The only way I could get support, and it took me a while to discover it, was to make telephone friends with one of their engineers someplace in Texas.

We spent countless hours together on the phone, with me inside the machine, literally crawling inside. Between us, we managed to spend

that whole time servicing that pair of machines, very successfully keeping them running.

## MY ENTRY INTO POLITICS

Before we became partners with the Ridders at Catholic News, we had political ambitions. As I said Mount Vernon was a politically splintered community. At that time, my kids were in elementary school. I became very conscious of school board issues. The paper became involved in a school board election. That was really fun. The Mount Vernon school board was an entrenched male dominated, Italian political stronghold. It had been a given for years, that these Italian men were dominating the school board, as a private domain.

# ELECTION ISSUE

**Voters' guide...p.8-9**

This is our seventh issue and we have been more successful in a few short weeks than we had ever imagined possible.

We have tried to be fair, informative and interesting. Hopefully, we have succeeded. As the elections draw near, the decision confronts us whether to make political endorsements. Friends and well wishers have advised us on both sides of the question.

Some, who feel that we ought to make choices, say that it is the legitimate function of a newspaper to try to influence public opinion.

Others feel that we are too new. That we can only do ourselves harm by making political endorsements and that we run the risk of antagonizing many of the friends we have made so far.

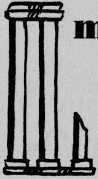
Both sides in the discussion have points which are well taken.

We have decided that we cannot duck the question. We feel that there are differences, important ones. We feel that since we have been closely following both the issues and the candidates, we have a responsibility to inform the voters of our observations and evaluations.

We wish to stress that our endorsements reflect our opinion. We make no claim to being right, no claim that ours is the only opinion. In each case we are explaining our reasons and we believe they are honest non-partisan choices.

*Endorsements on page 16*

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mount vernon


# FORUM

...a weekly

15¢

Vol. 1 - No. 7 Thursday, October 28, 1971    19 Gramatan Avenue, Mount Vernon, N.Y.    Tel. 664-3340

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Ignorance of the by-law...

## Quorum was lacking in Dowling decision by Bar Association

The Mount Vernon Forum lasted about a year, and was re-invented into a service bureau.

We realized that Mount Vernon was one-third black, one-third Italian, and one-third Jewish. If we could figure out a way to split the Italian vote, we stood a chance of winning the election. Part of the solution was to start an organization called Mount Vernon United, an attempt in the late 1960s to form an alliance with the black community.

My next-door neighbor, Herb Reich, his wife Gerry, and I, were partners in both marijuana smoking and political scheming. Both Herb and Gerry were very bright. I remember sitting around their kitchen table, nights on smoke-filled end, creating strategies. We finally devised a plan to find a black man and an Italian woman to run on a ticket against two Italian men. Looking back, it sounds like white arrogance, but it was pretty far out audacious thinking at that time and place.

We were able to find a well regarded local woman named Carmela Iaboni and a local African American school teacher to run as a ticket. It proved a successful strategy. We split the vote, some of the more liberal Italians were ready to vote for an Italian woman, a mother, for the school board. The Jewish vote mostly sided with us, and the black community was eager to have an African American man on the school board. Surprise, surprise, we won. We actually succeeded in changing the complexion and the political composition of the Mount Vernon School Board.

Unfortunately, Mount Vernon had many other problems, including a political community that had a tradition of dishonesty and scandal, both black and white. Mount Vernon was never, as I knew it, what you might call a righteous town.

That reminds me of the line that goes “Politics is like making sausage. You don't want to know what goes on in the back room.”



The failure of the paper and the election victory pretty much coincided, though they were not related. So emotionally the win and the loss somewhat canceled each other.

I don't know how ambitious I've been in my life. I'm active. I'm not an activist. But I'm a doer. I'm a risk-taker. I don't mind moving and changing. I don't seem to mind switching one thing for another. But I don't know how ambitious I am. There's been a time in my life that I wanted to achieve some fame and notoriety. But it has never been my priority.

## MAKING LEMONADE

Shortly thereafter we ceased publication of the paper and entered a new phase. It wasn't a choice, it was an economic necessity, a case of one plus one didn't equal two, it equaled one. We had plenty of lemons, so we made lemonade.

Sheila had marginal involvement in the early days of Mount Vernon Forum. She was helpful in creating the minimal advertising layouts we were able to garner. She became a more serious partner when we stopped publishing newspapers and transformed the company into the next incarnation. Around that time she was doing freelance work for a local company called Catholic News Publishing. They were an old-line firm, the official publishers of the Archdiocese of New York. They published Catholic Telephone Guides, College Directories, and a weekly newspaper, The Catholic News. All of these were heavily supported by advertising. Each ad was created as a separate mechanical or piece of artwork. That was Sheila's expertise. Catholic News Publishing began using our services quite heavily. We had a commercial graphics camera and darkroom to make photostats. We also had typesetting capability. They had been seeking a resource to do freelance advertising production. As our newspaper prospects dimmed, the conversation



bloomed around us becoming an in-house service bureau for their needs. Ultimately we formed a partnership that produced all the Catholic News Publication materials and added two other weekly publications, the Irish Echo and the Riverdale Press, as well as a number of smaller newsletters. At our peak, we produced over 100 pages weekly.

Sheila was very good at making advertising mechanicals. For the actual page makeup we created a page assembly shop. This was a big room with light tables lining the wall in a sort of ring. Each table held a fluorescent light inside, and a translucent glass top. We had an efficient production setup. We were ready to go for them.

Working with us was one of the fastest keyboarders I'd ever met in my life. Judy rarely made a typo. She was amazing. She was joined by a couple of local housewives, who needed part-time work and whom we trained to do keyboarding, proofing, and paste-up. The result was an almost seamless partnership for both parties, a win-win. It was a perfect marriage, while it lasted.

At our peak in those days, we generated over half a million dollars annually. We had a spacious loft on McQuestin Parkway in Mount Vernon, a semi-industrial neighborhood. The Ridder family, Vic Jr. and Senior, that owned Catholic news publishing, were ideal partners.

Mount Vernon was where and when I first started smoking and growing marijuana and other substances. Nobody inspired me to grow it. I had this area behind my house with sunny southern exposure. It was protected from prying eyes and animal predators. The area was eight feet wide by ten feet deep. I grew at least two crops of eight plants, each about eight feet high.

Looking back on those days, I am torn between pride and shame. The pride being my ability to recruit, hire and train people who had not been in that profession previously. We hired many part-time women and men. They worked with us strictly part-time because of the kinds of schedules that the papers required. We would be very, very busy for two or three days, and then very slack for two or three days. During that time I would hire housewives and teach them paste-up, or proofreading, or keyboarding. During peak times, we would run three keyboards.

It was a production-oriented environment. My pride was to be able to deliver a product every week, on time, regardless of what problems we encountered. Each week, it seemed would present its own crisis. Either a machine would break down, or two people would get sick at once. Or the weather would interfere. Or Catholic News would have an extra large advertising volume. Who knew what the next problem would be. What strikes me and what I remember with pride was our ability to train people, lead them and motivate the staff to function as a team, and then resolve any problems that occurred on the fly. We developed a virtual elasticity.

I didn't think much about that at the time. I was doing it while I was doing it. In retrospect, that characteristic is something of a thread I have followed in many ways through most of my life, to motivate people, train them and blend their activities into a smoothly functioning team.

On the shame side, I separated from my wife in 1971 and got divorced several years later. It was a feeling that had been growing over time. I was involved in an extramarital affair, and had been for a couple of years. It was very exciting but really toxic. No point in getting into details. My wife and I were feeling the effects of that. She knew on some level that I was being unfaithful. I was a very bad liar. It wasn't just that one instance. There were perhaps half a dozen women over time. In

retaliation, she had an affair with my brother-in-law, a CBS foreign correspondent. My wife and I had some teary nights of attempted reconciliation.

It was too late for me. I was not feeling good about the person I had become. I decided that in order to feel better about myself, I had to change my behaviors. My decision was to walk away, and, in effect, start over. I needed to find ways of learning about myself and how to like myself better.

The truth was, I didn't like myself.  
I didn't like the way I was behaving.  
I didn't like who I had become.

I didn't like the fact that I could be driving across the Tappan Zee Bridge, getting a blowjob and having an orgasm, stoned out of my mind, at the same time having two kids and a wife waiting at home. I had become that guy doing that kind of thing on a regular basis.

We sold the house in Mount Vernon and used the proceeds to settle our financial affairs. At this point, my recollection becomes very fuzzy. Perhaps because this period does not reflect well on me. Partly because I was smoking marijuana daily. It was the sexual revolution and I wanted to be part of it. It was the era of "Hair". I had discovered Su Casa, an adult summer camp near Woodstock, and began spending many weekends there.

This period is a little fuzzy for me. We moved to Hastings-on-the-river, a fairly new apartment building, which had its own swimming pool and platform tennis court, racquetball. I remember it clearly. But that's all I remember about that period. I don't remember many details. I don't remember how long I stayed there with them. Perhaps a few months or so. I don't remember where I moved next. But it was out of there, and

they moved up the road, I believe, to something that was less expensive. My daughters started going to school in Hastings. They were four and six at the time.

## THE LIMBO YEARS

This period which I have termed the “limbo years” began when I decided that I didn't like who I was. I was married to a good woman, but for the wrong reasons. So I decided, I just had to find another way of dealing with my life. My father thought I was crazy when I mentioned that I wanted to break up my marriage. He thought I was having a nervous breakdown. It was the marriage he was concerned about, not the business. My father thought I was going out of my mind and perhaps I was a little bit.

He offered to pay for therapy and I accepted, though without much enthusiasm, and began seeing a male therapist in Manhattan, which proved ineffective. However, it led to my discovering a woman named Florence Kopit, in Manhasset, on Long Island. She and her husband Jerry ran a therapy center there. That was a very important period for me, because it did turn my thinking around, and it got me started on a spiritual path. Florence was a spiritual sojourner on a path of her own, which was called Pathwork, a slightly weird group, but valid and interesting .

I also made other connections in groups, apart from the private sessions with Florence. These were confrontational therapy groups, similar to The 12 Steps ,where if you were bullshitting, the other group participants called you on it. Seated in a circle, we would ” work” around the room, each of us delving into our personal shit piles. If the group felt that a person wasn't being real in their work it was okay to call him/her on it. With those ground rules, it was very hard to fake anything. That was what I needed, a lot of accountability. That was

when I began to take the process seriously and deal with the anger, the hurt, and the issues that I had been avoiding. It took me many more years to recognize my self-involvement, my principal inherited characteristic from both my parents. I got really close to Florence. I really liked her approach.

## THERAPY

Florence's center used a number of innovative therapy techniques that I recall. For one thing, she had a mat that hung on the wall, and a beater, called a "Bataka", that we used to beat the shit out of that mat. It helped to release a lot of anger. Another technique she used was to put me in a chair, and then put another chair opposite me and say okay, now imagine your mother or your father (mostly my mother) in that opposite chair and have a conversation with her. That was very difficult, very painful but also helpful. I went there for several years, despite the long hour and a half drive in each direction.

I was not a part of Florence Kopit's connection with Pathwork a very interesting channeled teaching. However, I respected her involvement with it and I knew that that was a key part of her life. I also got involved in Theosophy at that point. I was consciously seeking a personal path.

Therapy was coming out of the Freudian mode and going into its next stage which was more confrontational, an approach that came to be known as bioenergetics, So we were afforded the opportunity to act out some of our anger, our emotions. It was also the era of the "primal scream".

For me, it was also the time for the discovery of yoga, spirituality, and the sexual revolution, a juicy gumbo. All these changes at once. I was overwhelmed and didn't know it. In that period and at the same time that I started going to therapy, I started doing a lot of reading of

spiritual books, smoking large quantities of marijuana, and sexually acting out. “Too much was not enough.”

During this transitional period, the communication with Sheila and the kids was almost non-existent. It was nothing beyond the necessities. It wasn't until a couple of years later that we started communicating again. We basically communicated over the kids and that was it.

I also got involved for a hot minute with a woman in Mount Vernon, who was starting a spiritual astrology center. She was instrumental in guiding me to some literature and she also constructed my astrology chart. We slept together once or twice, but that was not in the tarot cards, not really.

I was reading spiritual materials wildly. Really esoteric stuff, like a beautiful book called “Toward The One” written by a Sufi master, Pir Vilayat Khan. Also reading Zen stuff, a book called “Beginner's Mind, Zen Mind”. Reading RamDas book “Be Here Now.” It was definitely a period of growth and seeking.

I needed that time of separation. I don't even remember where I was living. I think I moved immediately to a nondescript apartment in Mount Vernon, but I don't remember.

## THE START OF GROWING UP

I was trying to grow up. It might take me 20 years. I thought, mistakenly, that I wasn't a person who repressed my anger. Most of it involved my mother and eventually I was able to confront that fact. That didn't mean I resolved the issues overnight. I was angry at my mother, for virtually erasing me from her life. I didn't know at the time that her treatment of me triggered so many repressed feelings, but it all came to a boil at the same time.



My encounter with RamDas' teachings was very significant. He was the LSD partner of Timothy Leary. They both worked at Harvard, experimenting with LSD and its effect on human consciousness. When they got kicked out for their work in that realm, they headed in different directions. Timothy Leary continued his LSD research, and RamDas went to India, found his guru and became a spiritual teacher upon his return home to this country. These were landmarks in my spiritual growth, but also, what you might call part of the annals of spirituality, and spiritual bestsellers in the 60s, 70s, and 80s.

Years later Ram Das suffered a massive crippling stroke and spent more than a year recovering. His first post-stroke public appearance, which I attended, was in Palo Alto, California, at a landmark New Age conference headlined by Byron Katey, Eckhardt Tolle (Power of Now), and Ram Das (Be Here Now).

I was mesmerized by this gentle, smiling soul, who stammered and groped for words but spoke most eloquently about his struggles. He became a universally beloved figure over the next fifteen years, embarking upon projects which focused on justice and equity issues. He is as close as I have ever come to finding a guru.

I thought about LSD at the time. I was tempted to sample it, but I was scared. Psychedelic drugs were very available but I was a little bit chickenshit. I had a single LSD tab, which I carried around for months and never used. Instead I chose sexual adventuring.

I had a lot of guilt about that. I had treated my family badly and I knew it. Sheila didn't deserve the way I treated her. Fortunately, after a couple of years, she met somebody else. She picked up the pieces of her life and had a successful second marriage. He was a hyper loyal person. I have a feeling that she would have put up with almost anything. I'm not sure

that's to her credit, but I acknowledge that I was the person who screwed it up. She was a nice lady, but not particularly exciting. I think I was looking for something more challenging. I don't know how she might react to my saying that, but I believe it's true.

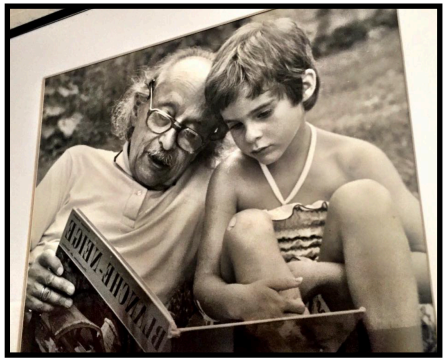
I was an emotional wreck during that period, which I call my “limbo” years. My drug use was heavy and increasing exponentially. I got to the point where I was smoking not only every day, but I was toking all day long. At this crossroads, I don't remember how I was making a living. Somewhat in desperation, I started writing resumes with a firm called Resume Writers.

A few years later, still in my resume years, we rented a family house in Wellfleet, Mass, where everybody in my extended family, and then some, were there over that summer. I was in the resume business at that time. I had a Radio Shack tablet, a TRS 80, and was modeming resumes back and forth while I was on vacation. That was unheard of at the time. A single page took about ten minutes to a modem, but it worked.

Around that time, my aunt's house became the social center of the family. I was living in Mount Vernon, doing quantities of spiritual reading, and trying to figure myself out.

Everybody from the family would converge on her house. It was her house that began the “family reunion” rituals. We are now planning reunion number four or five in the last 10 years. Amazing. They have evolved to virtual via Zoom. So that 50, 60, 70 people come to it via Zoom. We had 57 screens earlier this year. Because of COVID it was easy to organize. People showed up from Norway and California and down south, from all over the world.

Years later during my third marriage, for a short while, my house on the lake in Dutchess County became the center of family activity. We hosted one reunion there. But that was short-lived and this memoir has made me realize how closely I have replicated my Father's self-absorption. I can't believe I'm doing exactly as my dad did. I'm pretty self-absorbed I've been there for my family some of the time. I've helped them where and when I can.



**Grandpa Lucien with daughter Robin during a charmed moment with Snow White.**

As adults, my two older girls have not needed much help from me. I definitely have not been what you'd call a doting parent. I was pretty unavailable much of the time. That has changed somewhat in recent years. One of the things I've tried to do in my life is to teach the kids how to make their way. I think I've done that fairly well. They are all doing well in their respective work/life paths

I do believe my kids have some resentment over the numerous relationships I have had over the years. We have never really discussed this issue. Perhaps it is an area in which I feel on thin ice.

I'm still friendly with my first wife. That's a plus. Alycen's mom, who was my second wife, had a major stroke 10 years ago and suffers from aphasia, difficulty in speaking. She lives with Alycen. I interviewed her a couple of years ago, because I was making a documentary about her. I asked, What do you think is the most significant event of your life? I expected her to say, having a child and but she surprisingly replied, "meeting you".

That blew me away. Both she and Alycen have had COVID. And that's been a nightmare. Gratefully, they have both recovered.

My third wife Rena has been out of my life since our divorce, and despite a couple of attempts on my part to make amends, we have no relationship.

I have a positive relationship with all three of my daughters. I'm not a stranger to them. I was not what you might call the most attentive father during their growing up, but I've been a good father. I've been around and in communication with them all their lives.

As they have grown older, I have, I think done a better job of relating to them. My eldest daughter never forgave me for showing up at her wedding, riding on rollerblades. That was a period where I was hugely into rollerblading and showing off. The outdoor wedding was under the Tappan Zee Bridge. I figured what the hell. She didn't appreciate it. She's still smarting over it, a little bit. I'm very proud of my daughters. All three are good people and are doing well.

Resume writing proved to be an effective bridge into my new life. A life of doing for others more than myself. Writing on behalf of someone else proved to be a huge shift in my consciousness. I learned to accept people and to accept feedback from others. When they said, "Well, I don't like this or I'm not comfortable with that." I learned that my comfort was not the issue. In the particular of their resume, they needed to feel like they'd written it. If they didn't feel that, then I hadn't done a proper job. I strongly felt that if my client went into an interview, and a smart interviewer asked, "Did you write this?" I wanted them to be able to honestly reply in the affirmative.

NON POSSESSION

I wanted them to be comfortable with saying YES.

So that was something I really had to be very aware about. It was not an easy lesson, that took me years to fully learn. That learning process, I now realize, was also a step in the right direction for taking me out of my bubble of self.

I needed to develop an attitude of non-possessiveness. For instance, if I was writing a resume for a plumber, it couldn't sound like he'd gone to college. It had to be appropriate to the person, which is a very different kind of writing, I was not writing for myself, I was writing on behalf of someone else. This meant I had to get into their head and use the words that they might use, but at the same time make sure that proper English was employed, all the T's were crossed, and the i's dotted and the punctuation was correct. I couldn't upgrade an individual, I could only help them put their best foot forward.

Another breadcrumb on the path of learning compassion.

Writing has always been painful. I'm a very good writer, but I find that writing from scratch is always a painful process. Perhaps this was what made news writing, resume writing, and memoir writing so attractive. In each of those instances, one begins the process with raw materials. Sets of facts. Sometimes I imagine balls of clay or a piece of stone. My job as a writer is to give shape to that raw material. Then I become a writer who behaves like a sculptor, chip, chip, chip, tinker, tinker, tinker, tweak, tweak, tweak, until I shape something I am comfortable with. Writing a news story and writing a resume are both formulaic though in very different ways. Writing a resume, for me, was not nearly as painful as writing a news story, in part because I acquired a computer and word processing, which made editing and correcting easier by an order of magnitude

More painful was writing an essay, or worst of all, fiction. At least with the resume I started with a person's history and some structure. I knew that this was the raw material with which I was working. My task would be to mold the information so that they would be putting their best foot forward. A motto I used at that time is still appropriate, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression".

I would go out of my way to interview somebody, even if they came in with a draft resume, because I realized that people left out important details. Mis-prioritizing was another frequent error. I wanted to help people think through what were the most important items in their resume. If one considers the resume a strategy, and I believed very strongly that it was, what is the strategy? The resume is not a straight jacket, you can adapt it to your strengths. You can use it to help you put your best foot forward.

