The Break With Jason

He Becomes a Rich Man

Jason (the one long-term friend I made at HP Labs) stayed at HP until ’92 (I left in ’91), when he moved to Rambus to become a middle-level manager. Rambus sold integrated circuit chip designs to a variety of companies, including several video game makers, among them Nintendo. The company did very well for several years; he was given generous stock options, and for a time on paper he was a rich man. He lost a great deal of his paper wealth when the dot-com bubble burst in 2000, but he sold enough of his stock in time so that he was financially independent and able to retire in his late forties. He and his wife sold their house in San Carlos and bought an $800,000 house on Aragon Blvd. in a pleasant, upscale old neighborhood of San Mateo. I am sure he was worth at least $4 million at the time of his retirement. In any case, he had enough to be able to afford to rent a small office in downtown San Mateo where he set about doing natural language research, that is, research aimed at finding ways to enable the computer to understand ordinary written English text. His initial goal was a program that could process patent applications.

His Research

I was interested in this project. But I told him that I would approach it from an efficiency point of view, not necessarily a natural-language-processing point of view. That is, I would begin by finding out how much time was currently spent in writing and analyzing patent applications, then see where the greatest time saving could be achieved. Perhaps it would be in something as simple as modifying the forms the applicant filled out. I pointed out to him that one way or the other, his program would have to parse the language text of the application in order to, in effect, fill in blanks in one or more standard forms. So why not just give the forms to the applicant? He said he wanted to see if he could write a program to analyze the texts. I think I also told him that natural language processing of that sophistication was too difficult, not for him, but for the existing state of knowledge and technology. Later, I told him that I had come to think that Noam Chomsky’s idea that each child by the age of five has internalized a grammar that enables him, in principle to generate an infinite number of grammatically correct phrases — that this idea was misleading. In any given context — home, job, shopping, dining out, travel — certain phrases are used again and again. A much better approach to natural language processing, I argued, was to catalog the frequently occurring phrases in a language and, in effect, attach their semantics beforehand, so that a program could simply look up the semantics when it came across the phrase, and didn’t have to start from scratch figuring out the semantics with each document it analyzed. He said a number of people in the field had had similar ideas, but he gave no sign that he thought them worth pursuing.

His Conservative Nature

We kept in touch by email and phone, if only once a month. When I asked him, he would check a short proof that I sent him via email (he would invariably find an error), and he would always be willing to make a copy of a proof I thought might be important and sign, date, and store it just in case a question of priority of discovery should arise in the future. He also stored the copies of my books and papers that I made once a year or so in anticipation of a computer crash and the loss of my backup disks. But he never asked me how my work was going, or what my ideas

were. He did ask me once why I wanted to work on such difficult problems, problems I had almost no chance of solving. I told him that I had no interest in working on problems that anyone could solve. I looked on his question with contempt, because to me it was a sign again that he was a man who lacked the recklessness, the daring, that I considered essential for any kind of really creative work. At the time, I did not know Einstein's opinion on the subject:

"One should not pursue goals that are easily achieved. One must develop an instinct for what one can just barely achieve through one's greatest efforts."

I did not tell him that another reason, perhaps the fundamental reason, was that no one could criticize my slowness if no one had the solution, whereas they could, and often did, when it came to classroom problems. And if I worked on a problem that any bright PhD could eventually solve, my slowness would almost certainly mean that I would be scooped, even if my solution was valid. There was also my aversion to being on top — to being admired for having solved a minor problem that others considered important, with the result that I would no longer be small and oppressed and obedient to the call of the grand struggle, but instead would have to develop a swagger, give talks, demonstrate the required arrogance and contempt toward those who were a few fractions of an inch lower on the totem pole than I was at the moment.

Another sign of his fundamentally conservative nature was his reaction to a film I recommended. He had said that he and his wife had been thinking of going to a movie on his birthday, and did I have any recommendations. I said that I had just seen *Carrington*, which I thought a particularly beautiful, if strange, love story. They went to see it. When I asked him what they had thought of it, he said that it had wrecked his whole birthday celebration: he and his wife were disgusted by the perversion of a homosexual man and a heterosexual woman being in love. (The man was Lytton Strachey, the Bloomsbury literary figure and author of the still-well-known collection of biographies, *Eminent Victorians*; the woman was the painter Dora Carrington.) I was shocked and repelled by their reaction, though I didn't say so.

On the one or two occasions I sent him one of my essays, he seemed notably unimpressed. He would always begin his remarks, "Well, it is well written..." and thereafter make clear where he thought I had gone wrong. My essay, "Reality High School", he felt to be "the last gasp of liberal thought" because in it I said, "If African-Americans can't find any other motivation to solve their problems than hatred of us, then we must accept that hatred". He felt that to be, at the very least, demeaning of African-Americans, and revealing a repugnant lack of self-respect on the part of liberals.

As the years went by, he became more and more right-wing. On several occasions when I asked him where he would place himself on the political spectrum, he said that he was inclined to think of himself as a libertarian on most issues. He had nothing but contempt for the idea of a national health plan, even though when he got sick on a trip to Canada, he found the medical treatment he received to be better than he had anticipated. I asked him to consider the Public Health Dept.: surely it was much more efficient to have all citizens chip in a few dollars each year to have a single government agency monitor the quality of the drinking water and keep an eye on sexually-transmitted, and other, diseases, than it would be for each household to have to buy its own drinking water analyzers and blood testing equipment and learn how to use them competently. He reluctantly agreed that the Public Health Dept. was probably a good thing. I told him that even though I had little use for the lower class, I couldn't see what was gained by forcing the poor to

suffer unnecessarily just because they couldn't afford health care. I don't remember his exact reply, but I recall it as having been words to the effect that the poor needed the discipline. But I may be doing him an injustice on this point. He certainly backed off (I assume temporarily) when I told him that even if Kay, the woman who had taken care of my mother, had lived, she couldn't have afforded any health care at all. What possible social benefit would have resulted from that good woman's suffering? Strangely enough, he was always a little alarmed when I would mention that after living on the edge of the ghetto for many years, and seeing what happens when parents give no thought to the genetic inheritance of their children, I thought eugenics was a good idea. I told him that in fact it was a moot point, because eugenics had been practiced for centuries by the upper class, and since the nineteenth century by at least some in the middle class. I asked him what any father in his social class would think if his son came home with a black girl from the Oakland ghetto and said he wanted to marry her. It wouldn't just be the cultural difference that would worry the father, it would be the uncertainty about the genetic component she would contribute to any children.

Our Breakfasts

Every couple of months or so we would have breakfast, either at the Inn Kensington located in Kensington (irresistible pun), the little affluent community of fifties' houses just north of Berkeley, or at a breakfast place of his choosing in San Mateo or Burlingame. When he rang the door bell here, he would always have a friendly greeting, and always have his patient, quiet manner, which sometimes seemed to me almost regal (I thought: it's the way he wears his PhD). For some reason, he almost always had to use the bathroom when he arrived, even though the drive from his house took no more than 45 minutes. I asked him to use mine, the downstairs bathroom, as opposed to the second floor one, which my housemate used. On one occasion, he made it clear to me that mine was dirty, which, I suppose, it was on that day.

I cannot recall a single time when he asked about my son, or about my own work. I, on the other hand, often asked about his sons and his work, not with the intent of trying to bribe him, but because I was in fact genuinely interested.

Unlike me, he was never desperate, never in doubt about himself, or at least he never showed it. And yet, he never hesitated to offer to come over and have breakfast with me when I told him I was suicidal again. And there was genuine compassion in his voice when he made the offer.

After breakfast, we would take a walk, usually, at my request, in neighborhoods with beautiful houses, and talk about life in the suburbs, our days at HP, perhaps a little about his research, and more and more about the situation in the Middle East and the menace of liberal softness and weakness. He couldn't get enough of right-wing articles, columns, and books describing in scornful detail the liberals' hatred of the West and love of the East — love of the have-not Third-World, especially Islam. I, of course, was in complete sympathy with his feelings on this score, especially after I had come to understand on my own the source of this knee-jerk liberal sympathy for the down-trodden, namely, that it was a matter of projection of the relative have-not status of humanities-oriented people, who knew that in the modern world, the humanities counted for next-to-nothing compared to physics and the other hard sciences, engineering, mathematics and big business.

His interest in history continued — not only in that of the Middle East but of Europe in general. He had read at least part of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He seemed to be fighting an attraction to Christianity, especially in its early years. He had high praise for Rodney Stark's 1996 book, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History.*

He had an extraordinary memory, including for names, a type of mamory I had been sorely deficient in all my life. (As a result, in old age, I disciplined myself to look up every name I had forgotten, no matter how much effort it took — book titles, authors, film titles, directors, actors, treaties, battles, dates, celebrities, politicians — in the belief that by doing so I was reconnecting the synapses in my brain, and thus slowing the effect of aging on my mental faculties.)

Although he had lived in the suburbs for most of his professional life, he never much liked them, sometimes referring to the typical suburban tract house as a "houseburger". He regarded the suburbs as ultimately a creation of the female of the species, which wanted to have a house in the country, with grass for the kids to play in. (He always got a kick out of Marx's phrase, "the idiocy of rural life".)

Critique of HP

He felt, and I agreed with him, that our Lab under Duley had produced only mediocre work. I asked for his opinion why. He said that R— and Duley had the right credentials and experience, but they were neither one of them creative individuals. As a result, they couldn't, or wouldn't, pick creative individuals to work in their department. (I didn't raise the question what this implied about Jason himself.) Second, he said, they didn't know what was going on outside HP in the way of integrated circuit design technology. The truth was that there were several companies producing software that was better than what the Lab had produced. (It would not have been wise to go outside if only one company were producing such software because if that company failed, then HP would have been left with no way of producing its circuits. But in fact there were several companies.)

A classical example of the inferior software being produced by HP was Chipbuster, which was headquartered in one of the divisions in Santa Clara where I had worked. Like Amigo, it was intended to be all things to all people, and as a result turned out to be just the opposite. A bloated monster of a project, with over a dozen programmers and support technicians working on it, it was kept alive year after year out of the vanity of managers who were unable to admit a mistake — a multi-million dollar mistake in this case. As far as I know, not a single finished chip design emerged from it.

Finally, there was the incompatibility of HP products with other products, forcing, again, far more design work to be done than was necessary, since more pieces had to be built inside the company. I am not sure, but I think the motive behind this incompatibility policy was the same as it had been at Beckman, namely, to prevent other companies' products from being substituted for HP's.

Invariably, I always felt myself inferior to Jason, mainly, I think, because of his PhD and his never expressing doubt about any technical subject (of course, he made no unfounded claims about his work either, let it be said) or about anything else in life. His physical condition was also better than mine. When we walked up hills he never seemed in the least out of breath, whereas I was sometimes breathing heavily, even during the years when I was still running a few miles a week, an embarrassment I naturally did my best to conceal. I found myself always trying to agree with him. When he criticized Clinton, I was always replying with language like, "Well, yes, you're certainly right, Clinton has some major flaws..." But he never replied in the same manner when I criticized Bush.

Dinners With His Family

For a few years, he invited me to the birthday dinner (no gifts) that he had at local restaurants with friends and members of his family in December, but when these ended, he still invited me to come over for dinner on Christmas Eve, where the full family would be assembled: his father, then approaching eighty, crusty, skeptical, but always ready with a laugh, his mother, famous for her mussels in tomato sauce, his wife Joanna and their three boys, his sister and her husband. It was always a fine evening, warm, cheerful, Italian, with no lack of conversation. (All of his family were liberals. I would point out to him that he was the black sheep of the family, a fact that he accepted with appropriate humor.) His father had been a civil engineer, and for a year or two had worked in Saudi Arabia. Jason said he returned with a very low opinion of Arab intelligence and initiative.

As far as I could tell, he was the perfect father. I never saw him express anger at the kids, never heard him say that they sometimes drove him crazy. He was there, ready to baby-sit, whenever it was required, and would unhesitatingly beg off a phone conversation with me till later if he was in charge of the kids.

He decided that it might be good if the oldest, Anthony, heard some classical music at home, and so he would play some of the well-known works, including, I think, Beethoven's *Pastorale Symphony.* Anthony, who was learning piano, seemed to like it, and would sometimes ask for a piece to be played. And yet, in all the years I knew Jason, not once did I ever hear him spontaneously exclaim over a piece of music[1]. Having classical music in the home was something that upper class families did, like keeping their yards well maintained and sending their children to the best schools.

The End of Our Friendship

The Middle East situation was on his mind more and more — that and the danger posed by liberals and leftists. He would send me articles from the right-wing press, recommend, even give me, books, most of the latter excellent. For example, he introduced me to the historian Paul Johnson.

On Aug. 18, 2004, he sent me the following email. (Since, in the following exchange of emails, portions of previous emails are quoted, I have placed his words in italics and mine in regular text.)

John,

In case you're bored and have nothing to do for a few hours, you can look at this, Norman Podhoretz' Guide to the Perplexed.

There followed an article by Podhoretz from the Sept. 2004 issue of *Commentary* titled "World War IV: How It Started, What It Means, and Why We Have to Win".

The same day I replied as follows:

1. I never actually commented on his not talking about classical music pieces he had heard, but once I told him that a woman, Ginny, with whom I had a six-month relationship in the early nineties, used to have classical music playing in all rooms of her house, night and day, yet she never remarked on a single piece. He then told me about a woman he had once carpooled with who had told him that she hated classical music but had it on all day at home. When he asked her why; she said it was for her dog, and he clearly thought that quite amusing.

Jason,

You'll have to forgive me, but I get impatient with these long political screeds, whether they are produced by the Right or the Left. Anyone with sufficient writing skills can make a case for either side.

Re the following [from an earlier email of his]—
What I have been trying to say is that the obstacles to a benevolent transformation of the Middle East — whether military, political, or religious — are not insuperable. In the long run they can be overcome, and there can be no question that we possess the power and the means and the resources to work toward their overcoming. But do we have the skills and the stomach to do what will be required? Can we in our present condition play even so limited and so benign an imperial role as we did in occupying Germany and Japan after World War II?
— I have two things to say: first of all, would you, as a father of three young sons, be as enthusiastic about the Bush regime's foreign policy in the Mid East, if one or more of your sons stood a very good chance of being drafted for, say, a year or two's service in Iraq? Second of all, I simply don't believe that unlimited money and unlimited numbers of American soldiers will be able to convert a nation of savages into an orderly modern nation. We need only look at black progress in this country despite the billions spent. And the U.S. is a hell of a lot more benign environment than Iraq. We still have millions of black teenagers without a grain of motivation in school, who are all too eager to embrace, instead of the ethic of hard work, the ethic of violence and that it is all the white man's fault.
The situation is far worse in Iraq.
I believe that our only sensible course is
(1) to pull out after the elections in January, saying that we have done what we promised to do — get rid of Saddam and give Iraq to its people — and that now the rest is up to the Iraqi[s] themselves. I just don't see how that could be legitimately described as "cut and run".
(2) Do whatever it takes to get other countries — Venezuela, Russia — to produce as much oil as possible.
(3) Start a nationwide, WW II style campaign aimed at reducing our dependence on oil. How in God's name this manages never even to be mentioned except in passing is absolutely beyond me, especially as the day is coming when we will have to face this challenge whether we like it or not. I have read several times that if we just got rid of SUVs, and chose good mileage cars instead, we would be able to eliminate our need for Mid East oil.

— J.

On Aug. 20, he replied point-by-point to my arguments as follows:

Jason,

You'll have to forgive me, but I get impatient with these long political screeds, whether they are produced by the Right or the Left. Anyone with sufficient writing skills can make a case for either side.

The stance that all argumentation is futile denies the efficacy of reason, at least in the realm of politics. I disagree with this stance. I also wouldn't characterize the article as a "screed."

I have two things to say: first of all, would you, as a father of three young sons, be as enthusiastic about the Bush regime's foreign policy in the Mid East, if one or more of your sons stood a very good chance of being drafted for, say, a year or two's service in Iraq?

Yes.

Second of all, I simply don't believe that unlimited money and unlimited numbers of American soldiers, will be able to convert a nation of savages into an orderly modern nation.

You're overdoing it with the "nation of savages" line, but I get your point. "Orderly modern nation" leaves a lot of room for leeway. I'd accept another Turkey, or a semi-autocratic Russia, just so long as Islamofascism is not part of the political mix.

I believe that our only sensible course is

(1) to pull out after the elections in January, saying that we have done what we promised to do — get rid of Saddam and give Iraq to its people — and that now the rest is up to the Iraqi themselves. I just don't see how that could be legitimately described as "cut and run".

The US stake in Iraq is not a question of bestowing benefits ("get rid of Saddam, give Iraq to its people") to the Iraqis, no matter how much people of vestigial liberal tendencies like to imagine the US as an international Santa Claus. The purpose of intervening in Iraq is to ensure that Iraq is no longer part of the loose network of Islamic autocracies that have the capability and motivation to collaborate with Islamofascism. Whether leaving in January is compatible with that purpose is questionable.

(2) Do whatever it takes to get other countries — Venezuela, Russia — to produce as much oil as possible.

I think this is very nearly irrelevant. See below.

(3) Start a nationwide, WW II style campaign aimed at reducing our dependence on oil. How in God's name this manages never even to be mentioned except in passing, is absolutely beyond me, especially as the day is coming when we will have to face this challenge whether we like it or not. I have read several times that if we just got rid of SUVs, and chose good mileage cars instead, we would be able to eliminate our need for Mid East oil.

I have never been able to accept some people's fetish for "energy independence" as the magic key that will unlock the solution to our problems. Even if we imported NO oil from any foreign source the Saudis would still be richer than Croesus pumping oil for the Europeans, Chinese, Indians, etc. (who, by the way, might be enjoying substantially lower energy prices than what we would have to pay for oil-alternatives), they'd still be funding the madrassas, al Qaeda would still be recruiting disaffected men from the fanatical sectors of corrupt Islamic

societies. How does "eliminating our need for Mid East oil" change any of this in the least?

It all strikes me as an elaborate attempt to produce the illusion of progress while we do our best to hide from our real problems.

Jason

On Aug. 20, 2004 I replied as follows:

Jason

You said:
The stance that all argumentation is futile denies the efficacy of reason, at least in the realm of politics. I disagree with this stance.

There is a great deal of difference between an essay that expresses the author's opinion and an argument between two people of opposing views, e.g., as we often see (in very muted form) on Lehrer, or on "Uncommon Knowledge".

I have spent a fair amount of effort in one of my books arguing that, despite what professors of philosophy like to believe, what Heidegger did in his books was emphatically not participate in an argument or a discussion, that is, dialogue, with, say, the scientific/technological point of view, but that instead what he did was create literary works expressing his view of the modern world.

If Podhoretz were to engage in an exchange of emails, or letters, with a respected person on the Left, subject to certain basic rules (e.g., all data to be from mutually-agreed-upon sources) and the interchange were to be published, I would definitely think that to be worthwhile.

I said:
"...would you, as a father of three young sons, be as enthusiastic about the Bush regime's foreign policy in the Mid East, if one or more of your sons stood a very good chance of being drafted for, say, a year or two's service in Iraq?"

You said:
Yes.

Wow! I have to tell you I am shocked. You seem to be saying that even if the terrorists captured one of your sons and made a film of him being decapitated, and put the film on a web site, you would be able to say to yourself, and Joanna, Yes, his death was not in vain. Holy Christ!

Remember: I was a child during WW II, so I have at least that experience of my country fighting a war that just about everyone thought was necessary, and I also have the experience of learning about young men in my town not coming back, and I also learned later that it wasn't just the lower class that were being sent off to risk their lives, it was pretty generally the sons

of all classes. (Unlike the case with Iraq.)

So WW II is my touchstone in matters like this.

You said:
I'd accept another Turkey, or a semi-autocratic Russia, just so long as Islamofascism is not part of the political mix...The purpose of intervening in Iraq is to ensure that Iraq is no longer part of the loose network of Islamic autocracies that have the capability and motivation to collaborate with Islamofascism.

But even if you put tanks and soldiers on every street corner over there, permanently, you are never going to be able to ensure that! Is Pakistan "part of the loose network of Islamic autocracies that have the capability and motivation to collaborate with Islamofascism"? Parts of countries can become terrorist strongholds, and if the strongholds are eradicated, they can simply spring up elsewhere.

I believe our only hope is an international ongoing terrorist-tracking effort, using every means we can muster.

You said:
I have never been able to accept some people's fetish for 'energy independence' as the magic key that will unlock the solution to our problems. Even if we imported NO oil from any foreign source the Saudis would still be richer than Croesus pumping oil for the Europeans, Chinese, Indians, etc. (who, by the way, might be enjoying substantially lower energy prices than what we would have to pay for oil-alternatives), they'd still be funding the madrassas, al Qaeda would still be recruiting disaffected men from the fanatical sectors of corrupt Islamic societies. How does 'eliminating our need for Mid East oil' change any of this in the least? It all strikes me as an elaborate attempt to produce the illusion of progress while we do our best to hide from our real problems.

Well, first of all, I am not in any way saying that energy independence is some kind of magic key. But I am saying that it is a very bad idea to put the fuel that powers your economy in the hands of an enemy that is out to destroy you.

— J.

On Aug. 27, 2004, he wrote:

John,

Comments on your "comments":

If Podhoretz were to engage in an exchange of emails, or letters, with a respected person on the Left, subject to certain basic rules (e.g., all data to be from mutually-agreed-upon sources) and the interchange were to be published, I would definitely think that to be worthwhile.

This might be an enlightening exercise, maybe not. What we have instead is a different type of exchange. Author A writes from a leftist point of view, author B (Podhoretz) writes from a rightist point of view, author C ... and on and on it goes. There's perhaps no resolution to this "debate" as the different authors revise and partially contradict each other. However, we the readers have the advantage of contemplating fully developed theses instead of debating points. It is our responsibility to evaluate their merits.

I said:
"...would you, as a father of three young sons, be as enthusiastic about the Bush regime's foreign policy in the Mid East, if one or more of your sons stood a very good chance of being drafted for, say, a year or two's service in Iraq?"

You said:
Yes.

Wow! I have to tell you I am shocked. You seem to be saying that even if the terrorists captured one of your sons and made a film of him being decapitated, and put the film on a web site, you would be able to say to yourself, and Joanna, Yes, his death was not in vain. Holy Christ!

Be shocked. My support for Bush's Mid East policy isn't based on the calculation that someone else will bear the burdens. You seemed ("I am shocked") to have assumed that it was.

On your other points, you assert an equivalence, or at the least a strong correlation ("You seem to be saying..."), between serving in Iraq and being beheaded on videotape. Out of the less than 1000 who have died there, how many have shared this fate? Is it two, or one, or zero? (Nick Berg was not a soldier.) Comparison against the the number of service men and women who have served in Iraq (200,000?, 300,000?, more?) only underlines the absurdity of your "You seem to be saying..." argument. If you were trying to make an exaggerated point about the continuing US casualties in Iraq, I will only point out that the casualty rate remains very low in comparison to other wars in our history, including WWII (your "touchstone in matters like this", as you state below).

On another aspect of being shocked: am I wrong to read into your comments the hint that if I truly loved my children (as much as, say, you love your son) then I couldn't support a policy that might see them put in harm's way? (It looks like more than a hint to me.) I'll ignore the implied personal criticism but I will address the place of LOVE in matters like this later on.

Remember: I was a child during WW II, so I have at least that experience of my country fighting a war that just about everyone thought was necessary, and I also have the experience of learning about young men in my town not coming back, and I also learned later that it wasn't just the lower class that were being sent off to risk their lives, it was pretty generally the sons of all classes. (Unlike the case with Iraq.)

So WW II is my touchstone in matters like this.

Literally, of course, your statement "It wasn't just the lower class that were being sent off to risk their lives ... Unlike the case in Iraq" is false since no one is being "sent" anywhere. The draft is gone. But there is no doubt that there are subpopulations that enter the armed forces in disproportionate numbers and that the rich are not among them. Just like the Civil War. I don't recall Lincoln contemplating throwing in the towel in 1863 because his army didn't reflect equal burden sharing.

Still, it's a problem. But just what do you propose to DO about it? If you offered a solution I missed it. While you're at it, you might try to devise a solution to a similar "problem", namely that Republicans enlist in the armed forces in far higher numbers than Democrats :-).

You said:
I'd accept another Turkey, or a semi-autocratic Russia, just so long as Islamofascism is not part of the political mix...The purpose of intervening in Iraq is to ensure that Iraq is no longer part of the loose network of Islamic autocracies that have the capability and motivation to collaborate with Islamofascism.

But even if you put tanks and soldiers on every street corner over there, permanently, you are never going to be able to ensure that! Is Pakistan "part of the loose network of Islamic autocracies that have the capability and motivation to collaborate with Islamofascism"? Parts of countries can become terrorist strongholds, and if the strongholds are eradicated, they can simply spring up elsewhere.

No, American soldiers are not required to patrol the world. They're not doing so in Pakistan, which is slowly squeezing its terrorist strongholds with the help of the CIA and US Special Forces. America has a similar role in Uzbekistan.

Eventually, Iraq will fit that pattern. The key is to leverage America's strengths by tipping the scales in favor of "our bastards," as Pres. Kennedy put it.

I believe our only hope is an international ongoing terrorist-tracking effort, using every means we can muster.

This is too vague to criticize or support. Since terrorists don't walk around with bar codes on them and do their best to hide, how are we supposed to track them? Do we go out to their places of origin (Saudi Arabia? Iran? ...) and hunt them down? Once we identify them what do we do then?

But I'm probably wasting my time analyzing this proposal too closely, since the idea underlying it seems to be withdrawal from active resistance to terrorism and seeking a safety-in-numbers ("international") passive ("tracking effort") approach.

As for "our only hope is," these are indicative of desperation and fear.

You said:
I have never been able to accept some people's fetish for "energy independence" as the magic

key that will unlock the solution to our problems. Even if we imported NO oil from any foreign source the Saudis would still be richer than Croesus pumping oil for the Europeans, Chinese, Indians, etc. (who, by the way, might be enjoying substantially lower energy prices than what we would have to pay for oil-alternatives), they'd still be funding the madrassas, al Qaeda would still be recruiting disaffected men from the fanatical sectors of corrupt Islamic societies. How does "eliminating our need for Mid East oil" change any of this in the least?

It all strikes me as an elaborate attempt to produce the illusion of progress while we do our best to hide from our real problems.

Well, first of all, I am not in any way saying that energy independence is some kind of magic key. But I am saying that it is a very bad idea to put the fuel that powers your economy in the hands of an enemy that is out to destroy you.

The "fuel that powers" our economy is in our hands. They have to sell us the oil even more than we have to buy it. They're not going to stop doing so. The real problem is all the money they're making off of oil, some of which goes to fund our mortal enemies. As I argued above, an energy independence program will not solve that problem, at least not in the next 30 to 50 years, so it's not even worth discussing as part of a war strategy that has to address the next 5, 10, or 20 years. Divesting the Arabs of their oil is a far more straightforward approach, though I don't advocate it — yet.

I regard the energy independence movement (Down with SUVs!) as a manifestation of a very old impulse. Across the centuries we can readily identify asceticism in Medieval society in its hair shirts, mortification of the flesh, denial of sex and all the appetites generally. It's harder to recognize when it's closer to home, but asceticism underlies the energy independence movement in its prescription that our salvation lies in self-denial and suppression of consumption. It's essentially a religious impulse.

As I read your letter I felt like I was transported back in time, back to the 60's. From the telltale language ("Bush regime"), to the expressions of moral outrage ("I am shocked", "Holy Christ!"), to the assumption that Love (of kids, in this case) trumps all other considerations, to the small-is-beautiful ethos reborn as energy independence, right down to the basic policy prescriptions of The Movement (Withdraw from Vietnam/Iraq!), you touched a lot of the bases.

You're not the only one. Two or three of my friends and acquaintances are exhibiting the same symptoms, and the same seems to be true of US society in general. The Movement is coming back, rather as the individual cells of a slime mold congregate and form a fruiting body in the proper environment. And the environment is similar, with anxiety and the specter of death (THEN: draft/Vietnam/nuclear war; NOW: terrorism/Iraq) haunting our lives.

In times like these religious movements are born or reborn (even within the "secular" Left — the Right for the most part already has a religion it's satisfied with). I recall that Irving Kristol analyzed the '60's Counterculture as an essentially religious phenomenon. I don't remember him explaining WHY the Counterculture developed when it did, but now that we see the growth of its contemporary little brother, we must suspect that the causes of the two move-

ments are similar, if not the same.

The way I see it, there is a common cause, and it is FEAR. The members of the intelligentsia/ Left/Democratic Party/Blue America (I'll just call them "the Left") who are reconstituting '60's themes in politics and foreign policy are like a herd of herbivores (many are vegetarians, to boot!): first a general anxiety sets in and the herd gets jittery, nervous; then some start to run and a general panic ensues; it culminates in a stampede. The Left has given in to panic and is in full stampede.

While the stampede is on each one's fear communicates itself to the others, rationality is suppressed and credence given to demonic forces (9/11, Bush Lied!), safety is sought in numbers (Kerry's plan to "internationalize" the Iraq force when anyone with a brain can give a dozen reasons why this won't happen is not popular because of its intellectual cogency, but because it expresses the basic instinct of a herd animal under stress to melt into inconspicuousness in the center of a crowd), debate is discarded and replaced by demonstrations (the herd, literally), opposing points of view are dismissed out-of-hand (your cavalier, contemptuous dismissal of Podhoretz' article ("screed")), problems are perceived as crises (Is Iraq a difficult problem to solve? No! It's a hopeless quagmire since it's "a nation of savages".), and anger at all those who aren't running.

Nah, I'm not running, not with this crowd. And, if you want to know just how obtuse I'm capable of being, I will post my theses to the wall:

1/ The environment is not in crisis. Global warming is a problem that can be managed, not a crisis. The recent rise in oil prices, especially if sustained, will do more to induce fuel-efficiency and promote a carbon-free economy than all of the Kyoto treaties ever imagined.

2/ The War on Terror is going reasonably well. It will be a long haul, but we're winning. There will be some setbacks along the way, but we will survive them. Bush is doing a decent job (I give him a B). He hasn't done everything I wish he would; on the other hand, he's avoided several stupid mistakes I would have made.

3/ The Iraq War is going well, too. Since journalists are very much a part of the fear feedback cycle that drives the Panic, you need to consult primary sources to find out what's really going on. However, no one with an Internet connection today has any excuse for not knowing the truth. I can give you half a dozen sources, Iraqi and American military, who paint the same picture: a country that's largely pacific, hopeful of its future, and enjoying prosperity it hasn't known, plagued by isolated pockets of violence, but slowly overcoming that problem, too. And the universal refrain amongst these sources is "Why doesn't the foreign press depict the progress that's being made, instead of just the problems?"

4/ There was no mismanagement of the War or Post-War. Yes, we were unprepared for the post-war reality -- THAT WAS INEVITABLE. There is no policy board anywhere in the US that could have planned adequately for Iraq. The important thing isn't to plan meticulously for every contingency (like the pre-WWII French did), but to adapt to circumstances as you find them (as we are doing).

I could say more, but you get the gist.

Jason

On Aug. 27, 2004, I replied:

Jason:

After reading your latest, I am feeling a need for a parting of the ways, at least temporarily.

What bothers me the most is your conviction that your views are correct, and that all those who hold differing views are either naive, or cowards, or worse. Yet I'm afraid that some very smart people who know far more about the Middle East (and world history) than you do, and who would deeply resent being labelled cowards, strongly disagree with you.

What bothers me second-most is your apparent inability to see any major faults in Bush or his policies. ("Bush is doing a decent job (I give him a B).") If you want to call all those who are appalled at the man's low intelligence, his ignorance, his lack of leadership behavior that would be demanded of any CEO (questioning what staff members tell him, weighing alternatives, doing the what-ifs, being skeptical about optimistic predictions) — if you want to call all those critics naive, or cowardly, then there is nothing I can say.

As soon as I see, in a person as intelligent as you are, a loss of critical faculty about something the person cares deeply about (<u>particularly</u> about such things), I feel it's time for me to leave.

Please say goodbye, at least temporarily, to Joanna and your sons and your parents.

Wishing you all the best,

— John

On Aug. 30, 2004, he replied:

John

I won't attempt to rebut your points. It is entirely possible that you're right and I'm wrong regarding this president; only time will tell.

I also think it's a good idea to go our separate ways, at least temporarily. It's going to be a contentious, ugly election, and we're not likely to agree on much for at least the next 2 months.

Peace be with you,

Jason

And so a twenty-year friendship came to an end. Perhaps the real reason was that, after sixteen years living in Berkeley, my patience with political extremists had run out.

What Happened to People I Knew

Joe Timmer, the Polka Man

Over the years, I wondered, now and then, what had become of musicians I had played with. I thought of Joe Timmer, the leader of the polka band I played in while at Lehigh, and wondered if he were still alive. Finally, on the evening of Nov. 17, 2004, I decided to see if I could reach him by phone. He answered, and we talked at length about the old days, and about his life since then. He was now 74 years old but still going strong. He had bought the radio station, WGPA, where he had had his program in my Lehigh days. But now he had a two-hour polka show each day from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. He also appeared on TV. He had become known throughout the Lehigh Valley as "Jolly Joe". I thought: "No one deserves this success more than you do; you may not have been the best musician I ever worked with, but you were about the best band leader any man could ask for."

A Reunion With Paddy

The universities had a policy of not giving out the addresses or phone numbers of former students, so the best you could do, in trying to reach someone, was to call the university office, tell them what you wanted to do, get the correct address of the university and the office, and of the woman you had spoken to, then tell her that you would be sending a letter inside another letter, with a request that she forward it to the indicated person.

This didn't always work. It took several tries with Union College in order to reach Jim Swan, with whom I ran cross country and went skin diving while at White Plains High. Likewise, it took several tries with Cornell to reach Paddy Hurley, my first true love, but on Nov. 20, 2004, I received an email with Subject "YOU":

> Hey John:
> What a surprise to get your letter out of the blue! It is true that we are all feeling the need to re-connect with our roots at this point in our lives. I have been attending Cornell reunions since I have been single (1986) and find that my connections to people I went to college with are still very strong. I am also very close to one or two high school friends. F.E. Bellows has had two reunions, one of which I attended about 10 years ago. It was amazing!!...
>
> I won't give you the whole story, but here it is in a nutshell:
>
> After Cornell I spent two years at Eastman getting a music ed degree. My parents were opposed to my performing ambitions, so I started teaching, and, with the exception of a few years when my kids were little and Tom was making a decent living, I have been at it ever since. I am still enjoying it (I am a hell of a teacher by now...) but want to explore some of the things I haven't had time for (like more performing.) I never really stopped

> playing: I play currently in a couple of decent regional orchestras and my brass quartet is 10 years old now. We are the — Brass Ensemble[1] (you can see us on our website @ —) That is my first love. I stopped my private teaching this year in order to prepare to retire, have more time to practice, market the quartet, and just live a little less stressfully.

She then went on to say that, after losing her job at the high school in the Connecticut town where she had lived for many years she had moved to Westchester County, where we had grown up, to take a teaching job in Scarsdale. She then described her two children, a son who was a chef and restaurant owner, and a married daughter to whom she said she was very close. She concluded:

> So there you have it. Let's talk sometime. Let me know when you will be on this coast again.
>
> Do you have any family besides your son? Are you close to him? (None of my business, actually...)
>
> Paddy
> Phone: —

I tried to view her web site, but couldn't bring it up; tried again, no success. I wrote her about the problem, then, on a third try, was able to access it, and there, according to the caption, she was. Only because the picture was not sharp could I manage to convince myself that the confident-looking, tall woman on the left, holding her trumpet vertically in front of her, fingers cupping the valves, was the Paddy I had known fifty years before.

We arranged for a time for me to call, but the line was busy. She explained in an email that she had had the phone off the hook so she could take a nap. We set another time. No answer. (Yes but No.) She decided that she should call me, and so, on Tuesday evening, Nov. 23, 2004, for the first time in close to 50 years, I heard her voice again. She sounded older, more self-confident. She used the term "gig" when describing bookings of her quartet; for a moment I thought she was doing it because she thought I would be impressed, but I soon doubted it, and assumed it was just a word, like "cool" that had remained in active use, in this case exclusively among musicians, over the decades.

I told her how I remembered going over to Roland K— 's house with her, and how he was always practicing his tympani. When I told her I had said hello to him once at a San Francisco Symphony performance, she said that he played in an orchestra in Aspen, Colo., before becoming tympanist for that orchestra. She said his wife has been seriously ill, and that he too was ill with cancer and other diseases.

She told me, for the first time, that her mother had been a botanist, and graduated from Cornell. Her mother died in a car accident in '64 , which had a deep and long-lasting impact on Paddy. The following year her father moved to an apartment across the street from the family house at 1603 Harrison St., which, she said, was the oldest house in Mamaroneck. A few years later, the family sold the house. It was then demolished, I don't remember why. Her younger sister — I never knew she had one — was living in White Plains, where she worked for an HMO.

---

1. Full name and website address withheld to preserve Paddy's privacy

Her older brother, whom I did remember, lived in New York City, was then about 70, and was a renowned endocrinologist (not an engineer, as I had thought), specializing in thyroid cancer.

She spoke of her math anxiety throughout school, saying that one reason for it was that teachers were always comparing her to her brother, who had been good at the subject. Making matters worse was the fact that "both my parents were scientists" and so she said that was why she became a musician.

Throughout the conversation, I sensed the same aloofness that I remembered from when I first knew her. On the other hand, she twice asked me about my own life. Since she had been talking about her parents, I told her a little about my father, and then that I was working on several math papers and books. She: "Well, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." But I made clear how much I disliked engineering. I told her I was trying to find Gracia Spettel, my high school creative writing teacher, because Mrs. Spettel had had such an influence on me, and Paddy said she would contact two women friends who might be able to help me track her down. One was named Anne Shaw, and she had gone to White Plains High. Paddy sounded enthusiastic about my desire to look up this old teacher of mine, but never mentioned another word about either of her women friends or my search. (Yes but No.)

She said that she had been fired from her Connecticut teaching job half a year before she would have received a full pension, and so the pension she received, plus her investments, would not bring her more than $30,000 a year. A teacher friend of hers who didn't get fired would receive $80,000 a year in pension alone. "But I like to work, so..."

She asked several times when I was coming East. Then, after twenty minutes or so, it became clear that she wanted to end the conversation. I assumed the reason was that she was worried about the phone bill.

I was scheduled to come East in February, 2005, to visit Gaby, and so I suggested we have dinner. She said she would like that, and perhaps we could go to her ex-husband's restaurant, in the upper East Side. I checked in Zagat and found that the restaurant had a very high rating. We set the date at Saturday, Feb. 12. Then, on Jan. 12, an email from her: "I am not backing out of our 'date', but something has come up for the 12..." The something turned out to be the monthly meeting of her book club, which she had forgotten about but which didn't want to miss, since she had missed the January meeting. I tried to find another evening during the time I would be in New York, but nothing worked out. Thoroughly disgusted at another of her Yes-but-No's I told her that maybe we could get together the next time I was in the City. Then, a few days later, an email from her: "I spoke with some folks from the book group last night and told them that I would miss the Feb. 12 meeting due to a secret rendezvous with an old friend. (They were intrigued...)" (Yes!)

Already in November, after she responded to my letter, I knew I would send her a copy of the Brubeck CD with the piece ("Give a Little Whistle") I had played for her in my basement playroom those many years ago. So on the 17th of January, I mailed the CD with the following letter:

> Dear Paddy,
>
> I don't know if you remember, but one evening many, many years ago, I got you to listen to Brubeck's recording of "Give a Little Whistle" (track 12 on the enclosed). We stood in the barren so-called "playroom" in my basement (dark green and red tiles, faux wood-grain wall panels, no furniture), and at the end of Brubeck's solo, you said the words that I think any sophisticated musician and music lover would say on first hearing that solo. (Let's see if you say them again after listening to the piece this time.)

There is no doubt in my mind that Brubeck's solo belongs to the handful of great jazz solos[1]. I will never admit to how many times I have listened to it. Incidentally, the recording was made essentially by accident: Brubeck and group (with Paul Desmond on alto, of course) were just more or less fooling around before the start of the evening's performance at George Wein's Storyville jazz club in Boston (this was in 1952). The engineer seems to have forgotten to turn off the recording equipment after testing it, and the rest is history.

I am not sure how much of Brubeck's improvisation was pre-composed, and I don't care. But if he did in fact create the whole thing on the spot, that was truly amazing.

Another outstanding piece on the CD is "Over the Rainbow".

Hope you enjoy them.

A few days later, an email from her: "What a delightful surprise I found in my mailbox yesterday! The Brubeck/Desmond record is SOoo deja-vu! I certainly cannot remember what I might have said about that solo in 1954[2], but it strikes me as amazingly avant garde today. The harmonic creativity is right up there with Debussy, Wagner et al. We obviously have a lot to talk about..."

Needless to say, I told Gaby about the dinner, and she offered nothing but encouragement. I took a cab to the restaurant, got there early, walked around. The restaurant was on a side street that to me had the intimacy of a street in the Village. I checked my watch, kept walking around. Finally, a few minutes after the agreed-upon time — seven, I think — I walked up to the door and made my entrance. The place was tiny — the size of a large living room. On the left was a counter, with a view of part of the kitchen behind. In front of me was a table, with several middle-aged people. The faces looked up at me. I recognized no one. Then an old woman with hair to her shoulders like that of my high school teacher, Mrs. Robacker, the friendly witch, said "John?" There was no resemblence to the young girl with the pony tail whom I had loved. I would not have recognized her on the street. (Nor would she have recognized me, I was sure.) She introduced me to another of the looking-up faces. This was her ex-husband. He stood, we shook hands, then, after small talk, he conducted us to a small table against one wall. I noticed a young Asian at the table, who said nothing.

We began by talking about the restaurant. She said her son had been a partner with his father but had then left to open his own restaurant, I think in Connecticut. Now her ex was trying to sell it. At one point in the evening's conversation, she revealed that some 20 years ago her husband had fallen in love with the young Asian at the table, and that had led to her divorce. His lover was now his partner in the restaurant. Not once did she mention any relationships she had had since

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1. In the nineties, I math-tutored the 12-year-old son of a local coffee shop owner. A remarkably talented kid who, among other things, was a damn good jazz trombonist. I offered him some suggestions re improvising, then put together, on a tape, eight or so of what I considered the greatest jazz solos of all time, so he would have some models to follow: Beiderbecke's on "Baby Won't You Please Come Home", several of Charlie Parker's, of course, one by Johnny Griffin with Thelonius Monk, a Clifford Brown or two, Chet Baker's on "Love Nest", and several others, including the above of Brubeck's.
2. As the reader will recall from the White Plains High School chapter in vol. 1, she said "It's Bach!".

her divorce, and I began to wonder if perhaps her aloofness was due simply to the fact that she had never been all that interested in men.

We talked about her life in Connecticut, her teaching, her kids, the brass quartet. I can't remember saying more than a few words about my own life, although I certainly mentioned Jeff and his success. Once or twice there was a half-suggestion that the next time I came East I should plan on visiting her, but I sensed her regretting it as soon as she said it, because there was the possibility I might actually take her up on her offer.

Outside the restaurant, after dinner, we said a few final words. Then a superficial hug — on her part a mere extending of one's arms past the person's upper arms, then the bending of one's arms at the elbow, making as little contact as possible with the other person, then giving a few light taps of one hand on the other person's back — and I began to look for a cab. She started to walk purposefully down one street. As a cab stopped, I realized I should have offered to have it drop her off wherever she was staying. I called to her, she waved her hand, said no, she would walk. For a day or two afterward, remembering the half-invitations for me to come and visit, I couldn't get out of my mind that there might still be hope for me. I envisioned happiness at last, a life living with a musician, talking music all day in a nice house in Connecticut, far from blacks and radical leftists and know-nothing neighbors. What would I tell Gaby? That it was not in my hands, that I couldn't say no to the dream of my youth come true. I also realized why the White Plains High 50th Reunion that I attended in October of 2004 had been so barren: my life in high school had been completely centered on music. All my friends and acquaintances had been musicians.

I also thought: age may have changed her physical appearance to the point of unrecognizability, but her personality hadn't changed one bit. The slight remoteness that drove you crazy, and that always made you think, "Maybe there is a way! maybe there is something I can do or say that will...!"

When I returned home, I happened to see the end of a *Dr. Phil* segment in which he was telling a woman that it is not worth waiting for the guy she was in love with, that she had a right to happiness, too. And there and then, purely as a result of these words of a TV psychotherapist, the yearning, the hoping, the wishing, the perhaps if I... suddenly seemed stale. Suddenly, my only regret was all the time I had spent in high school and college pining for a woman with whom, in all likelihood, there never could have been long-lasting happiness.

Esther Accuses Me of Libel

On Jan. 3, 2006, out of the blue, I received the following email from Esther, whom the reader may recall from Chapter 1 of vol. 4, under, "I Attempt a Palace Coup at Sybase", was a technical writer I worked with. The Subject field read "thoughts on your website".

Her First Email

John ,

Hello, and happy new year to you. I'm writing because I've come across your website, thoughtsandvisions.com. When I first read the chapter on Brahms I must admit my feathers were ruffled. But I'm now feeling philosophical about your rant, and I admit I did enjoy reading other parts of the book. However, I want to pass on a few thoughts.

First off, you should reconsider using individual's real names. You hide under anonymity, and you should offer the same consideration for those whom you talk about. This is simple courtesy. Did you know the woman you mentioned from your HP days, the one that had MS, is still alive and has written a book? I did a quick google search on her. Do you think she needs to know you want to take her from behind? Does using her real name [now changed] add anything to your literary aims, or are you hoping to gain readership through the name dropping and sexual descriptions? (I think it's the latter, although you claim your aims are loftier.)

From a legal perspective, your usage is clearly libelous. It's like me writing the following paragraph:

I worked with a gentleman named John F. I won't include his full name, because I'm about to say mean things about him. [Insert accusations and innuendo.] John F. had a son of whom he was very proud. Because I say nice things about his son I can tell you his name was Jeff Franklin.

Now that little piece of bad writing would be considered libelous, because you clearly identify John through his son. The same applies to how you named me as — , and later me and my husband by his full name. This applies to many other individuals in your book.

In terms of the writing, I think some of it is quite good. Your description of learning to scuba dive, for example, is vivid and well drawn. Your discussion of early marriage is painful to read, and well worth reading. And although you will hate to hear this, I could see a developmental editor pulling out the pieces on sexual dysfunction and creating a very compelling tale, one that could get published.

Do you realize how similar your reaction to potentially losing your inheritance is, when compared to your mother's response to losing part of her husband's pension? Read them again. You both have a remarkable and almost delusional sense of entitlement.

Also, I won't be the only one mentioning how angry you are with all women. Misogyny permeates your Genius autobiography — contrary to your academic essays where you write at arms length about your decision to default to the male pronoun. It starts with your mother (possibly deserving, from what you say!) and taints your perspective throughout your long life. I found something strange about you and made every effort to steer clear of you during our Brahms days. I think this was something between you and me — maybe I sensed the depression, or maybe the way you need to conquer women, or who knows. Regardless, my own father was a manic depressive who killed himself in our living room when I was a kid, and I am familiar with the Black Dog of which you write.

For the record, I am well, and not prone to banging on my keyboard when frustrated [a reference to my description of her trial-and-error approach to figuring out how to perform a new task]. I worked in technical writing for a dozen years total, mostly as a self-employed contractor working at my own office, and I was successful — I bought that 4-plex you coveted when I was 25 years old, and I did much of the remodeling myself. I did not like going "staff" as I did in Brahms; you certainly witnessed — and exaggerated — my discomfort at the nine-to-

five aspects of the job. You insinuate my professional successes came to me because I was young, female, and attractive, but I think that's rubbish, just you trying to figure out how some impatient kid half your age could 1) be your boss 2) be more productive than you 3) have more $ than you, something you value almost as much as physical desirability. If you wrote a rant on the misplaced and fast-paced problems inherent in software development and the high-tech world, I'd have congratulated you (the "why" of why I, and others, were successful); instead you merely threw stones and cast sexual aspersions on the females. Calumny, at best, and no argument whatsoever.

Enough from me, I've got real work to do. You caught my bitterness in that last paragraph, but I do truly wish you well. May 2006 offer you peace of mind, and true companionship.