For example, if my client had only finished two years of college, with a concentration in English literature, but you are currently in computer sciences, should you be putting your education at the top of the page? The education, and the placement of the education, can be at the end or at the top, depending on who you are, and what you're trying to accomplish. Furthermore, you could write a chronological resume, or you could write a semi-chronological resume, or you could write a skills-based resume, or you could use a summary, or you could use an objective, or you could combine them. All these variables were considered in my development of resume strategies for my clients.

It was clear to me that there were always many ways you could play a person's qualities and qualifications, either up or down. That was back in the 80s, and in the last 40 years or so, resumes have changed considerably, but perhaps not that much. The big difference today is that most resumes are not paper. based. They are digital. In addition,



more and more resumes are visual, so you can include a picture, or you can have a video resume, or you can have a video component to your resume. Much greater flexibility has evolved regarding resumes and how they're handled in the job search process.

Resume writing proved to be a stabilizing factor in my life at the time, but Su Case and the sexual revolution intervened as a powerful competitor to my best intentions.

## CHAPTER 3

### SU CASA, MI CASA

My involvement with Florence Kopit and therapy indirectly led me to Su Casa, an adult summer sexual playground 15 minutes from Woodstock in Hurley, New York, alongside the Ashokan Reservoir.

Miriam and Yussi, the owners, were a charismatic and enigmatic couple, with an open marriage, who ran an immensely popular hotel and bungalow colony, frequented by many of NYC's most progressive social workers. For about \$50 for the weekend, one could enjoy a bed, two family-style meals a day, late-night living room dancing, nude swimming at the pool, BYOB and marijuana, yoga, group sex (if that was your interest), and plenty of engrossing conversation and socialization with a hyper interesting crowd.

Yussi was a master builder, or, more accurately, a mega builder. He dotted his ten acre property with freestanding shacks, erected almost overnight, on cinder block foundations. Plywood construction and tarpaper roof, no insulation, no plumbing. Mostly two twin bunk beds and a few doubles. Spartan as you could get, but they served the purpose, basic privacy for sexual adventurism.

The atmosphere in the living room was steamy and fraught. For relief, there was a large outdoor covered patio where I spent many hours, smoking weed, flirting, and conversing.

Miriam was a buxom, charming, warm-hearted hostess for whom I had a passionate crush, which I was too timid to voice, in marked contrast to my customary behavior.

I soon moved in with Steve and Rosalyn, two singles whom I met at SuCasa. Steve was a burly Jewish guy. I don't know if I would call him a mama's boy but a guy who was always in anxiety over daily decisions. He couldn't make up his mind, indecisive, indecisive. Roz was a big-boned bi-sexual, very decisive, assertive woman.

We shared a top floor gorgeous apartment, in a building on 103 Street and Riverside Drive. The huge apartment had eight or nine rooms. It was situated on the top floor, with an incredible view of the Hudson River and a leaky roof. Roof aside, it was a fantastic apartment. The building had been built in a different era with the expectation that well-to-do people would live there. It was a little too close to Harlem. So it was edgy, and suspect. 97th Street was the redline border cross, but of course, this was Riverside Drive. The apartment itself was gorgeous.

We shared it fairly well until I got a girlfriend, Stacia, who wanted to move in with us. She moved in and everything fell apart. Steven and Roz, particularly Roz, resented the hell out of her, and she pretty much returned the disdain. Stacia was not an easy person. Somewhat difficult was an understatement. We kept modestly to ourselves. She didn't choose to socialize with them. I had met them at SuCasa, the loosey-goosey fuck farm. Their relationship with my lover was oil and water. They simply did not mix. Shortly thereafter, they asked us to move out. This began my period of limbo and bouncing around.

Stacia and I had met at a place called Pumpkin Hollow Farm. It was a different kind of farm, the spiritual retreat of the New York Theosophical Society. The Society was a middle-class version of a straight-laced commune, a spiritual organization based on the work of two women, Annie Besant and Madame Blavatsky, a controversial Russian occultist, philosopher, and author, who co-founded the organization in 1875. Blavatsky and some others had sponsored an

Indian teacher named Krishnamurti, whom they were fronting as a kind of poster boy Guru. It was a somewhat “airy-fairy” organization that fostered wood sprites and tree fairies, as well as some solidly grounded and sensible spiritual practice. Krishnamurti, the designated spokesperson and poster face, was an Indian speaker and writer, who, in his early life was groomed to be the new “World Teacher”, but later rejected this mantle and withdrew from the organization. His interests included psychological revolution, the nature of mind, meditation, inquiry, human relationships, and bringing about a radical change in society. He stressed the need for a revolution in the psyche of every human being and emphasized that such revolution cannot be brought about by any external entity, be it religious, political, or social.

This was at a time when I was eagerly consuming a steady diet of spiritual authors. My source was the Esoteric Bookshop on 53rd Street between Madison and Lexington, housed in the headquarters of the New York Theosophical Society. Pumpkin Hollow Farm was their retreat Center, which they shared with a group called Nurses for Therapeutic Touch.

Therapeutic touch is also known as hands-on healing. These were professional nurses who believed very strongly in the healing efficacy of “hands-on”. They were granted special privileges at Pumpkin Hollow Farm.

The Farm had a bountiful truck garden, enough to feed 60 or more people at peak. They also conducted a variety of workshops open to the public. It was a lovely place, with a combination of cabins, and motel accommodations. All meals were served, family-style, community-style, where you served yourself from a serving line.

Stacia and I met at Pumpkin Hollow, on a bridge, over a little stream. This happened about two years or so after my first wife and I separated, in the early 70s,. The setting was quaint, picturesque and very granola. I soon felt like we were spiritual soulmates. We both felt a spiritual connection. We met in a spiritual community and at that time it felt like spirit was moving within us. I was ready to give up SuCasa in favor of this higher ground.

Stacia was, intellectually and spiritually, a goddess follower. For many years she had been deeply involved in goddess studies, women's religion, Wicca, and feminist readings. Stacia was an extraordinary person, but very dysfunctional in many ways, some that I never fully comprehended. Stacia believed that she had been born a twin, and I was inclined to believe her, though she never produced any evidence. She believed she might have been the illegitimate child of a Chicago mobster and his girlfriend. She never knew a true parent. Her first memory, as she recounted to me, was of herself, and a twin sister abandoned in a garbage can. Whether that was a phantom memory or a real one, I have no idea.

It was impossible to decipher from Stacia's misty memories and lack of documentation the truth of her background because she truly didn't know. She had been adopted by a couple and described incidents where her stepmother, or whatever it was, made her hang the laundry. Then if she didn't hang it properly, beat her, tore it all down, and made her put it all up again. By any measure, she was mistreated. She was also, she claimed, sexually abused and mistreated by the woman's husband. We never discussed that in detail, because I had no need to know. She left that situation as a young teen and struck out on her own, landing in upper Michigan. I don't know many details. My understanding is that as a teen, she was taken under the wing of a female professor at the University of Michigan, someplace on the Upper Peninsula.

Unfortunately, we can't check any of this with Stacia, because ten years ago, weeks after her retirement from a struggling career as a high school teacher she suffered a massive stroke. She now has aphasia and memory loss.

My relationship with Stacia and our subsequent marriage alternated between delight and disaster. I still have difficulty “grokking” that. We



**My common-law wedding with Stacia. Note the harp and female officiant.**

had a child who grew to two years old before we actually married. Not a civil marriage, but a ceremonial. Our daughter Alycen called it “us wedding”. It was a fairytale, hippy-ish, unlicensed, garden wedding at Pumpkin Hollow. Both of us were troubled people, going through difficult times in our lives, each with our own challenges.

Stacia and I truly bonded. However, our life together, while that lasted about ten years, was almost always surreal. It was like being on a moving merry-go-round, where the scenery was constantly changing and where nothing was stationary. It was hard to get off, harder to stay upright. During the time we were together, including our marriage, breakup, reconciliation, and second final breakup, Stacia and I lived in at least thirteen places, both together and apart. No wonder I felt adrift. I expect we both felt that way. She was unorthodox, to say the least. A straight-laced gypsy. Stacia had no ability or interest to reconcile with Steve and Roz. They just didn't get along, oil and water. It was no surprise when they asked us to leave.



In hindsight, I have no regrets about losing them as friends, but I'm trying to remember where we went from there. We became vagabonds. Neither one of us was earning a complete living. Stacia was working freelance writing articles for Junior Scholastic. She'd write a few articles a year but not enough to make a complete living. And I was scratching by as a neophyte resume writer. I think we had a temporary apartment in Mount Vernon. We truly cared for each other. We couldn't live together, and we couldn't live without each other.

Not long thereafter, when I was working as the production director for the Irish Echo, Aer Lingus was a major advertiser. The Echo received frequent perks from the airline. At one point, they offered us a pair of tickets to Ireland. I had recently begun seeing Stacia, who was a huge William Butler Yeats fan. A free trip to Ireland. We jumped at the opportunity, and we were excitedly looking forward to the trip. We arrived at the airport and we proudly showed our tickets. "Sorry, folks," the agent observed, "those tickets were for yesterday."

Happy to say, they accommodated us. They very graciously switched us and got us on a plane the next day. But we did it with a big whoops.

We flew into Dublin, the only major city that I've known where no building was higher than four stories. It did not look like a typical modern city. There were no skyscrapers. It looked like an enormous village, very civilized, very friendly. Food was pretty awful, but Irish music and entertainment were magical. It was a wonderful place. We rented a car and drove throughout Ireland from east to west and then north. They talk about Ireland being a very green place. We were there in late spring, and I have never seen so much green. However, it was chilly. Stacia had some Irish friends or acquaintances that she wanted to visit. We dropped in on these people unexpectedly, and they welcomed us and sat us down for a meal. You know, it was like, "Oh, yeah, come in,

man” albeit with an Irish brogue. We drove west. And then we drove north. We had a destination in mind, almost to Northern Ireland, a village called Glencolumbkille to visit a craft commune run by a Catholic priest, where they made Irish sweaters and other handmade items to market to Americans. They welcomed us enthusiastically and we sat with the priest and talked about his plans and discussed helping the community to market their craft products in the States. Nothing ever came of it, but it was well-intentioned. From there then we headed south, through Yeats country, where Stacia was in seventh heaven. This was the trip of her dreams, To be in Ireland and to follow the trail of Yeats lore. It was a memorable trip.

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Alycen was probably conceived in Ireland. It was late spring, pretty cold and chilly, though pleasant and sunny. We were on the West coast of Ireland, on the ocean, and we decided we wanted to go to the beach only to discover a chilly steady breeze. To stay warm, we laid down in a hollow place in a sand dune. Protected, we got more sun and it was quite pleasant. I don't mean to imply that Alycen was conceived on the beach, but the whole trip was somewhat magical, as was Alycen's conception.

We did visit some churches, but they don't stand out in my mind. We also visited some Celtic piles of stones with markings on them, but again that was not my thing. It was Stacia's thing. Stacia was a historian. I just remember a nice church. Let's go on to the next one. Or that was an interesting library, or that was an interesting pile of stones.

We did not cross the border into Northern Ireland. We got close to it. but we did not cross. We did not have any intention to do so because we had been properly warned about the factions. One band down here and one band up there, and Ireland in the middle. We pretty much avoided that.

Immediately upon our return from Ireland, we learned that Stacia was pregnant, and soon after I had a new daughter. Love “trump's” all. I was ready to be a father for the third time. Perhaps I could do a better job this time around. As it turned out, that opportunity presented itself soon enough. We had a baby in March and by summer we decided to move to West Stockbridge, Massachusetts to start a company, Painted Pony. Alycen was less than a year old, still nursing, and lactose intolerant, but she could tolerate goat's milk. Stacia discovered a goat's milk source about 20 miles away and on my work trips to Great Barrington, I would drive an additional ten miles to Sheffield to purchase goat's milk.

We were in fantasy land. Stacia was an excellent artist, and she kept making pieces at home. Stacia had fallen in love with the style of a famous furniture painting artist, Peter Hunt. He painted furniture in full American folk art style. His pieces featured lots of leaves and scrolls and that kind of thing. Stacia was a student of his work and she had painted several charming pieces in Westchester. We decided to start a company called Painted Pony. I still have some logo artwork. We moved to West Stockbridge, on the New York State line/Massachusetts border. Great Barrington, where my father lived, was a convenient 10 minutes away. So there was a relative close by, not a bad deal. We rented a little house in a town of fewer than one thousand people, and in revival mode. It was just over the hill from the Tanglewood music festival. A perfect potential market for our idea. Lenox, Lee, Stockbridge. That was a huge year-round tourist area. The tiny tiny town that was undergoing a presumptive revival. We decided we would market painted furniture. Unfortunately, we never gained any traction.

To be precise, we weren't making furniture. We were buying small items like pre-made unpainted mirrors, or cabinets. It was nice stuff, but small pieces. I even have one lovely piece still that I treasure. We

never got off the ground for several reasons. Number one, Stacia's idea was to do one of a kind. My idea was to start production line, buy a dozen or two mirrors, paint them all slightly differently. We had vastly differing visions. Stacia and I were living in differing realities. We were in West Stockbridge for almost a year, which I recall as mostly winter. I think we produced three pieces, maybe four, and we didn't sell any of them. We didn't even try. We never got off the ground.

I never was overly indulgent with my kids, but then again, Sheila was an attentive mother. I've had some good times with them. I've enjoyed their company. Now I found myself without any choice, in a situation where I became our daughter's sole parent for a while.

I was working part-time at the local newspaper, the Berkshire Courier marketing my expertise by helping to put the paper together each week.

With that and some part-time work for my Father, I made almost enough money to pay our food bills and rent. We scraped by, for almost a year. And then Stacia became deathly ill with a heart problem. Suddenly, I became, for all intents and purposes, our daughter's sole caretaker. Stacia's health insurance was New York-based. We just couldn't hang out in the Berkshires. Under the circumstance, we couldn't survive there.

So we moved back to Westchester and I was looking for work. I can't recall exactly how it transpired, perhaps an ad, but I got involved with an organization called Planetary Citizens. My responsibility was to oversee their publications. Planetary Citizens was a bona fide United Nations non-governmental organization (NGO).

They had a house in New Rochelle, a mini-estate with a gatehouse. As part of my salary, we were provided housing. A one-room cottage,

maybe 50 yards or so from the main house. Stacia and I moved in there with our baby daughter, who at that time was about a year.

The three of us, in one big room, scarcely bigger than my current bedroom. That's where we lived for close to a year. Stacia was virtually an invalid recovering slowly and precariously from her chronic heart condition.

The man who ran Planetary Citizens was a very spiritual gentleman, a good man with lofty ideals, married to a woman whom I can only describe as a would-be cult leader. She saw herself as a spiritual teacher with all women acolytes. It was a rather dark leaning. I did not have much contact with her in that aspect, except to say that after we'd been there less than a year, with no hint of warning, she came to us and said "you have to leave right now". We were shocked, very surprised.

I was doing publications work for the organization and never had a whiff of trouble. What do you mean? "Well, one of my acolytes came to me and said that your spirit was coming to visit her at night, and making sexual advances to her", or something like that.

You gotta be kidding me. Right? I mean, ain't no way, Jose.

Anyway, we got kicked out. Pretty much overnight. End of the story. No argument.

There we were. Homeless, and in hell, but, where in hell were we going to go? We packed everything we owned in and on top of our ancient Volvo station wagon. Popped our toddler daughter in the car, and headed for Florida, to visit my mother. Why on earth did we do that? I don't know. But that was our intention. We wanted to introduce my mother to her latest grandchild.

It was an awful trip, a hellish trip. Mostly we were staying in campgrounds, RV parks, and roadsides. We did not have an RV. We just had our ancient Volvo station wagon, which was a great but cranky geezer of a vehicle. We also had a large designer tent from our summer at Pumpkin Hollow. And we were planning on staying at my mother's place. We had everything we owned, in and atop that station wagon..

Loaded to the gills. Sweaty and unshowered. We pulled into my mother's driveway. It had been a rough trip and we were nearly broke.

We must have looked like gypsies. I don't think either of us had bathed for three or four days. We had just traveled 1500 grubby, empty-pocket miles. We had a near two-year-old child with us. My mother's first gesture was to hold out her arms and say to our daughter, "Oh, come give grandma a kiss". Well, Alycen looked at her like "Who is this old lady? I don't know her". And she backed off, shyly.. Of course, most kids would have done the same.

My mother took offense and never forgave her for that. Mother's contemptuous response was, "She's just like you." So they never bonded.

Stacia was not, in any way, my mother's kind of person. At that point in my life, I wasn't either. My mother was pretty straight-laced. Very much keeping up appearances. She was actually a pretty modern woman, albeit with an old school mentality. She loved fine things. She was always very properly dressed. She had a few lovely antiques. She liked to appear more prosperous than she was. We did not fit with her self image.

So, after about two weeks, we packed up our car and left with a bad taste in our mouths. She didn't chase us out the door, but we decided we had



to get back to New York. We had to start our lives over. We had to find a place to live before the school year started. Stacia wanted to do substitute teaching as well as her freelance writing. She never made much money, but she was always drawing something. Our daughter Alycen has scrapbooks galore of Stacia's artwork. At one point, I imagined that she might end up writing a book, a goddess book with her own illustrations, but that never happened.

Upon our return to New York, we found an apartment in Pelham, with a woman who needed the rent money. Under the circumstance not a bad situation. It was in the village, walking distance to everything, and lo and behold, we became the Directors of the Pelham Art Center.

It was fortuitous. We were relatively active in the community. We had joined the Pelham Art Center. Pelham, an active upscale women's community that had started a local art center a few years previously. This had matured to the point of looking for their first employed director. Stacia and I offered them a "two for one special": we would share the directorship. They would get extra value, and they jumped at it because we were both decently qualified. Excuse the expression, we were white, and Pelham was a very white community at that time. We were middle class. We were both college graduates. We were ideal. The women founders on the board were all upper-middle class. They were all much more prosperous than we were.

We were a great fit for them, perhaps better for them than they were for us. I mean, who else would come to work for them, for that kind of paltry salary. It made sense from their perspective purely in terms of where we were at and what we could offer them. We did an excellent job for them for about a year before it went off the rails.

My aunt Betty and her family lived about a mile away. Their proximity was a godsend, providing a social haven for us. They had a swimming pool, so we had family nearby, and a place to go. My aunt was of crucial support to us at that time, not financially, but emotionally. She was a



Stacia inside our tent at Pumpkin Hollow Farm.

real surrogate mother. Since the breakup of my parents, she was an emotional bulwark. I was a favorite of hers and we got along very well. Perhaps there were times when I disappointed her, but that's family

Around this time Stacia and I decided to get married. Alycen called it "us wedding". She was about two years old. We had been spending summers and three season weekends at Pumpkin Hollow in our magnificent tent. We had a memorable hippyish ceremony in the garden. We were both dressed in white. The entire wedding party

paraded through the garden, led by a piper. After that we celebrated a veggie community meal. A fairytale day.



**John enjoys the New York Times, on the platform at Pumpkin Hollow.**

We struggled in Pelham for about a year and a half, until I decided that I had enough of the fact that I was only making half a living. I was also having trouble getting along with Stacia. Our main bone of contention was our child-rearing styles. She could not bring herself to provide consistent discipline to our daughter. Stacia couldn't set limits, period. She was totally unable to set limits for Alycen. Maybe because the wrong kind of limits had been set for her when she was a child. She was unable to establish and maintain any type of structure.

It frustrated me that terms like discipline, structure, organization, were never acceptable subjects when it came to Alycen's upbringing. Stacia couldn't contemplate any of those with consistency. Our life just seemed like short bursts of chaos. Interestingly, Alycen's recollection was that I was the hands-off parent.

### **Alycen's view**

**“There were a lot of differences in terms of parenting style. Mostly hands off. I remember a lot of things falling to my mother. My father was much more explosive. Not that he hit me or anything like that. Neither of my parents was into punishment in that way. My father was a very hands-off parent, not a disciplinarian. He was just explosive. He had a temper.”**

My view was that Stacia was very kind and good-hearted, but chaotic. On the plus side, Stacia and Alycen visited many museums together and Alycen got wonderful exposure to the art world, but with very few limits.

As co-Directors of the Pelham Art Center, due to our disagreements over our roles, we were having trouble sharing the job.. I started looking for alternatives. I was going to trade shows and exploring, not applying for jobs, but keeping my eyes open. At one show I met a couple who published a trade publication in Los Angeles, which covered the retail display industry. They had a difficult problem because their magazine was mushrooming, and they were always late, always missing their deadlines. I got into a conversation with them during the trade show and mentioned that's what I had done for 10 years, put together publications. Their reply was “do you want a job?” I couldn't turn it down. I would be the Production Director of a magazine. That sounded very attractive to me. They would pay my airfare and provide me housing in their vacant RV. I said to Stacia I'm going to California, and I accepted the job.