— Esther

My Reply to Her Email

On Jan. 3, 2006 I sent her the following email in reply.

Dear Esther,

Thank you for taking the time to write. I will respond to each of your points in turn.

You said:
"First off, you should reconsider using individual's real names. You hide under anonymity, and you should offer the same consideration for those whom you talk about. This is simple courtesy. Did you know the woman you mentioned from your HP days, the one that had MS, is still alive and has written a book? I did a quick google search on her. Do you think she needs to know you want to take her from behind? Does using her real name add anything to your literary aims..."

I tried to reach her a number of times over the years without success, then heard from several sources that she had died of MS. I will change her name in the book today.

You said
"...or are you hoping to gain readership through the name dropping and sexual descriptions? (I think it's the latter, although you claim your aims are loftier.)"

Name dropping is usually done when a person is famous. I never knew she was famous, if that is in fact what she is as a result of her book. In any case, she is the last person in the world I would want to hurt, which is why I didn't use her name until I believed she was dead.

As to the sexual descriptions: my one and only goal in writing the book has been to give as honest and accurate a portrait of myself and my life as I can. That means including sexual matters.

You said:

"From a legal perspective, your usage is clearly libelous. It's like me writing the following paragraph:

'I worked with a gentleman named John F. I won't include his full name, because I'm about to say mean things about him. [Insert accusations and innuendo.] John F. had a son of whom he was very proud. Because I say nice things about his son I can tell you his name was Jeff Franklin.'

"Now that little piece of bad writing would be considered libelous, because you clearly identify John through his son. The same applies to how you named me as — , and later me and my husband by his full name. This applies to many other individuals in your book."

I talked at length to a libel lawyer before putting the book on the web site. I specifically posed the question to him, "Suppose I write a description of someone, and they don't like it. Is that libelous?" His reply: "If they don't like the description, they can write their own book." He made clear that no one can demand that they not be written about. My policy has been to use actual names when I felt I was not saying anything negative about a person.

He also drew my attention to an important distinction in libel law: an author can say virtually anything about anyone provided he makes clear that it is his opinion: thus, "I always thought that X was a liar, a cheat, and a thief" is not libelous, but "X was a liar, a cheat and a thief" might be.

I then raised further questions based on what an HP friend told me about a tell-all book that a one-time Silicon Valley CEO had written. I felt that, based on what he said, my book was not libelous.

I intend to send him a copy of your email, and, of course, my web site address, and the titles of the chapters you refer to, and this email, and ask him for his opinion.
"
As soon as I finish this email, I will change the name — and that of your husband to something different.

You said:
"In terms of the writing, I think some of it is quite good. Your description of learning to scuba dive, for example, is vivid and well drawn. Your discussion of early marriage is painful to read, and well worth reading. And although you will hate to hear this, I could see a developmental editor pulling out the pieces on sexual dysfunction and creating a very compelling tale, one that could get published."

Thank you for the compliments.

You said:
"Do you realize how similar your reaction to potentially losing your inheritance is, when compared to your mother's response to losing part of her husband's pension? Read them again. You both have a remarkable and almost delusional sense of entitlement."

No, I did not realize it, and I appreciate your pointing this out. Perhaps I will add this as a footnote, as I have added other comments from readers as footnotes. Let me know if you want credit. Otherwise I will simply say "A reader has written the author..."

But I find it strange that you regard my mother's and my sense of entitlement as "almost delusional". I think my mother was not out of line in expecting the owners of the company my father was president of to make sure she got the pension that they had always promised him she would get. But I gather you haven't read the first volume, so you wouldn't know about that. In the case of her second husband, I don't know what the truth really is.

Somewhere in the sections in the later chapters regarding the lawyer who almost managed to walk off with much of my inheritance, I think I say that, even though I don't expect many readers to believe it, throughout the years I also felt that a major motivation of my fight for the inheritance was to prevent my mother from giving my father's hard-earned money to scoundrels like that lawyer. I know myself well enough to know that this is not a rationalization.

You said:
"Also, I won't be the only one mentioning how angry you are with all women. Misogyny permeates your Genius autobiography — contrary to your academic essays where you write at arm's length about your decision to default to the male pronoun. It starts with your mother (possibly deserving, from what you say!) and taints your perspective throughout your long life. I found something strange about you and made every effort to steer clear of you during our Brahms days. I think this was something between you and me — maybe I sensed the depression, or maybe the way you need to conquer women, or who knows. Regardless, my own father was a manic depressive who killed himself in our living room when I was a kid, and I am familiar with the Black Dog of which you write."

Wow. I think maybe the author of that paragraph needs to do a little introspection. I tell you in absolute honesty that no one, man or woman, in my long life has ever accused me of being misogynistic! For the past six years, I have had a relationship with a woman in New York City — we get together several times a year, write emails to each other every day, talk on the phone two or three times a week — and time and time again she has said, knowing of my history with my mother, "You really like women!" (not only because of the success of our relationship but because I get along well with her woman friends, old and young).

You said:
"For the record, I am well, and not prone to banging on my keyboard when frustrated."

Not sure I understand that. Do you think I wrote a nearly-1000-page autobiography, containing hundreds of pages having nothing to do with sex or mothers, out of ... frustration?

You said:
"I worked in technical writing for a dozen years total, mostly as a self-employed contractor working at my own office, and I was successful — I bought that 4-plex you coveted when I was 25 years old, and I did much of the remodeling myself. I did not like going 'staff" as I did

in Brahms; you certainly witnessed — and exaggerated — my discomfort at the nine-to-five aspects of the job. You insinuate my professional successes came to me because I was young, female, and attractive, but I think that's rubbish, just you trying to figure out how some impatient kid half your age could 1) be your boss 2) be more productive than you 3) have more $ than you, something you value almost as much as physical desirability. If you wrote a rant on the misplaced and fast-paced problems inherent in software development and the high-tech world, I'd have congratulated you (the "why" of why I, and others, were successful); instead you merely threw stones and cast sexual aspersions on the females. Calumny, at best, and no argument whatsoever."

Re 1): as far as I can recall, you weren't my "boss": you were the leader of certain projects, e.g., involving that word-processor we were supposed to learn; Steve was my -- our -- boss, and Deirdre was, at the end, my editor, as assigned by Steve.

Re 2): if I don't clearly state that you were more productive than me, I will in the next revision of the chapter. I thought I made it clear in the book that I was trying to sell what I felt -- and still feel -- was a much more efficient method of approaching the task at hand, and was failing utterly to convince any of you technical illiterates.

Re 3): I envied you being able to live in the 4-plex, no question about it. I never thought of you having more $ than me, because I believed, perhaps wrongly, that I had more than you!

You said:
"I'd have congratulated you (the 'why' of why I, and others, were successful); instead you merely threw stones and cast sexual aspersions on the females. Calumny, at best, and no argument whatsoever."

You seem not to understand that an autobiography is not an academic treatise, or even a piece of journalism, still less a public relations exercise. It is the author's view of the life he lived. I have written about my experience on Brahms, no more, no less. But if you seriously believe that our efforts — yours, mine, the rest of Stan's team, including Stan — were "successful", then I don't know what to say. While you are probing my web sites, you might take a look at — , and get an idea of what I was trying to get you people to understand, and why. I was miles ahead of you all, and before you dismiss that, remember that my method comes with a quick, easy, way to measure what I claim about the quality of the resulting documentation.

Also, I would remind you that the Sybase section of the book contains what I still consider to be a valid, and important, analysis of why Brahms failed.

You said:
"Enough from me, I've got real work to do."

Sorry I forced you to spend all that time writing an email to me.

In conclusion, let me say that yours is the first negative criticism of the autobiography that I have received so far out of a total of, I suppose, several dozen emails. Average number of

readers per month of various chapters numbers in the tens. In fact, all the other emails have been quite complimentary, although none has come from people I knew in the HP and Sybase days.

Last year I resumed contact with a guy I ran cross country with in high school. He turned out to be an editor of genius, and has just finished going through the first volume (childhood through the end of college). (He had no problem with my using his real name, which is Jim Swan.) At one point he said:

"You set some impossibly high standards for yourself at a very early age, so I can understand your sometimes feeling you fell short. But in all seriousness I have to say that there are a lot of writers who'd consider their lives well spent if they could produce something half as good as your autobiog."

I will make the changes promised above by the end of the day.

Thank you for writing. I wish you all the best in the New Year.

— John

Her Reply to My Reply

On Jan. 4, she sent me the following email.

Hello John. A few clarifications.

"My policy has been to use actual names when I felt I was not saying anything negative about a person."

I don't think you are defining "negative" broadly enough. You dismiss dozens of women as being mentally inferior. You describe bodies in detail. I doubt very few people would enjoy being discussed like that. Besides, it detracts from the strengths of your narrative.

But it still begs the question: why write an anonymous book when you list the players' real names? Is that fair?

" 'For the record, I am well, and not prone to banging on my keyboard when frustrated.' "

"Not sure I understand that."

You have a lengthy description of me figuring something out in frustration, which included keyboard banging. You asked me how to do something using some software, and I banged around to get you the answer, and you were unimpressed. (I hope you said "thank you." :-)) The insinuation is that that's how I figure everything out, as I'm an unsystematic technically illiterate female. I don't recall the incident, I hope your writeup was exaggerated. (Do you

realize how many opinions you form on coworkers based on how they did — or did not — help you? The people you praise tend to be helpful to you, willing to lend a hand when you need assistance getting your work done. The people you dismiss (this is both male and female) are the ones who don't help. You have higher success asking for help from those outside of your team.)

"In conclusion, let me say that yours is the first negative criticism of the autobiography that I have received so far out of a total of, I suppose, several dozen emails. Average number of readers per month of various chapters numbers in the tens. In fact, all the other emails have been quite complimentary, although none has come from people I knew in the HP and Sybase days."

I think my review was mixed, not negative. I think you should rework the narrative so you focus on the "story" you experienced in Brahms, say, rather than having a heading on a particular person, followed by your opinions on that person. That is gossipy, and it lessens the overall effect of your other writings, where the story and your experience stand up so well. It doesn't mean you don't talk about people. It's just framed in a narrative where a situation shows us the dynamic, rather than you telling me their details.

Consider changing many of the names you use. Be subtle! It's difficult to imagine that most of the women in your book would be pleased with your descriptions of them. Please, ask your editor to pay particular attention to that. There are patterns there, at least in your writings, even if your personal life is going strong.

Again, deadlines call, and I must return to my work — am editing my book before it goes into its third printing. I am glad to have found your website, glad to have reconnected, and I do not feel forced to respond in the least. And I wish you a hearty good luck getting a variant of this book published.

take care,
— Esther

My Reply to Her Reply

On Jan. 4, I wrote her as follows:

Dear Esther:

No need to answer this, but I just want to respond briefly to some items in your latest email.

In response to my

"My policy has been to use actual names when I felt I was not saying anything negative about a person."

you said:
"I don't think you are defining "negative" broadly enough. You dismiss dozens of women as being mentally inferior. You describe bodies in detail. I doubt very few people would enjoy being discussed like that. Besides, it detracts from the strengths of your narrative."

I'm not sure there are "dozens" of women in the entire book! But if I remove the sexual intercourse remark (which I now believe is rather vulgar) from the section about —, whose name I have changed to "Amy T — ", I defy anyone to tell me that I dismiss her as being mentally inferior. I praise her programming ability explicitly, not to mention how well we worked together, and, of course, her extraordinary courage in the face of her disease.

I urge you to read the sub-section titled "Eva" immediately following the Sybase sub-section. I again defy anyone to tell me that I dismiss her as being mentally inferior. In fact I believe that I say explicitly that, although she didn't have a PhD, she was a natural-born scientist in her thinking. (That statement may be in the essays, but it needs to be added to this sub-section if it is not there already.) All the quotes in that sub-section reflect my genuine rage at seeing the intellectual accomplishments of women not given the credit they deserve. She didn't seem to grasp the business of task-oriented documentation, but that is a minor point at the end of the section, and cannot possibly be interpreted as my implying she was mentally inferior.

Read the sub-section "Kathy" (in the next-to-last of the "Working at HP Labs" chapters). I lived with her for five years. I cannot believe that I ever regarded her as mentally inferior, or that I imply that she was.

Look at my remarks about Katrina Garnett in the Sybase section. I always praised her administrative and technical ability while at Sybase.

It is true that I did not think much of the mental ability of a woman named "Georgia", in the sub-section of that title in, I think, the fifth-from-last file. Read the sub-section and decide for yourself if you think my opinion is justified.

Well, enough. I am going to go through every sub-section centered on a woman, and try as honestly as I can to decide if I have been unfair. Then I will have my editor do the same.

I will probably take your advice and change the names of most or all of the women who are described at any length.

You said:
"But it still begs the question: why write an anonymous book when you list the players' real names? Is that fair?"

I don't want to go all intellectual on you, but the phrase "begs the question" is properly applied only to logical arguments. It means "assumes what one is trying to prove". It is therefore a logical fallacy. You mean "raises the question", but don't worry: just about everyone is making the same mistake nowadays.

As to your question, "why write an anonymous book when you list the players' real names? Is that fair?" It seems to me you are assuming that all my descriptions of people are unfavorable. But that is emphatically not the case! Read the passages re my boss at Beckman Instruments, Manny Gordon. Read the passages re Tom Whitney or Howard Smith at HP. Or re Prof. William Michael at San Jose State. Or re the above-mentioned women. I have no reason to believe that people who are praised highly do not want their real names used.

I should mention that, since the book has been on the web, I would guess that, conservatively, based on website stats, every file in every chapter has been read wholly or partially, by at least 35 people (for some chapters, e.g., re high school and college, the number is much higher). It is reasonable to assume that at least some of these readers were people in the book. Not a word of complaint so far.

In response to my:

"You said:
'For the record, I am well, and not prone to banging on my keyboard when frustrated.'

Not sure I understand that."

You said:
"You have a lengthy description of me figuring something out in frustration, which included keyboard banging. You asked me how to do something using some software, and I banged around to get you the answer, and you were unimpressed. (I hope you said "thank you." :-)) The insinuation is that that's how I figure everything out, as I'm an unsystematic technically illiterate female. I don't recall the incident, I hope your writeup was exaggerated. (Do you realize how many opinions you form on coworkers based on how they did — or did not — help you? The people you praise tend to be helpful to you, willing to lend a hand when you need assistance getting your work done. The people you dismiss (this is both male and female) are the ones who don't help. You have higher success asking for help from those outside of your team.)"

I remember the incident very clearly, but I would remind you how I tried, again and again, to get you people, including Stan, to think about the fundamental questions — "What are our goals?", "What are some ways of accomplishing them?", "How should we prioritize the work?", "How should we measure the degree of our success?" — and the importance of a systematic approach. I am almost certain that I told you at least once that we should start writing up instructions for performing some of the functions we routinely had to perform on the word-processor each day, then arranging them in an Environment format for rapid accessibility, so that each person would not have to figure these out for him- or herself.

I remember countless attempts to get you people not to spend days, weeks, months initially on questions of typefaces and background color and margins, and instead to start working top-down on an instruction set for Brahms users, in accordance with the wise rule, "first the functionality, then the optimization" (as the computer scientists say). All of these suggestions and

pleadings and arguments went nowhere. Worst of all, none of you made reasoned counterarguments to my proposals.

So it was natural for me to have the opinion that you and the others were proceeding by trial and error and by current, unquestioned, practice.

But you are absolutely right, now that you mention it, that I tended to rate people by their helpfulness to me, since I utterly detested having to learn and remember trivia that should have been look-up-able. I think somewhere in the Sybase chapter I describe how fed up some writers, and one of my bosses, became with what they regarded as my laziness in this regard.

In response to my

"In conclusion, let me say that yours is the first negative criticism of the autobiography that I have received so far out of a total of, I suppose, several dozen emails. Average number of readers per month of various chapters numbers in the tens. In fact, all the other emails have been quite complimentary, although none has come from people I knew in the HP and Sybase days."

You said:
"I think my review was mixed, not negative. I think you should rework the narrative so you focus on the 'story' you experienced in Brahms, say, rather than having a heading on a particular person, followed by your opinions on that person. That is gossipy, and it lessens the overall effect of your other writings, where the story and your experience stand up so well. It doesn't mean you don't talk about people. It's just framed in a narrative where a situation shows us the dynamic, rather than you telling me their details.

"Consider changing many of the names you use. Be subtle! It's difficult to imagine that most of the women in your book would be pleased with your descriptions of them. Please, ask your editor to pay particular attention to that. There are patterns there, at least in your writings, even if your personal life is going strong."

I agree, your review was mixed. I think you mean by "It's just framed in a narrative where a situation shows us the dynamic, rather than you telling me their details" something along the lines of a day-by-day (or week-by-week or ...) sequence of what-happeneds, with various people entering and exiting and re-entering, etc. The extreme of this is a journal.

I have to tell you honestly that I feel that I know more about writing narrative than most writers, the reason being that I spent a lifetime trying to find a way to do it that I could accept. I have kept journals over the years, written countless letters and emails, experimented with a variety of approaches to the short story and the novel, and finally arrived at the style and format you see in the book. I think it is worth pointing out that several readers have said of the book, "It reads like a novel!" (Which, frankly, surprised me.) You are the first person to even mention, much less dislike, the name-oriented structure. I urge you to take a look at the sec-

ond of the two files in the Lehigh chapter in vol. 1 (I think this chapter is one of the best in the book). Under "Music Days" you will see that "The Musicians" is entirely name-oriented.

My instincts tell me that, even if I could remember the day-by-day (or week-by-week or ...) details, or even if I wrote them down in a journal (not sure I did in the Sybase days), no one would be interested because such detail is fundamentally dull. Besides, as I have said several times, I am writing what I remember as I remember it, and my memory centers on people and projects (in the most general meaning of the term) and ideas. If you have read the entire Sybase section, you know there is a fair amount of space devoted to Brahms at the concept and goals and problems levels.

Historians face the same problem that the author of an autobiography does. Intuitively, we would expect that history should be written as a chronological narrative representing past reality. In other words, a day-by-day or week-by-week or ... decade-by-decade sequence of what-happeneds. But for some reason this just doesn't work. It is boring and confusing. Churchhill, who was no mean historian, comments on this problem somewhere. Inevitably, historians, and at least some authors of autobiographies, wind up breaking their narrative down into themes and people, with each theme and person's life being treated chronologically, but no continuous chronological order applying from theme to person to...

Sorry if this has become boring.

You said:
"Again, deadlines call, and I must return to my work — am editing my book before it goes into its third printing. I am glad to have found your website, glad to have reconnected, and I do not feel forced to respond in the least."

I assume your book is — [a book about the California coast]. Will keep an eye out for it. I'm not sure I understand what you mean by "I do not feel forced to respond in the least." Did I imply that you did? Or are you referring to my intended joke at the end of my last email?

You said:
"And I wish you a hearty good luck getting a variant of this book published."

Thank you! And thank you for your suggestions. I will show them all to my editor. And I wish you all the best for the New Year, and with the third edition of your book.

— John

I leave it to the reader to decide how much of Esther's criticisms was justified.

Reunion With Michelle, the Yes-But-No Girl

The reader will recall the young woman, Michelle, I used to go running with in the early eighties while I was nominally pursuing a relationship with her mother.[1] In the late nineties or early 2000s I managed to track her down. I invited her for dinner in Berkeley. She arrived with

her sepulchral-looking boyfriend — tall, gaunt, wearing a black duster — and we had dinner at the Bateau Ivre. She said her mother had met a rich lawyer and was living with him in Eastern Europe. We had no further contact until, out of the blue in early 2004, Michelle called, said we had to get together, and that she was in Berkeley once a week for therapy. I said that would be great, I would love to see her again. But there were no further communications from her until November of 2005; again we talked on the phone; this time she asked about physics just as we had on our runs in the early eighties. She said she wanted to find out more about it, so I recommended some popularizations.

We talked again one day in early 2006. She revealed she had contracted lupus but was slowly recovering from the initial ravages of the disease. Despite her illness, she seemed to enjoy reminiscing about our times together. She hoped that we could do a little running when I next came to the Peninsula.Then, in the fall of that year, she called and said her father was dying of cancer. She said that even though he had been unsympathetic and demainding through much of her life, she was realizing how much she loved him. On Dec. 30, 2006, I received the following email from her:

"Hi John- I am very sorry not to have called you in the last few months. I planned on doing so but get strangely busy and distracted. This is not a reflection on your importance to me but on an obsessive habit I seem to have of keeping busy. Am working on changing this. I look forward to visiting w/ you in the new year.

"I send you my love and wishes for a beautiful year full of joy, warmth, and understanding. You are very precious to me and I want you to know that.

"May you have peace, joy, and many blessings..."

Her father died in February 2007. After his death she seemed more than ever to want to renew our old friendship. It seemed clear to me that, just as I had once been a kind of second father to her, now she saw me in that role again. This was confirmed by an email she sent me after one of our conversations:

"Thank you John - when he died I realized that I still had a little girl who was waiting for him to come back to me - we were very close when I was small. That is the part that is hardest to let go of. I'll call to schedule something - please call me next week if you don't hear from me.

"May you have peace, joy, and many blessings..."

At around this time, she revealed that her illness had turned out to be scleroderma, not lupus.

More postponements, but in December, she finally made a commitment to come to Berkeley . I was delighted, and made reservations at a good restaurant, namely, the Baywolf. And so, on Sunday, Dec. 30, we finally met again. As she walked around her car, which was parked in front of the house, I thought she looked very much as I rememebered her at 16, though she was then around 45. She had the same long hair, had not gained any weight. When she approached and I

1. See "Jane and Michelle" in third file of Chapter 1 of Vol. 3

had given her a hug, I noticed a tightness of the skin on her face, as though she had had a facelift. This was the only sign of her illness that I could detect.

We spent six hours together: first we went on a walk at Inspiration Point, the beautiful narrow road where I had gone running so many times over the years;[1] then at dinner at the restaurant. The time flew. She had studied piano and guitar in recent years, was interested in jazz, liked Thelonious Monk, so I played her a couple of Monk recordings when we came back to my house. I told her afterward there a very few people on this planet with whom I can talk as easily and naturally as I do with her.

She had expressed great interest in our going on the annual tour of beautiful Berkeley houses that was sponsored by the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAH). But when I wrote her to give her the date of the house tour BAHA she replied that she would be interested if she was in town. I sensed more Yes But No and decided not to attempt any further communication with her.

Tricks of Memory

I don't know any way of evaluating objectively how good my memory is, or how good it was at various periods throughout my life. I have always felt it was way below that of the average college professor, and that was further proof that I was, though I hated to admit it, really not meant for an academic career. Throughout school, memorizing things had always been not only a difficult task but one I strongly disliked. My Environment idea for textbooks arose from my asking myself, among other questions, "How much of what you need to know in order to solve problems in a subject can be looked up as needed and thus does not need to be memorized?"

Gaby always regarded my memory as exceptional but that was because she was losing, or believed she was losing, her memory for names and words. Some readers of this book have said my memory is remarkable, but I tell them that if that is true of events I have experienced, it is because the vast majority of them were experienced in profound depression, and pain seems to imprint memories far better than pleasure or the absence of any feeling at all.

I have anything but a photographic memory. I have had to look up the meaning of some words many times. I became so appalled at my inability to remember small things I needed to do, including things I needed to enter in the books I was working on, including this one, that in desperation I developed a mnemonic device. I imagined a white board in my mind on which I could draw cartoons representing what I wanted to remember. I was surprised that these drawings often remained for an entire day, even though I did not think of them. "What's on the white board?" I would ask myself when I was in a position to make a note on paper.

But the trick didn't work well for words or numbers, and so when I passed a for-sale sign on a house, and was curious as to the asking price, the best I could do was to keep repeating the realtor's phone number in my mind until I could write it down. At home, after looking up a number in the phone book, if I didn't want to carry the book to the phone, I would say the number in my mind in varying tones, as an announcer might say it in ad on TV, and then dial the number by hearing it spoken in those tones.

In my late sixties, I began trying to memorize poetry again, as I had tried at Lehigh University. Here, too, sound was a great aid: I memorized most of Yeats' "Under Ben Bulben" by simply hearing in my mind Michael MacLiammoir's reading of it on cassette tape[2]. Once again, Gaby

1. See the third file of Chapter 1 of Vol. 4 under "Running".

was unduly impressed by my ability to recite short poems. "He can recite poetry for hours!" she would tell friends, which simply wasn't true. I told her that the ancient Greeks committed amounts of poetry to memory that would simply be unbelievable to us.

As the years went by, I detected no noticeable change in my memory or, for that matter, my thinking processes, since both always seemed hopelessly inferior. In any case, I had never had occasion to believe my memory of events and scenes played tricks on me until two incidents that occurred when I was 69 and 70. The first was in connection with a house that I passed if I happened to walk back on Dwight Way from Steve and Jane's restaurant. It was much larger than the cheap stucco and clapboard houses along that well-traveled road, with a wooden balcony on the second floor, a front porch, and what appeared to be a small widow's walk on the roof. It was painted yellow with white trim, and always reminded me of the inside of the creamsicles we ate as kids. It had been built in the late 19th century, as I found out from BAHA[1], and then had been added onto in subsequent years. There were several ancient trees in the yard, which had always seemed spacious, the distance from the sidewalk to the front steps some fifty feet or so.

Then, one day in 2006, I was suddenly shocked to discover that the entire house had been moved some thirty feet closer to the sidewalk! — or so it seemed. I couldn't believe my eyes. A few days later, a black man with a valise was leaving the house, and I stopped him and asked if he knew anything about the house having been moved. He shook his head, his mind clearly on other things[2], said he had just bought the house, knew nothing about its past. I searched in neighboring blocks, thinking that perhaps I had forgotten the location of the house, but found nothing remotely similar. Since then, I have passed it many times, each time racking my brain to try to figure out how my memory could have failed so suddenly. Perhaps they had cut down a tree in the front, and that had changed the apparent distance of the building from the sidewalk. But I doubted it. I remain utterly perplexed.

The second incident occurred during an attempt to resume contact with Wendy, the woman I described in the last file of Chapter 1 of Vol. 3. She had lived in Napa and during the winter floods of 2005/2006 I wondered if she was all right, so I wrote her a short letter at her old address. After several weeks, the Post Office returned the letter marked "Addressee Unknown". After repeated attempts by phone to reach people who might know her new address — she had been a frequent volunteer with the Senior Citizens Center, I remembered her telling me — I eventually decided to drive up and go to her house. When I arrived, I was utterly amazed at how different it looked from what I remembered. I had had a very clear mental image of it as having been on a wide, untraveled road, near a corner, with trees on both sides, and with the doorway on the left side. But now it was on a narrow street, with houses on both sides of her old house, and on the other side of the street as well, and the door was on the right, not the left! The house also seemed much smaller, at least as viewed from the outside. A young woman answered the door and told me that she and her husband had bought the house from Wendy about a year before. I didn't feel it appropriate to ask to see the interior again. She said they had received an email from Wendy in Vancouver, and that they would be glad to forward an email to her, since they didn't feel they should give out her address to a stranger. I wrote a short note in longhand, gave it to her, and a

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2. *The Poems of William Butler Yeats*, Read by William Butler Yeats, Siobhan McKenna, and Michael MacLiammoir, Spoken Arts

1. Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association

2. As I found out later, he had bought the house to establish a rehabilitation center for drug addicts.

few days later heard from Wendy.

But so amazed was I at how wrong my memory had been that I drove around the neighborhood looking at least for the wide roadway. Nothing. Wendy later said that I had to remember that the whole town had experienced a huge influx of residents in the 25 years since I had last been on her street. I told her that still didn't explain the narrowing of her street and the change of the door from the left to the right-hand side of the house!

Computer Hell

This record would not be complete if I didn't say a few words about the torments that have brought me closer to suicide more often than any others. I am referring to the torments of buying and using computers. I won't bore the reader with more than a representative handful of details, since he or she is probably all too familiar with the hell I am describing.

I bought my first computer, a Sanyo, in the early eighties. Given my incompetence at HP Labs, I had absolutely no faith that I could find a good, reliable computer on my own, so I asked Michael J. — at the Labs to recommend a consultant. Which he did: a woman named Carol Simpson who was connected with a store called the "Digital Deli", and who, with her husband, had built a life around high technology: they had a single-engine plane, and in their free time would fly around the country. She was serious, intelligent, and obviously concerned to do a good job for me. So she recommended the Sanyo and installed it. I think the total cost of computer and her services was around $3,000. By today's standards, the machine was almost unbelievably primitive: it consisted of a metal box containing a small black-and-white monitor, and a separate Epson printer. You backed up your files on 5¼-inch floppy disks (which weren't really floppy). I don't recall having any trouble with the machine except that later I found that all the countless pages I printed out and stored in binders, including the pages of a journal I was keeping (in shame), were all fading. As I write this, some 25 years later, many of these pages are approaching illegibility. Meantime, the ink and paper containing the essays I wrote for Mrs. Spettel in White Plains High School some 50 years ago are virtually in the same condition they were when I handed them in to her.

I kept the Sanyo until around 1993, when, as a free-lance technical writer, I found that I needed to become comfortable using the FrameMaker word processor. So again I asked Michael J. — for a recommendation as to a reliable computer manufacturer, and he strongly recommended I buy a PC clone from a company he had done business with, Beyond 2000 in San Jose. It was owned by an Israeli. I recall having to bring it back for repair several times — a nuisance, since San Jose is more than 75 miles from Berkeley — but the owner never objected, and his charges were fair, I thought. By far most of the problems I had were with the HP LaserJet 4 that came with the PC: I spent far more than the cost of the printer on repairs, and each time I had to drive the 60 miles to the HP Repair Center in Mountain View, and pay a minimum of $300 just to have the technicians of my old company open the cover. I spent well over $1200 on repairs to the printer. Around 1996 I got email, with CompuServe as my Internet Service Provider (ISP).

In 2000, I had a then-friend build me a PC clone and install Windows 98 on it. She did a good job: the hardware had not broken down as of fall, 2005. But I came within a whisker of losing a lifetime's work, because it turned out that the new version of FrameMaker might not accept files made on the old version that I had (Frame 3.0). Numerous phone calls and emails to their Support Dept. revealed that no one on the Frame staff knew what the truth was. After some two months of

going back and forth, I found a technical writer in the East Bay who had the new version. I sent her several of the old files, and yes, the new version would upload them, so I bought it.

The problem I faced, and continue to face, has been discussed in various articles in the popular and technical press, including *Scientific American*. It is simply this: if a software manufacturer produces a new version of a piece of software that does not load old files, then the user has no choice but to keep the old piece of software running ... forever. But eventually it will no longer be possible to find parts to repair the computer on which the software is running, and then the user must hope that the software — including all his files if he has backed them up on tape or disk — can be loaded on the new computer the user buys. If it should happen that the old software cannot be run on the new computer, then the user is out of luck. If he or she hasn't made a practice of backing up every file on paper, all the files are lost.

The authors of these articles pointed out that, unlike in the past, when letters written on acid-free paper in pen and ink could be counted on to last for decades, even for centuries, in our time a vast written record — documents of all sorts: literary, business, scientific, plus letters and now email — will be lost to the future due to this ongoing process of technical obsolescence. (The phone company, which is required to keep records going back several decades, solves this problem by keeping all the old computers on which the records were originally stored, and paying technicians to keep the computers running.)

Writing books, or in fact writing anything a person wants to preserve, using the computer, is making a bargain with the devil.

Since I did not want to spend my days reading manuals and attending users' group meetings in a constant effort to keep up, I decided to become what computer consultants call "an appliance user", that is, a user who merely learns how to do what he wants to do, and makes no attempt to understand more than that, just as the vast majority of telephone and refrigerator and microwave users make no attempt to understand how that equipment operates, and furthermore don't need to. I hated the computer, I hated computer managers and programmers (having witnessed them in action firsthand over the years at HP and at other companies), and I often thought longingly of the days when the tools of writers and mathematicians were pen or pencil and paper.

And so, starting around 2000, I began using consultants: one for my PC, another for Frame. This became a necessity when CompuServe was bought by AOL. The CompuServe software worked reasonably well in the nineties, but AOL converted the software into a living nightmare. To give a mild example: in old CompuServe, if you wanted to save a recently-received email in an email folder, you simply dragged the email subject field from the Recently Received Email folder to the folder you wanted to save it in. The email was then filed in chronological order in that folder. AOL changed this so that, when you dragged the email to the folder, it went to the first position in the folder, that is, before the oldest email in the folder, no matter how many emails were already stored in that folder — thousands perhaps. You then had to manually drag the email from there to its proper chronological location. But the AOL CompuServe software had far worse problems, including a habit of locking up the entire computer unpredictably while you were online. The only remedy was to do an unorthodox shutdown of the computer, subjecting the computer software and hardware to serious risk of permanent damage. CompuServe Support under AOL typically required waiting upwards of 45 minutes before you could speak to a person. Around 2004 the company fixed this problem, and so most of the time you could get a response within fifteen minutes. The Support personnel, all in India, were infallibly polite but were inclined to give standard answers that at best only temporarily fixed the problem you called about, because the cause lay in the incompetently designed and modified software.

Consultants began to tell me simply to go to another ISP. But as of mid 2005, I had more than 15,000 emails in the email archive, many of which, for example, all those to and from Gaby, had to be saved indefinitely. But CompuServe had deliberately made it difficult if not impossible to convert these emails for access by any other ISP. My consultant put the figure of converting them and saving them separately at around $3,000.

In April 2005, at the urging of CompuServe Support, which said that the locking-up problems would disappear if I bought a new computer, I bought a Dell with Windows XP for around $1100. (My consultants said that I was asking for trouble in depending on a computer for more than four or five years.) By October of the same year I had spent close to $1,000 in consultants' fees simply trying to get the computer and software to work properly — close to the cost of the computer and software. Most of the money went to trying to get Symantec virus protection software to work properly.

One morning at the end of August, 2006, a few seconds after I had pressed the start button as usual, the screen suddenly went blue and a message appeared saying that the hard drive was damaged. I had never seen a message like this before. I called my regular consultant, he told me, rightly, to call Dell Support. Amazingly, they answered the phone within minutes, and then had me go through a series of tests. One of the tests ran for several hours. The Support technician told me to call him back when the test was completed. He gave me what I understood was his private phone number at the Support Dept. The test finished, I called the number. No answer. I called again and again. No answer. I left a message and three hours later he called back. He apologized, said he had been busy. On and on it went, for several days, the blue screen appearing even though the tests found no damaged sectors on the hard drive. (By then I had learned, from other users, that the screen was called the Blue Screen of Death.)

Then the technician said he had been looking through the file of reports that the Support Dept. maintains, and had found a case in which the problem was fixed by interchanging the printer card and wireless card in the back of the machine. This made no sense whatsoever, but I agreed to make the attempt, with the technician instructing me over the phone. But now the machine's operation suddenly slowed down considerably, and so I called the second of my two consultants (Art S. —, to be introduced below). He said that his instincts told him that the switching of the cards was right. He came to my house, immediately saw that I had not put one of the memory card plugs back in properly (the cards had been removed to see if doing so stopped the messages about a faulty memory.) He switched the cards, and the problem was solved. What is most infuriating is that in 1995 I published a book — which in 2005 was still available via amazon.com — describing a method for doing computer documentation that would elminate at least two thirds of the agony I and many other computer users suffered in attempting to use home computers. The method was rigorous, simple, the quality of the results could be measured using the second-hand on an ordinary wrist watch, and the method could be adopted beginning with a single entry in an online Help index. Yet after ten years, only one software company that I know of has made any attempt to implement the method. The technical writing community may be indifferent, but the human factors community is openly contemptuous of any suggestion that they could do a much better job than they are doing.

And then, apart from the daily fear that your hard drive would crash that day, or your word-processor company would announce it was abandoning your word-processor, or your Internet Service Provider (for example, CompuServe) would announce it was going out of business and that there was no way to transfer your thousands of emails to another storage facility — apart from all these torments, there were the minor nuisances that wrecked your concentration: the screen

pointer for your mouse would suddenly stop moving when you moved the mouse: it would seem to have become slippery, requiring you to make repeated movements of the mouse in order to get the pointer to move. The only solution was to turn a sort of screw-in plastic disk on the bottom of the house, remove it so that the rubber ball inside fell out, then get an X-acto knife and carefully cut and remove and blow out the dust threads that had wound themselves tightly around the *x*- and *y*-direction rotors that converted the mouse movement into the pointer movement. Then you had to drop the ball back in the hole, twist the disk in order to tighten it, and hope that you gotten rid of enough dust threads so you wouldn't have to repeat the process. There was always something.

I have tried to come up with a figure for just how much of my life has been wasted in days of not being able to work either because of failed software or because of unbearable anguish over how serious a given problem really was. I think, conservatively, I can say that altogether I have lost a year of my life. And yet, as computers become ever more complex, ever more difficult to repair, ever more complicated to use, I wonder if the future will not read this sub-section with envy. "You know nothing of the agony we are forced to go through!"

If there are no computers in the Afterlife, I will know that God is just.

A Way to Deal With Technology

In 2007 it dawned on me that the technology we used in our everyday lives could be quite useful, and even pleasant to use, *if we always had an expert on hand*. The fact was that it was designed to be used by people who had a great deal of knowledge about it. But the idea that the average computer user was capable of, or had any interest in, acquiring and keeping up on all this knowledge was a fantasy that only engineers and programmers could take seriously. Beginning in the early 2000s I had two computer consultants: one for the computer itself and one for the word-processor, FrameMaker, that I used. One of the consultants told me that among his colleagues I was known as an "appliance user" . But he was perfectly willing to accept my abhorence of the kind of knowledge that was necessary to keep my computer running because, at the least, it helped him earn a good living.

Around this time I began explaining my appalling failure to keep up with the latest technology — I had no cell phone, no iPod, no Blackberry, and none of the other electronic gadgets that endlessly poured forth into the eager hands of the insatiable American consumer — by telling people that I was a 19th-century guy who had the misfortune to be trapped in the 21st century.

Destruction of My Father's Dam

I had always planned to go to the state of Washington to look at the Glines Canyon Dam, which my father had designed in the 1920s. In the summer of 2005, I contacted officials in charge of the Dam, asking if there was a history of the Dam, and if my father's name was mentioned in it. The answer was that none of the existing histories mentioned him, and that furthermore the Dam was scheduled to be torn down in 2008, along with another dam on the same river, as part of the national program of recovering rivers for restoration of fish and other wildlife.

The officials said that the dam was hydroelectric, something I had not known. I asked why, given the nation's energy crisis, anyone would want to tear down a source of electric power. The answer was that by now the generating plant was inefficient compared to current plants. I asked why no power generation was preferable to some power generation, regardless of inefficiency,

especially considering that the power plant had long since been paid for. The official had no answer.

And so all I can do is go and see the Dam before it is torn down in 2009. I do not know at this time the fate of the Dam my father designed in Columbia, South America. I often wonder if he considered these works of his early years to have been his immortality. If so, he would at least be comforted to know that the Posey Tunnel which he designed, connecting Oakland, Calif., to the island of Alameda, remains in good condition and in daily use.

The Dumbing Down of Cody's Book Store

Throughout the nineties and the early 2000s, the dumbing down of American educational and cultural life continued apace. I have described the yuppie Muzak being broadcast by the Bay Area's only remaining classical music station, and how the Republican administration's cutting of the Public Broadcasting System budget drove the local PBS stations to trying to raise funds from an ever broader, ever dumber, audience, and how once-great Berkeley High School in the early 2000s was in danger of losing its accreditation as a result of the steady onslaught of black parents (mothers mostly) whose response to the failing grades of their numerous kids was to demand that the courses be made easier.

But some of us thought that at least Berkeley's intellectual landmarks, like Cody's Book Store, would remain untouched by these onslaughts of American mediocrity. For decades, the store had truly amazing clerks: you could go in and say to one of them, "I'm looking for a book on the history of Zen Buddhism, author's last name begins with a K or R or something..." and immediately the clerk would point and say, "Bookcase against the wall, third shelf down, about a quarter of the way in from the left," and sure enough, there would be the book. You could discuss editions of the classics, and, on mentioning an author's name, have the clerk rattle off the books the author had written and tell you without using a reference which ones were still in print. In other words, these clerks were the equivalent for books what the one I have described in an early chapter of volume 2, was for long-playing records.

Starting in the late nineties, the small privately-owned book stores throughout the Bay Area, and throughout the nation, came under increasing competition from chains like Barnes & Noble, who, it was reported, got special deals from the publishers that enabled them to sell books at far less than anything the small stores could afford. (It was even said that publishers submitted manuscripts to the chain stores before deciding on publication, so that the stores could give their opinion as to probable sales of the book.) Lawsuits were filed, including one that Cody's participated in, but the small stores had a hard time staying in business.

In the early 2000s, Cody's began cutting back on its inventory, or, more precisely, getting rid of all inventory that was likely to sell slowly. Their German section shrank to a half its original size, and all the translations into German of the Georges Simenon Inspector Maigret novels, which offered a great opportunity to read German that wasn't too difficult while at the same time was inherently interesting — all these books disappeared from the shelves. Then we regulars began to notice that the old, knowledgeable clerks at the store likewise began to disappear, to be replaced by young clerks whose idea of a good way to spend your free time was definitely *not* in reading books. One day in late 2005, I heard the following story from a person I trust implicitly and who was in a position to know that it was true.

Young woman student at the information desk of the store: "Do you have *Mein Kampf*?"

Clerk, moving to the computer keyboard: "Author's name?"

Student: “Hitler.”
Clerk: “First name?”

Math Wars

In March of 2004 I posted an ad on a Physics Dept. bulletin board at UC asking for help in understanding Special and General Relativity. I received an email reply from a fifth-year graduate student who was working on a PhD in string theory, then considered the most promising means of unifying quantum mechanics with general relativity. He answered my physics questions in an exchange of emails. I then thought: “Why not have him take a look at my Fermat’s Last Theorem and Syracuse Problem papers?” He was willing to do this, and thus began a consulting relationship that has lasted to the time of this writing (May, 2007). His name was Ed and he proved to be the sharpest, the most acute, critic of my work, finding errors that even the graduate students and a couple of professional mathematicians overlooked. He also had none of the pedantry that drove me to distraction in professional mathematicians. And he was by far the most loyal consultant I ever had. After receiving his degree, however, he said (Aug. 26, 2004) in reply to my asking him what universities he was applying to:

> were i staying on my current track, one or two postdocs would be absolutely necessary (there are no examples otherwise in my field in the past 20 or 30 years that i know of). however, i am going to step away from physics for the time being and return to some fiction writing projects that have been on hold for several years (and start some new ones).

I encouraged him to stay with physics, citing Einstein’s working in the Swiss patent office, and lamenting the all-or-nothing attitude that the mathematics and physics cultures bred into graduate students; I told him about the two recent PhDs in mathematics I had once talked to, who had decided to give up mathematics altogether when they failed to obtain tenure tracks at Princeton or one of the other top math departments in the nation. He replied:

> i have tried to examine in myself the reasons for leaving the field, looking in particular for the sort of all-or-nothing attitude you speak of. i did have very high expectations going in, and to some extent they have been disappointed — research has not been nearly as rewarding as i had hoped, and i have yet to achieve anything i would call significant success therein. my primary motivation, however, is to return to what has been my interest for a long time now, namely writing. i spent two years in england reading literature as preparation for this eventual move, and it became increasingly clear throughout the phd process that the move needed to come sooner rather than later. in short, i found my self staring out the window writing in my head when i should have been doing physics. i imagined that perhaps physics would be the way i supported my writing habit, but the will to write took over too soon. so there i go. i still love thinking about and talking about physics, but i need to make a career elsewhere. it is always difficult to tease apart the feelings that go into such a decision, and for that reason, i really appreciate your comments.

One of the pleasures of a trip to New York City to visit Gaby was my morning coffee break at a little restaurant a few blocks from her apartment called Le Pain Quotidien (The Daily Bread). It had an interior of bright wood, and a long table on one side, where diners could sit and eat com-

munally. I would have a cup of their delicious, rich coffee, which was served in a white cup the size of soup bowl, and read in the company of the local upper class. One morning in 2005, the man sitting next to me asked what I was studying. I said, "tensor calculus" (I think the book was P. A. M. Dirac's *General Theory of Relativity*[1], which I found very difficult). He said he was a math professor and that he could "do that stuff with my eyes closed". I didn't ask him what exactly he meant by that, because I could see that the whole point of existing, for him, was to prove to one and all how brilliant he was, and I had no patience with mathematicians like that.

The following year, while obtaining help from Ed the Physicist on tensor calculus, I told him what the mathematician had said, and asked how many of the basic operations in this calculus are algorithmic, meaning, can be performed by a computer. In an email of April 9, 2006, he said:

> no real math professor, at least at a top-notch institution, would say something like that. it's sort of like bragging about an ability to do addition. sort of embarrassing for the guy, even putting aside how rude he was. console yourself with the fact that he was insecure and had a reason to be....

On April 11 Ed wrote:

> The big computer programs (Maple, Mathematica) that do symbolic manipulation of mathematical structures do a good job at handling tensors. Maple has everything built in; with Mathematica, you have to fiddle a little with their array structures. I used Mathematica a lot to compute curvatures etc for General Relativity problems.

Apart from Ed, the best consultant I found was a graduate student in mathematics at a major university in California. He was from Eastern Europe; I will call him N. He was always overworked, and so needed frequent prodding to complete the readings I asked him to do, but he did a good job. It turned out that he was subjecting his PhD candidacy to a genuine risk by consulting for me: the professors made it clear to all the graduate students that outsiders were invariably crackpots, especially if they were working on problems that had so far not been solved by professional mathematicians. I naturally guaranteed N. complete confidentiality, except that one day I accidentally sent an email intended for him to the entire math department mailing list, which I used to advertise for consultants. The uproar was great enough to get me barred from placing any more ads. I pleaded with the man who was in charge of managing the mailing lists, offering to make a public apology. He refused. I explained how desperately I needed to be able to advertise for consultants, reminded him that I had been doing so for years without causing any trouble. Eventually he relented.

Another Me

On 6/23/05, I received the following email:

> "Just Googled on FLT[2] and came upon your very recent paper on the possibility of the existence of a simple proof of FLT.

1. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1996.
2. Standard abbreviation of "Fermat's Last Theorem"

"I'm one of those amateurs who never gave up looking. I've had a rationale that I have been looking at for 47 years and I knew there had to be a piece of the puzzle I was missing. I've been like the little boy digging in the big mound of horse manure saying, 'There's got to be a pony in here somewhere.'

"Well, I'm pretty sure I found the piece of the puzzle. It was hiding in plain sight for 350 years. For every exponent, there is a mathemetical relationship between x, y and z that, when you finally see it, you cannot believe that it is there.

"I've come up with an independent proof for n=3 which relies on the fact that 3 is a prime number, and then used the same methodology (congruences) to develop a proof for all prime values of n. A math professor at a local university has checked and rechecked the proofs and said that he cannot find any fatal flaw. He urged me to send it to the College Mathematical Journal for review and, hopefully, publication. It's 16 double-spaces [sic] pages.

"He didn't believe I had anything at first and was reluctant to spend any time on it, but something apparently intrieged [sic] him and he plowed on. When he finally realized that I had a new proof for n=3 he began to get a little excited, because all I needed to do was to do the same thing with a binomial expansion and I had a proof for all primes. I've now done that. He says that he will not believe it himself until he sees it in print. The CMJ [College Mathematical Journal] has had it since 6/13/05. Haven't heard anything yet, but I'm sitting on pins and needles.

"Except for the math professor and my immediate family, you are the only one who I've shared this with. That's because you never gave up on us amateurs. I'll let you know the outcome, one way or the other.

"Richard"

We exchanged a few emails while he waited for the verdict from the Journal. Then, in December 2005 a referee informed him of an error. At first he thought that the referee had merely made up the error in order to keep him, an amateur, from receiving any credit for finding a simple proof, but then he realized the error was a real one. He asked me to take a look at the paper. I told him what I had told other amateurs who asked me to read their papers, namely, that I was not about to help someone else render null some thirty years of my own hard work on the problem. If he would guarantee me in writing that I would get shared authorship if my efforts on his paper resulted in publication, I would be glad to take a look at his paper. He sent me the guarantee.