I don't think Stacia ever forgave me for making that decision, but I went and it was a rent-free horror show. I lived in the couple's RV in the parking lot of their garden apartment, for as long as I stayed with them, about six months. The woman was a mercurial slave driver. What



was worse, she always broke her own rules. She would set a deadline and then she would ignore that deadline. Then she would demand to know why we were late. She and the husband, a pot-smoking pool boy who carried no weight whatsoever, would play a predictable monthly game. The wife wore the pants. She called all the shots and she also made all the income. The husband was a nice enough guy, but a lightweight.

I lasted as long as I could, and finally, I said, Sorry, lady. I'm out of here. At that point I think she was happy to see me go. I believe she was ready to fire me anyway. So I bid them goodbye, packed up my rollerblades, and my ancient \$300 Toyota, with rusted out floorboards, and found an apartment in Venice Beach. I didn't look very hard and it didn't take very long. Not a bad spot once I got rid of the millions of cockroaches that had infested the place. It was a month to month rental, something you could do in California at that time. I loved Venice Beach but I began to think seriously about returning to New York. I just ran out of energy and funds. The California lifestyle was not a great fit for me. I missed my daughters and I missed Stacia. I missed home.

Returning to New York and Pelham was painful. I think my daughters would say to me, that they wish I had been more hands-on in their upbringing. I was generally around, but not always much involved. We spent many a vacations together. They lived with me on and off after marital breakups or my breakups, or their breakups with their mom, when their mom couldn't handle them. My middle daughter, Robin never lived with me out of my marriage, but Lisa did. Lisa came to live with us when we were living in Pelham, and she was a handful. She was in trouble at that point. I was in trouble too. So that was not good timing. I was a loving father distracted much of the time. To some extent in my own way, and in my own time. I had adopted my father's parenting style as my own without meaning to, and without realizing it.

Looking back, Stacia was, certainly, a very different kind of partner, a very different style of woman, more Gypsy-like, more intellectual, much more challenging, but also much more fragile. I often said of her, perhaps with a degree of unkindness, “she enjoyed poor health”. There was an element of truth in that.

Our difficulties should have been no surprise. They were hiding in plain sight from the start. Pretty much what you see is what you get. Except for my sexual adventures and I've never been very good at hiding them. I managed to curb that part of me during my marriage to Stacia, but I am who I am. What you see is what you get. And if you don't like it walk away. She did.

Stacia had a great need for relationship and for connection. She had a huge mistrust at the same time. She came from a very troubled background. It was understandable that she should be leery of relationships. Immediately prior to our meeting, she had a relationship with a gay male. He was kind of a counselor and advisor to her. That was whom she knew just before we met. He was not local. Somebody that she connected with in Michigan or Chicago, before she came to New York. I never met him, but I was the next relationship in her life. To some degree we viewed each other as soulmates. The physical aspect of our relationship was secondary. The physical was okay. But It was nothing to write home about.

We loved each other very much. Despite that, during that time as gypsies, our relationship was pretty contentious. This was especially obvious from an economic standpoint because we were always walking the edge. In my second marriage, money was an issue every moment. We were both broke almost all the time. During that period we were



both under-earners. To make a living, I began writing resumes again, part-time at first, and then full time.

As I recall, we tried valiantly and in vain to rebuild our relationship, but there was no spark left. We tried moving from Pelham to Park Slope in Brooklyn. We tried to reconcile, but it didn't work, though we struggled for two more years together. I had lost Stacia's trust, and that was basically the beginning of the end. We were never really a couple again, we were just two people sharing a daughter. Matters got worse and worse as we fought over our opposing views of how our daughter should be raised. At one point we got into a shouting match on the curb, over how to discipline Alycen. It was terrible, both for her and for us. After about six months attempted reconciliation in Brooklyn, I finally moved out to an apartment, a five-minute walk away.

We never filed for divorce, because we never had a civil marriage. We lived together as common law. We had a wedding ceremony, but there was no civil license.

Looking back, my relationship with my three daughters from two different marriages has matured over time. There was a 10-year gap between them. It was fairly easy for the two older girls to look at Alycen as a younger sister. They weren't in competition. For Alycen, since her mother doesn't have any family, my family became Alycen's sole family. So she is extremely, even hyper, family-oriented and family conscious.

Robin, the middle child, is the most difficult of my three daughters, in terms of my relationships, is Perhaps, because in many ways she is the most like me Perhaps because I never paid enough attention to her. Perhaps because we spent the least amount of time together. Perhaps that's just the way the cookie crumbles. I don't know. They have definitely developed relationships with each other, but I can't speak

much to that. I am happy to say I am in a relationship with all three, and all three relationships are uniquely different.

So there I was ,with two broken marriages and three daughters, no job. I started writing resumes somewhat in desperation. It was a way of making some income. I was just scraping by. I found a job working for a company called Resume Writers, an interesting outfit. The owner, I thought, was a bit of a scoundrel. His girlfriend was straight and narrow. She ran the company and she trained me very well.

I think she was in her mid-30s. He was probably in his mid-40s. But he was a hustler. I had the feeling that this resume company was not a thing he took particularly seriously. She did. She was an excellent trainer. I was an excellent writer. Part of writing resumes is proofreading and re-reading everything. She taught me other skills, for example, to read a resume page backward, so that you're really seeing it. The combination worked. I felt very grateful for having that training and experience. I believe I worked for Resume Writers for about a year and then went to work for Career Blazers, a major placement agency, in the Grand Central area. They were expanding their offerings and hired three resume writers as an adjunct to their employment service.

A resume In those days was equally important as it is now, perhaps more so. The style was somewhat different. There was no internet. It was all paper. A resume and a cover letter were vital to the job search. Most people didn't have a clue, and I may add, probably still don't have a clue. Resume styles and resume culture have evolved over time. In the earlier post war days there was much greater stability. Three or four jobs over a working lifetime was the rule. More mobility than that was considered a negative. Today, lack of movement, stability, has become a liability. Resumes today are also quite different from what they were until the the end of the of the 20th century. Over the years, loyalty has

increasingly become a liability and job hopping has become commonplace and even rewarded. Variety of experience is much more highly prized today than in former times. Resumes have remained an ever present job seeker's tool evolving with the technology and the culture changes. Resume writing today is a billion-dollar business. There is a lot more fluidity because everybody's looking for a job, the next opportunity, the next stepping stone.

The three of us at Career Blazers, Bob, June, and me, were a smooth working team and when we felt the company began to exploit our talents we decided to team up and strike out on our own, forming a company called Resumes Plus, offering a broader array of career services than just resumes. We found a convenient office on Madison Avenue and 43 Street and set up shop. We used IBM Selectric Composers, which did an improved job over previous devices, because they had memory, and one could make corrections and changes rather easily, an important factor in resume preparation. Our partnership lasted over a year until we each found higher ground and talked about going separate ways.

Serendipitously, at this time, I was back in touch with John Grimes, the publisher of the Irish Echo. Catholic News was ceasing publication of the Archdiocesan newspaper and the Irish Echo was looking to set up their own page composition. Their offices were on Fifth Avenue, directly across from the Empire State Building

Do you have any recommendations of equipment to use, Grimes asked? Which is better, Photon, Compugraphic, or whatever. And we got into a conversation where I asked him, "Would you have any interest in me setting this up for you and running it for you for a period of time until you train your own people, and then it's yours". My proposal to them contained two conditions: one, you pay me part-time. and, two, you give

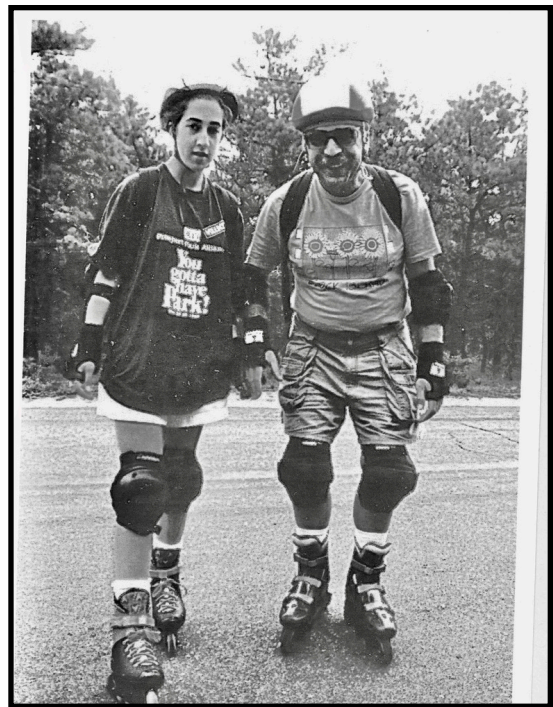
me office space. It's a deal. That was a happy business stroke. Everyone, everybody won.

I started my own business, Network Resumes pretty much scot-free, located directly across from the Empire State Building on Fifth Avenue. I ended up with office space. I had computer typesetting equipment access, available to me four days a week, and free rein when I wasn't working for them. My rent was paid, my expenses were minimal. I made a few dollars in salary, not much. So everybody won, and Network Resumes began operation. I was starting a new venture. I had a pleasant apartment in Park Slope, and I discovered rollerblading.

Things began looking up.

Rollerblading was a way of exercising, recreation and a way of traveling around the city. For a while, it also became my commuting style,. I began rollerblading from Brooklyn to Manhattan, and my office in Midtown. I also joined a group called the New York Road Skaters. Each weekend we would meet and as many as fifty of us would go on a 15 to 25-mile road skate. We would pack a lunch, and stop every so often so that laggards could catch up. The more proficient would act as leaders and rear escorts. I wonder what motorists thought as the lead skaters stopped traffic so that this group of skaters could pass through.

We had many notable experiences, including circling Manhattan.



**Daughter Alycen and me rollerblading in Prospect Park, Brooklyn.**

Prospect Park. Central Park, Flushing Fairgrounds, across the George Washington Bridge, and up to Tallman to name a few. We always wore headgear, knee, and elbow pads. I even had a blinker light on the rear of my helmet.

We also had an unforgettable weekend in early Fall when a group of about 50 of us spent a glorious two-days skating around Block Island. We had the roads and the hotel virtually to ourselves. An incredible experience.

I was in the best shape of my life and would rollerblade from Park Slope To Midtown, in 12 to 15 minutes, faster than if I took the subway. It was thrilling, speeding along, right up Second Avenue, and zipping past traffic, continuing my way as traffic inched along rush hour. I was going in and out, skillfully and carefully. I was very polite, but even so I'm sure there were some people who were really pissed at me. I had no incidents that I can recall, except that one time a cab door opened on the traffic side. Fortunately, I was able to dodge, and not do any damage to myself or the door.

Arriving at the office, I would remove the roller-blades, allow myself a few minutes to cool off, and begin my business day. Two days work for Irish Echo and four days for Network Resumes.

In my approach to writing resumes, my priority was flexibility. I strongly believed that a resume wasn't a formula, but rather a strategy. I would ask people regularly, "What is it that you're looking to accomplish with this resume?" When that is clear we can design a resume to do just that. Many people would respond with, "Well, I'm just looking for a good-paying job" Okay, so let's throw some shit against the wall and see how much sticks. People would get that message. So what kind of a job, a job that pays. Well, you can't apply for any kind of job, you've got to

tell the employer what it is that you're looking for. Otherwise, you're going to get put at the bottom of the pile, or maybe in the circular file. After a while, most people got that message as well.

At that point they'd begin to focus, with my help, on what search avenue they'd like to pursue. One path to this was to have a clear objective. Though these days objectives are less of a requirement, it still makes sense to let people know what you're looking for, rather than expecting the employer to figure it out.

In fact, they're not going to tell you what you're looking for. They will likely say, I don't know what this person wants, and he/she doesn't want what I have. Throw it out.

Another advisory would offer people (and I wasn't the only one telling them this): "You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

That means your resume has to be perfect. If it isn't perfect you are handicapping yourself. What I mean by perfect is not only no errors of tense, no missing periods, no inconsistencies, but perfect also in the structure and format. For example, countless times, people would present with a two-year degree, an associate's degree. They were 10 years out of school and I'm asking "Why are you putting this at the top? Is this the first thing you want people to see?" They'd answer, No. Then why is it at the top? What is the first thing you want people to see? What's the most important thing about you?

So then let's focus on that, the first thing people see. In part that's what I mean by a resume is a strategy. It's definitely not a formula.

I used to employ three resume formats, chronological, semi-chronological, and a skills format. My view was that the format of the



resume should be determined by one's unique strategy. Architects use a very appropriate phrase, "form follows function". The form that you select in your resume needs to follow the dictates of your individual background.

Some of what I'm saying now comes out of frequent talks I would present at libraries throughout the city. I made a series of slides and projected them during presentations and workshops I offered.

Around this time suitcase computers were introduced. Kaypro and Osborne were the leading brands. Each weighing about 25-35 pounds. I thought they were clumsy and clunky, and of limited utility. However, I clearly saw the immense advantage a computer would provide to my business. I was ready with cash in hand to buy the first computer or almost the first computer that was available to me, and seemed suitable.

Then I discovered a computer called the Eagle 2E, an incredibly clever design, in a magazine. The Eagle 2E was. It was an all in one desktop, that looked a bit like a Bloomberg terminal, green 12-inch screen. The unique feature was a dedicated keyboard, which allowed one to do fairly sophisticated word processing. Simply, it was built into the computer. The name of the software was called Spellbinder which later withered as more advanced softwares took over. But at the time, it was absolutely unique. It was simple, straightforward, elegantly effective and the keyboard was dedicated to word processing. You could run a spreadsheet on it, but I had no reason or interest in that. It ran on an operating system called CPM. It had 64 K minuscule, a page and a half and you were done, but it was the best at that time. The Eagle also had a single side 360 K, floppy drive, a flexible disk like a flat pancake, or resembling a 45 rpm record.

It served my purposes wonderfully. I had a printer, a noisy inefficient dot-matrix early printer. Again, they were also pretty basic. Those printers took minutes to print the page. They weren't wonderful, but they did the job. The first computer, the Eagle 2E, felt really expensive, about \$1700. The second one, I think I paid less than \$1000. I bought it second hand. And the third one I bought at auction for \$100. So I had three computers in my office. I don't know why I needed three computers, but I did sometimes had two keyboarders, so we could input two resumes at a time. And, of course, one keyboard for me.

One of our methods of securing business was to offer a no-charge review and evaluation of an individual's resume. We did our best, to be honest, and candid. Less than 5 percent passed muster. My basic charge for editing a one-page resume was \$50 to \$100. To write one page from scratch was \$175, and included an interview. I also generated a lot of repeat business. A key secret to our success, I believe, was our commitment to working with an individual client until they were completely satisfied. That, I believe, was a unique promise and we lived up to it.

I am proud to say that over ten years in the resume business I only had one client whom I could not satisfy. In that case, we refunded the money in full. I never had a complaint to the Better Business Bureau. My typical customer would come back to me within 12 to 18 months. People would change and move around and they would add experience and seek to update. We maintained files on every resume and client indefinitely. So I got a lot of repeat business. Over time I built a substantial regular clientele.

I still write resumes on occasion, not for money. I do it for fun and to offer service to people.

Several cultural and historical factors combined to make resumes a must-have item. I don't think that resumes were even used prior to World War Two. It was only after the war when soldiers returned to civilian life that an active job market developed. As the economy heated up, employers started requiring resumes. Also, the rise of memory typewriters and ubiquity of computers, facilitated the ability to prepare and store a resume. Storage capability was initially expensive, which spawned a class of specialists. Thus we evolved from people doing their own resumes, to recognizing, that you don't do your own dental work, you're not your own ophthalmologist. You're not your own therapist. And maybe you shouldn't be your own resume writer. For most people, a competent professional resume writer, in my opinion, will do a significantly better job than you'll do for yourself

Shopping for a competent resume writing firm can be daunting. Ask to see samples. So wise consumer oriented questions might include:  
Who determines when the resume is finished?  
Will I be charged additional for fine tuning?  
How long will my resume file be maintained?  
How will I be charged for updates?  
Will you work with me until I am completely satisfied?  
Are print copies included?

Unfortunately, there are resume writers who aren't worth the digital paper that they're writing on. There are also resume writers who make big strategic mistakes. There are also resume writers, who write to a formula. Pretty much one size fits all, like hack fiction writers who write the same novel over and over, just with new characters. I'm not knocking that, but if you are considering getting resume help, I suggest you consider carefully the qualifications and expertise of your potential helper.

The above questions should help to to select a service that will produce an effective result. A simple, useful guideline: is your resume producing interview opportunities? If the answer is Yes, then it is doing its job.

If you agree that a resume is a strategy, then you've got to ask yourself, what is that strategy meant to accomplish?

It's important to recognize that your resume is not intended to get you into every door, just the doors that you want to enter.

So what doors do you want to enter? It's important to make that clear on your resume. Not everybody does. My estimate is that less than half the people make it clear about what they're after, what they're looking for. This is also the justification for having more than one version of your resume at the ready.

Starting Network Resumes was an interesting period and exciting. It pulled me out of my funk. I was able to shine a light forward for lack of a better term. I was doing stuff for others. Whenever I've been involved in doing for others, I feel like I'm thriving.

During that period I never had more than one staff person. Mary, in particular, stands out. She was a keyboarder. Later when I moved to the Lincoln Building, she moved with me. She still calls me every couple of years just to say "hi". Mary was one of the two fastest keyboarders I'd ever met. She was a long drink of water, six-foot string bean woman, sweet as could be, and very spiritual. Very straight-laced and a weirdo.

I don't even know if I can describe what made her weird or how she was weird. She was an original. She was, she wasn't a hippie. She was just an original. A lovely lady, very loyal. She worked with me for about four

years until I closed down my shop. Ten years later, I would still hear from her once in a while.

I hired two young brothers, African-American kids, perhaps around 12 and 13 years old. They would come to the office every afternoon after school. They would walk up and down the avenues, Fifth, Sixth, Madison, and Lexington, posting my advertisements for Network Resumes.

I had made up Post-it pads, the size of a quarter sheet of 8 1/2 by 11, cut to make pads. And they would adhere these to any bare surface along the Avenues.

That's how I advertised. I would occasionally check up on them. Check Madison Avenue and see if I can find posters, evidence of their trail, then I knew they were doing their job. Those little posters were my principal advertising. They worked amazingly well. People would take them, fold them up and put them in their wallets. I'd have people come in six months or a year later and say I've been carrying this around for six months now. Do you still do this? Sure. That was my principal form of advertising.

We also did a little bit of newspaper advertising. But who advertised in midtown? We paid 50 bucks for a tiny little ad. I couldn't afford it. However, I did a lot of radio shows, radio interviews, and that kind of thing. I also networked extensively with other career counselors. They often didn't do resumes and would send me potential clients. I didn't have to do high quantities in order to survive. That changed a little bit when I went to the Lincoln building because my expenses were higher. So then I did more counseling groups and provided a broader range of services.

It wasn't long before I realized that writing resumes was not enough for me. It was good. It just wasn't enough. Not in terms of money or satisfaction. I felt that I had had plenty of life experience. In addition to writing resumes for people, I was giving them lots of advice. I just hadn't gotten around to selling or marketing that advice. I felt that I could offer more. At that point, my business was called Network Resumes but shortly thereafter we moved to the Lincoln Building and about a year later changed the name to The Livelihood Center. And I started marketing a full service operation.

My service was fairly unique in New York for several reasons. First I was not a trained career counselor. So I was not selling career counseling, I was selling marketing, job search resumes, strategy, etc. Second, we were tech savvy, more so than most smaller firms. Third, we endeavored to sell a complete array of services.

As a way of competing, I came up with the idea of selling a package. I proposed that for \$1,000 or so I would work with a client until he/she got a job offer. Didn't matter to me how long it took because I knew that if we work together and you did your end of it, you would get an offer within three to six months. An offer was the key. So I could guarantee somebody that I would work with them until they got an offer. Because the test was not getting an interview. It was getting an offer. That worked pretty well.

Not everybody went for it, for sure. But between that and writing resumes, and I started doing a lot of lecturing, I got involved with the Career Development Specialist Network. These were all certified career counselors. But I was a better resume writer than any of them. So I did a lot of lecturing to them on writing successful resumes.





In 1985, I wrote an article for the New York Times about Interviewing. I queried them. Are you interested in an article on rehearsing for a job interview? And they responded positively. The article appeared in a weekend edition's Living section.