There and then began an exchange lasting until Apr. 4, 2006 in which each of us wrote close to 100 emails. Over the next few months, I learned a little about him. He was in his sixties, and had an invalid wife he had to take care of.

"My professional experience has been primarily in Army facilities maintenance management - structures, housing, utility systems, roads etc. Budget wise, maintenance is always underfunded, the priorities going to training and weapons systems. When unprogrammed events pop up like Katrina, Bosnia, Irac [sic] etc. they steal the money out of maintenance and then never put it back. My job was to keep the infersturcture [sic] functioning with inadequate

> resources. This forced me to take short cuts as a way of life. That has been my training. So, I am interested in problem solving, and doing it in the simplist [sic] possible way. While I see and appreciate the beauty of pure mathematics, I am programmed to take short cuts. My last 3 page paper was a short cut. The formal paper was an attempt to explain the solution to a problem so that a layman like myself could understand it, someone who didn't know what a lemma meant."

His paper was clearly the work of a man who had tried hard to write in clear, simple prose. The trouble was that he had very little knowledge of the *form* in which mathematical statements are expressed. The only way I can convey to the layman the difference between writing that does not follow this form and writing that does is by making an analogy with algebraic equations. It is perfectly possible to write, for example,

> "Let the unknown quantity be augmented by five and then this entire quantity multiplied by itself twice. Now let the unknown quantity be multiplied by itself and subtracted from the previous product, and the whole then decremented by thirty-five, and set equal to zero. Find the unknown quantity."
>
> This is not wrong, it is simply a long-winded and potentially ambiguous way of saying:
>
> Solve the following equation for x:
>
> $(x + 5)^2 - x^2 - 35 = 0$.

In 47 years, he seemed not to have mastered the equivalent of a freshman course in elementary number theory. And yet, he was a thoroughly decent sort, and clearly glad to have someone, after all these years, pay serious attention to his life's work. He did not argue when I pointed out errors in his ongoing attempts to find a proof. I made what effort I could to fix these errors.

The reader must understand that he and I were in a long line of losers who had tried to find some meaning for their empty lives by proving the Theorem. This line went back to the late 1600s, when Fermat's son, Samuel, first announced his father's Theorem in the course of editing his father's works. Proving the Theorem held an irresistible appeal for amateurs because it was so easy to understand: the Theorem asserted simply that there does not exist a positive integer n greater than 2 such that, for any positive integers, x, y, and z, $x^n + y^n = z^n$. If n is 1 or 2, there exist lots of such positive integers x, y, z. For example if $n = 1$, we have $x = 8$, $y = 5$, and $z = 13$ because $8^1 + 5^1 = 13^1$. If $n = 2$, we have $x = 3$, $y = 4$, and $z = 5$, because $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$. All you needed to do to prove Fermat's Theorem was to prove that no such equalities could occur if the exponent n was greater than 2. Amateurs assumed that, because the problem was easy to understand, it therefore must be easy to prove. Nothing was farther from the truth. Some of the best mathematicians in the world worked at a solution for over three centuries. Yet it wasn't until the mid 1800s that they had even managed to prove that the Theorem was true for all but three n less than 100. Still an infinite number of n to go! Finally, in 1994, the Princeton mathematician Andrew Wiles was able to prove the Theorem for all exponents n greater than 2. His proof was part of a much larger proof of another theorem, and Fermat's Last Theorem could legitimately be said to be merely a footnote to that larger theorem. But the amateurs did not give up. Since Wiles's proof covered some 200 pages, the amateurs, including me, now set out to find a "simple"

proof.

Various prizes were offered over the years for a proof of the Theorem. One was the Wolfskehl Prize, which in 1958 was worth about 7,600 German marks. One of the professional mathematicians who was charged with reading and responding to submitted proofs wrote:

> "Nearly all 'solutions' are written at a very elementary level (using the notions of high school mathematics and perhaps some undigested papers in number theory), but can nevertheless be very complicated to understand. Socially, the senders are often persons with a technical education but a failed career who try to find success with a proof of the Fermat problem. I gave some of the manuscripts to physicians who diagnosed heavy schizophrenia."[1]

The reader will recall the proud contempt of my co-worker, the mathematician Ian McGregor, at HP Labs, for any amateur attempt at proving the Theorem. Having received a few crackpot "proofs" of the Theorem over the years via the Internet, I could not be unsympathetic to the attitude of professional mathematicians. And yet I always made it a practice not to humiliate these poor souls, but instead, if their work showed the slightest sign of being coherent, offering to look at their papers in return for shared authorship, and in any case always saying, "It is entirely possible you have discovered something that no one else has thought of."

In April, Richard sent his latest proof attempt to a local mathematician. I told him I would wait to hear what the mathematician said. I never heard from Richard again.

A Flicker of Hope

In November of 2005, I made a series of corrections to errors in my Syracuse Problem paper. N. read them over, sent an email with "Great", "Good", "OK" following each correction. Then he said:

> "OK. I think that's all. I still haven't found a reason why I shouldn't believe the first possible proof but I'll go over it once again and I'll let you know."

He never raised any further objections. This was the first time anyone had said words to the effect that one of my solutions to the Syracuse Problem might be correct.

Another Flicker of Hope, Soon Extinguished

I continued to work on papers concerned with Fermat's Last Theorem and the Syracuse Problem.

I advertised for consultants on the electronic bulletin board of a major university in the area and once in a great while got a response. One was from an Indian student who was in the final months of completing his PhD thesis. But he discovered errors in one of his proofs, and so it was only months later that his work on the thesis was finished, and he was awarded his PhD. Finding a job proved difficult, but by fall he had a one-year contract to teach mathematics at a small college in Southern California. By then he had had time to look at one of my Fermat papers. On Oct. 26, 2005, I received the following email:

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1. Schlichting, F., letter of 3/23/74 quoted in Ribenboim, Paulo, *13 Lectures on Fermat's Last Theorem*, Springer-Verlag, N.Y., 1979, p. 16.

"Subj: VERY IMPORTANT!!! READ ASAP
Date: 10/26/2005 2:28:51 PM Pacific Standard Time
From: ...
dear john,

"i have spent the last hour looking at p.28-29. those pages appear to have no contradiction. which means you have a good chance at FLT. i say chance because i don't think that the lemma 0.85 on p.39 is right. at least the proof seems faulty.

"here is the correct version.
...

"now that i have written the above out, it seems very similar to what you did. you had some (what i assume to be) typos in your proof.

"now the lemma is fixed (i think).

"let me know what you think. i applaud you (maybe a bit early... but it looks okay to me) that you have a proof."
...

So at the age of 69, I had received an email from a professional mathematician congratulating me on having found a simple proof of a theorem that had baffled the best mathematicians for more than 300 years. In the hours following, I walked around saying to myself, "See? You were justified in believing in yourself! But you knew you would win despite the years of anguish and self-contempt. You have a right to live after all!"

Of course, good practice demanded that I obtain corroboration of my achievement. So I sent an email to Ed the Physicist and asked him to take a look at the proof. It, like all my papers, was in a paper on my web site. Within a day he replied, saying that my argument had a fundamental flaw, which he pointed out, and there was no denying that he was right. So I had no right to live after all.

A Nasty Professional

Around 2001, a young mathematician who had just received his PhD and his first university appointment, saw my offer on my web site to pay $500 to anyone who could find an error in my solution to the Syracuse Problem. He wrote a cordial email saying he would bring the offer to the attention of graduate students and a few faculty members, adding, as I recall, that he didn't have time to check the solution himself. In April, 2006, the Indian mathematician had to end his consulting for me because of lack of time, and since by then I was receiving no reply to my electronic bulletin board ads, I decided to write to the mathematician who had contacted me around 2001.

"Subj: Syracuse Problem
Date: 4/26/2006
To: ...

...:

“You may remember that we communicated in early 2001 about my paper on the Syracuse Problem.

“Since then, I have done a great deal of work to develop the basic ideas in that paper... , all the while paying graduate students to critique my efforts.

“Now, at least one graduate student believes I have a solution. Since you seemed to have a genuine interest in my approach, and since I definitely need the help of a professional mathematician at this point, I would like to offer you shared authorship to help me to bring what I have into publishable form.

“I’m sure you realize that, if I really do have a solution, shared authorship could be the coup of a lifetime.

“I ask only that you read the rest of this email before replying. I will do my utmost to be brief.

“First I will outline my strategy for solving the Problem, then I will give what I hope are the appealing conditions of my offer (including a very low requirement of your time), and then finally I will list the pages in my paper that you would need to read to understand the proposed solution.

“Outline of Strategy

“Here is an outline, informal of course, of the strategy underlying my possible solution. So far, out of the many dozens of grad students who have gone over the paper, none has said he has seen this strategy attempted elsewhere.

...

“Conceptually it is that simple, although as you can imagine, the machinery to make it all work is a bit more complex.

“Conditions of My Offer of Shared Authorship

“You would be allowed to withdraw at any time;
I would guarantee complete confidentiality: no one would know that you are working on the paper unless you told them;
You would be paid any reasonable hourly fee you desired for the time you spent;
You would be allowed to put in as little as one hour a week;
You would be free to continue to work on your own Syracuse research.

“Needless to say, I can supply references as to my ability to work cordially with others, and, of course, as to my not being a crackpot.

"Pages Describing Proposed Solution

"The pages that need to be read to understand the proposed solution are the following...
I urge you to take a little time to think over my offer before you reply.

"Hoping that all is going well with your research and teaching.

"egards,

"-- John Franklin

Almost immediately, I received the following reply.

"Subj: Re: Syracuse Problem (2)
Date: 4/26/2006 12:14:23 PM Pacific Standard Time
From:...

"Hi,

"I'm not interested in taking a look at your strategy for the 3x+1 problem.

"Good luck, ..."

I was beside myself with rage and self-contempt and shame at this rejection by a young mathematician who had once been civil toward me. I wrote to Gaby, "Do you wonder that I live much of the time in suicidal despair?" I couldn't bear not knowing why he had so curtly dismissed my labors, so I wrote to him:

"Subj: Syracuse Problem (2)
Date: 4/26/2006
To: ...

...:

"I certainly respect your decision, but it would be a big help to me if I had some idea of your reasons. Below are a few that occur to me. You only need to list the appropriate numbers in a return email.

"You have my word that I will not bother you again, regardless which numbers you give, or if you don't reply to this email.

"1 -- You think I am a crackpot.
2 -- You simply can't believe that I have a promising strategy.
3 -- You have your own solution to the Problem.
4 -- You don't have time to work on another paper.

5 -- Something I said in 2001 offended you.

"Regards,

"-- John Franklin"

Again, his reply was prompt:

"Subj: Re: Syracuse Problem (2)
Date: 4/26/2006 8:57:27 PM Pacific Standard Time
From: ...

"I don't like to use the word crackpot. My opinion is that if our [sic] strategy actually works, you would have known it by now, so probably it doesn't work."

I Attempt to Write in the Approved Style

As I have said earlier, I always felt that in mathematics, what counted most was *ideas* —

ideas like one underlying the calculus, namely, that if you want to find the area under a curve, you can line up a bunch of vertical rectangles side by side under the curve, and compute their area, which is easy; then you can make the rectangles thinner so you can put more of them in the same space, and again compute the area; and proceed in this way so that "in the limit" you have the area under the curve (calculus gives a method so that you don't have to repeat the process an infinite number of times);

ideas like the fact that if you want to know if the number of things in one set is the same as in another set, you don't have to count them, all you have to do is see if the things in the first set can be matched one-for-one with the things in the second set; if they can, then both sets have the same number of things (even though you may not know what that number actually is); if not, then they don't (no counting needed!);

ideas like Cantor's marvelous, and simple, proof (based on the previous idea) that there are more decimal numbers (so-called real numbers) than there are fractions (rational numbers);

ideas like the one that lies at the basis of probability, namely, that the probability of something is the number of ways the somthing can happen divided by the number of ways anything (in the set of things under consideration) can happen;

ideas like jagged lines and rough surfaces that have the peculiar property that if you look at a piece of them under a powerful magnifying glass, the piece looks just like the big piece (self-similarity, the basis of fractal geometry);

and many others.

Of course ideas are not in themselves mathematics, they only become mathematics when they are placed on a firm logical foundation, but for me and at least some other mathematicians, the idea comes first. "Logic is the means by which I convince the world of the correctness of my intuitions." (Jacques Hadamard, I believe).

Surely, I kept thinking, there will be a mathematician who will recognize the originality and insight of my ideas, and disregard my inept writing style, knowing that that is something that can

be corrected once the concepts and the arguments are correct. I could simply pay someone to convert my papers into the approved style, as I had done on several occasions in the past.

But no such mathematician appeared. Instead, overworked mathematicians and graduate students used my inept style as a way of avoiding trying to understand the ideas I had in mind — anything to avoid that kind of labor! Criticize the style and find an error in the logic and you are done! You can preen yourself on your rare kindness to those less fortunate (amateur mathematicians) and do it with a minimum of time and effort!

In 2006, I decided that, no matter how much I hated wasting my time on what I regarded largely as pedantry, I would have to start learning how to write in the approved style, if only to force my few readers to do what they were supposed to do. So I bought four of the leading style guides and began working through them, building an index to all four as I went. The guides were *How to write mathematics*, by Paul Halmos et al., *A Primer of Mathematical Writing*, by Steven G. Krantz, *Handbook of Writing for the Mathematical Sciences*, by Nicholas J. Higham, and *Mathematical Writing*, by Donald E. Knuth, Tracy Larrabee, and Paul M. Roberts. Halmos and Knuth I regarded with particular contempt, but I tried to spend at least an hour a week on these books, and on slowly correcting the style of the papers I was working on.

One thing that surprised me in going through the books was their emphasis on clarity. Throughout the eighties and nineties, as I had struggled with the few math problems I had chosen to work on, I worried that my writing might not be *difficult enough* for the professionals. I worried that, if they found it easy to understand, they would dismiss what I had to say. This concern was not as bizarre as it may sound. A friend of Gaby's who worked for many years as a mathematician at Bell Labs, one of the nation's leading research labs, told me that if a mathematician in the Labs published a paper that others outside his specialty could understand, they dismissed it as not being important work. But the experts said that my goal should be to help the reader as much as possible, and this I now set as my goal.

The Final Blow

On 9/7/2006, I submitted my paper on the Syracuse Problem to the same journal that had rejected it several years earlier.

On 9/18/2006, I received the following email:

"Dear John Franklin,

"Thank you very much for the submission of your paper, "A Solution to the Syracuse Problem," to [journal name].

"Below I have appended a message from [name], the editor-in-chief. We regret that we cannot accept your paper at this time in its current form.

"We appreciate your consideration of [journal name].

"Sincerely,

"[managing editor's name]

----------"

"Dear Dr. Fraenklin[sic],

"I have been going over your submission. It is certainly an intriguing result, but I am afraid that your logic is flawed.

"As you point out, the argument seems to indicate that there are no examples of the results, which is patently false.

"Unfortunately, the paper is written in an style that makes checking very hard.

"Mathematical writing has certain standards designed to make checking possible. In particular, the definitions have to be made with precise language. Your definitions of partial-comp, and exponent, are done only with examples.

"The whole argument looks somewhat suspect since you seem to conclude from it also something which is false. The fact that this is a contradiction only means that the argument is incomplete.

"I know that [name of former editor of journal] put forth a lot of effort helping with this paper.

"Best wishes.

"[name of editor-in-chief]"

I was shocked to find that the editor-in-chief's criticisms made no sense. My email attempting to explain this to him is given below. But first I must remind the reader, who may be inclined to regard anything I say as the defensiveness of an author who can't bear criticism — I must remind the reader that I was spending several thousand dollars a year to have people read and critique my papers (usually paying at a rate of $50 an hour). I doubt if any one of those readers would say, "Franklin can't take criticism." Of course, if I felt that a reader hadn't understood an argument, I would say so, and try to make the argument clearer, but there are dozens of emails of mine that say, in so many words, "You are right. My argument doesn't work." It was clear to me that the editor-in-chief's criticisms arose from a superficial perusal of the paper with the sole purpose of finding reasons to justify a decision of rejection that editor-in-chief had made before he even looked at the first page. The following is my email to the managing editor and to the editor-in-chief:

Dear Dr. [name of managing editor]

Naturally, I am disappointed about your rejection of my paper, "A Solution to the Syracuse Problem". I am even more disappointed about the reasons that [name of editor-in-chief] gave for the rejection, since I don't understand two of them, and since one I think I can legitimately disagree with. My (respectful) reply to [name of editor-in-chief] is given below, in the form of bracketed comments to his email. If you feel it is appropriate to forward the reply to him, then

I hope you will do so. Please assure him that I will not reply to his response without his permission.

My paper deserved far better. Frankly, I am appalled.

Thank you for considering the paper.

Best regards,

-- John Franklin

[My responses to the editor-in-chief's comments are given below in square brackets.]

Dear Dr. Fraenklin[sic],

I have been going over your submission. It is certainly an intriguing result, but I am afraid that your logic is flawed.

As you point out, the argument seems to indicate that there are no examples of the results, which is patently false.

[I have no idea what you mean by this. What "examples of the results"?]

Unfortunately, the paper is written in an style that makes checking very hard.

Mathematical writing has certain standards designed to make checking possible. In particular, the definitions have to be made with precise language. Your definitions of partial-comp, and exponent, are done only with examples.

[It is flat-out not true that the definitions are done only with examples. Furthermore, these definitions, and indeed all definitions in at least the first seven pages, have been read and found acceptable by well over a dozen mathematics graduate students and several professional mathematicians. Certainly if any of these readers had felt that the definitions of "partial comp" and "exponent" were done only with examples, they would have told me, and I would have changed the definitions appropriately.]

The whole argument looks somewhat suspect since you seem to conclude from it also something which is false. The fact that this is a contradiction only means that the argument is incomplete.

[I simply don't understand what this means. The proof of the Syracuse Conjecture is by contradiction. In the Remark that follows, I give another proof by contradiction, easily derived from the first. Both contradictions arise from the assumption that counterexamples exist.]

I know that [name of former editor of journal] put forth a lot of effort helping with this paper.

[He did several years ago in a much earlier version of the paper. I am deeply thankful for his help and have expressed my gratitude in the Acknowledgements. But he did not see the version of the paper I submitted because he was too involved with other work.]

[I cannot conclude this email without a few additional words. In brief, I don't think the paper got anything remotely like a fair review. If the definitions of "partial comp" and "exponent" were so poor as to prevent you from understanding the rest of the paper, why didn't you stop there and say so? So I must assume that you felt that despite my poor writing style, you understood the intended meaning of the definitions.]

[You mentioned no other objections to definitions (or to the proofs of the lemmas). So I must assume that you felt that you understood enough to examine the proof of the Conjecture. But then, if you found a flaw in my proof by contradiction, why didn't you point to the exact place in the proof where the flaw occurs?]

[My strong impression is that you made no effort to understand the argument on which the proof is based. (One can understand an argument even if it flawed.) If you had, you wouldn't have needed to resort to language about "examples of results".]

[Finally, I need to tell you that well over a dozen mathematics graduate students, and several professional mathematicians have gone over earlier versions of the paper in the past few years. I assure you I have no problem in being told that I have made an error, or that my exposition should be changed.]

[In connection with the latter, I have made it a rule to spend an hour a day reading, re-reading, and attempting to apply, the advice contained in Higham's "Handbook of Writing for the Mathematical Science", Krantz's "A Primer of Mathematical Writing", and Knuth et al.'s "Mathematical Writing". In addition, as Dr. [name of managing editor] will tell you, I am constantly attempting to find writing style consultants.]

-- John Franklin

On 9/21/2006 I wrote:

Dear Dr. [name of managing editor]:

Before I terminate communication with the editorial staff of [journal name], I feel I have to do what I can to prevent another author from receiving the kind of treatment I did, because, in the long run, such treatment can only hurt the reputation of the journal. (I will certainly never recommend the journal to any mathematician or computer scientist.)

Let me begin by taking a wild guess as to what really happened: you received a paper from an unknown author claiming a proof to a very difficult unsolved problem. You were skeptical about the claim -- as you had every right to be. You then looked through your records and found that in the late nineties, I had submitted a paper claiming a proof, and that a referee had rejected it, and that, after being given a chance to resubmit it, I withdrew it.

You decided that you could not risk wasting a referee's time again. What to do? What you could have done was to write me and simply said [sic] that, on the basis of my past history with the journal, you felt you could not give me the benefit of the doubt a third time, and therefore had to reject the paper. But if I could find a professional mathematician who was willing to state to you that he felt I had in fact solved the problem, you would then be glad to reconsider the paper.

That would have been the honest, the decent thing to do. I would have been sad, of course, about your decision, but I would not have objected to it.

Instead, your editor-in-chief decided to fake a reading of the paper and come up with a few bogus reasons for rejecting it (one of them patently not true, two of them incomprehensible and revealing zero understanding of the solution).

I plead with you, for the sake of the reputation of the journal, and for the sake of common decency, to make it a rule from now on to be honest with authors like me. That's all that is required. A policy of deceit and humiliation does no one any good.

Regards,

-- John Franklin

On 9/22/07 I received the following email:

Dear John Franklin,

It goes quite too far to accuse us of a "policy of deceit and humiliation." I forwarded your previous message to [name of editor-in-chief], who replied:

Upon a second reading, it became clear that [journal name] is not the proper journal for your paper, because it does not contain any experimentation.

Further, if you do have some professional mathematicians who have verified the proof, it would be good to mention them in the acknowledgments.

I find myself disinclined to explain our editorial policy because of the hostility of your latest message. However, I will state that [name of editor-in-chief] did not "fake" a reading of your paper, and to assume that he did so because you disagree with his comments seems to reflect some defensiveness on your part.

Sincerely,

[name of managing editor]

That same day I responded:

Dear Dr. [name of managing editor]

Thank you for responding to my email, and for forwarding Dr. [name of editor-in-chief]'s comments. Had he taken a few more minutes with the paper the first time, he would have noticed it contains no experimental data, and could then have rejected the paper for a perfectly legitimate reason.

Re my "defensiveness": as I emphasized in my reply to Dr. [name of editor-in-chief]'s comments, I have done my utmost to find readers of earlier drafts of the paper. These readers have pointed out errors and I have fixed the errors. I do not have a problem with persons criticizing my work! But it is always abundantly clear that the criticisms are based on an actual reading of the parts of the paper I have asked to have read.

Since receiving Dr. [name of editor-in-chief]'s rejection, I asked a mathematician with a high reputation for his expository skill to look over the first few pages of my paper. I did not mention Dr. [name of editor-in-chief]'s comments about the definitions of "exponent" and "partial comp" -- in fact, I did not mention [journal name] at all. The mathematician pointed out a number of improvements that could be made, but none of them had anything to do with the definitions of these two terms!

In the last analysis, you will have to make up your own mind about Dr. [name of editor-in-chief]'s objections. I repeat: I spend a major amount of time throughout the year asking for and receiving criticisms of the paper, so I think I have become very good at judging if all or part of the paper has received a fair reading or not.

Thank you again for your email.

Regards,

-- John Franklin

I immediately began searching for another journal. I don't recall how, but I found one that, from its title, seemed ideally suited for my paper. Furthermore, on searching the list of editors, I saw that one of them was a mathematician whose work I had studied extensively years before, and for which I had the highest respect. So I sent an electronic version of my paper to him, mentioning in my email how delighted I was to find that he was an editor of the journal, and telling him about my extensive study of his work. In keeping with the journal's policy, I sent a copy of the paper to the editor-in-chief. I quickly received an email back from the editor-in-chief — "ok, good luck with the referees" — but received no acknowledgment from the editor. I assume this was because he knew the editor-in-chief would send the acknowledgment.

I waited three months, pleased that the paper had survived at least the initial perusal by the editor and probably a referee. But I felt I should be sure that, in fact, the editor had received the paper, so I wrote him, apologizing for bothering him and, to reduce that bother to a minimum, asking him to inform me only if my paper was no longer under consideration. (If that were the

case, he by rights should have informed me already, but I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt.) I received no reply. I waited another two months, then wrote the editor-in-chief asking him how long it typically took for an author to receive a decision on his paper. The editor-in-chief replied, "when you choos[sic] an editor, you may ask him: usually 4-5 months".