I consider Resume Writers, Career Blazers, Resumes Plus, and Network Resumes as a string, as a continuum along the same line. And then the shift to the Livelihood Center was the next step and where the Jobfather was actually born. I did a lot of work in the early evening because that's when many people were available. So I spent many, many days, working from seven or eight in the evening. I did a lot of my writing in the mornings. I typically turn a resume around. From the time I interviewed somebody, to the time I showed them the first draft in three or four days. I didn't take long because I knew in a heartbeat they wanted to get back to work or they wanted to get out there and interview. They were handicapping themselves. If they tried to do it with their old crappy resume. That's why they were paying me. I was pretty calm, pretty conscientious along those lines. In addition, I never felt I was finished with your resume until you felt I was finished. I would ask people, please let me know if there's anything you're not happy with, because that's important. Most people were one or two go-rounds and out of there. But there were few with whom I might go eight or 10 or 12 rounds. Believe me, it was a temptation to kick them in the ass and say, "out of here", but I didn't, because my commitment to people was that I would work with them on their resume until they were comfortable. And that was my guarantee to you, to the customer. So in 10 years, in the resume writing and the career counseling business, I don't think I had three people who asked for their money back.

I had a number of stories that were even better than that, where people crediting me with giving them a jumpstart in their working lives.

But people being people, they pay \$100, or whatever, they get a job done, and they move on. And I never expected expect much in the way of thanks, but there are a few people who have kept in touch with me over the years. A few have actually said, "John, I owe it all to you." I can think of one in particular a woman who liked books, and she wanted to work in the library. But she had zero experience or training. So we figured out a way to get her an internship. She got started and now she's a senior librarian in the New York Public Library. Amazing.

Another woman I recall who was unfocused but knew she liked photography." I like to take pictures," she declared," and I like developing." So we got her a job in a photo lab. She had no experience and had been trying and trying and trying to get a job, with no success. How many times I have noticed that when people get on the first step, that's all they needed. Stepping stones and bread crumbs again.

A good example was my niece, Karen. She had just gotten out of college and she was floundering. She didn't know what she wanted to do. She didn't know where she wanted to go. Somehow she wanted to be connected with magazines and photography, her two passions.. She was working for me at the time. This was when I was living on West End Avenue. I had just shut down the Livelihood Center. And Karen was working with me as an intern. I said, Okay, I'll take you on. I'll help you get started. We helped her get a job as a deputy assistant photo editor, maintaining the photo files at National Geographic. But that was her entree.

It was her first job, her first step on the ladder. That's the key to getting people in the door in the industry of their choice so that they can take the next step, and they can see a pathway. I was very good at that because I was creative and inventive. I didn't see obstacles. I still don't.

As I mentioned earlier, I don't go over obstacles, I don't go through them, I go around them. That has worked for me. I believe I think out of the box.

Thinking outside the box, is a three-dimensional type of thinking More than yes or no, on or off. It could be yes and no, or yes and no and maybe.

There are many ways to approach this. For example ask all the questions backward, or ask the questions in a different way, or what am I missing here? What's not included in this picture? Or what can I remove from this picture and how would it change it? How can I change my way of thinking? That is what out of the box thinking is about. There's an expression. When you look at things differently, the things you look at change. Some of the best examples of masterful out of the box thinking are the works of Roger Van Oech. One of his best :”A Whack in the Side of The Head”, is a primer in out of the box thinking and very helpful in getting started. An other title worth browsing “A Kick in the Seat of The Pants”.

I have worked intermittently with at least two of my daughters, Lisa and Alycen regarding their work lives. They both have come to me for a fair amount of advice, and to just talk things over. I've done Alycen's resume for years. Lisa comes to me to talk about how to strategize her corporate life. I'm thrilled and pleased that my daughters have come to me for that.

**ROBIN”s View-- “My father used to have this saying, you never get a second chance to make a first impression, said Robin Aigner. That was kind of his motto in the resume business for a while. And that really has really stuck with me and has always stuck with me, certainly in the job world, but also in life. The way he moves around in the world and being resourceful, figuring out how to get what you need and**

**looking at things from different angles has really rubbed off on me in my life.”**

I am pleased to have been able to help all three of my daughters in their livelihood paths, though it may be in lieu of some other degrees of closeness. But at least I have been in a constructive relationship and we talk to each other. I'm delighted by that, and I'm grateful for it.

During this period I also became involved with the Career Development Specialist Network, an organization of career professionals, career counselors and social workers..

These were all people who had degrees in counseling. I think I was the only one in that organization who had no academic background to speak of, but I was considered an expert in resumes. I was doing PowerPoint presentations to them. I had this wonderful set of transparencies that I put up on the wall about doing resumes with illustrations and graphics. It was really well done. And well received. I knew what I was talking about. So I gained credibility in that field. That led to being hired by the College of New Rochelle.

## **PROFESSOR AIGNER**

I never intended to teach a graduate course. I never attended graduate school. But I certainly felt I had a Ph.D. in life. At the time, the Internet was in full bloom and job search boards were popping up like spring daffodils. I had heard that the College of New Rochelle was offering a Master's program in High School Counseling. I proposed to create a course entitled "On Becoming the Online Career Counselor". They bought it. Online job search was in its relative infancy. The course was largely focused on potentialities. I ended up teaching two semesters of leading edge technology to a class of graduate students, almost all of



whom were high school counselors, who would largely end up advising students on what professions or colleges to enter. It was an excellent trailblazing course in the very, very early days.

I only taught the course one semester. I didn't really like teaching graduate students. First of all, they weren't career counselors. They were mostly high school guidance counselors, who were going to be instructing their students on college choices. So the kinds of things that I was teaching were of only marginal interest to them. Secondly, College of New Rochelle was a second tier college. Most of the students felt like they should get an A grade just for showing up. I disagreed. I marked it on a bell curve. Some people weren't happy with me.

One unexpected outcome of that experience was my meeting Lindsay Levine, the lone career counselor in the class,,who became my protege. We developed a friendship and a decades long collaboration which lasted until she died about three years ago. She and I became professional buddies and she inherited teaching subsequent Iterations of the course. Over the years, we did a lot of trading back and forth of books, resources and ideas. She would often come to me with a problem client and say, how should I deal with this? Ultimately, she ended up moving here to Ossining.

It was plain to me very early on that the the internet was soon to become a dominant factor in global life. I'm not a technician. I've never done much programming, maybe five minutes worth and I hated it. I've never done HTML programming. I've tried it, but didn't like it. I described myself as a power user. I have taken boxes apart and put them back together again. But again, I'm not a technical guy. I'm plug and play. So I can read instructions and I can put it together, right? I've done some soldering in my life. But I can't read the schematic, I've assembled boxes from scratch, I replaced practically every part in a computer at some



time or another. I was lucky in that I got introduced to technology when I was quite young.

As a power user I like to play with a screwdriver and a soldering iron. In the early days of PCs, I've taken the boxes apart and I've replaced the motherboard. And I've put in a better hard drive and done all that. That's much more difficult to do with the Mac's because they're not intended to be as user accessible, and they have all kinds of proprietary screws.

Over the years, the technology has developed. And I've developed my skills accordingly. Lately in my old age, my hand eye coordination has declined. Therefore I don't get inside the box as much anymore. But I'm very willing and able to teach myself how to use new apps. I love discovering apps, and discovering new ways of doing old tricks. That has stood me in good stead.

I'm not a good employee. I'm a hard worker. I like working for myself. I like being self-directed. I like getting up in the morning when I'm ready to get up and going to bed at night when I'm ready to go to bed. I don't like to be on someone else's schedule. I also don't like to be at someone else's direction. You may have noticed that my career has mostly been freelance or self employed. And when not freelance at least loosey goosey.

Corporate life hasn't worked for me. It worked very well for my daughter and she was very good at dealing with the people above her, and dealing with the people below, because she's really in that chain of command. I'm not comfortable with a chain of command. I would rather do what needs to be done and ask permission later. And if permission is not granted, apologize. I don't like asking permission.

Early in my meditation practice I encountered a technique called self witnessing. What it involved was trying to sit on your own shoulder and watch yourself witnessing your thoughts and behaviors, and attempt this, as best you can, from outside yourself. I found this technique very effective. It was something of a novel concept for me, self witnessing. It was, if nothing else, an opportunity for self examination and conscious transformation.

After I separated from Stacia I entered some fairly intense meditative practice. I didn't have much else to do. And I was trying to improve myself. I was also into what is called Kapalabhati, a breathing technique, where it's like explosive breathing. It kind of energizes you and helps you to relax as well. I was also into what is called alternate nostril breathing, where you breathe from one nostril and then you breathe from the other. I was also going to an ashram. In the Bahamas, Yoga in paradise. I was practicing pretty, pretty intensively. on Paradise Island

At the same time I was living in Park Slope, roller-blading into Manhattan, making my bones as a resume writer. Hosting my young daughter's weekly visitations. Practicing meditation, and getting my life back together.

## CHAPTER 4

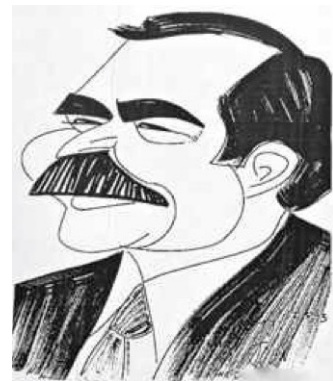
### JOBFATHER REPRISE

The Jobfather was created when I started the Livelihood Center. Inspired by the novel, The Godfather, which was immensely popular. I believed that the branding moniker, Jobfather, would be marketable.

The original movie Godfather phrase was, “I made him an offer he couldn’t refuse “. Jobfather modified the original to :”He will get you an offer you can't refuse.” For marketing purposes this worked splendidly.

When the Livelihood Center closed, after about five years of operation, the Jobfather went into seclusion. It was never made clear what happened. It's like one of those exploitation sequels, Superman Returns. You never knew what happened to Superman. He just disappeared. It seems the same thing happened to the Jobfather, and in 2020, he returned, because the world of Covid 19 needed him. I felt that the Jobfather was a convenient moniker for the career work I still wanted to do, pro bono. It's a different time, in a different place. So, The Jobfather Returns

It is unclear to me today just how many people today relate to the Jobfather title in the way that they might have 20 years ago, but It's still a convenient moniker. The caricature was created for me by a prominent New York Mirror artist from the period. It worked back then and seems to work at present. I envision the Jobfather as an umbrella for my writings and blogging. It’s also an avenue of approach for people to seek my opinion. I never sought to be king of the hill. Rather, I wanted to be the advisor behind the throne. I have always envisioned my role as a trusted counsel.



Just so with the Jobfather, for many years the presence behind the Livelihood Center. I really loved doing it, but as a one-man-band I was burning out. The rent was not exorbitant, and I had a staff person. I was trying to support myself and I had a rewarding time with it, but there came the point where I said, I can't do this forever.

## THE LIVELIHOOD CENTER

Fundamentally, part of the problem between me and my wife Rena was her concern that I wasn't contributing enough financially into the household. I was putting a huge amount of sweat equity to the house. I was just eking out, breaking even in my business. My space was a little four-story building about 15 feet wide that pre-existed and around which the Lincoln building was wrapped. The building was about 50 feet deep and 15 feet wide. We occupied the entire second floor. It was a brownstone era building on Madison Avenue and 41st street, actually encased by The Lincoln Building. If you walk out of Grand Central Terminal, you face the Lincoln Building across the street. My building was around the corner, on Madison Avenue, but a part of the same edifice, like a baby kangaroo pocketed in its mother's belly. The ground floor housed a shop. Then there was my floor, I faced the street so I had frontage for a sign. Just consider, The Livelihood Center occupied the entire floor of a building on Madison Avenue between 42nd and 41st streets. It was in a A-plus prime location, and was an "only in America" situation.

There were two floors above me and a tiny pocket elevator, which sometimes worked. It was a perfect place for The Center, furnished via office furniture auctions featured every Sunday in the New York Times. Companies that were going out of business would auction off all their possessions. One could pick up high-quality office furniture for a song. , In my present apartment I have two chairs, which when new probably

sold for several hundred dollars. They have padded armrests, they are magnificent office chairs. I paid 30 dollars for the pair.

I used to attend these auctions regularly to snag bargains. Between the NY Times auctions and the Bowery I obtained all the furniture for our Cape Cod venture as well as the Livelihood Center. The Bowery used to specialize in used restaurant furniture and supplies but has lately been transformed into a much more upscale place, albeit, in some ways, much less interesting.

One of my favorite hobbies is resourcing. Or finding interesting sources for unusual objects of my particular interest. In the late 20th century, the Bowery was a treasure trove of oddball resources. I used to spend hundreds of hours wandering around Manhattan side streets, looking for interesting places to locate resources. I still do some of that, but very differently. I do it online now. So I'm not looking necessarily for interesting places, but I'm looking for stuff, online research, or where can I find this? Where can I find that?

In part, that led to my interest in the job search, though it was just my computer and the resumes at the start. Occasionally, I would help somebody with resourcing, strategy planning, or interviewing. The Center was developed as a way to help people with the 360 degrees of their job search. We would sponsor groups and Saturday morning workshops where we'd talk about what problems or issues our clients were encountering in their search. Eventually, I acquired a video camera and was videotaping clients interviewing and assisting them with skills development. This was early on, when videotape was VHS cassettes, and when people were starting to talk about doing video resumes. We were trailblazing video interview training. That proved very helpful as It gave folks an opportunity to view and hear themselves in ways that they had never been able to before.

The interviewees suddenly heard themselves say,” um, well, you know, you're not, you know, you know, you know”, as I've been doing in my interviews for this memoir.

When you're in an interview, that stammering repetition is never helpful. Unfortunately, you are seldom aware of how you are coming across. The interviewer is very aware of your stumbling and fumbling, but you are not. So it was a major eye-opener for our clients to practice seeing and hearing themselves in real-time. At the time, this was quite revolutionary. We weren't the only ones doing it. What made us unique was that we were the only retail center for this type of activity. At that point in time, these activities were only undertaken by upscale “outplacement” firms that were paid by corporate HR departments as a hush-money departure ramp for senior executives. We were the only retail center for this type of service. Outplacement specialists were getting paid thousands of dollars to gently relocate executives to a new firm, but for people who were paying their own way, very little was available at any price. What we were doing was quite innovative, and extremely cost-effective.

### A COMPLETE PACKAGE

We also offered complete beginning-to-end packages, which, for an affordable flat fee, we would support a client until they received an offer of employment. We allowed clients to “pay as you go”, they didn't have to pay upfront. That worked pretty well for those who chose that path. We also sold job search-related books and offered a lending library, so clients could borrow books at will. I had a reading space, with a friendly round table where we conducted workshops and support groups.

Resume editing was our biggest single revenue source, followed closely by writing from scratch. For those who had a starting point on their



resume, and for under \$100, we would conduct a “fill in the blanks” interview. We would figure out what was missing, during a brief interview, and then upgrade the resume and work with our client until they were comfortable. It was a fair deal.

Throughout the later 1980s, I was mostly writing resumes, not helping people get jobs. I realized that I had knowledge and skills, and could help people in deeper, more productive ways throughout their employment search and personal marketing experiences. I had learned a great deal about placement when I had worked earlier with Career Blazers, a placement agency, but at the time that wasn't my job. Later, at the Livelihood Center, I now had the opportunity to leverage this in-depth experience. I also engaged in extensive networking with career counselors. Counselors came to know me as a resume specialist. Many of them sent their clients to us in need of resumes.

Many of my father's iconic photos graced the walls of the Livelihood Center. My father passed away in 1999. And then my uncle in 2000, a year later. Neither of them ever visited the Livelihood Center, but I think they would have been proud. This was a source of regret as my father was a significant loss

## VIDEO INNOVATIONS

Our workshops which addressed interviewing skills utilized video and also tended to emphasize the “questions you hope they don't ask”. I would have clients make a list of these in preparation for the sessions. This was very effective.

For example,

Were you ever fired from a job?

What did you think of your last boss?

Were you ever mistreated on the job?

Have you ever been convicted of a crime?  
How come you've had so many jobs?

Video practice interviewing and small group workshops were two additional innovations. Even our approach to resumes was unconventional. We made a commitment to our resume clients that we would work with them until they were completely satisfied. I truly believed that I was among the top five resume writers in New York City.

Increasingly career counselors would ask our firm to edit their client resumes writing. Most career counselors were never trained in resume writing. Before I started the Livelihood Center, I had worked with several resume firms and thus had received several years of training in this discipline.

Another innovation was our use of audiovisual resume presentations. Flash them on a wall or a screen. This was prior to the days of Keynote or digital slideshow presentation formats. I still retain those transparencies. I believe they mostly still are appropriate. I really enjoyed talking to career counselors about resumes. I joined a professional networking group, called the Career Development Specialist Network, (CDSN). They met at the mid-Manhattan library, the career library, which is two blocks from the 42nd Street library on Fifth Avenue.

CDSN met monthly and I was the only person in that group who did not have either a degree in career counseling or an advanced degree. Despite this, I became the go-to person for resume advice and expertise and that was quite satisfying. I liked being an expert in the field. I did presentations at the mid-Manhattan library and was hired to offer workshops at the libraries in the Bronx and Brooklyn.

## TALKING HEADS

During that time, I also became a “talking head” on radio shows. I was out and about promoting myself as an expert. I had hired a publicist, as much as I could afford, for a short period of time. He got me on several regional radio shows. At one point I was a frequent guest on a radio show with a husband and wife team on WCBS radio. I also lectured at the libraries and at professional groups. I sometimes got paid for that, but not much. In particular, there was a husband and wife who ran an interview show, which focused on a lot of issues around working. I appeared on their show, radio, not television, several times and that was productive.

## BREAKFAST AT JUNIORS

The Livelihood Center and the Jobfather also arranged a weekly series of breakfast presentations at Junior’s Restaurant on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, where we combined breakfast and a career talk in a one-hour early morning format.

This was very much in a period where I was helping people with their livelihood, and offering workshops and presentations, wherever I could. I would speak at any venue where people would listen to me, the Career Development Specialist Network the Public Library or the local Unitarian Universalist congregation in Brooklyn Heights.

## PRO BONO LOVE

I had a contact at Brooklyn Heights Unitarian Church who encouraged me to do a multi-session workshop there. As I recall, there were three or four participants. One of the attendees was an elder care attorney, who had just been separated from her husband. She was in the audience, talking about getting her act together, and flirting with me. She had the biggest boobs that I had ever encountered. She seemed a very bright woman and we did some minor flirting. I invited her for

coffee. We carried our coffee to a bench on the Brooklyn Heights promenade, around the corner from her home, and chatted for a couple of hours. We repeated the ritual a couple of times in the following days and we somehow ended up in bed. Presumably, I was giving her some career advice. Well, career advice was a pretext for continuing to go to bed. She owned a brownstone in Brooklyn Heights, and, bit by bit, I learned her backstory. In retrospect, that should have tipped me off, but the hot sex kind of blindsided me.

The backstory: she was married to a corporate litigation attorney, in a top-tier Jewish corporate white-shoe law firm. In that era, most of the big-time law firms were Catholic or Protestant. This was a Jewish law firm. White shoe refers to the top of the line, corporate mergers, and acquisitions: Sadden, Arps.

He was a big-time litigation attorney, real knife-fighters, in the junkyard dog category. One step removed from divorce attorneys. He was minting money, and they owned a brownstone in Brooklyn Heights. Rena learned that he was fooling around in the Orient someplace, with Asian women. When she found out, she decided she was going to get a divorce.

She quickly contacted every prominent divorce attorney in Manhattan. This meant that since she had contacted them, he couldn't hire them. That was the way her mind worked. I knew that story, and it should have been a tip-off for me. Unfortunately, my penis was doing my thinking and I ignored the obvious. I ignored my misgivings and we got into it hot and heavy.

That's the short version of how I met my third wife.

Every relationship and every marriage is different. If you ask how important a role should sex play in a relationship, I would respond that

is a decision that one rarely makes with full presence of mind, much less a decision one makes with intellect. How many people you know make that kind of decision intelligently? It's a large and valid question, with a very individual answer. There's no rule of thumb. There are no societal guidelines. There may be as many answers, as there are responders. No two answers are likely to be alike.

In each of my relationships, each of my marriages, the answer to that has been very different. Over time, especially recently, I've come to the conclusion that the physical aspects of a relationship are less important than in former days, though I still long for them. I'm in a relationship now where there isn't much physicality, there's some cuddling. There's certainly plenty of warm feeling. But then again, I still need to fantasize and long for days gone by, even while recognizing that's not reality.

#### A SEASON FOR EVERYTHING

Reality is accepting the seasons in my life and dealing with my personal wintering. Oh, wouldn't it be great to have sex with that woman there, boy, she's got a nice body, but I can, to some extent, satisfy that urge, with my computer screen. Let's be real and understand that there's a season for everything. I've had my season, and I'm deeply grateful for that and content with it. Still, I wouldn't mind having a longer season.

My season with Rena was sexual... mental health... medical..financial, and ultimately bittersweet.

How that evolved.

When I met her, she was really buxom. Really, huge breasts and sexual energies, insatiable at that point. During her therapy, which was ongoing during our entire relationship, she was haunted by buried memories of some form of trauma involving her father.experiences.

I think the trauma may have involved both her and her brother. She would have flashbacks to it. Her mother and brother were in total denial that any traumatic incidents ever took place. Tellingly, her father had been banished by the mother and exiled many years earlier, probably because he was sexually molesting the children, nobody wanted to admit or discuss it. The daughter, whom I was involved with, was having flashbacks. She was being treated by a therapist who prescribed lithium. The lithium triggered a mood disorder, where she was flipping into bi-polar behavior. She would alternate between manic episodes and periods of severe depression. Around this time I entered the picture.

She'd get into a flurry of activity. Manic behaviors. She became over-enthusiastic, hyperactive. She would work feverishly until three or four in the morning. This was related, I believe, to her hyper-sexuality and insatiability, but as the beneficiary, it was hard to say no.

Then, without warning, she'd flip into a depression and go for weeks or months in depression. When I met her, she was very buxom and she was probably 30 pounds over ideal weight. But there's a Jewish word "zaftig" (or stacked) and over the course of our marriage, she lost all that weight. She became very slim, and a yogini, and her personality changed drastically in the process.

It felt like you'd be dealing with one type of person one day and then you'd be dealing with a different person the next day. She changed her mind frequently. She would agree to something one day and reverse herself the next. It was very unsettling.

## MY STEPSON

There were many ways in which we had a really troubled relationship. For example, she had a teenage son. Not long after we met, I moved in



with them. The three of us in this brownstone on Willow Street in Brooklyn Heights, which was the prime of the prime. Her son was going to one of those upscale, largely Jewish, private schools that were favored by Brooklyn Heights nouveau riche. He met me at the door one day and out of the blue, he said, “John, I don't want you to take this the wrong way. But I don't like you”.

I felt he was protecting his mother and of course he was jealous. I had a discussion with Rena about it, and I felt it was an honest statement on the part of her son, but I didn't attach a whole lot of importance to it. When he said that, it wasn't about me. It was about his feelings as a son, the son of a mother who was having a hot and heavy sexual relationship with someone who is not his father and was living in the house. How else should he feel?

Despite some misgivings, we decided to get married. I signed a prenuptial agreement. We found a rabbi in the neighborhood who would marry us. I broke the traditional glass, and we had a “huppa”, a traditional portable canopy under which the bride and groom stand, After the ceremony, the whole wedding party trooped back to her house, and we had a lovely reception in her garden. Very conventional and vanilla. We agreed that, whatever we came into the marriage with, that's what we go out with. I was basically coming into the marriage with zero, nothing but the clothes on my back and a large CD collection.

## KNEECAPPED

Three major events occurred while we were still living on Willow Street in the Heights. One I broke my kneecap and two I began working in mental health and both Rena and I established respective connections with Yoga ashrams.



**A reform Jewish synagogue wedding, with the “huppa” canopy and an all female retinue..**

Patella first.

Walking across sunny Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village on my way to an appointment, I stumbled over my own feet and came down hard on the pavement. I felt a sharp pain in my right leg and as I reached down to my knee, I realized that my kneecap was separated into two halves like a cracked egg,

Still, mostly in shock, the pain would come later, I looked up. Towering above me was one of New York’s finest on horseback.

“Please call an ambulance,” I croaked, “I am unable to get up.” Less than ten minutes later, I was en-route to the nearby St. Vincent’s Hospital emergency ward.

Fortunately, one of the city’s top sports surgeons was in attendance. I was promptly wheeled into surgery, wired, screwed, and sent to recovery. Next came a DVT, or “deep vein thrombosis”. In other words a blood clot. The doctors discovered that I was missing a clotting factor in my DNA which caused my blood to clot over aggressively. After about two weeks of touch and go concern over the clot progressing to my heart, blood thinners dissolved said clot and I was out of danger but was informed that I would need to take a blood thinner (coumadin) for the rest of my life. In a walking cast and on crutches, I headed home. Several months of very beneficial physical rehab followed, which Rena strongly supported as I walked the neighborhood on crutches.

## SELLING THE WILLOW STREET HOUSE

My family mostly strongly disliked Rena. I mean, Stacia was wacky, but they liked and/or respected her. Rena, they could barely tolerate. Steven, my brother was okay with her. My three daughters were not. Despite this, we got married, and within two years after our wedding, she decided she wanted to sell the brownstone on Willow Street in Brooklyn Heights. I proposed we conduct a “sale by owner” and save many thousands of dollars. This house, I felt, was going to sell in a minute.

Rena felt: Oh, no, it's too much. I can't do that. I don't want to interview all those people. I said I'll do it. The house sold in about two weeks. Rena thanked me with a 2% commission and we went looking for a new place to live in Manhattan. We found a lovely apartment on West End Avenue and 85th Street, a block from a reformed, new age style Jewish

synagogue where they featured singer Krishna Das and various forms of Indian spiritual chanting. It proved to be a very socially active synagogue, that had gained a wide reputation as a social center. We lived a block and a half away. Quite a change and also quite nice.

We resided there for about eighteen months, living the Manhattan, West Side life. In that period, we made a trip to Palo Alto, California and attended a "new age" conference, our pretext for going out there. We also visited Rena's son, who by then was graduating from Stamford, and had formed a non-profit outreach center for street teens in San Francisco.

The conference was notable in that the revered spiritual teacher, "Be Here Now" author Ram Das made his first public appearance after suffering a severe stroke. His presence was very moving as he haltingly addressed the audience.

We also briefly flirted with the notion of purchasing a house in Palo Alto. However, the inflated real estate prices in that area of California, combined with the daily dose of the morning fog, quickly convinced us that our home remained on the East coast, at least for the time being.

We returned east, and we agreed that neither of us wanted to remain in the city at that point. We each were developing our multiple, distinctly separate threads and connections to the mental health field.

## ENTRY INTO MENTAL HEALTH

As Rena became more involved with yoga, we together became increasingly involved with mental health. As part of the physical therapy for my knee, I joined the Brooklyn YMCA for lap swimming. I had recently exited from my Livelihood Center space, had taken that initiative into our home, and was looking for new horizons with an eye

on the mental health field. I networked with a fellow swimmer who suggested I contact a woman named Joanne Forbes at South Beach Psychiatric Hospital on Staten Island. This proved to be one of the most consequential working relationships of my life.

Unfortunately, Rena felt I wasn't making a sufficient financial contribution to our household. I was paying my own way for sure, and I was putting massive sweat equity and maintenance energy into the property. That approach upset her and increasingly dismayed her. In an attempt to resolve that issue, we went into therapy. Rena was not happy when the therapist questioned why was she so concerned about this? She didn't know how to deal with that, but we tried to live with it for a while. I started working with South Beach, and contributed sporadically but not much to our household expenses. My attitude was twofold: first, I was contributing sweat equity, and secondly, I wasn't a drain on resources.

We're not living high off the hog. I'm not a financial drain. What are you worried about? I think it was psychological., Two things were happening with Rena at the time.. She was in the process of becoming a yogini. I had introduced her to yoga. We had gone down to the Bahamas, and she clamped onto that like a magnet and started practicing yoga devotedly. As she practiced yoga, she got skinnier and skinnier and skinnier. Which was fine. She also got more and more difficult, which was not fine.

She was an elder law attorney and she had real problems with organization, focus, billing clients, and follow up. Having said that, she was an excellent attorney, but her mind, in my opinion, was very scattered. She would neglect to follow-up with her clients although she never got into any real trouble over it. That certainly affected her and raised her level of anxiety.

Around this time my position at South Beach began to crystallize into something real and we started to look into the possibility of buying a house somewhere in the lower Hudson Valley. Within a few weeks, we drove by a little lake in Dutchess County, a private, man-made lake. There, by golly, was a house for sale, on the lake, a lovely house which needed some TLC. The owners were under pressure to sell. For a very modest price, we eventually owned that house on the lake.

From then on, for a couple of years, it became my/our project to shuttle back and forth and upgrade the house to a standard where we could enjoy living there full time. That was my pride and joy. I put a full-time effort into upgrading the house. It became my beautiful passion to groom it into a lovely place to live. We upgraded the beach, enlarged the deck, installed a covered awning and did extensive landscaping, including the creation of a rock garden with a man-made stream and mini-waterfall..

As a consequence of my connection with Rena, I came to know a little bit more about mental health. She and I created a radio show about recovery. That was part of the reason South Beach hired me, albeit on a contract basis initially to create an anti-stigma video. In hindsight, I suspect that there may have been some resentment on Rena's part since originally she was the one who was the mental health expert and it occurred to me she may have harbored feelings that I was poaching on her turf.

## MY NEW BOSS

Joanne Forbes, my prospective boss, was an out-of-the-box former psychiatric nurse and had been recently elevated to community outreach coordinator for the hospital. A former rock groupie, she was



then the third ranking person in the hospital hierarchy and was responsible for community outreach and community relations.

She and I hit it off immediately.

South Beach was arguably the pre-eminent and the best-regarded psychiatric hospital in the state. It was a very progressive hospital, known statewide for initiating and advancing forward-looking mental health treatment and wellness strategies. Though the facility is located on Staten Island, they have satellite clinics, principally in Brooklyn, across the water from Staten Island, connected by the ferry and the Verrazano Bridge.

My original connection was via a short term contract which they had secured to produce an anti-stigma video related to people who were recovering from serious and persistent mental illness returning to the community and finding employment.

The grant was to produce a video intended to show success stories of people who had returned to work. They were good employees, and that one could count on them, showing how they were as loyal or better than regular employees. The intention was to counter the stigma that somebody who has suffered mental illness was a problem employee and to demonstrate that was not the case. They do, sometimes require some accommodation. That's the intention of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The hospital had secured a grant to make a video that presented this case.

Joanne was my kind of person. She was very much out of the box. Very unorthodox in her approach. Very community-minded and very patient-oriented. She interviewed me and hired me almost immediately. I think she hired me because she didn't have any better candidates. I did later

ask her, why did you hire me? I didn't have any mental health experience except a wife with a diagnosis. She said "I hired you because you were not a mental health lifer. You had not been working in the system all your life." I answered, "Oh, okay, I understand. I never made a video, but my father was a photographer, so, I guess I could make a video, I'll figure it out." And I did.

Looking back on it, the video we produced was not the best. It wasn't perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but it was sufficient to the task and it accomplished its intended purpose. A few months after we finished that six-month contract, Joanne came to me and said that the hospital had hired a consultant who was lobbying New York State to create a couple of positions called "Workshop Developer", which would be a newly created state line. There will be an exam for it, she explained, are you interested in taking the exam? My response was, of course, I'd be happy to take the exam. There was no manual to study. Much of it was common sense and a little bit of knowledge about the mental health field. I don't know how many people statewide took the exam.. My recollection was that I ranked number one or number two in the state. In any event, there was no question that they would hire me straight away, as soon as approval came through. I had an inside track.

While I was waiting for the position to ripen, brother Steven and I went on an adventure to Mexico in an RV, two old dogs, and two old codgers.

## MEXICO TRIP

I wanted to attend a workshop on self-publishing, which was being presented in Lake Chapala, near Guadalajara, Mexico. Over twenty years earlier, during a memorable trip with my first wife Sheila, we had experienced the best fish dinner I had ever tasted, Lake Chapala Whitefish. Outstanding. I looked forward to replicating that experience,

The town was a favorite of expatriates. They even had an American community center. I asked my brother Steven if he wanted to accompany me, and he quickly responded positively.

The workshop was being presented by a self-publishing guru and I signed up. I offered to shop for a second-hand RV and quickly found a potential candidate nearby. I also investigated rental options and scoured classifieds for sales of used vehicles. As I looked around, lo and behold, I found a woman who had a 10-year-old RV. A 20-foot Lazy Dayz nearby. Good brand, and 20 feet was an appropriate size, in decent condition. It was a standard shift and it was in drivable condition a little bit run down but had been sitting unused for two or three years. My recollection is the owner was widowed and was happy to get rid of it. The price was right. I paid about \$2,000, a relative bargain. I took it home and started working on it. I dolled it up a little bit and got it tuned up.

Okay, Steve, we're ready to go. Armed with my recently arrived copy of "Lonely Planet: Mexico version", we set off, just in time for a laid back appointment with our destiny, The Workshop.

The condition of the RV was decent, not lavish but unbowed and totally serviceable. Along the way we added a noisy but effective electrical generator and tires. We replaced a lost connecting pin in our shock assembly and replaced the airbags in our suspension system, but nothing that we considered daunting. We also had an interesting electrical failure in our DC converter related to the refrigerator, which we repaired near New Orleans where an independent operator came out to our campground and serviced the unit.

The beginning of the trip was slow and somewhat boring. We stayed mostly in RV camps or businesses where we could dump our toilet and

get fresh water and use a cable TV hook-up. We discovered Walmart parking lots as a convenient alternative to RV parks.

Just prior to the Juarez border crossing we stopped at a state RV park in South Texas, right on the border. Texas scenery was notable for the right-wing and praise the Lord signage that we discovered which locals used to mark their property. Signs instead of scent. We crossed the border at Juarez and entered Mexico through the slum wracked back streets of that beleaguered city.

Two days later, Guadalajara was noteworthy only for the confusion of getting through it. It felt like it took us forever to go through that large commercial city. When we emerged from Guadalajara we were only about an hour away from our destination, Lake Chapala. It was late afternoon and I remember a blinding sun was in our eyes as we entered Chapala.

We stayed at a place called MiSueno (My Dream), owned by a retired American lady. We put our electrical line over her fence and plugged it in for a nominal fee. We stayed there for several days. It was like a motel with an inner court, very private and attractive.

The American Center impressed us both as a lovely club with a very well-equipped library, game facility, dining room, and bar. Everyone there seemed very friendly. But good, Lord, we're south of the border, and here we are in an American retirement community. It was surprising to find so many Americans living as snowbirds.

With regard to cooking, we didn't starve, we didn't feel the need to go to local places in order to eat. We had adequate groceries, and the four of us, two brothers and two dogs, did quite well. No more Chapala

Whitefish however. In the intervening years, the lake had become polluted due to overdevelopment and poor sewer management. No more fish, but remediation efforts were under way. Perhaps my children will someday again enjoy Chapala Whitefish.

I remember one meal that Steve cooked, a pork tenderloin, which was absolutely delicious. And I learned to love pork loin as a result. Isn't it interesting how memories are often about the smallest of things, like RV cooked pork loin.

When we left Chapala we headed toward San Miguel d'Allende, several hundred miles due East This was in a region where I recall some of the most treacherous roads that I've ever traveled. Steve recalls one harrowing instance, riding in the right seat while I was driving the vehicle on a barely two-lane, hard surface highway, asphalt or concrete. They may have been preparing the sides of the road, in particular my side of the road. Probably widening the hard surface and to do so they dug down a good 10 to 12 inches. So here we were driving and Steve is looking over the edge out his passenger window at a drop off of about 10 to 12 inches, where if one of our wheels had gone too far, we would have been totally destroyed. At that point, Steve recalls, he was peeing in his pants.

We both remember that drive as absolutely terrifying. There were frequent high mountain desert drives where we were going uphill at a fairly slow speed because we're in this underpowered, overloaded, Ford vehicle with an automatic shift.

We had people behind us on a narrow two-lane, switchback mountain desert highway beeping at us and passing us and dodging cars coming the other way. I also remember a drive down from the high desert on these winding roads constantly braking, smelly and smoking and in

danger of failing. So you downshift and now your transmission is screaming at you louder than the folks behind you. Or you've allowed the shift to go into high gear and you're riding your brakes in order to prevent yourself from going too fast. That was unnerving. Exciting, and dangerous as hell.

We lost a shock absorber bolt God knows where, some back road, We limped into a construction yard, I think it was. Neither one of us spoke much Spanish. I had an English to Spanish dictionary and Steve had a better accent and a couple of words more than me. Or maybe it was the other way around. The Mexicans are masters of the “make do” repair. This guy in a lumber yard, in nowhere Mexico, was able to find a bolt that worked as a temporary repair and kept us on the road. We propped up the front end with stones, and he was nice enough to crawl under the vehicle risking life and limb. He got us going again, “thank you Jesus.”

## **THE FEDS, MEXICAN STYLE**

Steve recalls:

“The Federales are some pretty dangerous dudes, all carrying M-16 rifles, probably, donated by the American government to the benefit of the Mexican military. These dudes, their job, I guess, was to make sure that contraband agriculture, as well as drugs and/or any other banned products were not being transported across provincial borders. And here we come to a roadblock, you're in the left seat and I am on the right. This dude with an automatic rifle is asking us questions, which of course, we're not Spanish qualified. I think they may have asked us for some documents that we showed them. And at that point, he indicated we should exit the vehicle. We had been warned not to get out of our vehicle. And at this point, since we'd been stopped for over several minutes I believe it was Riley who came up front and stuck up a nose under one of our elbows, and as if to say hey, I'm here you know that my



nose or scratch my ear. And at that point Jet, who was a very imposing good-looking long-legged black Labrador, came and stuck his head over John's left shoulder at the window and scared the shit out of that young trooper. He couldn't have been more than 20 years old, who was standing there with his M-16. And sternly saying, get out of your vehicle. At that moment Jett also stuck his head out the window as if to say hello. Jett didn't growl but just his presence scared the pants off of this soldier. Apparently, in that person's upbringing, dogs were not pets. They were guards and were trained and meant to be dangerous. And with that, he backed off and said, "Okay, vamoose, on your way, Get out of here."

Yeah, I remember it the same way. In Mexico, large dogs are placed on the roof of houses, flat roofs. They are the warning system.

Another thing I remember about the Mexican roads was you'd be on totally empty roads, like driving through parts of Texas. Straight as an arrow and you're driving and driving, all of a sudden, you come to a road hump, which if you were going more than just a couple of miles an hour, you break something.

Those road humps were located as one entered every village, but there was no warning that you were entering the village. Suddenly there was the road speed bump. We had numerous kidney jarring moments when we didn't slow down quickly enough, all the cabinets flew open, and stuff would fall out. I remember both of us having difficulty anticipating those road bumps.

San Miguel D'Allende was a lovely colonial town with a centrally located RV campground where we stayed for about a week. The RV park was close enough so we could ride our bikes or walk into town. Unfortunately, we couldn't take the dogs with us so we have to lock up

and leave them behind. We ate at one or two restaurants that were quite nice. The town was another expatriate settlement that had a rather artistic, almost Provincetown like atmosphere.

I ended up making a video while we were in San Miguel. I had brought a video camera and a laptop computer. We had met some people who offered to take us to visit some new agers who had established a commune out in the desert. We made a bucking bronco jeep ride into the high desert to visit this leading-edge alternative community called Karakadir. They had been commissioned by a gay lesbian couple to build an ecologically low carbon home from local desert materials. We watched as they created low-cost bricks from desert “caliche” sand or adobe. The house, which featured multiple alternative energy innovations, was comfortably cool, even in the high desert sun. I had a video camera with me that day and took copious footage, which I edited into a charming video when I returned to our RV.



I'm really proud of that video. It's semi-professional, and lots of fun. They were doing all kinds of interesting things like distilling water with



the sun, making a house from local desert “caliche” a sand and



limestone mix and raising crops in the high desert. Unfortunately, the commune is no longer in existence. I have no idea what happened to it, just seemingly gone with the Mexican wind.

From San Miguel we headed to Guanajuato, a university town which one entered through a tunnel. Steve was terrified that we were going to get stuck in that passage. He was correct. We drove through it and scraped by. We didn't break anything because he climbed up on top and lowered an antenna. But I remember thinking that we were not going to make it, we were going to lose some of our hardware. We climbed out of the tunnel to a higher area where our copy of Lonely Planet had indicated there was a campsite. After several passes back and forth along a several mile stretch we finally figured it out. We discovered the the campsite which turned out to be a charming roadside cutout, barely big enough for several vehicles, overlooking a delightful valley view of the back side of Guanajuato. For a few dollars a night, we had a great view, water, electric hookup, access to a mini-market and a ten minute walk into town via the aforementioned tunnel through the mountain

We parked and we camped there, where we met a couple, a man and his wife, who were able to connect to the internet because they had an addition on their little pickup truck with a gizmo on the back. He was

writing a book. It was a good place for the dogs because we could take them out without being on a leash. We thought we could monitor them. Then Riley wandered off down the road, and we couldn't find her. Oh, damn, I thought, we had really lost Riley and but she showed up again.

I also remember walking around down in Guanajuato and everybody was stoned. All the college kids who were smoking dope the whole time.