I waited another month, wrote the editor-in-chief again, telling him that I had no heard a word from the editor in more than six months. He replied:

> both authors and editors have full autonomy in [name of journal]: the first may chose any editor, the editor makes up autonomously his decision. [editor's name] is a top scientific personality, used to a very high standard, he will surely decide and act for the best

I began writing to a professional mathematician who was a friend of Gaby's, a recent PhD in computer science, and a former PhD candidate, asking for their advice. The professional mathematician and the recent PhD said I should wait another month, then write the editor again, asking for a status report. The former PhD candidate said I should wait longer; that no news is good news; that sometimes a decision on a paper is not reached for a year or two.

I waited another month, then wrote the editor again, copying the editor-in-chief, saying that if I didn't receive a reply, I would have to assume that the paper had been rejected, and that I was free to submit it to another journal. When I didn't receive a reply from either of them in five days, I knew that it was all over for me.

I wrote a final email to the editor-in-chief, pleading with him to tell me what I had done wrong, so that I wouldn't repeat it with the next journal. I told him that if the editor regarded a claimed solution to a hard problem that was submitted by an unknown author to be worthless, then all he had to do was send me an email saying that my style did not meet the journal's standads, and so the paper had been rejected, and that the decision was final. Surely he could have done that much.

The editor-in-chief never replied.

It was the final blow. To be deemed so inferior, so much a crackpot, that editors do not feel your papers justify even the dignity of a one-sentence rejection, filled me with unbearable shame and self-contempt. I had been living in the worst, the most pitiable self-delusion for thirty years, but now the truth had been conveyed to me. I went from a daily life of suicidal depression to one of each day being burned at the stake.

As I lay tossing and turning in bed, I tried to figure out what had happened. The answer I came up with was this: probably there was a grapevine among journal editors, and so when my paper arrived, the editor checked it and found my response to the rejection by the previous editors. He then went to my web site, saw that it contained papers on some of the hardest problems in mathematics, including Fermat's Last Theorem, and also a book that strongly criticized the contemporary academic mathematics culture (though written by a person with a different name) and decided that I didn't even deserve the few seconds it would have taken to send a one line rejection email.

My opinion of the editor's mathematical work did not change: I kept in mind what I considered one of the fundamental abilities that intellectuals needed to have, namely, the ability to accept the fact that brilliant work is sometimes done by first-class sons-of-bitches.

Ironically, during those final days, I wrote an email to another world-famous mathematician I had admired for many years, telling him how much I had enjoyed his latest book, and offering a

few additional thoughts of my own. He wrote back:

> ...let me say that I've read your e-mail word by word, and your remarks are all remarkably perceptive. Of course, we are both going against the current zeitgeist/esprit des temps/spirit of the times. But who cares!
>
> You may not be a mathematician, but you are my kind of intellectual. Ignore the madness of the world...

Why he made a point of saying I was not a mathematician, I don't know, but his praise cheered me briefly. But only briefly. Then the Life Unbearable resumed.

Not Even a Linguistics Professor...

Around noon one day in April, 2006, while waiting in line at the counter of the little restaurant at the Musical Offering, just across the street from the U.C. campus, I noticed an attractive young woman next to me. I asked her if the book she was holding was a linguistics text, as that was what the title suggested, and she said yes, it was. (She had black hair, bright eyes, and, at least in memory, she wore a blue dress.) We got to talking and after we ordered each of us somehow found it all right if we sat at the same table.

I thought she was a graduate student. I am not sure how much I asked about her research, but — unable not to take full advantage of my opportunity — I was soon telling her about some of the linguistics ideas I was working on. She listened attentively, seemed genuinely interested, and at one point remarked that some of these ideas were subjects of resarch at Stanford. At the end of the conversation, she told me her name.

When I got home, I was so inspired by her having listened to me that I felt I had to send her an email that would present my ideas in a more organized fashion. I called the linguistics department at the university and was told that she wasn't a graduate student, she was a professor. The department secretary gave me her email address. A few weeks later, I wrote her the following email:

> Dear Prof. — :
>
> You may remember that we had a conversation around noon at the Musical Offering during the week of Apr. 24: it began with my asking you if a book you were holding was about linguistics. I found it a very pleasant conversation, and I hope you did too.
>
> Since then I have wanted to present, in a clearer and more concise form, the main ideas I brought up. I will certainly understand if you have no time to reply. In any case, please be assured I have no intention of dragging you into a long email exchange. I will do my utmost to be brief.
>
> To begin: several years ago, it occurred to me that Wittgenstein's famous assertion, "The meaning is the use", could be interpreted as "Semantics is pragmatics". I then began wondering if syntax could not also be interpreted as pragmatics, and decided that the answer might be yes: a natural language grammar describes how one says what one wants to say in the circumstances that it is appropriate to say it.

At the time, I was trying to come up with a better way of approaching the learning of a new foreign language (I realize that learning foreign languages is of only incidental interest to the academic study of linguistics, but please bear with me for a moment), since I had long felt that the traditional grammatical approach was "backwards": it seemed to me that grammatical rules are something that we come to intuit after we have learned sufficiently many words and phrases and sentences in a language. It seemed to me that a grammar is not a set of instructions for how to speak a language, but rather an abstract summary -- a report -- of the words, phrases, sentences, etc., that a certain speakers (e.g., native, educated speakers) use all, or nearly all, of the time.

And that led directly to the idea of a frequency-of-occurrence approach to language, rather than a grammatical approach. I remembered how I was bothered, in jr. high school Latin courses, by having to memorize cases of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, e.g., "hic, haec, hoc, huius, huius, huius, huic, huic, huic, hunc, hanc, hoc, ..." I thought even then: "How often did the Romans say these sequences of words? Probably never, unless they were grammarians." On the other hand, we students never found out how to say sequences of words that Romans probably said every day, e.g., the Latin equivalents of "How are you?", "I am hungry", "Which way is the forum?", etc.

You might reply that we weren't learning conversational Latin, but rather literary Latin. But I feel the same argument applies. We never learned how to write a letter or an essay by merely selecting from a list of words and sentences. What we learned was a complicated set of rules which, even if we followed them carefully, offered no promise that the resulting sequence of words and phrases would be in fact what a Roman would have used.

(Speaking of conversational Latin, you might enjoy Henry Beard's amusing "Latin for All Occasions" ("Lingua Latina Occasionibus Omnibus").)

So I decided, a few years ago, that it would be far better if the form of a book for learning a foreign language were closer to that of the phrase book that tourists use. All the most common phrases and sentences in the language would be listed, in alphabetical order, by their equivalents in the native language. Thus, under "H" would be found "How are you?", followed by the equivalent phrase in the foreign language. Under "W" would be found, "What time is it?", followed by the equivalent phrase in the foreign language, etc. (Of course, in some languages, e.g., German, in which the noun typically comes first, and the verb last, a "frequently-occurring phrase" might well have other words between the elements of the phrase.)

(I believe there are now electronic devices available on the market that allow the user to type in or otherwise select a phrase in a foreign language, and the equivalent words are then heard through a loudspeaker. I think such devices have been used by the military in the Iraq war.)

I said above that I was aware that the academic discipline of linguistics is only incidentally concerned with the learning of foreign languages, and so now let me get to more abstract matters. One test of the academic value of a set of ideas in linguistics can be obtained by consid-

ering the problem of computer translation of natural languages. Using the above ideas, a computer program for this purpose would consist of a data base containing a large number of the most-frequently-occurring phrases in the target language along with, possibly, a representation of the corresponding semantics. Parsing would be a last resort, when the above data base failed. Furthermore, the program would make it easy for new phrases and sentences to be entered manually, with appropriate semantics. (I am simplifying here, for clarity. Certainly something along the lines of "grammatical rules" would be required even with the data base.)

Which brings us to the subject of Chomsky's contributions to linguistics. There is no question but that he made a seminal contribution to the theory of formal languages. In particular, there is no question that what he claimed for five-year-old human beings -- that they can, in principle, generate an infinity of strings in their language -- is true of formal grammars: such a grammar is a finite set of strings ("productions") that, if the productions are of a certain form, e.g., "A can be replaced by bA", can generate an infinity of grammatical strings. As I'm sure you know, Chomsky's ideas proved invaluable to the design of compilers for high level computer languages.

But I think he did major damage to linguistic thinking in arguing that what was true for formal languages was true for natural language. I no longer believe that any speaker of a native language can "in principle" generate an infinity of grammatically correct strings in the language. Instead, I believe that native speakers learn a relatively small set of strings of words and phrases which they then assemble in a limited number of ways, over and over, as daily experience demands (pragmatics again).

But we are again talking about frequency-of-occurrence, and that means that we are in the realm of information theory, where a string with a high frequency of occurrence has low information, a string with low frequency of occurrence has high information. So it seems to me that one of the most important properties of any natural language -- or, I should say, any context in any natural language -- is its information content, in the formal sense (which is not the semantic sense). I believe that this property is every bit as important as grammatic rules.

To summarize: "Grammar is for grammarians"; frequency-of-occurrence, i.e., information-theoretic content, should be of fundamental importance in linguistics; Chomsky was right about formal languages, wrong about natural languages.

Let me say again how much I enjoyed our conversation. But I had no idea you were a professor! (I only found out after I called the Linguistics Dept. The person answering the phone said you were, and gave me your email address.) Instead I thought, "Boy, some of these grad students are really sharp!"

All the best,

-- John Franklin

No reply. But then I thought: “Of course! She is still in the glow of beatitude at having been appointed a professor at one of the nation’s — the world’s — great universities! She is not going

to want to reply to an informal *email* from a guy she met at a lunch counter, for God's sake. So I wrote a ten-page paper, presenting all my points as formally as I could, including appropriate references, and sent it to her. She never replied.

But within a month after I put the paper on my web site, it became one of the most frequently visited each month.

An Electrical and Mechanical Genius

One of the most remarkable men I ever met was the computer consultant for my next-door neighbor Steve, a man named Art S. —. Although I had an excellent consultant, Aaron, I used Art when I wanted a second opinion and then, later, when problems arose with my wireless connection to the Internet. (As was increasingly common from 2006 on, one neighbor would have a device called a "router" in his house, or, in Steve's case, in the garage he used as an office for his bookkeeping business. Other neighbors would then transmit and receive the necessary signals for their Internet connection to and from that router via small antennas on the backs of their computers. The router in turn was connected to the Internet via cable or the phone company's DSL line.)

Physical Description, Speech

He was in his late fifties, thin, with a pig-tail hanging down from the back of his head, though he wasn't bald. He had a wispy goatee and walked with a bit of an old man's stoop, although in a quick manner that would make you describe him as "spry". He had a Tennessee accent, an old-man voice, and spoke rapidly, with frequent repetitions of the phrases "what happens is..." and "basically" and "make a long story short..." since much of his talk was explanations of machines and technical concepts. When a mechanical or electrical part was no longer available, he would say it was "made of unobtainium". When I expressed disbelief that a piece of software could do something he had just described, and he really didn't have time to go into the details, he would wave his hands and say, "Don't worry. It's fairy magic." When we got onto a subject which revealed the stupidity of the government or of the software manufacturers, and he didn't want to allow it to take away time from the work at hand, he would shake his head and say, "Don't get me started".

I managed to maintain a sense of humor even when, as a result of the latest computer problem, I had the gun loaded and had written my farewell note to Gaby . During one of these black periods, the subject of Mel Brooks' film *High Anxiety* came up, and he said that it featured a place that was ideally suited to people like me, namely, the Psychoneurotic Institute for the Very, *Very* Nervous. But then he caught himself, said no, what I needed was the *Cyber*neurotic Institute for the Very, *Very* Nervous, and I thought the term was perfect, and could well be the source of yet another branch of psychotherapy.

Whenever I spoke of my fears, for example, of earthquakes, and attributed them to my neurosis, he commented that he was neurotic too, and had many of the same fears. (He thought it possible that earthquakes might be caused by the moon.) And, like me, he was driven to distraction by the racket of power saws and leaf blowers in his neighborhood.

Brief Biography

He had been born in Kentucky. The family then moved to Tennessee where they lived for his first 11 years, then moved to Montgomery, Ala. He said once that when he was 12, his father had taught him the binary code (the one used in computers, which requires only the two digits 0 and 1

to represent numbers) and the binary powers (powers of 2) up to 2^{16}, whereupon he promptly rattled them off at breakneck speed: 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048, 4096, 8192, 16384, 32768, 65536. He said his father had also taught him how a superheterodyne radio receiver works. I thought of my father, who had always been glad to teach me and my brother how to use mechanical tools — the correct way to drill and saw and fasten pieces of wood together (use screws, not nails!). And yet all my life I have had a morbid inferiority complex about my ability to use hand tools. On the other hand, the teachings of Art's father had resulted in a man who delighted in working with mechanical and electrical things, and in fact a genius for doing so. If I were forced to explain the difference in us, I would say that, as a boy, he probably didn't hold his father in the same awe as I held mine. Maybe it was no more than a case of his father just happening to know some neat stuff. I never asked Art about this, but I am guessing that his father was not an engineer who was the president of a company and who commuted to a big city every day and published papers in important journals and spent his evenings working on inventions.

Art said that in high school he had become involved in broadcast radio and had tried to get rid of his Southern accent, but had been unsuccessful. He was a stand-up comedian briefly (two performances). After two years of college, he got married (this was during the Vietnam War years), had a daughter and a son. His brother was the head of a plastics firm, he having previously made a reputation for himself by applying W. Edwards Deming's ideas of statistical quality control, which were then new, to the manufacture of a plastic product that until then had proved difficult to make.

Perhaps one reason I felt comfortable around Art was that he was a natural self-teacher. He told me that one of his early projects when he was learning programming was a program to generate prime numbers efficiently. (A prime number is one that has only itself and 1 as factors. Thus, for example, 5 is a prime number because its only factors are 5 and 1, whereas 6 is not, since its factors are 6, 3, 2, and 1.) He immediately recognized the importance of what mathematicians call a "closed form" representation of the prime numbers, that is, a formula which was capable of generating all the prime numbers, as opposed to a mere program that would generate successive primes by trial-and-error. Not long after — in the eighties — such a closed form was discovered by two mathematicians.

Then a few years later he decided to learn to fly, and earned his single-engine pilot's license. Although he had long given up flying small planes when I knew him, a relic of his pilot days remained in his speech, for, when he repeated back the digits of a phone number or a computer code you had read off to him, he always pronounced "nine" as "niner". Despite, or perhaps because of, his experience as a pilot, he had a deep-seated fear of flying in commercial airliners. One reason may have been that he knew two of the mechanics who had been on duty at an Alaska Airlines terminal the night before a fatal Alaska crash. He knew that one of the mechanics was a chronic drunk.

He also had had close calls on several commercial flights — the planes having to make emergency landings. Regarding his fear of flying, he said, "I think too much and I know too much."

In intellectual matters, his learning had a rough-hewn, home-made quality. He knew what Maxwell's equations[1] were about, but he hastened to admit that it had been many years since he had studied them. He sometimes got anecdotes wrong about famous thinkers, and sometimes

1. These set forth the laws of electromagnetism. They were derived by the physicist James Clerk Maxwell in the 1860s.

mispronounced their names ("Lefnitz" instead of "Leibniz"). But one day when he was working on my computer, and the classical music station started to play selections from movie scores, he immediately recognized the first one: "Max Steiner!" he said, naming the composer. "*Gone With the Wind*! 1939!" and then he quoted one of Scarlet O'Hara's famous lines (something to do with putting off something until the next day).

Example of His Extraordinary Ability

Since the computer problems he solved will be less easily understood by the reader, I will give an example of his remarkable mechanical intuition.

One time when I came back from a visit to Gaby, the battery in my car was dead, the car being a 1988 Toyota Camry I bought in 2003 from Jason, who is described above. I had the car towed to Art's Automotive, no relation, probably the best car repair service in the East Bay, and also introduced to me by Steve who, as the reader has no doubt gathered by this time, had an uncanny ability to find top-notch experts. They repaired it, I brought it home, and a few days later, when I went to start the car in the morning, the battery was dead again. I brought it back, again they fixed it, and a week or so later, the battery again died. I casually asked Art if he had any ideas about the problem. He said he was coming down to do some work on Steve's computer and would take a look at it.

He went about his sleuthing task in the intense way I had observed when he worked on my computer, clicking his teeth, but nevertheless responding to my questions without annoyance. Among his many gifts was knowing how not to lord it over those whose technical knowledge was incomparably inferior to his. Once, when I told him I had neither the time for, nor the interest in, learning the details about how the software on my computer worked, he merely replied that I was what his trade called an "appliance user". There wasn't the trace of a suggestion in his voice or manner that this was a bad thing to be.

I think he had brought a meter to measure the battery strength. He noticed that when I shut the engine off, the battery immediately started slowly discharging. Yet all the wires in the engine compartment seemed to be connected properly. After apparently running out of ideas, he crawled behind the steering wheel, felt around above the ignition where the key went in, did something, climbed back out, and found that this time the battery wasn't draining.

"Aha!" he said. "What you've got is a broken ..." and he gave the technical name. "All you have to do is, make sure — here, come here...", and he had me slide behind the wheel and feel for a little button above the ignition key. "Before you shut the engine off, hold that button down Then release it after the engine stops." He explained that in these old cars, sometimes the key lock stops shutting off all the power circuits, as it should, but that the holding down the button accomplishes the same thing. So in the space of an hour or so he had solved a problem which had baffled the mechanics at the best auto repair shop in the East Bay.

He not only knew everything he needed to know about the problems he was called on to fix, he also had an extraordinary amount of historical knowledge about technology. If I brought up the Army surplus receivers I had used in my ham radio days in the fifties, he would give me the history of these receivers. When he was explaining the signal interference that occurred because too many neighbors were on the same frequencies with their wireless routers, he remarked in passing that the Hollywood actress Hedy Lamarr[1] had been co-inventor of a device in World War II which prevented the enemy from intercepting the signals to radio-controlled torpedoes, the device arbitrarily changing the frequency continually on which the control signals were transmitted, she having gotten the idea from thinking about the fact that pressing different keys on a piano represented

changes in frequency. When he was fixing the second phone line in the house, which had been wired incorrectly by a phone company technician in the process of an attempt to repair the first phone line, he remarked in passing that the acronym for standard telephone service was "POTS" ("Plain Old Telephone Service") and that the impedance on the lines was 600 ohms, and that the names of the two wires for each line were "tip" and "ring", the latter term referring to a circular part, not to the ringing of the phone; a third wire he said was called "sleeve".

Analysis of His Ability

More than once, after he had solved yet another problem, I would say something like, "Sheer genius!" He would shrug, say it was nothing but experience. But I gradually came to conclude that what put him so far ahead of others in his field were three things: first, a logical mind, which of course others had; second, always having the right tools; and third, his extraordinary memory for technical details.

Regarding the second: he always arrived with a black bag containing his tools, including various electronic measuring devices, and sometimes a few pages downloaded from the Internet. His tools included not merely the expected screwdrivers and wrenches but also tiny versions of the same that he had picked up who-knew-where. With this latter set, he told me, he had been able to remove a circuit board from a computer whose disk drive had failed, resulting in the potential loss of much valuable information for one of his clients. The manufacturer apparently felt that the circuit board should not be removed by ordinary repair technicians, and so had made the screws so small that no ordinary screwdriver could be used on them. But Art happened to have this little set, carefully stored in a red plastic holder, which enabled him to remove the screws. He then removed the same circuit board from the second drive of the computer, replaced the first board with it, and lo and behold, the drive worked sufficiently well that all the information on it could be copied. "It was just an idea," he said. A lesser talent would have told the customer that the only hope was to bring the computer to a drive salvaging shop and pay the hundreds, perhaps over a thousand, dollars to have the disk removed and run on another machine.

When he worked on the second phone line, as described above, he had devices to see if a signal sent from my housemate's room went to the connection box at the front of the house; and a special phone he could attach to wires in the connection box to see if it rang when he dialed the number associated with the wires. When, after he had figured out the problem with my car battery draining, I asked him where he had picked up his mechanical knowledge, he said, well, country boys in Tennessee starting messing around with cars at an early age.

Regarding his extraordinary memory for technical details: as I have said, this was by no means limited to technical details of the present, but included the history of numerous products. I am convinced that at least some of his intuition came from a deep, abstract understanding of how things work, by which I do not mean what is normally found in manuals and textbooks, but instead the subconscious design habits of engineers: "I bet they designed it this way..."

He collected old machines, electronic and mechanical. When I told him how sad I was that I would soon have to scrap my 1979 Toyota Celica (my car prior to the 1988 Toyota mentioned above), because I couldn't stand the thought of this fine piece of machinery, this loyal servant of two decades, being crushed into a cube and tossed into a vat of molten scrap, he offered to take it

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1. "An amazing woman, who actually was an inventor but better known for running through the woods in the buff in the 1933 film *Ecstasy*. She and composer George Antheil had a patent on this device but apparently never made a dime from it."

if I didn't charge him anything. I agreed on condition that, when he no longer wanted it, he would give me right of first refusal on taking it back. He fixed it up and drove it for a year, but then said that the cost of keeping it going any longer would have been more than $1000, even for him, and so I took it back. As this is written (April 2007) the car is parked in front of my garage. I am no longer able to start it, but every once in a while, as I pass it on the way to the garage, I place my hand on it as a token of affection so it will know that, even in its old age, it is still loved.

Political Beliefs

As I mentioned in the first chapter of Vol. 4 ("A Mutt and Jeff Duo"), Art and Steve became good friends, even though they were on opposite ends of the political spectrum. When I pointed this out to Art, he said that the main reason was that he and Steve both wanted a just society. Art's second wife , a professor of psychology at a nearby state university, was, like him, a libertarian anarchist, and I think had written at least one book on the history of the movement.

Success of His Business

I don't know what his annual income was. He was charging $125 an hour in 2006-2007, and always billing for less time than he actually spent, I suppose in part because he felt a little guilty about the time we spent talking about the history of technology, and about philosophy and political theories. He and his wife lived in a rented two-bedroom, two-floor condo in Martinez, a non-descript patch of flat suburbs about 45 min. from Berkeley, always hot in the summertime. Incredibly, he had had clients who were completely indifferent to his remarkable ability. He told me he had been fired by a firm of lawyers in Oakland because he routinely showed up not wearing a tie (and he was not about to start wearing one for people he could not respect). He had been fired by another company because he did not have Microsoft Certification. He said he had never seen the need to spend the several hundred dollars and months of study required to get it. Furthermore, he said, "Some of the people I've known who had it were real idiots who didn't know their butt from a reboot key."

A Child's Scream

Shortly before 8:30 a.m. on Friday, Dec. 23, 2005 — the weather foggy, wet, and unseasonably warm — I was lying in bed after the early morning's work at the computer when suddenly a child began screaming in the apartment building around the corner at 2016 Blake. It was occupied by dark-skinned people from the Third World, the cloying smell of their cooking often all too evident as you passed the place in the evening. In the nineties, it was known that several crime families lived there. They observed goings-on in the neighborhood from their second floor balconies, and then sent their relatives or friends over to burglarize apartments when they knew the residents were away.

It sounded like the child was screaming over and over again, "*I don't want ...* ! *I don't want*"...! Instead of doing what I should have, namely, gone over there immediately, I lay in bed waiting for the sound to stop. It didn't. I had never heard anything like it before. It was beyond terror; the only way I can describe it is to say that it sounded like the cry of a child being burned alive. After several minutes, I got up and headed downstairs. Suddenly the screaming stopped. There was no whimpering, no choking sobs, as you might expect. I walked over to the apartments. Not a sound to be heard. No sign of anyone. None of my neighbors, needless to say, had

bothered to come and investigate.

Later in the day, I talked to a neighbor about the incident. He said that those apartments were now well-known to the police as a haven for prostitutes and drug dealers. I heard no sound of children from the place after that. I am convinced the child was killed.