Leaving Guanajuato we travelled up the Atlantic Coast, through miles and miles of orange country and endless lines of produce trucks, just after we passed through the mountain area.

In those mountains I learned that I was not well prepared to drive a big RV like that. You really need some skillful driving, skillful means to drive one of those things. I dinged it up quite a bit, but I managed not to wreck it. Steve was a better driver and I was a better navigator.

Steve ended up doing most of the driving during our Mexico trip. We discovered after some hit and miss adventures, that airline pilots might be fine air navigators, but could as well be lousy road navigators.

Reading a road map, particularly a Mexican road map, is very different from an air map. So when I was driving, and my brother was navigating, we would be fucked up constantly. We ultimately decided rather than have constant arguments, that he would do most of the driving, and I would do most of the navigation. Since I could read a road map, I could say to him, Steve, this is a difficult to read map, but there's a road up ahead here. Looks like about five miles on your left. Look out for it. I think that's where we're supposed to turn. Mexican roads in those days were not very well marked. They weren't set up for tourists. And often, they were not secondary but worse than secondary roads. Many of them were glorified dirt roads. So we finally found our best division of labor

for driving around Mexico and we ended up with some very interesting stops and we met some fascinating people.

As we headed home we had one last big dog experience at the border. US border customs inspection checked us out for drugs. We didn't have any. However, they use drug-sniffing dogs. So we got out, and the drug sniffing dog entered our vehicle and that poor dog went berserk. So they searched the vehicle from top to bottom. I guess our two dogs stirred up some pheromones. That was a scary experience.

The trip was a good bonding experience between my brother and me. We had a good six-week adventure where we learned we are not great traveling companions. We are very, very different. He's very precise, and I'm much more loosey-goosey. He's got his routines and he sticks to them. He would spend half an hour doing a walk around the RV. Every morning, which I could respect but I get really impatient sometimes. He's military trained. I'm not. I'm anti-military. So, it's very, very different attitudes, styles. But, we like each other and on that trip we learned to accommodate each other. That trip was a landmark in our closeness as brothers.

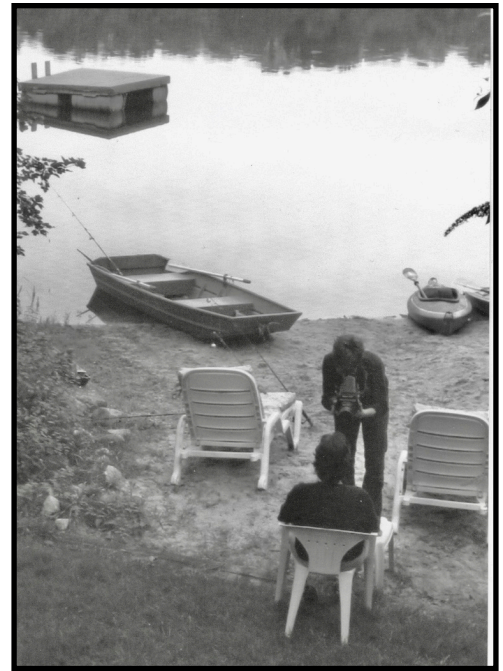
## WORKING AT SOUTH BEACH

Our return was timed perfectly. South Beach had come through and they were ready for me to begin.

It was a half-time position, which suited me just fine. It was a four hour round trip to Staten Island to Dutchess County, but only three days per week. I additionally had full-time benefits. The job was fascinating. I worked with a team of three people in the administration. Joanne was my boss, my nominal boss. Gary Klemuk and Marty Erman were our team members. Marty was in charge of all employment activities for

patients. Gary was the guy who was in charge of all programming for patients. And Joanne was the community relations person. A very interesting team. I was what you might call a full-fledged colleague on that team. My job, as it turned out, was to come up with program ideas to develop patient skills and facilitate their re-entry into daily life and then implement those programs .

At one point I said to Joanne, “What is my job? What do you want me to do?” She replied , “Go do your thing, and keep me informed.” And that's what I did. In short order, I created a training manual for a recipient cleaning company, a patient-based company, doing commercial cleaning, and a training manual for it. We commenced classes, we had three or four flights of classes, with more than 20 trainees on each event. A huge success.



**Lake Dutchess beach at our doorstep. Note rowboat and kayak.**

## TEACHING WORK/LIFE SKILLS

We were training “recipients of services”, AKA patients, in commercial cleaning and practical life skills. Or, how to be an effective employee. I recruited and hired a fellow who was a commercial cleaning supervisor. He ran the training sessions and eventually became the company General Manager. Based on my syllabus, we developed a detailed, comprehensive, step-by-step training program.

I was dealing with patients who were being prepared to function back in the world. Some of these had been seriously mentally ill. Some of them were not so serious. Some of them had been in the system most of their lives. Some of them had been in the system only a couple of years. Most



had never successfully held sustained employment. All in all, a mixed crew. I saw my role as initiating and facilitating patient recovery and empowerment programs related to employment..

## PATIENTS PRODUCING VIDEOS

In a parallel initiative, the patients themselves produced videos. I started a video production company where the patients learned camera and audio production and were shooting and scripting incredibly powerful recovery stories. We had a dedicated high-quality professional camera, to which I added a second camera which I purchased with personal funds. One of the video company projects involved shooting videos at other sites. We visited area group homes and recorded interviews with the residents. Though I was oblivious at the time, it was really high risk because I was driving patients around, frequently in a state vehicle, sometimes in my own vehicle. We were loaded up with video equipment and we'd go into these group homes, and set up interviews with residents. We'd pack up and leave, and then I dropped people off at their own residences. I was fortunate that we never had an incident or an accident. I was way out of bounds, not with any bad intention, but way off the playing field. Naturally, everybody loved it, because they were doing things that they had never imagined doing previously. Joanne knew what we were doing so it wasn't as if we were going behind anybody's back, but nobody was paying much attention to the liability aspects. I guess that was part of Joanne's style. Thank goodness. So I was staying loose. Do what you want, just keep us informed.

## MY TWO YEAR LOST WEEKEND

Life was perfect. I was living on a lake, a private lake, where the fish were begging to be caught. They were literally jumping out of the water. I had two kayaks, a rowboat, and a tiny bedraggled sailboat. My dog,(a rescued black part Lab deer chaser) and I could swim across the lake daily. We had rebuilt and rehabilitated the beach in front of our house. A private sandy beach graced our doorstep. We had expanded the deck to be large and comfortable for entertaining and I had built a cover so that it was sun shaded. I spent all my spare time landscaping. It was beautiful.



**The deck at the lake house. For a while our house became the family's social hub. Great barbecue, fish aplenty and social bonhomie. The beach is below the deck on left.**

Overnight it came crashing down. A toothache started the domino cascade, thus beginning my two -year lost weekend.

A few days earlier I had visited a local dentist. He had performed some root canal work. Unremarkable, unrecommended, and not very concerned about hygienics. A few days later Rena and I were at Fishkill Holiday Inn to interview Jane Pauley, the heralded news correspondent, regarding her experiences with depression and mental illness. It was a drizzly, cold, raw December day. We finished interviewing and wrapped up the equipment and headed home. Upon arrival, I remarked that I felt whipped and decided I would take a nap.

Ten days later I awoke at Yale UniversityHospital. My chest hurt like hell and a voice whispered softly in my ear, “Welcome back, we were worried about you.”Over the coming months of recovery, I learned the story.

## A FIVE PERCENT CHANCE OF SURVIVAL

The morning following our video shoot with Jane Pauley, Rena tried unsuccessfully to wake me. When she couldn't rouse me, she called EMS. They took me to the local Putnam County hospital where medical staff were unable to pinpoint the problem but they observed I was declining fast. After 24 hours of uncertainty, they decided to send me to Yale University Hospital in nearby Connecticut, a ninety-minute ride.

As I arrived at Yale, the doctors rushed me directly into surgery. The surgeon told Rena he thought I had a 5 percent chance of surviving. A staph infection, most probably from the dental procedure, had turned my heart valve “to jelly”.

I awoke 10 days later with an invaded chest cavity, a “bovine” or cow’s replacement heart valve, a speech impediment, lost peripheral vision, and the equivalent of a major stroke from oxygen deprivation as a result of my trauma.

Rena, I learned, had been my advocate through all of this. My initial recovery took six weeks and she camped out at Ronald Macdonald House the entire time. She barely went back to our house during the entire six weeks.

### MAN PLANS GOD LAUGHS

My wife was my caretaker when I was sick. As a result, I believe she burnt out.

During my initial hospital stay, she spent most nights at Ronald McDonald House. She was my advocate to the medical staff during the entire experience. After six weeks, they sent me home. I was looking forward to recovery and resuming my life, but I was still quite fragile.

The super-star cardiac surgeon had taken me off blood thinners as he sent me out the door. I have a missing clotting factor, discovered many years earlier, which causes my blood to clot aggressively. He thought he knew better. Three days later, I was back in the hospital with a blood clot in my leg, known as a DVT (deep vein thrombosis) which threatened to travel to my heart or lung. After several days of touch and go, the clot was dissolved, and I was back on blood thinners. I returned home, in good spirits, but far from healed. As we drove home, I was disturbed by phantom visions, on my right periphery. This I later learned was a “temporary: after effect of the peripheral vision loss. It would subside over time, but on the ride home, it was unsettling to feel that there were phantom buildings on my right horizon.

I was ready for rehab. Four more weeks in Skyview, a rehab facility, about 30 minutes from our home. Rena was a basket case by this time. She badly needed a respite, a vacation.

She split for a couple of weeks and went to an ashram on a yoga retreat. It might have been teacher training in the Bahamas. I was in no shape to be alone at that time. Alone at home, I did some foolish things. I suffered several panic attacks, and sent myself to the emergency room, fearing I was having a heart attack. They sensibly set me aside and had me focus on breathing deeply and then sent me home.

### **MY Daughter Lisa Speaks**

**“It was a lot of responsibility taking care of my father, because I had to make some decisions on his care, and this is after he was sick and got out of the hospital, from a physical aspect in terms of after surgery and then the subsequent news of the divorce from Rena. So things kind of spiraled out of control after that. It was rough. Periodically I would have to run up to his house, because he wasn't able to drive. And he was basically alone. So periodically, I had to drive up there and help him out whether it was picking him up at the emergency room or getting him to a doctor or any other needs. And then my uncle took over for a while.”**

While Rena went for yoga teachers training I was home alone during a very vulnerable time. I badly needed support. In desperation I went on the internet seeking female companionship and made a date, even giving our address, and then attempted to cancel. At the appointed time, I was hiding every time a car passed, lest the rendezvous take place.

When Rena returned, I was so filled with remorse, guilt and self-pity that I blurted my misdeeds out as she walked in the door. If I had said nothing, I might still be married. I was a mess.

## RENA WANTS OUT

Rena couldn't forgive me. I think my pitiful behavior pushed her over the edge. She decided she wanted out. She was burnt out and she wanted to join her son and daughter in California. She wanted to go out there to visit and perhaps live with them. Pitiful as I was, she had no stomach for dealing with me. Given my state, I could hardly fault her. For the next year, however, the theme song echoing in my head was "You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille". For her part, Rena became increasingly reluctant to communicate with me, forcing me to communicate through the lawyers. That was especially painful.

She arranged for me to go live with my brother in Connecticut, and expedited my finding a new home for my beloved black lab rescue dog, Jett. The dominoes just kept falling. There was an appreciation of life, like the fact that I was fortunate to still be living and had the opportunity to experience life on life's terms. One thing that getting sick and the long recovery taught me is gratitude, which I'd never felt before. I live now in gratitude every single day.

Living with my brother and sister-in-law in Connecticut was a low point for me. I was depressed and bereft. I believed that I had lost it all, that my useful life was over, and there were moments when I refused to get out of bed. I just lay there weeping inconsolably. I was fearful that living out of state, I would lose my health care benefits and my right to return to work. So after a few months, I negotiated with my daughter, Lisa, to move in with her family in Ossining, NY. I moved into a small apartment in her basement.

## MY OWN PLACE, A BAD SPACE

I was still a mess. Paranoid and suspicious, fearful and nervous. I had difficulty relating to my young teen grandsons. I worried that nearby TV dish antennae were actually spying on us. Though things slowly improved over time. I was still not ready to return to work. It was now approaching a year. Living with Lisa lasted a few months and ultimately I moved into my own place in Ossining, A rental space in the village, with an absentee landlord on Maurice Avenue, only a few blocks away from where I live at present. Living in the basement, there were an unknown number of Mexican laborers. On the ground floor, the landlord, who at the time was living in Italy, reserved that apartment for his daughter who presumably was supposed to be keeping an eye on the house, though I never met her. I lived in one of two apartments on the second floor. My next-door neighbor was an ex-con with a teardrop ID, a girlfriend, and a three-year-old daughter. We had several conversations about his spiritual epiphany while in prison, but I never felt quite comfortable with his neighbor status.

Rena had packed my belongings and shipped them from the lake house in Dutchess County. Suddenly, dozens of moving cartons arrived and were stacked high outside my door, willy nilly. The apartment had a south-facing terrace and deck, like a sun porch arrangement. It got sun all day long. The whole apartment was very hot. I had a little window air conditioner, which barely kept up. I was in bad shape. I was paranoid and feeling like the dish antennas across the street were spying on me. My apartment was well over 90 degrees. It was one of those 100 degree days. My safety valve was the community center, which had air conditioning.. But there I was, lying on my living room floor, getting cooked.

I also become obsessed with the fact that I had taken home the camera that we used for the video training, and I was afraid that someone, a



year later, might think that I had stolen it. I used to carry the camera around in my car. I was transporting patients and we were visiting other sites and doing video shoots, when I got sick the state's camera was still at my house. Nobody gave a shit. I mean, nobody even noticed. But I panicked. Oh my god, my thinking went, they're gonna think I stole it. I was even afraid to tell them that I had the camera. As it turned out, nobody noticed. Nobody gave a damn about it. I was the only one who got crazy over it. Eventually, I shipped the camera to South Beach. Everybody's fine. Okay, great. Thanks a lot, John. We didn't even know it was missing. But I got antsy about it, I was afraid they would think I stole it, and by the way, I had at that point, intentions of returning to work. I didn't want to return under a cloud.

## CHECKING INTO THE PSYCH WARD

I realized I was on overload. I didn't know what to do. I panicked. I thought people were spying on me. I was in an environment which I didn't trust. So I called 911 and said I wanted to go to Phelps hospital's psych ward. I don't know why I picked that, except that I knew that I was slowly going out of my mind. The EMS techs took me there and it was, as I recall a Sunday afternoon, which meant that they had just half staff. Processing was an ordeal, just getting me in there. I was in a precarious state of mind. They kept asking me all these questions. Who am I? Who is this relative? Who is that relative? Who could they contact? What Why, When? What was this number? What was that number? And I really had difficulty answering. But they finally processed me through and into the psych ward. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was a case of "be careful what you ask for, you might get it".

What I didn't realize at the time was that when you sign yourself into the psych ward, you don't get out of there until they say you can get out.

Furthermore, the minimum stay is four weeks. So that meant I was going to be there for at least four weeks. I didn't fully realize that time. It seemed like a safe haven, which I needed. I was having some hallucinations. Even once in the hospital, I was imagining that I was going to be rescued. I was hearing my boss coming down the hall, trying to convince people that she knew who I was, and I knew who she was, and that they should let her in, so she could rescue me. I kept hearing noises on the floor above me and told my daughter people were listening to what was going on. I was not in good shape, for sure. At one point, I got hysterical and they had to give me a shot of something to calm me down.

They almost put me in the quiet room. I was pretty delusional. During the first few days I kept imagining that people were listening from the floor above me.

## MY ELEVATOR FANTASY

It was a bad time. I kept having this fantasy. I was in an elevator and the elevator took one year to get to the top floor. And every time it got to the top floor, the door would open. But before I could exit, it closed again, and I would have to spend another year, a lifetime, on that elevator.

I was in my own version of hell. And I couldn't get out. In my fantasy, it took the form of an elevator trip. And the elevator to get to the top took something like a year or 100 years or something like that. It kept replaying it over and over and over again. That was one fantasy or delusion that I had at that point.

During this period I had real trouble relating to people. I was in my own world. My own crazy place. I think the diagnosis was psycho-affective.

So I was temporarily somewhat psychotic. After about two weeks, I guess I had recovered enough to say to myself, I have to get myself out of here, and the only way that's going to happen is if I cooperate. I don't want to stay here any longer than I have to. So I started actively cooperating, I was behaving. I wasn't giving anybody any trouble. And that was a conscious decision that I made. Previously, I had been bitching about medication, complaining about this and that, you know, and not wanting to relate to other people. But at that point, I must have gotten better, because I said, Okay, I'm going to play the game. Even if I'm faking the game, I'm going to play the game. Even if I was not sure of the line between faking and reality, but certainly knowing that in order to get out of there, I had to play the game. That was a healthy move.

Lisa visited me regularly and was very helpful. There was a public phone on the ward so I could call her. Lisa visited me nearly every day I wasn't in any danger, but I did need that reassurance of a friendly face, As she recalled, I was in pretty bad shape.

Though grateful for her being there, I was trying to convince that there were these spying on me or not treating me right. I kept asking her to please check what's on the floor above me. You know, it was symptomatic. I was quite paranoid.

## THERAPY

I attended a therapy group which In my opinion, it was a joke. Mostly I kept my mouth shut, and tried to be relatively honest, and a little bit self-revealing. Still, I had trouble taking it very seriously. However, I knew that they would be looking for signs that I was stable. So I played stable. The same thing was true regarding socializing with the other patients in the ward. There was high turnover. I played cards mostly, or

Scrabble, or Monopoly. I played all the available games because they were a distraction. I could at least pretend to socialize.

There is, it occurs to me, something to be said for the notion, “fake it till you make it.”

The main concern of the psychiatric and social work professional staff was what you intended to do once you were out? I told them I had an apartment waiting for me. My current apartment was not a good space. Before I was hospitalized, I been apartment hunting and the landlady showed me a studio apartment. And I said, Maureen, this apartment is too small, I can't live here. But I like your house. I would like to move in there. If anything larger opens up, let me know. after I'd been in the psych ward for about two weeks, she called my daughter who said, he's in the hospital. But give him a call. He'd love to hear from you. Maureen said she had an apartment for me. I responded, “Okay, that's great. I'm a little bit otherwise occupied. I had a little bit of a breakdown. Can you hold it for me?” She agreed, to do her best to hold it for me. As it turned out that's where I am still living ten years later. It was a great move. The apartment was a comfortable one-bedroom apartment. The property is lovely. It was the only apartment in the entire building that did not come furnished. That was a requirement because I have my own furniture. So I've been here for 10 years. It's been a perfect combination for me. I'm her longest-running tenant at this point. I will ever be grateful for her trust. It was that trust in who I was that made it happen. So as I said, in the psych ward, I played the game.

A full day in the psych ward is a crashing bore. They wake you up around six o'clock in the morning for meds and rounds and all that hospital stuff. Then you wait around till seven or 7:30 for breakfast. Then there's not much to do except watch daytime TV. Things may have

changed because I think they have a better facility and I think they have a sunroom now, at Phelps. Back then they had a common room with a TV that played non-stop game shows, daytime serials and Judge Judy, all day long. And, of course, always a hassle over who wants to watch what. I don't think they had cable either. They just had the broadcast channels. So you had that and an hour or two, as I recall, of game time. This was generally only lightly supervised where they'd open up the closet, and they had Monopoly or Dominoes, typical card games, and board games, I played a lot of gin rummy with other patients. The patient turnover is pretty high. I was there for six weeks because I had committed myself. If someone was there involuntarily, they could be in and out again in two or three days. So it's a whole different patient relationship. Therefore one day, you could have a good group of people. And the next day, you might have a group of people who won't talk to you, or whom you don't want to talk to. I remember a woman at the time who wanted to play cards, but couldn't remember the rules and kept insisting on her own version of the rules. We would go over and over the gin rummy rules. It just wouldn't work. So, I did play a lot of card games and a lot of dominoes. Not very satisfying but it served to fill the time.

They also had weekly therapy groups and occasional sessions with one of the doctors. Weekends were awful because everybody was short-staffed.

Mealtimes were the best time of all, You could put food in your mouth. Also, if you were on your best behavior, they led us on occasional walks outside the hospital. If you were in favor, you could get off the ward and go on the walk. This was a very strange thing for me. I could understand why they were restricted, but the walks were so therapeutic. I couldn't understand why they didn't extend the privilege to more patients..

Except I would I guess they were afraid of people acting up outside the ward. So they had to be pretty well convinced that you were a safe bet.