Net Worth

In 2005 I began walking around with a slip of paper in my wallet that contained a tally of my net worth. I enjoyed updating it each month after I got my monthly report from Shufro, the New York City company that was managing my finances just as, for 50 years, it had managed my mother's. The numbers for early 2007 are given in the table below. "Annual Capital Equivalent" is the calculation that I thought up but that my neighbor Steve, a bookkeeper, told me had no validity because nothing can be called "capital" that can't bought or sold, and, for example, I couldn't buy or sell the money from which my Social Security payments are derived (see "Financial Arguments" in the first file of Vol. 4). But the calculation contined to seem a useful way to convert apples to oranges, or, in this case, convert income to a single annual figure. The calculation is simple: divide annual income from some source by a conservative estimate of the average return you are making on all your investments. The result is Annual Capital Equivalent. Thus, for example, my room rental was paying $4,500 a year, and my average return on investments was about 5%. So $4,500 divided by 0.05 = $90,000. I have placed capital amounts, and the value of my house, under the same heading, for ease of addition.

Table 1: Net Worth in Early 2,007

Financial Category	Monthly income	Annual income	Annual Capital Equivalent
Room rental	$375	$4,500	$90,000
Social Security	$1,214	$14,568	$291,360
House			$725,00
IRA Acct. at Shufro, Rose & Co.			$782,030
Living Trust Acct. at Shufro, Rose & Co.			$501,993

Table 1: Net Worth in Early 2,007

Financial Category	Monthly income	Annual income	Annual Capital Equivalent
Checking account, avg.			$9,000
Total net worth			$2,399, 383

Not bad for a man who retired at 59 after having been fired from his last five jobs, and who had spent his life at the bottom of the white collar barrel! There are advantages to a Swiss upbringing.

Unfortunately, the greed and stupidity of lower class home buyers, and of the crooked brokers who were only too glad to cater to them, provided the risky mortgages could be passed on to other, greedy investors, soon ended the pleasant upward climb in my net worth. In May of 2008, the value of my house was almost certainly down to $550,000, if not lower, and my Shufro accounts had dropped also, though proportionately much less.

Daily Life

As I said in the Preface, one of my goals in this book was to be a historian of the everyday. Many people scorned the detail which that would involve, regarding it as trivia. And yet, as Marshall McLuhan remarked, what is regarded as trivial and unimportant in an age is often what becomes most valuable in the future, because, being regarded as trivial and unimportant, it is not preserved by anyone. How much would we pay for a verbatim record of the conversations had by just about any Roman during the Augustan period? Diarists like Pepys and the Goncourt brothers had an interest in such trivia:

> ...[the Goncourt brothers] wanted to provide future generations with a compendium of all the minutiae that were missing from accounts of ancient Rome: "A period for which one has neither a dress sample nor a dinner menu is dead and gone, and cannot be revived." They knew that incidental details were often the most precious and that too deliberate an attempt to enhance the diary's historical importance would diminish its lasting value.
>
> Without the Goncourts, we might never have known, for instance, that Paris theater audiences could be just as cruel to child actors as they were to the adult actors, that by 1867, bookshops no longer provided their customers with chairs, or that gaslight shining through *fleur-de-lys*-shaped holes in the metal walls of a urinal created beautiful effects "on the violet paper of a poster advertising a cure for venereal disease".[1]

1. Robb, Graham, "Treasures of Vanity", review of Baldick, Robert (tr.), *Pages from the Goncourt Journals*, *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 15, 2007, p. 32.

But the results of several attempts to record the minutiae of my current daily life — including the thousand trivialities that daily life is heir to — have been insufferably smug, despite the misery they describe, and so I have omitted all but a description of the children I would see at the little restaurant where I had breakfast each weekend.

The Twins

On Saturday and Sunday, starting around 2004, I went for breakfast at the Kensington Bistro, on the curiously empty Kensington Circle in Kensington, the little residential community just north of Berkeley. If I had been giving a course in urban design, I would have had the students write a term paper on why this little Circle in the heart of an affluent community was so bereft of commercial life. I should mention in passing that Kensington had the lowest crime rate for miles around, one reason being that the police did not hesitate to stop and question drivers who looked like they didn't belong there.

The restaurant staff had become my family. I could always count on a friendly interchange with the owner, Lynn, and with the waitresses: Angela ("Angela from Indiana"), a skinny, attractive blonde who was studying consciousness at John F. Kennedy University (I never found out just what was studied in that subject) or with Sarah, who went on to start a pre-med course in New York City, or with Kathy, a Phillipine young woman who married the boss's son, or Alyya, who ran marathons. I made a point of always being friendly to the bus girl, Elizabeth, a Mexican who was trying hard to improve her English and was taking courses in business. It was a place where I could practice being interesting to young women.

The restaurant had wisely set aside a little room off the main dining area for parents with children. There was a blackboard and a collection of toys so that parents would be encouraged to bring their children for breakfast. In late 2005, I got to talking to twin girls, Alice and Naomi, aged two. They had big eyes, neck-length hair, and initially I couldn't tell them apart. That first day, one of them was talking on a plastic red, green, and blue toy phone. When I asked her whom she was talking to, she said it was grandma. I: "Well, please tell her I said hello." Later, the girls announced that when they went home they were going to look at the moon. I: "But can you see the moon during the day?" "Yes!" they both exclaimed. Their father, smiling, said they had discovered this. The following are some memories of those happy Sunday mornings.

One day when I arrived 20 minutes later than usual, Naomi piped up, "We thought you were *sick*!" She said it again, her emphasis on the last word making clear that you really had no right even to be *alive* if you got *sick*.

Another time I told them that I wouldn't be there the next weekend because my son and his wife had invited me for a weekend in the wine country. "Are you going with your lady?" asked Naomi, she having remembered, a couple of months earlier, that I had said that I was going to visit my ladyfriend in New York City. I told her no, she was still in New York City.

Later, the toy phone was replaced by a woolly elephant named Ellie, later renamed Wanda, then Ellie Wanda.

I had a hard time understanding their little piping voices but their father always translated for me. But I think it annoyed them a little that I didn't understand everything they said.

On rainy days, they arrived in shiny plastic raincoats, one girl's red, the other's green, with colorful decorations. They wore multicolored rain boots. I always told them how nice they

looked and thought to myself, "Their mother could be couturier to the nation's children!"

One weekend they announced that they had had the flu. I asked if they had to take some medicine. Naomi said they had gone to the pharmacist. Her father said in a confidential voice that they were getting the pills in their orange juice.

Another weekend, one of them asked: "Why is John eating?" Her father, laughing: "Because he is hungry. Why are you eating?"

Their father, a lawyer dealing in mortgage insurance, was the most loving father you could imagine: always patient, solicitous, often smoothing the girls' hair affectionately, and the girls were blossoming as a result. He said that he took them out to breakfast each Sunday or Saturday morning to give their mother some time to herself. She came into the restaurant only once — an attractive young woman with the nervous concern of the young Jewish mother whose children are everything in life to her (along with her husband).

They lived in a house in the Berkeley Hills. Their father told me that Naomi's room had a view of San Francisco, across the Bay, and so she always referred to it as "my city".

February, 2007 : Alice came over to my table holding a little flat, cutout, plastic flower. She put it in front of my nose. I, sniffing deeply: "Mmm, smells wonderful!" I noticed it had the price,"$4.99", still on it. She said they were going to a birthday party the next day.

Later, Naomi came over and pointed at the ketchup bottle in front of me. She, holding her arms around her chest: "I *hate* catsup!" As she walked away, I asked her, "Do you like mustard?" She, turning, still holding her arms around herself: "I *hate* mustard!" I asked her what she liked. She: "Butter with pancakes!" I: "How about mayonnaise?" I had to repeat it a few times because she didn't understand. After a little help from her father, she nodded enthusiastically.

Later: "We are a *mess*." I: "Why are you a mess?" "Because we've been *eat*ing."

A Sunday in March, 2007: As I stepped down into the children's room of the restaurant, both girls exclaimed, excitedly, "We called you! We called you!", which I assumed meant while I was standing in the front room talking to one of the waitresses. They looked at me with their crisp white teeth and big eyes. As usual, they talked at the same time: first, something about the Cat in the Hat. Then one of them asked: "Why did you take your hat off?" and another, "Why are you wearing your *jack*et?" (Another time, one of them asked me, "Why do you have short *sleeves?"* I: "Because it is warm. It's spring. You will be wearing short sleeves too.")

Then one of them came over to me holding a big red-and-yellow striped snake, its tail sewed to its back. I asked them what its name was. They: "Snuffy the Snake." But then one of them, I think Naomi, said, "No, its name is Zelda!" An argument ensued, their father, in good humor, tried to break it up, commenting to me, "They're bickering." Both girls, immediately: "We're *bick*ering!"

Then Alice gave me half of a plastic orange and I pretended to take a bite of it.

On another occasion when they were there before me, Naomi said, as I stepped down into the little dining room: "We were here before you. We were *waiting* for you!" I explained that I had to type on my computer.

Sometimes one of them would be talking on her toy phone as I arrived. I always asked whom she was talking to. Naomi: "We're talking to Annie. Oh, she talks and talks and talks and ..." I: "Well, you could tell her that you have to have breakfast now and that you will call her back. Does she live near you?" Her father explained that he had to drive them to visit her; he said the three of them met in nursery school.

They were now attending pre-school — a Jewish school in their neighborhood, which they attended two days a week.

On another Sunday when I arrived late, they pointed at the couple sitting at my customary table next to the wood-pellet stove: "They're sitting at *your* table!" I: "But now it's *their* table." (By then I was beginning to master Alice-and-Naomi-speak.) Then Alice: "This is my hat", shyly taking it off, showing it to me, clearly wanting me to praise it, which I did. They were wearing cloth pink jackets and little skirts. As often as not, they had some new clothing to show me: it was a fashion show each week.

I was at my table one Sunday, reading the paper, when I heard a commotion from the main floor of the restaurant. Then: "John, John, look!" They were on the top step of the three that led into the children's dining room, carefully making their way down, one toe carefully placed on the next lower step, like little old ladies. Alice showed me a sheet of pink paper with various crayon letter fragments all over it. Naomi came over and silently opened her palm. It contained a large green plastic bug with extended bobbing eyes and big legs.

Another day, they having come late and so having to take a table in the main room, I meanwhile sitting at my usual table next to the stove, I said goodbye to them and was walking to the front counter when I heard little footsteps. "John, John, you forgot your *jack*et!" I thanked them profusely — I think it was Naomi, the ever-alert, all-watchful, who saw it. It was my old Sybase jacket, given to me by the company long ago in the nineties, dark blue on the outside, purple on the inside, with a band of dirt around the inside of the collar.

Another Sunday, as I was leaving, having said goodbye to them, Naomi called out, waving, "Goodbye, John. Take care," and I had to quickly turn away, lest they see that I was moved almost to tears.

May 20, 2007, they now three years old. Alice shyly held out her finger.and showed me her colorfully-decorated bandage. I: "What's that? A bandage?" She nodded. I: "What's it for? How did you hurt yourself?" She: "It's a pinch." I: "I see. Does it hurt now?" She nodded. I: "It'll get better, don't worry." Delighted, she ran off.

Naomi then came back with her, silently holding up one hand, fingers in an "O". I: "That's an 'O'! What's this?" I made a "C". They were uncertain. I: "It's a 'C'. 'C' is for cat." I then made other letters: "M", "N", holding fingers down. " E" by holding fingers sideways. I: "You can make a 'P'!" I show them." I: "But you can't make an 'R', that's too hard." They were delighted by all this.

I then asked what they were going to do that day. Were they going to go out and look at the moon? Not sure. I: "You can go out and see it at night". Naomi: "At night at Hanukkah it is very dark and you have to go outside with baskets".

Later that same month, the subject of nursery rhymes came up. Their father told me, "Naomi knows a hundred." Then, as he cut up her food, Naomi said, "Daddy, Daddy listen to my story!" She began:

Cows are in the meadow
Eating buttercups
ah-tshoo, ah-tshoo
We all jump up

She knew "Jack Sprat", finishing it after I said a few words; also "Hickory Dickory Dock".

Then, one Sunday in the middle of June, 2007, Naomi (who had had some tears over an orange-juice-glass incident) suddenly launched into "The Lady With the Alligator Purse":

Miss Susie had a baby
she named him "Tiny Tim",
She put him in the bathtub
to teach him how to swim.

He drank up all the water,
he ate up all the soap,
He tried to eat the bathtub,
but it wouldn't go down his throat.

Miss Susie called the Doctor,
Miss Susie called the nurse,
Miss Susie called the lady
with the alligator purse.

In came the Doctor,
In came the nurse,
in came the Lady
with the alligator purse.

Mumps said the Doctor,
Measles said the Nurse,
Nonsense! said the Lady
with the alligator purse.

Penicillin said the Doctor,
Castor oil said the Nurse,
Pizza said the lady
With the alligator purse.

Shot said the Doctor,
Pills said the Nurse,

Nonsense! said the lady
with the alligator purse.

She recited all the verses flawlessly, and then, rather liking the round of the applause she received, recited them all again. And again. And... In response to my question, her father said they have a book of these verses, he reads them a few times aloud and Naomi has them memorized. Alice could do a few also, but she was more bashful than Naomi, so I never learned the full extent of her repertoire.

By that time, we were having real conversations because I could understand their speech a little better. They would come over to my table, which was just about at their eye-level (when I was standing, they were a little taller than my knees), look up at me with their big eyes, little white fingertips on the edge of the table, and chatter away. They said they were having ballet lessons on Saturday, and Alice proceeded to demonstrate what a pirouette is. When I asked them what other kinds of things they liked, they replied immediately, "Swinging on swings and trying on *hats*."

Alice brought over a stuffed dog from the restaurant's collection of toys. I asked her what its name was. She: "Sophia." I asked her if she had a pet dog at home, she shook her head, said no, they have two cats. "What are their names?". She: "Moo-moo and Woof." I asked her what color they were. She didn't seem to understand. Then she said, "They don't have any color. All they have is fur. The color is underneath. It's like your jacket." (She gave my collar a tug and was obviously referring to the color of the actual flesh.)

I was sometimes greeted with a chorus of "It's John!", "It's John!" when I arrived at the restaurant and they were already at their table. Then I was updated on their latest activities schedule. Previously we had ballet on Saturday morning, but now we had swimming, including water ballet, which included pirouettes (demonstrated skillfully, in all variations, by Naomi), following which would be SuperTots (gymnastics), following which would be pre-school (Montessori this time). Naomi gave me the names of all the teachers they had had.

I learned in July, 2007, from their father, that both girls had had crowns put on their teeth. I asked him what kind of anesthetic they had been given. He said a total, and so they had regarded the whole thing as something of a lark. More crowns will be required, he said. The reason was that the enamel didn't form on some of their teeth — possibly a genetic problem caused by their mother having taken antibiotics when she was pregnant. The girls proudly showed me the gleaming metal in the backs of their mouths.

One Sunday they invented a game of jumping off the top of the two steps that led down to the children's dining room. They both clambered to the top, then, holding hands, off they went, with cries of delight. No little old ladies any more. Then back to the top.

Their father, however, had to remind them that they needed to use their Inside Voices because other people were trying to talk to each other while they ate their breakfast.

As they were getting ready to leave, and their father helped Alice on with her little cloth jacket, Naomi suddenly wanted *John* to help her on with *her* jacket. Her father said that John wanted to eat his breakfast, but Naomi insisted. And so I was granted the honor of helping milady on with her street attire. In the process, I received a brief lecture on how I should always take my jacket *with* me whenever I left my table because otherwise I will for*get* it and drive all the way home and then have to drive all the way *back*.

No two Sundays were the same. Naomi wanted to know why there were bubbles in my drink (champagne — or, actually, just sparkling wine). I tried to tell her that they gave a nice tingly taste, just like they do in soda, but her father signalled to me that the kids had never had soda. So my explanation was useless. And then, of course, Naomi insisted that we "clink" (our glasses, she with her little orange juice glass, I with my champagne glass). I said, "Here's to you!" and she repeated it, thinking it quite an amusing thing to say.

Alice always asked me about the bandages on my fingers. I told her that I cut myself on roses and in cutting firewood. Their real purpose, of course, was to stop my biting on particularly damaged fingernails.

But there were regular occurrences, too. Naomi coming over to me: "I have to go pee. Keep an eye on Alice." Then her father would accompany her to the bathroom in the basement.

A Sunday at the end of July, 2007: They were there by the time I arrived. Both of them: "John! John!" Naomi: "We were here *before* you." Their father, quietly, but laughing: "Well, It's not a contest." I said something about their mother perhaps coming one Sunday. Naomi explained that their mother never comes because she stays home *clean*ing.

Later they said they were late themselves that morning. I: "Why?" Naomi: "Because we had to go to a wedding." I: "Who got married?" Their father then with some embarrasment explained that Naomi wanted to marry him, so that was the wedding that morning.

They talked about their first weeks at Berkeley Montessori. Naomi: "At first we were *scared*." I: "Well, that's understandable, because it's all new. But soon it will all be familiar." They: "Now we are not scared. We are learning *the rules*."

They told me at one point that their father had been in New Guinea and had seen pygmies. Naomi: "They don't wear any clothes, and you know what they use for money?" I: "No." Naomi: "Pigs! And they poop *every*where!"

The first Sunday in August, 2007, they were again there ahead of me, busy coloring a sheet of white paper. "We brought these from *home*," Naomi said several times of their crayons. Their father had drawn a large heart and a small heart on each sheet of paper, so they could color them. Alice didn't know, or had forgotten, that they were called "hearts".

The next Sunday, when they saw me coming across the street as they were getting out of their van, they jumped up and down, "John! John!" They told me that last night, their daddy was talking in his sleep, then their mommy, then they both were laughing, then they, the two girls, started laughing. Then Naomi told me about Pompey, how people were in their beds and all this lava came down on them, because of a big bolcano.

When we had taken our tables, Naomi came over and wanted me to admire her new shoes — sandals of soft brown leather — that their father told her are called mary janes, like the shiny black shoes long ago. Then she said that she had put her shoes on all by herself, then her panties (raising her dress quickly to reveal white panties, then lowering it), then her dress.

Later she showed me that she could make an "M". I told her that if you turn it upside down it becomes a "W". Then I asked her to make an "O". Which she did. Then an "I", which she did with the dot. Then an "L" and a "V". She told me that a "B" is too hard because you have to make those two things that go around. She then asked me to draw a heart for her on her white paper place-mat, which I did. She filled it in with the crayons the girls often brought from home.

Alice then recited (several times):

"The horse he slipped and fell on the flea
'Whoops', said the flea, 'There's a *hors*ey on me.'[1]

The next Sunday, I was late arriving. They were already busy with their crayons. Naomi showed me her name, which she had spelled: "N AM O I". I praised her, and then printed "A L I C E" for Alice. She wanted me to make a heart for them, so I did. Then a smaller heart, which I did. Then a big heart, which I did.

Sometimes, as I read my paper, I would sense a small presence at my elbow, and, when I turned, I would see Alice's two big eyes looking up at me.

A Sunday in September, 2007: Alice came over, holding up a piece of toast that had been cut on the diagonal, her little white index finger and thumb holding it by the apex. She: "Look! A triangle!" I: "You're absolutely right. That's a triangle." She then took a bite in the middle of the hypotenuse, held up the piece of toast for me. I: "But now it's not a triangle." She rubbed her finger over the bite part. Thereafter just about every Sunday, one of them would hold up the pre-bite toast, announce its geometric shape, then take a bite. In December, I showed them how, if you put two of the pieces together, you get a *square*.

Another Sunday, later that same month: As soon as I arrived the girls told me about how they had been flying kites and how their kite went into the water, and even though they pulled and pulled on the string they couldn't get it out. I asked if they had been flying kites near the ocean. Naomi: "Not the ocean! We were at the Mor*een*a!" by which she meant the Berkeley Marina, a section of land fronting the Bay. I told them I could bring them a new kite the next week and meet them at the Marina. Their father nodded, with a weak smile, but said nothing. Later, Alice elaborated on their kite experience, telling me that a great white shark had come up and taken the kite down to the bottom of the ocean to try to repair it, but couldn't.

Another Sunday: They came over to my table. Naomi: "My hair is all wet." She repeated it. I: "That's because it's raining outside. You have to wear a hat." Alice, looking up at me with big eyes: "No, it's not raining. Its misty moisty."

Another Sunday in the fall: Naomi shyly approached me, asked if I would like to come to their house. I: "Yes, I would like that very much, but first you need to ask your daddy and mommy if it would be OK. " Her father smiled, said "Well, we can think about it...." I told Gaby that I was sure both parents were genuinely afraid of having a possible dirty old man know where they lived.

Both girls, but Naomi especially, liked knock-knock jokes, including some I had never heard before: She: "Knock knock." I: "Who's there?" She: "Orange." I: "Orange who?" She: "Orange

1. According to Google, these are the last two lines of a verse called "Boom Boom Ain't it Great to Be Crazy", the first lines of which are:

"A horse and a flea and three white mice
Sitting on the curbstone shooting dice,"

you glad I didn't say 'banana'?" But one of them was downright scary. She: "Knock knock." I: "Who's there?" She: "Nobody." I: "Nobody who?" She: "Just...nobody."

Early in December, 2007, I gave each of them a golf pencil, since they liked to draw. These pencils were shorter and more manageable than a normal pencil. Their father said that their upcoming birthday on Jan. 25 was a frequent subject of conversation at their house. I asked the girls how old they were. They: "Three-and-a-half!" I: "And how old will you be at your next birthday?" They: "Four-and-a-half!"

At the end of December, 2007, the owner, Lynn, sold the restaurant because it simply wasn't profitable. We all made plans to do research to find another restaurant in the area for our Sunday breakfasts. Since I knew I might not see the girls for much longer, I thought I should satisfy my curiosity regarding what kind of twins they were. I told their father that I assumed they were identical, but he said no, only fraternal. Yet at first I had been unable to tell them apart. On the other hand, the student who was then renting a room in my house was an identical twin, yet you would hardly think that she and her sister even came from the same family, so different did they look.

The girls' father gave me his business card and at this late date I finally learned his name: Bill.

The next Sunday, when I arrived, the girls exclaimed, "We have a present for you, we have a present for you!" They gave me a little brown bag with a rope handle. Inside, wrapped in white tissue paper, was a gingerbread man, with a loop of string attached. Alice, several times: "It's a Christmas ornament!" I: "I know, and I am going to hang it on my tree" (I didn't tell them I didn't have one).

I hadn't been sure about exchanging Christmas gifts, so I hadn't bought them anything up to that point. But the next week I called their father at work and asked for his advice. He said a card would be fine — they carry around cards they receive all day. I went to several toy stores, found two similar cards, each with an angel, since I knew they loved angels. I wanted to buy something else, but found just about everything in these stores was made in China, and the recent news about dangerous Chinese products was very much on my mind. So I called Bill and told him. He said he would talk to his wife and that I should call back the next day (he never called or emailed me — I always had to call him). His wife recommended books. At Barnes & Noble in El Cerrito, I bought two similar books for kindergarteners. They were amply illustrated, and the language was simple enough that I felt the girls would understand the stories as their parents read to them.

Then, it was time to say goodbye. I told them that we adults would try hard to find another place where we could have Sunday breakfast together. I stood there, feeling very sad. Alice came over, looking up at me with shining eyes, slowly put her fingers to her lips and blew me a kiss.

A woman who had been a regular at the Sunday breakfasts came up with a list of breakfast places to try. None of them could compare with the Bistro. Several weeks into January, we met at Au Cocquelet, my favorite Berkleley coffee shop, where I went for my mid-day cup of tea and a donut. The food was mediocre at best, the place almost empty.

Their father told me that he and his wife had been talking about the day when the girls were born. The girls asked their parents what date that had been. The parents said January 25th. Both girls together: "That's the same day as our birthday!"

The Sunday before Valentine's day, 2008, still at Au Cocquelet, Naomi walked up to me as soon as I arrived and asked if I knew why the bib on the front of her dress was pink. I: "Well, let's see..." She: "So it matches my shoes!", and she pointed at them; they being also pink. Then she said she had a valentine for me (her father had to fish it out of his jacket pocket): it was a piece of white paper about six inches at the longest, cut into a heart shape and decorated with a heavy, red border made, it seemed, with a marker pen. In the center were two "googly eyes" I think she called them — transparent buttons in which smaller black disks moved around like pupils, as in the Sesame Street muppets. On the back, in a father's hand, "To John", and above that some squiggles that could, perhaps, be construed as a young person's attempt to write "Naomi" until she lost interest. There was a backwards "N", an "O" with a line across the centere, and a quite respectable "C".