## PRIVILEGES

Another privileged activity was to go to the snack bar. If the staff felt they could trust you, you could go, escorted, and spend 20 minutes or so at the snack bar. Many of the patients in the ward didn't have money. So they would ask others to buy them a soda or a treat.

In the psych ward, I learned an appreciation for each day. For waking up every morning, feeling like I want to get out of bed and taste the day. I've had a good life. I hope to have some more of it. But who knows how long that will be?

“Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht” is an old Yiddish adage meaning, “Man Plans, and God Laughs.” Despite our most careful planning, the Road of Life is unpredictable, Our best-laid plans in life can be upended by unexpected changes, which could be either disappointing or exhilarating. Personal or other setbacks, losses of loved ones, illnesses or accidents, broken hearts, or tortured souls, are not uncommon occurrences in our lives. On the other hand, fate can provide unanticipated good fortune or heartening experiences.

Thus we all live with uncertainty both on a personal basis as well as from a national and international perspective This has been hammered into our consciousness by news of climate change, Covid19, domestic terrorism and the unending daily disquieting headlines.

In spite of multiple possible calamities, we are urged to think positively, maintain a spirit of optimism and not dwell on negative possibilities.

But this advice is difficult to follow when potential calamities face us in all directions.

What to do? We can't go through life being constantly vigilant, at least if we wish some semblance of inner peace. Many of us have developed the ability to compartmentalize or cognitively wall off our anxieties.

We try, as best we can, to minimize the possibilities of bad stuff happening by, for example, childproofing our homes, wearing Covid masks, helmets when biking and sunscreen when sunning, eating healthy foods, avoiding danger, and purchasing various kinds of insurance. But deep down we realize that we can't stave off disastrous acts of Mother Nature or Father Fate. We can't prevent all accidents from happening, nor can we always keep our loved ones safe and sound.

## LEARNING TO ACCEPT

We do learn (usually through personal experience) that setbacks and tragedies, like pleasures and successes, are “natural” parts of the ebb and flow of life. Even in dark times, however, we know at some level that “this too shall pass.” After initial terrible feelings, we gather our thoughts, bring our strengths to bear, and we do overcome. In these periods, we remember that time and caring people will eventually make things better.

In periods of serenity and calm, we need to appreciate the good in our lives. But exulting with joy and a sense of invincibility because of the health and success of our loved ones or when achieving a milestone or good fortune, should be tempered by reality. Just as with sadness, pleasure and celebration are ephemeral, and “this too shall pass.”



These experiences and thoughts were integral parts of my experience during the two years of recovery. In addition to “death and taxes” as life’s inevitabilities, there is another experience you can bet the house on: “Stuff” will indeed happen in our lives and unexpected changes will occur. Rest assured, however, that even after extreme joy or deep sorrow, your life will return to its natural state of normalcy.

## ACCEPTING MY REALITY

Accepting reality, I hired a divorce attorney who specialized in mediated settlements. I had no fight in me at that point. Negotiations with Rena proceeded slowly. She offered to buy me out of the lake house with a key provision. Namely, that I put half the settlement into a prepaid annuity that would provide a guaranteed income through my lifetime and expire at my demise. No more lake houses. We signed divorce papers, after several months of wrangling.

Traveling to Battery Park in Manhattan to sign the divorce papers was one of the most painful days of my life. Then and there I decided I needed to go back to work. It had been nearly two years to the day. New York State has a clause in their employment policies, that you can take two years sabbatical for illness. When I decided to come back, I called Gary Klemuk at the hospital and said, “I’m ready to come back to work”. He said, “Sure, come on back.”

“There’s one problem: I am unable to drive from Ossining to Staten Island. I would be traveling by train.” Gary then suggested that perhaps I could work at a clinic in Brooklyn.

I felt I could work that out. It sounded much more doable. This was at a time when I had just gotten divorced and was still adjusting to major

upheavals in my life.. And I'd been pinballing between Dutchess County, Connecticut, and Ossining for the previous two years.

### BECOMING A COMMUTER AGAIN

Now I was going to get on a train. The first day back to work was one of the scariest days of my life. At the hospital, I had been part of the administration. Now, in a clinic, I was entering a contrastingly foreign culture and environment. They had no idea what to do with me, but they were stuck with me, I was what you might call an outlander to the people in this environment. Their thinking was different, nothing was familiar. I was really shaky and fearful, and entering a totally new environment with new people. Who is this guy, John Aigner? He's coming to a clinic. He's got no clinical background. He's not a therapist. What the fuck are we supposed to do with him? I think initially I was viewed as kind of an albatross around their necks

It took me a while, six months or so, but I worked my way into a role for myself and into a situation where I was able to build some trust.

I don't know how I made it through the first day back to work, I traveled to Brooklyn. I felt completely unfamiliar with riding the subways. It was like being on my first day in China. I walked into this clinic and became suddenly and painfully aware that I was in unfamiliar territory. At the hospital, I had been working in an administrative environment. Now I was entering a clinical environment. The attitudes were totally different. The culture, the philosophy, and the people, their way of dealing with each other, everything was different. The clinic was much more by the book.

### CREATING A ROLE FOR MYSELF

To add insult to their injury, I had no particular role. They had been saddled with me and knew not what to make of me. I had the working

title of “workshop developer”, whatever that was. I asked that question but so did the staff at the clinic. Nobody knew my work role, least of all me. I had to create a job for myself in that unfamiliar and semi-hostile setting. The only thing people knew was that I was a line item on their staff. At one point the director of the clinic didn't quite know what to tell me. I suggested to her, let me figure it out. Give me some time to figure it out. I said to myself I'm not going to deal with the social workers. I'm not going to deal with the therapists. I'm going to deal with the patients.

These were all outpatients. Folks who came in for day programs.

What is it that I can do for them? How can I help them to improve their experience in the clinic without intruding on someone else's turf? The first thing I noticed was a computer room, with several IBM Windows computers that had been declared surplus from the hospital. Sometimes they worked and sometimes they didn't. First, let me see if I can get these to be more user friendly. I realized that these were all set up by technical staff. They weren't set up with casual users in mind. They were set up for hospital use and to hospital standards, HIPPA privacy standards. The first thing I did was simplify the setup to make them more user-friendly. Now perhaps we can find more games and applications that patients will relate to.

## MAC TO THE RESCUE

It also occurred to me that Macintosh-based computers would be easier for the patients to use. I had recently converted to the Mac OS and I loved it. The Mac system was much more user friendly. By good fortune and a watchful eye, I acquired two used Mac desktops at an eBay auction. I paid for them myself and had them shipped to the clinic. I never asked for permission and was prepared to apologize later, down the road, if that became necessary.

I set them up, and I got them working. Again, I did not ask permission. Suddenly, those were the only computers that were being used in the computer studio. People were competing for time on them. We set up an equitable schedule. The patients loved the change and suddenly the computer lab became a popular place. The Macs used a more graphic interface. That's why people love the platform. Even today, many businesses still use the Windows system. But individuals tend to use the Mac system. It's friendlier. We ended up with three Mac computers and a busy computer studio. That was the first step.

The next step involved the clinic art studio, a very nice art studio, but somewhat static. An art therapist showed up once or twice a week. Many of the patients were fairly accomplished artists. Many of them were beginners, willing to learn. I observed that these patients were producing some incredible work. What's happening with it? Oh, well, we take it home or we hang it up now and then. I wondered what would happen if we thought about making greeting cards from this patient artwork? So I started a project where we were making patient art cards. Not only were they outpatient work, but the patients themselves were going through the process of doing the production work. One person was taking pictures of the artwork using an iPhone. Another person was editing those pictures. And then of course with my help and we put them into the Mac. The next step was finding software and printing the art onto cards and then setting up a production line and boxing the cards. I obtained a suitable printer and we started printing cards and started a production line. We were folding and boxing the cards and selling them. Patients loved it. We started a contest to produce some of the patient's artwork, as a Christmas card set. That stirred a lot of enthusiasm, and a lot of excitement. We ended up with 10 patient originated cards. Several of them really looked darling, wonderful, and very creative. There were some patients who were really good artists.

We made a boxed set of holiday cards. It was exciting for the patients. It was exciting for the staff. Everybody loved it. We produced 50 boxes or something like that. The patients divided up the money. It was great. It was win win all the way around

Upon my arrival at the clinic I wasn't greeted with hostility as much.as the question "Who the fuck are you?" Basically, what I had to do was to figure out what I was doing there. I decided as an umbrella strategy to see if I could provide some creative services to the clientele, not therapeutic services, but daily living services. That's why we did the art card thing.

#### BREAKFAST IN THE MAKING

The third project we started a breakfast program. The clinic opened at eight o'clock in the morning. Patients would come in carrying cigarettes, bottles of Cokes, and a bag of Cheetos, and that's the way they were spending their benefits and feeding themselves. In consultation with staff, we agreed that there had to be a better way. Why don't we at least have something healthy? We started a breakfast program where we would participate in making a community breakfast. We'd make a big pan of scrambled eggs or bread pudding or hot cereal. We would get contributions from the neighborhood. The local bakery would give us the day-olds. We charged one dollar for breakfast. We became quite popular.

Patients loved the breakfast, which they fully participated in preparing, and it became a little mini-community center.It also got the day started. At that point, patients started going to therapists saying, I really like what he's doing. That's when the therapists started paying attention to me when they were getting feedback from the patients. From then on, I

had a very good relationship with the staff. But it took me about a year to develop that, perhaps a little more.

And I think I described this already was the notice that there, they had a computer lab, there was barely functional, it had three PCs, which were networked to hospital standards, which had all kinds of stumbling blocks and, and, you know, privacy crap in them and, you know, stuff that they were really not set up to patient use.

They weren't set up for anybody's use really. And, and then they had a tech come from, from Staten Island, once every couple of months, and unscramble the mess that everybody had made. So you know, nobody really wanted to use them. They weren't user friendly. And they weren't very functional. So I brought in a couple of us Macs.

And at that time, I was doing a lot of stuff on eBay and the internet. And I could buy a Mac for us for \$300. And I decided I was going to spend my own money, I think I got reimbursed for some of it. But I wasn't and that wasn't a priority for me to get reimbursed. was just it just got it done. This is why I could do it because I wasn't asking anybody's permission. I wasn't looking for funding. So I installed at the beginning, I think I installed two Macs. And lo and behold, people started flooding into the computer studio to use the Mac's so that was the first thing I did

The second thing I did, in my recollection, was to start a video training class. I was teaching It, and recognized that this was an outpatient clinic. So people came in for day treatment, which meant they came in about 8:30 in the morning. And they stayed there until about 3:00pm. in the afternoon. By and large, they didn't have a whole lot to do. They weren't kept busy enough.

There was an art studio which was staffed part-time. And there were some therapy groups, but nothing, you know, nothing to really engage people. So what I was looking for was activities that would engage people, and didn't require them to follow a certain pattern. So that the art cards were one that was a later project, the video class was very popular at four or five people and in the clinic, four or five people was a good group and didn't like to get big groups. And we made a couple of very nice anti-stigma videos. But what was very interesting is these were people with little or no skills, learning how to use and make video and then editing, you know, and then making DVD copies. So it was a whole process that I was teaching.

I also started a men's group that met once a week. Included in the population of the clinic were a number of people who were mandated, who were sent there by the court. Part of their alternative to incarceration was to show up at that program and behave. We had several people in the men's group who had been mandated. That was a challenge. I never felt threatened. But it was a challenge. Because these are people who had bigger issues.

## THE BEAN COUNTERS PREVAIL

Over time, while I was working at the clinic, I noticed that the administration, particularly at the state became increasingly dominated by a bean-counting mentality. They described this as “evidence-based”



but that's not what they were getting at. They wanted to push people who had been lifelong mental health patients into the community and into the world of work, partly so they could reduce the benefits. It wasn't an attempt to improve the lives of the patients, or the "recipients of services" as they were called. I think, at bottom, it was an attempt to save some money. The Office of Mental Health did have some awkward partnering with the York State Department of labor and they tried to develop some work/reward programs where they would reward clinics for getting patients to work and reducing their benefits.

Basically, what they were saying is if you started working, your benefits would be reduced. But we would reward you somehow, for working, so your benefits wouldn't be reduced drastically. It was all very complicated. Not transparent and not the kind of initiative that would motivate either patients or therapists. Joanne was out of the picture at this point, she had retired.

Earlier I had gone from working at the hospital to working in a clinic. As we've discussed, I work best when somebody says to me, Go do your thing, John, and keep me posted. Now, I found I had a supervisor at the clinic who kept hanging over my shoulder and correcting and micromanaging me. I hated that. There was not much I could do about it. Except to, say "yes, yes, yes," and then go do my thing. I've done that all my life. Yes, people to death and then go do what I want to do. It has worked out pretty well.

My evaluations tended to be of the nature of, well, John, you could improve your paperwork, your report, those kinds of things. In terms of patient relationships, I had one or two patients that I got into a hassle with though that didn't cause me a lot of problems.

This was a patient, a lesbian woman, who was very hostile. At one point, she accused me of being a misogynist. It wasn't even misogynistic. It was just something that she took, the wrong way. And so she started giving me a hard time.

I listened to her, and as it turned out, over the long run, we became friendlier. I won't say we became friends particularly, but she accepted me for who I was, and she wasn't holding out a grudge for me. The point was that I listened to her, without being defensive, and helped her to feel that her issues had been heard. That helped.

## RETIREMENT TIME

I finally retired from South Beach, about six years ago for two prime reasons. One, It was a four hour round trip to work two hours in each direction. I decided that to travel 12 hours a week, for 20 hours a week of work, seemed like a bit too much wear and tear. I was taking public transportation on the train into the city, taking two subway lines. Then a walk to Cobble Hill and Baltic Street. I loved what I was doing. I was really doing nice work there, but the administrative quality of mental health in the state was in a heavy transition. It became much more evidence-based and increasingly in the hands of the bean counters. They wanted documentable results. They wanted more and more numbers. They wanted people with mental health conditions, going back to work and proving it and the numbers became the focus rather than the people.

I was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the direction in which I perceived the state was moving. As someone who had worn two hats, as a patient and as a professional I recognized that I had a unique perspective. My wife was a mental health patient. The whole field of mental health during the past 50 years, historically a very short period of time, has undergone a tremendous transformation. If you remember movies about mental health in the '40s, it was about the snake pit. It was about insane asylums. It was about that lobotomy and electric shock treatments. Bad medications, some of which worked, some of it didn't. Over time, the medications got better. The understanding of mental health got better. And the field evolved. At some point, the political attitudes towards mental health lagged behind. At one point, for example, Governor Nelson Rockefeller pretty much emptied the mental hospitals. All those patients got dumped out on the street.

I think it was a well-intentioned move meant to save money, but what it ended up doing was criminalizing many aspects of mental health. These suffering souls were dumped into the streets, often homeless and unmedicated, where they interacted with the police, who themselves were clueless and unprepared for this population. Thus many became subjects of the criminal system, rather than the mental health system. And that was really bizarre. What we did was criminalize mental health. And we're still paying the price for that.

Over time, the medications, which in the early days were pretty primitive, they were the kind of medications that were like

sledgehammer medications rather than pinpoint. They've improved and they're still improving, we have a long way to go in terms of psychotropic medications, but they are improving and our attitudes towards mental health are improving. We are slowly recognizing as a society, that mental health is not an aberration, it's just a condition. But our attitudes to physical illness were much more realistic and much more charitable and forgiving. Also much less stigmatized.

We've seen a large increase in drug abuse. And in mental health problems. Certainly, if you are in the middle of a pandemic, and you lose your job, and your next-door neighbor has Covid and your kids are home from school, and your wife is going berserk. And you're under enormous stress. Stress produces mental illness. So I think we are and will be seeing an enormous jump in various forms of mental illness. I'm definitely worried that we're going to be treating this latest wave with relatively unrestricted over-medication for a long period of future time..

I feel compassion for those people in pain, whether physical or psychic.. I feel anger over the fact that it's so easy to get prescription drugs. You can get those highly potent and highly addictive medications as if it was chewing gum or penny candy. I believe that the easy availability of those hyper potent medications is a national disgrace. I can't condemn the people that use those drugs. I am loathe to condemn them for their desperation. It provides them some solace. What drives me crazy, is how addictive the drugs are. Shaking those addictions is extremely difficult. And it's going to be very, very expensive. And we're not addressing that, as a nation.

We are not addressing it at all. It seems to me that we are letting both political parties off the hook by allowing them to hijack the conversation via dog-whistle phrases and slogans.

For example, the whole idea of “defunding the police”. What an absurd term. Nobody really wants to defund the police. I definitely blame the Democrats for allowing that term to stick. It’s totally inappropriate and it doesn’t accurately describe what is meant. People may want to re-prioritize the funds. That's not the same thing as defunding.

In any case, it was becoming clear to me that my days of employment were ending. I looked forward to recreating myself and my life in the village of Ossining.

## CHAPTER 5

### RETIREMENT OR REHIREMENT

“Be careful when you retire, you're going to get busier than you were when you were working.”

That caution from well-meaning friends hasn't happened, perhaps in part because I am in control of what I do, and what I choose not to do. A huge benefit of retirement. However I don't think of it as retirement, but as a relief from traveling a daily four-hour round trip to work.

During the these past five years I have felt like I'm still working, but differently. These days I'm not working for pay so much. I'm working for personal satisfaction, or for others. It is very satisfying that I can pick and choose. I'm not subject to somebody else's will or instruction or someone else's priorities. The difficult aspect has been learning to comfortably say no. That's new ground.

Since retiring I've done various things. I joined my local Unitarian congregation, the first time I'd ever joined a church in my life. I always felt like Groucho Marx, I would never join any organization that would have me as a member.

I changed my mind. It wasn't so much for spirituality, it was for the community. That's been a very rewarding decision, one that I've enjoyed and appreciated. My congregation has gone through some rough times. We've gone through four ministers since I've been there, which is tough. In my opinion, the Minister we have now is probably the best of the lot. But he is still a recent arrival. We'll see how that works out. He's a contract minister, which means he could be there for a year or he could end up being there for 10 years. Who knows?

The next thing I did was to get involved in a mindfulness meditation group. I started with my partner, my latest lady partner. She's not quite a life partner, but we've been dating. We've been going out together, for eight years, now.

## MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

The group meditates every Friday afternoon, for about an hour. It has evolved. The library eventually gave us free space. We started out paying for space initially. Now, we do it on Zoom, and we've got a person who joined us, who was taking training in mindfulness meditation. In order to get her certification, she needed to do some mindfulness teaching, so she's taken over leadership. I've become her backup, which is fine, a second activity.

## WISE AGING

I started a Wise Aging group in my Unitarian congregation, which has 10 to 12 members. We meet twice a month. It is a discussion and support group around the issues of aging. Recently, we were reading from Parker Palmer's book "On the Brink of Everything". He was talking about aging and ways of viewing aging. In one passage he poses the question "What is enough? In our life? What is enough in the moment? How much is too much?" Those questions triggered me and brought me back to my addict days. If an addict is serious about being clean, that thought is ever-present, particularly in a 12 Step program. The idea that once is too much and too much ain't enough. In my life these days I have enough and I've done enough. Certainly, there are many things I could have done or still can do, and many things I didn't do, or didn't finish. That said, this life has been enough. I have plenty. There's nothing that I want or don't have. I'm comfortable with what I have, physically, spiritually, and emotionally.



I also started a short lived Monday Morning Career Coaching Group which may get revived in another incarnation I'm also doing resumes for a number of people at the moment, all pro bono.

And then, of course there is this memoir.

My principal regret in my life is people that I've injured, people that I haven't done the right thing by. It's something that I've consciously tried to change in myself and make amends. I had two very self-absorbed role models for parents. I was a self-absorbed person for a large part of my life. Let's not kid ourselves here, I'm still self-absorbed. The difference now is that I am more likely to give myself permission for my self-absorption. Along the way I have also gained some self-awareness.

I went to a memorial service for a good friend in recent weeks. I was particularly struck by several people at the memorial who said, "Gil, whenever he spoke to you, you felt like you were the only person in his world. He was overjoyed to hear from you, and you felt that he'd been waiting to talk to you." That was a lovely statement. People probably won't say that about me, but if I could engender more of that, in the way I deal with people, it would be a worthy goal. We can't change ourselves overnight, but we can have the intention to do things differently moving forward.

We can change our intention even if the reality exists that we don't always live up to our intentions. Intentions are very powerful nonetheless. The intention is an important starting point. If we have a serious intention, that will color our actions. If we want to get things done, it's crucial to start with an intention. So one of my intentions at this point in my life is to be more open to listening to what's on other people's minds and be more focused on where they're coming from, and

less focused on where I'm coming from. To the extent that I can accomplish that, it would be a positive step in the right direction.

It's very important to me that I still have relationships with all the important people in my life. When I think about how many people I know, who have children with whom they don't have any relationship, I realize I'm very lucky. I'm very fortunate. I've worked at maintaining those relationships. I haven't done it perfectly, I know that. but I don't mean to do any harm. It's just the way I am. And if I can help, I want to, if I can be of service.

About eight years ago, I met June and that was just a little bit before I had retired. I was still at South Beach, June, and I met through an online dating service, Senior People Meet, or Our Time. One of those. We communicated online and quickly realized we live near each other. We had some interests in common. Let's grab a cup of coffee together. So we met at a coffee shop in Tarrytown as they were battening down the hatches. Hurricane Sandy was due to arrive that night, and everyone was locking things uptight. We had an abbreviated meeting because they were pretty much shooing us out the door after we'd been there for 40 minutes or so. We discovered that we both had a connection with a therapist in Manhasset, remember Florence Kopit, in common, We both knew her from different angles, and we both thought that she was a remarkable person. I knew the woman as a therapist, and June knew her because they both shared participation in a group called Pathwork, a channeled spiritual path.

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The Pathwork was channeled teaching from Eva Parakis, a wisdom channel. June and Florence had both been participants. I had worked with Florence in her capacity as a therapist. She and her husband Jerry operated a Therapy Center in Manhasset.

## **June's point of view**

**“We met the day that Hurricane Sandy hit. I'm actually on Sr. People, one of those matching/dating websites. And so we met and then when we met in person on the day that Hurricane Sandy struck. We met at the Coffee Labs right here in Tarrytown. Actually, we both knew a therapist in common, from the work I had done, I think we were on similar spiritual paths. Over time we got together and shared what we really had in common. I think this is the basis of it, is that we were both interested in meditation. And we co-led a meditation group in Ossining at the Ossining Library for quite a few years, actually. And we both had an interest in developing our meditation practice. So we would lead it for the community and take turns and we shared, basically, a common point of view about it, we had a similar point of view.**

**Throughout our lives, I think we both had several relationships. And by now we realize that we had to have a more mature outlook and not expect the other person to fulfill our desires all the time. We've learned a lot from each other and part of it has to do with age. If we were young, we wouldn't have had the same experience at all.”**

When we discovered that we both revered Florence, we concluded that we needed to explore this further. So we decided to meet again. And, of course, you know, eight years later, we're still together. On the other hand, we broke up several times.

Our attitudes differ regarding how to resolve disagreements in our relationship. A large part of our disagreement has centered around the

fact that June tends to have strong opinions, for which she's often got no evidence. When challenged on that, she gets on a horse and starts flailing about. West Indians call it “getting on your pomps and pride”.

We have learned over time how to disagree with each other without getting defensive. How to disagree, without being disagreeable. That's an important part of our relationship. She's full of good intentions.

June's parents died when she was a young teenager. They were hardly ever home. They worked together in a successful business. Swiss immigrants, they traveled frequently to Europe, leaving June and her brother in the hands of an African American Baptist live-in housekeeper.

I think her brother was probably more latchkey than she. She was a girl in a European conservative family, which meant that she didn't get a whole lot of wiggle room. Her brother, apparently, got significantly more leeway. They both went to private schools. She felt all her life that she never had many close friends. She had a lot of anger over not getting enough of what she needed. It wasn't about money, She didn't even know how much money was in the family until her parents died, and then all of a sudden, she had an inheritance and didn't know what to do with it. Then she got married almost immediately, probably to change that situation. She married a guy who was a non-participant. So it seemed to be up to her to make all the decisions.

We have a relationship between two adults. Perhaps the first truly adult relationship for both of us.. We pretty much have agreed not to fight, or at least when we do fight, to fight fair and clean. Or just say, I'm not interested in this argument. Let's either stop, or I'm going to go home, and I'll see you later.

Both of us are in the period of our lives, where we are pursuing wisdom, to gain a wisdom perspective and to lead a life of greater equanimity. We also deal with consoling each other around the issues in our respective lives.

As much as we can, we provide counsel to each other. That seems to work. It is one of the things that I have to be careful about. Now that I'm putting it into words, and on paper, I have to be careful that I don't take an "I'm smarter than you attitude".

June can be surprisingly uninformed about certain matters. That's not to say that she's not smart. It's just that she doesn't have that piece of knowledge. For example, we have frequent discussions about civics and how our government works. There are areas in which she has little information but plenty of opinions. She's also very interested in helping immigrants, and when she tries to explain our government to immigrants, and she tells me what she said, I'm saying, holy cow, that's not quite how it works there. She doesn't want to hear that from me. Or where the fuck did you get that information. Or better yet, what information do you have to substantiate that? Or is that merely an opinion?

She's got two sons and an adopted Korean daughter. My opinion is that she has had some difficulty in dealing with men over her life. My view is that she's been intimidated by men, and because of that, she's developed some defenses, which are not always appropriate responses.

I have a good relationship with her daughter and an OK relationship with the sons, but it doesn't really go much beyond being at the table when they're visiting with their mother. When they're together, June has used me as a kind of buffer in those relationships.

I think June feels awkward in social relationships. So if I'm there, it helps because I do some shepherding of the conversation. This allows her to not feel as vulnerable. She's expressed the desire for me to join her so that she can be more comfortable and less awkward or less intimidated, and thus less anxious. I think, she feels like her son is less apt to bully her if I'm there.

June has not really developed a personal relationship or independent relationship with any of my family beyond the gatherings. This is a shame. But that's the way it is. She hasn't reached out to anybody and said, Hi, How are you? But then again, I have done it a little bit with one of her sons, and a little bit with her ex-husband. We have gotten together with her ex-husband and his wife several times, socially.

At this point in our lives, we are life partners. Having said that, I never liked labels. Don't put a label on me. As soon as you put a label on me, I feel like I'm on the way to being someone else. I don't like to be labeled, that he is this person, or he is that person. I'm a person. Not a label, but one who is constantly looking to grow.

For me, the idea of marriage and staying with one person for an entire lifetime is unreasonable. It doesn't feel right. Apart from issues of children, loyalty, money, finance, it just doesn't feel right. to have one relationship all your life. it just doesn't make sense. I'm not the same person that I was at 60, or that I was at 40. Or that I was at 30.

In my humble opinion, I do not expect that two people are going to grow at the same rate, or in the same direction at the same time. So how does a marriage account for that? It really doesn't. I think I've been blessed in some ways to have three marriages and two, long term relationships.

I'm the oldest in my family now. I'm the elder. Daily, I am reminded of that reality. The fact is that I hang out with people my own age, more than I hang out with young people, though I'd like to change that and spend more time more with young people. But I just seem to be comfortable with people my own age. Unfortunately, they're all dying around me, most of my friends are in their 70s or 80s. Many of them are very active, but we've all got our own issues, or our own aches and pains, our own illnesses. My friend was being treated for cancer and it metastasized. That made me aware that I don't make male friends easily. When I do, I don't want to lose them.

I've lost four good male friends recently. I don't have male friends that go back to my childhood. They're all recent. That reminds me very strongly of my own mortality, and what is going to happen to me, before too long. Whether it's a year or a decade, I don't know.

I'm reading a lot about mortality and what it's like to grow old. The idea of what is it that grows, or grows old or grows young? Perhaps we could choose that. Right? Like the idea of falling in love. Right. What about rising in love?. So, I mean, I think that the US idea of aging can be a creative process, or it can be a degenerative process. I think that to some extent, we choose and I'm trying, in as many ways as I can, to stay vital, not keeping young, but staying vital. This memoir has served that purpose and served it well.

I'm not a griever. I do feel sadness, I've shed some tears. The core of my spiritual practice is letting go. I know that involves letting go of grief. Processing it, acknowledging it, and letting go. I've read about the five stages of grief. I don't know if I totally agree with it. But that doesn't matter. I think they're valid. You know, that awareness and acceptance and processing and all that.



I still miss my father, terribly, even though he died nearly 20 years ago. I also miss my aunt, who was my surrogate mother. I don't miss my mother. I miss the fact that I didn't have a sweet mother, but I have learned to live with that. Because of my advanced age, I've had a lot of relatives die. My aunt has died. My mother has died. One of my sisters has died. I had a son, who died during a miscarriage.

I had an old couple of uncles and many people died around me. I don't know if I would say I get used to it, but I'm accepting.

I have a way to move forward to continue thinking. I mentioned my respect for Pema Chodrun, this idea of not clinging to the shore in a fast-moving river because that's where you get beaten to shit. But to get out in the moving water and just go with the flow and to a greater or lesser extent, I believe that I have incorporated that into my life. And that is, I don't cling to relationships or activities. I enjoy them. I cherish them these days but no clinging. I am learning to let go.

It is what it is, is the way I look at it. I'm not going to make something of it. I like my life as it is. It's slowing down, I recognize that. My body is holding up moderately well. I don't do enough exercise. But then you know, at 83, how much exercise do most people do? I did a lot in the past that apparently has stood me in good stead. My mind is still active. My senses are all intact. I can, touch and taste and smell and see and speak. I'm not suffering any great pain. Summing up. I have no complaints. My only complaint is I have no complaints.

I joined a Master Network. When I meet with them, they have about a dozen groups that meet in Westchester, and you can attend any meeting. My home meeting is in Yorktown. I meet with them on occasion at eight o'clock in the morning on Mondays. So there's plenty going on for me during this time of COVID. I don't feel in isolation, I'm

very comfortable on Zoom. The point for me was, I can be useful, I can be helpful. And I can be retired. As I mentioned earlier somebody said to me when you retire, just be careful, you may find you are busier than you ever were when working. I haven't found that to be the case. I've been careful about not overloading myself in my retirement.

I want to finish this work. And that is something that concerns me every day. Will I be able to finish this work? If I do, that's cool. I hope I can. And I hope I do. No, there's nothing raging inside me. Yeah, I'm torn between moving forward and winding down. I don't know, which is a stronger motivator. I guess they're both there. What's the phrase in the Serenity Prayer?

...Knowing the things I can change and knowing the things that I cannot and knowing the difference, and being able to let that be okay.

In summary, I would say that I'm taking it day by day. One of my concerns these days at the top of my intentions is I don't want to leave a mess for my kids. So to be able to clean up my loose ends, make it clear what I want to be done with the loose ends of my life. I'm focused on getting rid of the excess baggage in my apartment, which is plenty. That's the hard part, you know, making a will, which I have been promising to do for years. Those are the kinds of things that I want to make sure that I deal with because I know the mess that my father left us because he could not make up his mind. The same flaw is in me, the same characteristic is in me, and I want to do better than he did.

If I had to speak to a younger version of myself, I think I'd tell them what I've been saying all along in this memoir.

First, to thine own self be true.

And follow your own weird. Do no harm. And to the extent that you can do what you believe is best for you, regardless of what other people may think, other people, don't count in that equation. Be kind to others. Be respectful to others. But it is only you who is responsible for your life.

You don't owe anything to anybody about how your life should be lived. Now, that doesn't mean you can't commit yourself to others. You can: But that's not because somebody else has said that's what you should do. That's your decision. And your decision alone. Again, to follow your own weird. Much of the unhappiness in our culture. is people living other people's versions of our lives

They are living a life that they never wanted to live. They are not being true to themselves. I understand that that's probably a very Western concept. And probably a very 21st-century concept. But it is a concept that applies to the here and now and applies to a large percentage of our population. Unfortunately, that doesn't speak to the people whose lives are consumed by the need to put food on the table. And that's a whole different point of view. I'm not questioning that. But in terms of my culture, and my environment, and my peer group this is the first time basically, in history that we have had a large group of citizens over the age of 65, who are economically self-sufficient, and who expect to live another 15, 25 or 30 years.. We've never had that before in history.

One could say that is a whole new cultural dilemma and a conundrum. When before in history, have you had millions of people in their 70s and 80s, economically independent, expecting to live another 15 to 20 years of useful, productive lives? And having to figure it all out? Nothing even remotely like that has ever happened before.

So it's something personal to me, and I think that my country is still trying to wrestle with the thought. That's my goal and our collective

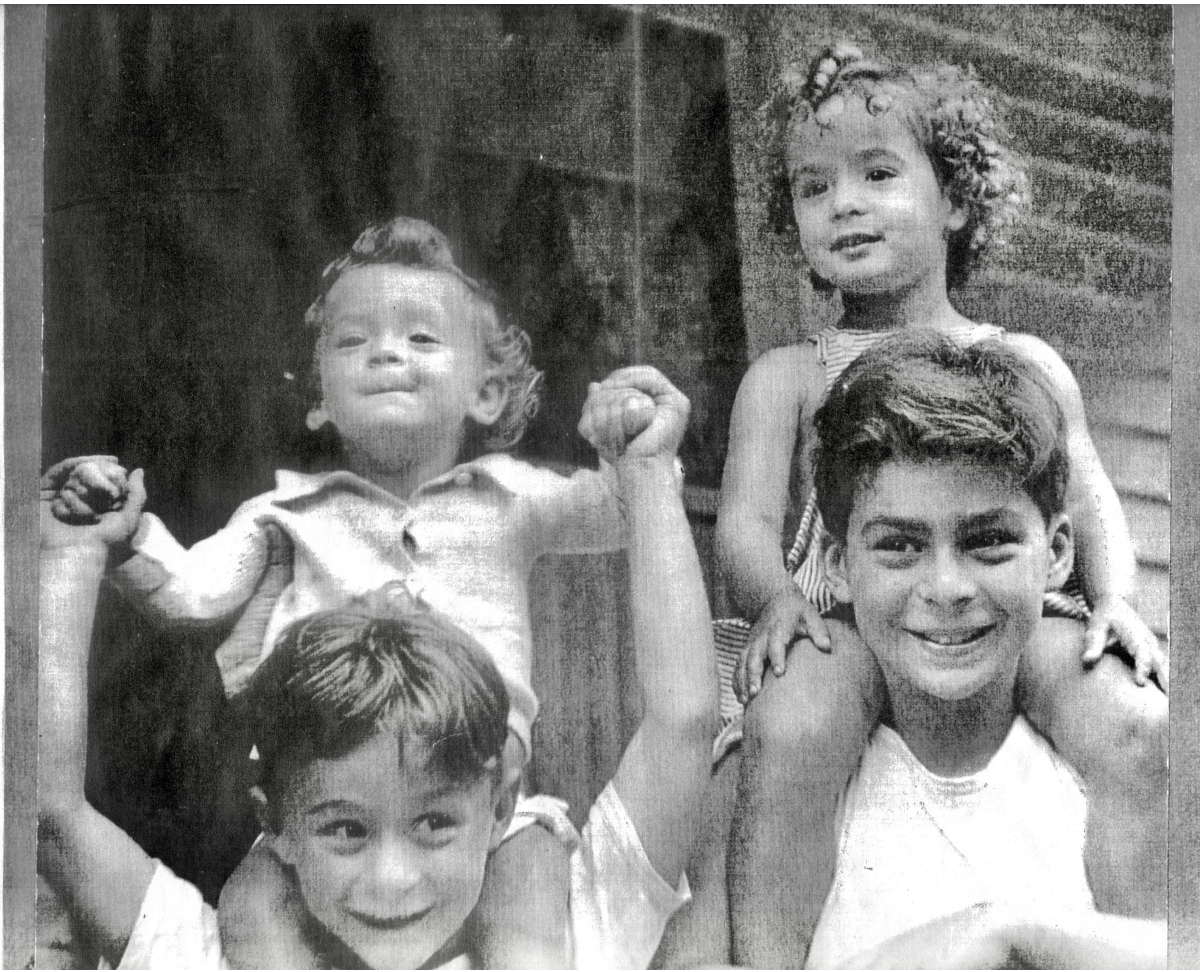
struggle. I think America is struggling with how to deal with its elderly population. How to take advantage of what wisdom the elderly can provide. We have barely begun to figure out how to leverage the cultural capital that our elderly population represents and find ways to use the elderly as a cultural resource. The elderly represent an immense supply of cultural capital, like an uncultivated field lying fallow.

The whole idea of retired people going on cruises and all that strikes me as bullshit. A colossal waste. I just don't know how long that can go on. Perhaps Road Scholar and lifelong learning is the start of an answer.

But it's an artificial attempt to keep busy, and we haven't really focused on how to get our elders engaged. Not only get, but keep them engaged. What goes on in nursing homes is a crying shame. I don't have the answer. Except maybe to be part of some kind of solution. The Wise Aging group is part of that, and each of us is searching for answers in our own way. Perhaps that is my future, to be talking about “elderhood”.

Other societies have developed valued roles for their elderly. For example, among Native Americans the elders were really the wisdom people of the community with the chiefs as the elder men, the women were the crones, and they were the healers and the caretakers. There was a wisdom role for all the elders. Our society has hardly begun to tap the wisdom of the elderly. Partly that may be because we haven't provided avenues for that. We've left it to each individual to find their own pathway.

So maybe, what will come out of that is some institutional or some cultural pathways. I don't know. I don't have the answer. I simply have the desire to share what I know. When you share what, you know, you multiply it, you don't lose anything. So if I can do that at this point, that would be valuable give back. One of the discussions that we had



**To my siblings, with love.**

recently at the Wise Aging group was about legacy, and what is a legacy? How will you be remembered? what will you be remembered for? Well, for me, part of that is what we're doing here. I would be happy to be remembered as two things. He was kind and he had a sense of humor.

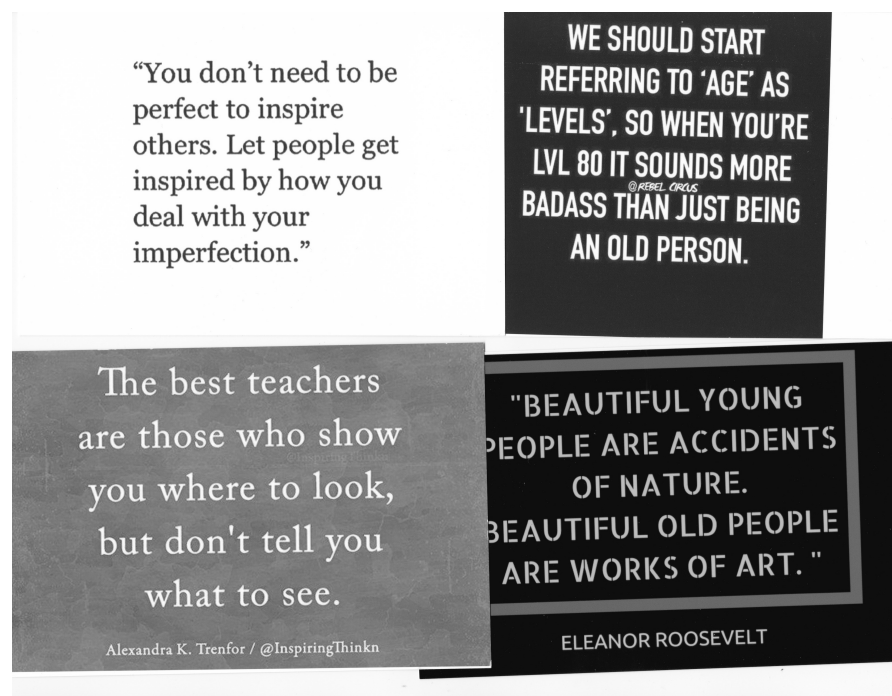
I don't know how much more of life I will have. That's why I'm feeling some urgency about this memoir. On the other hand, whatever it is, I don't know where I'm going to go when I'm gone. But I don't want to leave a mess.

One hears stories about people who have been considered dead and went through that process. They reported the wonderful lights and all that stuff. And that's nice. I'm hoping that the way I die is in my sleep, and I don't know what there is in terms of an after life, I just don't know. I do know that nothing in this universe is wasted. Energy becomes



something else, nothing can destroy energy. according to science. I pretty much accept science. I mean, it's better than the alternative. To my way of thinking, faith is faith in the goodness of people. And the goodness of life. It's not in faith in heaven.

I do not have an image of a man on a throne with a long beard passing judgment. Beyond that, I don't know. I don't believe in reincarnation. It's a possibility. I just don't personally believe in it. But I think that



Some of my favorite Wisdom Magnets

believe that all of us have better angels and we should trust our better angels in our behaviors. but that's not about heavenly angels, as about earthly angels.

At one point in this book, I talked about the theosophists, who believe in wood sprites and devas. I don't know about that either, because I haven't experienced that. I have experienced spiritual events, which tell me that there are more things in heaven and earth than we know of. I'm

people who do believe in it can make a decent case for it. I don't believe in heaven. But people who do believe it can make a case for it. Perhaps not a decent case, but at least a hopeful case. I don't believe that we're going to go up and discover singing angels. But I do

reminded of my refrigerator, where I have posted one of my favorite expressions.

“Don't believe everything you think.”

NOT THE END