Alice was not there, she being home with a cold. Naomi demonstrated her skill with a cell phone camera, showing me pictures taken of her, Alice, their mother. Then she insisted on taking one of me and the woman who had been part of our research committee. After that we somehow got onto the subject of Naomi's visit to her grandmother in the fall. I: "She lives in Harrisburg, right?" Naomi: "No! Pennsylvania!" I: "Or was it Pittsburgh?" She: "No! Pennsyl*van*ia!" Then, after a pause, she looked at me shyly, and asked, "Did you miss me while I was gone?" I: "I missed you a *lot*."

That was the last time I saw them. Their father apparently didn't like the restaurant. I continued to go for breakfast at 8 a.m. each Sunday, but they weren't there. I suspect their father had decided that the closing of the Kensington Bistro and our inability to find a replacement that was equally desirable, gave him an ideal opportunity to place his daughters out of reach of the old man who so obviously delighted in their company each Sunday morning. Later, I found a restaurant — Fellini, on University Ave. in Berkeley — that seemed a good replacement for the Bistro, its only disadvantage being that it didn't open until 9:30. I called the girls' father and told him about it. He said, in that shy manner he had, "Well, we'll have to try it." But he never did, at least, not on Sunday mornings.

Without the twins, and the rest of what I had come to regard as my Sunday morning family, namely, the waitresses and the owner of the Kengington Bistro, my Sundays were once again as bleak and empty as the other days of the week.

They had been my therapy, these little ones. I missed them enormously. It seemed a miracle that such happiness as theirs could exist in this world.

"The soul is healed by being with children." — Dostoyevski

Other Children

There were other children, of course, who came with their parents to the children's dining room. I remember two sisters, somewhere between the ages of two and four, both writing on the blackboard, that is, both making lines on the blackboard. The youngest wore a big red plastic fireman's helmet, and was clearly wanting onlookers to notice it. "I may be smaller but I have a bigger hat."

Then there was a Chinese brother and sister. The father, who gave me the impression of being in some high tech job, sat at their table talking on a cell phone. The mother sat facing him, listen-

ing to the kids at the blackboard behind her. The boy began writing the alphabet, and after each additional few letters, he sang the alphabet song up to that point. His sister, meantime, was writing down in the corner of the blackboard. Around "r", he got stuck. He stood there, thinking, tapping his chalk on the board, then said, "Hey, mom, what comes after 'r'?" She turned, told him in her quiet way, and on he went. Then, when all the letters were written, he sang the song all the way through. I resumed reading my paper. When I next looked up, he had written the lines of a musical staff on the board, and was writing notes on it — all F's, true, but it was a promising start.

And then there was a little girl, perhaps three years old, who played tic-tac-toe with her father, she clearly loving him very much. She was obviously a very bright kid. When she won, she climbed on his lap and put her arms on his chest. He was very soft-spoken and nice with her. I had no doubt that if he were to die, it would kill her.

I Find My High School English Teacher, Mrs. Spettel

Over the years, I kept trying to find out what had happened to my favorite high school English teacher, Mrs. Spettel, who, the reader will recall from the chapter "White Plains High School" in Vol. 1, had introduced me to précis writing and thereby changed my life. I had tried everything I could think of to find her: called the High School, talked to veteran clerks in the main office, talked to people in the alumni office, and to people they recommended I talk to; asked every former student who contacted me after reading the White Plains High School pages of the autobiography, and every former student they recommended I contact. I searched Google using her name. I found that, in 1983, someone by her name had published two articles in an education journal. "Classroom Discipline — Now?" (Clearing House, Feb. 1983): "Argues that discipline is the first step in producing learning. Sets forth techniques that have proven successful in maintaining classroom control." and "Don't Drop the Book!" (Exercise Exchange, Fall, 1983): "Discusses prereading activities, citing the book 'Too Late the Phalarope,' by Alan Paton, to help improve student reading comprehension and enjoyment."

And then, in the summer of 2007, I wondered what would happen if I entered "online telephone directory" in Google, having completely forgotten that I had already done this in searching for members of the Dixieland band we had in RPI (see chapter "RPI" in Vol. 1) and for Wendy, the Napa woman I had a Platonic relationship with in the early eighties. I entered Mrs. Spettel's full name and there she was, with several former addresses given, one in Brewster, N.Y. (none in White Plains or surrounding towns, but still, I thought, this must be her!). The last address was in Georgia. Could that really be my English teacher, spending her old age in the backward South? Her age was given as 88. That meant she had been in her early thirties when I had had her for a teacher.

But her age meant I had to move fast, so I wrote her a letter and the next morning sent it as an overnight letter, which meant it would arrive the next day. No reply for several days. I assumed I had the wrong person. Then a phone call in late afternoon on the weekend. It was her husband, Richard. The letter had been forwarded from Ga. to their summer vacation condo in southern Vt. He said she was very glad to receive it, but that her memory was failing, including her memory for words, and so she couldn't talk on the phone. They had taken X-rays (or done an MRI scan, I don't remember which he said) of her brain, and although she didn't have Alzeimer's, it was clear that the part of her brain having to do with memory was deteriorating. They had given her drugs to at least try to slow the process.

In the course of our conversation, I learned that she and her husband had married in 1950. He

was amazed when I told him I remembered that she had said once that he had been with Picker X-ray in White Plains. Yes, he had been in the International Division. He said that the rumor we students had heard had been wrong: she had never published a story in the *Saturday Evening Post.* But she had published an article in the Connecticut Journal of Business, about husbands traveling for business. In 1954 — in other words, the last year she had been my teacher, she had taken a leave of absence. In succeeding years she had children and then, in 1967, had gone back to teaching, but only part time, at Briarcliff High, where I had spent my sophomore year in 1952 (see the chapter, "Briarcliff High School", in Vol. 1). I remarked to her husband that getting a part-time teaching position in high school was rather unusual. He said, yes, but her reputation as an excellent teacher had preceded her. She had told the school authorities that she had to be allowed to bring her kids to school in the morning, and to pick them up in the afternoon, and the authorities had agreed.

Then, several years later, she taught at St. Luke's, a private school, grades 5-12, near New Canaan, Conn., where the family had moved to be near her husband's new job as head of International Sales with a company dealing in X-ray components. She later traveled with him all over the world.

In my mind's ear, I can still hear the sound of her voice, a sound that I will call "pointed", articulate, young, even girlish, and although I feel that an important goal of my life has now been satisfied, namely, that of thanking her for telling me about précis writing, I am sad that I will never hear her voice again.

"What If My Whole Life Has Been Wrong?"

In late November, 2006, I discovered a major flaw in one of my ideas regarding Fermat's Last Theorem (FLT) It revealed quite clearly that the intuition underlying the FLT paper in the book I had published in 1985 was fundamentally hopeless. Faith in the validity of this intuition had been one of the things that kept me alive for 25 years. For days I tried to retrieve something from the idea, but was unable to.

In my desperation, I re-read Tolstoy's story, "The Death of Ivan Ilych", which is about the life and death of a judge whose success was due largely to his having always done what was expected of him. Then, as he is dying of a terribly painful illness, he asks himself, "What if my whole life has been wrong?" I had asked the question, in one form or another, throughout my life, but now it seemed to demand an answer, even though I knew that Tolstoy had written the story after his conversion to a Buddhistic-Christianity, and even though it is clear he felt that if Ivan Ilych had lived a spiritual life, he would not have asked the question in his final days — "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible." "But why", I wondered, "should we believe that his life would have had meaning if, instead of adhering to bourgeois values, he had adhered to the values of this or that religious sect? If it is wrong to live one's life conforming to others, then that applies to living one's life conforming to the dictates of those who say that one must be true to oneself, one must believe in oneself, one must go one's own way." Or was Tolstoy saying that the judge should simply have "been himself"? But that is the view of the artist. Certainly the life of writing great novels is preferable to the life of working as a judge and doing what other people expect of you — if you prefer literature to the law and to the status that can bring. But suppose one is not an artist. I thought: "Just as, in the gambling casinos, they ring a bell whenever someone hits a jackpot on the slot machines, but never when someone *doesn't* hit a jackpot, so we only hear about those who believed in themselves and accomplished something,

never about those who believed in themselves and accomplished nothing." I thought of English professors, those prestigious bureaucrats with lifetime guaranteed incomes, lecturing their students about the importance of intellectual and artistic courage and of going it alone. I thought of the hope pushers of our time, telling eager college-educated audiences during public television pledge drives, that they can have it all if only they will be true to themselves.

But when people like me find that their intuitions are worthless, life becomes a waste of breath.

I Should Have Stayed at Beckman Instruments

I could have faced the loss of 25 years' work if I knew what I *should* have done with my life. I had followed a false god, namely, the god of salvation through achievement. What else was there? I thought: "My biggest mistake was leaving Beckman Instruments in the late sixties." I had recognized from the start that technical writing was my loser's solution to the problem of having no talent for technical subjects (especially engineering): I had told myself early on, "The reason I don't understand this subject is that it is not clear! So I will devote my life to making difficult things clear!" And because I knew I had more writing skills than the vast majority of engineers, I also was able to believe, "Only *I* know how to make this clear!" (And yet, as I write this, I cannot suppress my conviction, which lingers to this day, that there *is* a much more efficient way to present technical information than in the classroom-cum-textbook linear format that no one questions and that gives universities an excuse for charging outrageous tuitions. The equivalent for manuals is the traditional format of explain-how-the-product-works, then explain-how-to-use-it. To this day, I believe that the book I wrote on a new way of doing technical documentation — one that enables users to find the instructions they need in a few seconds[1]— was an important book, though at this writing, some 13 years later, not a soul in the technical documentation community has tried to implement even the basic ideas.

Had I acknowledged to myself in 1968: (1) that my management work had become routine, and that at least one or two of my employees had hopes that I would leave, so they would have a chance at my job, but that this in no way required that I leave; and (2) that I could pursue my interest in symbolic logic (see "A Seminar That Changed My Life" in the first chapter of Vol. 2) and then, later, in programming, without having to be the slave of my vanity by becoming a programmer or getting another degree — then I would have been in a position, because I was a manager, to start implementing my early ideas regarding a much better way to write manuals and textbooks (the Environment concept mentioned earlier in this book). I would not have had to spend thirty years trying to convince the dull brains of the technical writing community that I had come up with an important idea, because I would have been in a position to say, "It will be tried *now*."

I Should Have Stayed With Jazz

But then, looking back across the years, I thought: "I should have stayed with music — yes, even with Dixieland." If I had had the courage of my convictions, I would have begun making a catalog of phrases in improvisations (the building blocks), and attempted to arrive at an answer that I could accept to the question that dogged me throughout my jazz career, namely, "What is improvisation?" I would have even written down some of the most common phrases, just to see what they looked like on paper. Here as elsewhere, I could have refused to allow myself to be bul-

1. See "My First Book Published By a Real Publisher" in the second file of Vol. 4.

lied by the prejudices of better musicians I played with, in particular, Heim. Make it your own. I could have made an all-out effort to play like Sidney De Paris — not to the exclusion of other styles, by no means, because I should have, and could have, patiently learned the progressive idiom, meaning, in particular, the way the accents fell to get that old-time, but updated, Arban's self-accompanying effect.[1] (the effect that that so fascinated me. Nothing would have prevented me from getting a low-level job in industry — for example, technical writing — while I settled down to become a jazz musician on my own terms.

(I should remark in passing that, over the years, I often thought that if I had it all to do over again, I would have become a bass player. That was the only instrument I ever imagined myself being good at.)

I Should Have Been a Servant

And yet, when I watched a film about servants, for example, *Upstairs, Downstairs*, or *Remains of the Day*, or *Jeeves and Wooster*, I thought, "I should have been a servant!" It would have been the perfect job for one so desperate for approval as I was. I thought back to those days in my childhood when I imagined what it would be like to Be Perfect. (See first chapter of Vol. 1 under "The Two Dilemmas".) If I had been a servant, every movement, every thought, every word I spoke throughout my life I could have made Perfect. There would have been a perfect intonation for saying "A gentleman to see you, sir. He did not give his name. He said he was a representative of Pendergast and Co."

"Show him in."

"Very good, sir."

I would have had my little room, like Stevens, the head butler in *Remains of the Day*, where I would enjoy my cigar in the evening, and where I would have my few treasured books on a small bookshelf. My few clothes, no more than I needed, but always pressed, would hang in the closet. My recreations would be, say, a walk on the grounds of the estate and perhaps a trip to the nearby village to see a film on Saturday night. The Perfect Life, whose value would have been beyond question.

On the other hand, the truth is that the only times in my life when I was successful in a job was when I was a manager[2].

I Should Have Made My Life My Own

What neurotics like me fail to do all their lives is to make their lives their own.[3]Even when they attempt to do this they fail. They ask themselves, whether in words or feelings, "Am I making my life my own *in the right way*?" Certainly my lifelong ineptitude at using hand tools arose from my conviction that I could never use them in the right way. How much this conviction can

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1. Arban's was the name of a standard book of exercises for trumpet players. One of the techniques it taught was how to play in a way that sounded as though the player were accompanying himself — as though two instruments, not one, were playing. This was done by accenting the notes of each melody and then playing a triplet, more softtly, below each one (the accompaniment). The progressive jazz trumpet players made use of this technique in playing their solos, perhaps, in part, out of a droll sense of humor.

2. See first file of Vol. 2 under "Beckman Instruments" and second file under "Working at Signetics". Of course, my leading of various jazz groups as an undergraduate was also a form of management.

3. See the section, "Who Possesses My Experience?", in my essay, "Psychology", in *Thoughts and Visions*, on the web site www.thoughtsandvisions.com.

be blamed on my father, the best craftsman I ever knew, is irrelevant. Similarly, in jazz the question for me was always, "Am I being original in the way that the best players would call 'original?'" And similarly with writing. Less so in mathematics, strangely enough. There the question was, "Will I be able to convince mathematicians of my originality?"

I was going to say that being a servant is the opposite of what I am discussing here, but that is not true, since one can set out to make oneself into a servant that one knows is one of the best..

What Will Happen to This Life After I Die?

I began thinking of death even more than usual. I felt it coming toward me just a few days ahead. I became obsessed with questions like, "How do you get used to oblivion?" and "How will my familiar surroundings look to me after I am dead?" I didn't mean, "How will they look to others?" because that question could have been answered by taking photographs of the scenes that were part of my daily life: the view of the back yard from my back porch as I had my morning coffee and a few puffs of my cigar; the always warm, inviting view of the living room, which, with housemates, I always called "the fireplace room"; the view of the neighbor's trees through the window of my second-floor study. I meant, "How will my familiar surroundings look to me when I view them knowing I am dead?" Or not knowing.

I tried to imagine my world without me in it. (But that is the goal of Zen Buddhism: to live in the world without a sense of self.) Who will be climbing the stairs, contemplating suicide, when I am not here? What do you do to kill the time when you are dead? How can anyone possibly endure the *shame* of being dead, the shame of suddenly and forever no longer *paying attention*?

I thought: "I don't remember my birth, and I probably won't remember my death."

I asked, like just about every human being who has ever lived, "What is death *like*?" I thought: "It is impossible that all this awareness — and this awareness of awareness, and awareness of that awareness, and ... — could suddenly disappear."

I thought, as I had throughout my life, "This was the worst life ever lived," but immediately was ashamed for thinking it..

What Have I Accomplished?

Before I pull the trigger, I should certainly answer this question. First and foremost, I and my then-wife raised a son who has none of the mental ills of his father, and who seems a genuinely happy and admirable human being who has also achieved great success in his field. Certainly that must be counted as a major accomplishment. Second, I wrote five books that I am not ashamed of: this autobiography, the collection of essays, *Thoughts and Visions*, a book describing a way for computer users to find the instructions they want in only a few seconds, a book applying that idea to mathematics and technical subjects in general[1], and a collection of papers on mathematics and computer science (I now believe I wasted thirty years on these papers and achieved nothing except to demonstrate the degree to which we can live in self-delusion when we are desperate).

All of these books, but especially the first two, were written in a prose style that I had aimed for, but had been unable to achieve, for forty years of my adult life.

And, I suppose, some will expect me to regard as an accomplishment the enduring of more than 70 years of an unbearable life. But those who are inclined to regard that as an accomplishment, implicitly assume that others will benefit from my experience. And, in fact, when I first set

1. I omit the titles of these books in order to maintain my anonymity.

out to write this book, I had as one of my goals to write the book I wish I had stumbled upon when I was 18. But now I must say to the 18-year-old self who reads this book, "Don't waste your life believing in yourself unless you have abundant evidence by the time you are 25 there is something worth believing in."

Father and Son: a Close Call

My son said, in 2006, when I mentioned my wanting to have my life's work printed and distributed after my death, that he didn't want to be burdened with that responsibility because he knew nothing about such matters and had no interest in them. There wasn't a grain of hostility in his saying this. He was simply expressing a fact. But I felt that I had received yet another reason to believe that nothing of my work would survive. The one last hope I had was Randall Goodall, the book designer who had designed the book I published in the mid-eighties. Since he was a respected designer for the university presses, I had no doubt he would do a good job of publishing my life's work after my death, and that he understood my drive not to let everything go into the dumpster, or a closet or storage vault somewhere.

In 2007, my son said he was running out of space and asked not to receive more than one backup copy of my life's work each year while I was alive — I had been having the contents of all my web sites printed every eight months or so, and I would then send them to my son and to Jim Swan, my high school friend and the editor of my autobiography. Furthermore, my son said he no longer had room for the few pages of math that I asked him or his wife to sign and date each year in case a question of priority of discovery should emerge in the future.

We had had no fight or disagreement. I wrote him a letter spelling out again that all I was asking him to do was to sign checks for the monthly maintenance of my online web sites and for the bills covering the poshumous publication of the five or six volumes of my life's works, and that all my papers occupied no more than 250 cu. ft, so that the storage costs would be well under $150 a month. I included calculations to show that apart from the cost of the design and publication and distribution of the books, the yearly cost of storage and maintaining my web sites would be less than 0.1% of his inheritance. No response.

I was completely at a loss as to the reasons for his reluctance to do something that was so important to his father. People I spoke to said he might have felt intimidated by the contents of what I was leaving, but I made clear to him in my letter that he was under no obligation to read, much less understand, still less *like* any of it.

I began looking for a literary executor, and possibly an heir, with the one rule that the person must be from a family in which one or both parents had been academics. My then housemate and Zoe, who had been my housemate in 2000 (see second file of Vol. 4), and Michelle (see third file of Vol. 3) each offered to take on the task.

I called my lawyer and we began discussing disinheritance.

Each day, I looked at the shelf in my bedroom containing the carefully arranged mss. and papers and binders and letters that constituted a lifetime of intellectual effort, and tried to face the fact that the hope of at least family immortality had been a false one, like all the other hopes by which I had kept myself going through the years.

I wrote my son a second letter, this one setting down a list of the main possibilities, with sub categories. No response. I wrote him an email emphasizing how important this matter was to me. Finally, he set a time when he would call me. The phone rang and I applied all my management skills of yore, all that I had learned in countless hours of individual and group therapy, all I had

learned in numerous failed relationships: I said, "Well, I think we ought to begin with your telling me what you are feeling."

Within an hour, he had agreed to handle the storage and write the checks. After the conversation, I felt like a man who had just risen from his death bed to live at least one more day. I wrote him an email expressing how thankful I was that we had been able to work out a compromise. He wrote back:

> I too am happy with how we sorted out the storage matter. I know of people who dread their parents or their in laws, and I am very thankful that I feel ext*remely* comfortable and happy with the parents and inlaws that I have been dealt, in life. I am delighted to have parents on both sides who I enjoy and respect. So, it is very important to clear these kind of things up, when they come. I will confess that there are times, that phone communciation is not my best forte. I'm sorry about that.

I Become a Grandfather

In the summer of 2006, while on my trip East to see Gaby and go with her to Tanglewood and enjoy New York City for a few days, I went to Westport, Conn., to visit Jeff and Karlin. They suggested we have dinner at a new restaurant called "The Dressing Room", which had been opened by Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward on the property occupied by the Westport Playhouse, which they were reviving. During dinner, there was a pause in the conversation, and then, a little sheepishly, Jeff and Karlin announced that she was three months pregnant. They hadn't wanted to tell the family before they were sure that everything seemed OK. I was, of course, delighted, and congratulated them.

But in October, there was a phone call: Karlin had lost the baby. She was in the hospital. Doctors were trying to figure out what had gone wrong. During the conversations afterward, I was surprised at my son's maturity, since he remarked that sometimes Nature causes a miscarriage because there is something seriously wrong with the fetus.

Then, in summer of 2007, the announcement came that Karlin was pregnant again; the baby was due in January.

My son's 40th birthday was on March 20, and what he referred to as "the big four oh" was on his mind. As in the past, I told him not to worry about his age. In base 16 he was only about to be 28 and in base 20 he was only about to be 20![1]

He and Karlin went for regular visits to the doctor, but they did not want to know the baby's sex. They reported the fetus's size in terms of nuts and fruits calling it, for example, Peanut, then Walnut, then Pomegranate, ... etc. Everything went well, but the baby seemed reluctant to enter this world (who could blame it?). And so eventually the delivery was induced and a boy was born on Feb. 5, 2008. They named him Gabriel.

There soon followed an avalanche of pictures over the Internet, most of which I couldn't read on my wretched CompuServe email facility. But Marcella and her husband created a web site to display them. A few weeks later, Jeff and Karlin published a hard-cover book, thanks to some of Apple's software, filled with pictures of the baby and his new parents. They sent copies to the grandparents.

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1. In our familiar decimal system, 40 means 4 tens plus 0 ones. In base 16, 40 is written as 28 because this means 2 sixteens plus 8 ones. In base 20, 40 is written as 20 because this means 2 twenties plus 0 ones.

In July, I went East for my annual visit with Gaby. On our way to Tanglewood, we stopped to see young Gabriel. They let me hold him, and he looked up at me with big eyes and began scratching at my beard, which was his first. That evening, Jeff let me give him his bottle. He looked up at me with adoring, blue eyes (Gaby commented several times on the fact that he had "my eyes") as he consumed what seemed to me an enormous amount of milk, his little belly all the while growing bigger and bigger.

Unfortunately, he had an eczema, and frequently scrached his head. They put a little baseball cap on him, then mittens, but these didn't help. He woke up crying at 4 a.m. By breakfast time, Karlin was exhausted, and Gaby didn't help matters by saying several times how exhausted she looked. We left far later than Karlin would have preferred. Later, we found out that she was also a little angry that we had not offered to hold the baby more often. (I assumed that giving the baby to strangers, even members of the family, was the one one thing a new mother dreaded the most.)

Throughout, my son was a warm, loving father and husband. I thought: If your father always says to his son, I have the utmost confidence in you, young man, that you will always do the right thing, then the son grows up taking it for granted that that is what he will do.

The Future

Old men are sometimes asked for their views about the future. I am afraid that mine are deeply pessimistic.

I am pessimistic about the Third World — outside of China, Japan, South Korea, and perhaps India — ever confronting the single major cause of its problems, namely, population growth. The Third World will continue to produce babies without limit while coming with outstretched hand to the West, begging for help, and the West — at least Western politicians — will, as usual, prefer popularity to the risk of the unpopularity that might result from speaking the hard truth. As this is written (July 2005), two rock 'n roll stars have managed to convince world leaders that what Africa needs is another $50 billion dollars in aid. These deep thinkers from that citadel of profound thought about world problems, the entertainment industry, apparently have no idea that the West has already poured more than $500 billion[1] into that wretched continent and gotten nothing but corrupt regimes and poverty and disease and civil war in return. Can anyone with the slightest intelligence seriously believe that if, tomorrow, AIDS were completely eradicated from the whole of Africa, the poverty would decrease and African governments would become responsible? What is needed in Africa and throughout the Third World is what is most difficult and unpleasant to promote: a change in culture, in particular, a change in the culture of having as many babies as possible and then blaming the West for the consequences.

I am pessimistic about our chances of defeating the Muslim fanatics who are trying to destroy our civilization.

"I hope you good, loyal Americans understand that in the long run the Islamist extremists are going to win. Because you can't beat numbers, and you can't beat fanaticism — the willingness to die for an idea.

"A country like ours, proccupied with Jet Skis, off-road vehicles, snowboards, Jacuzzis, microwave ovens, pronography, lap dances, massage parlors, escort services, panty liners, penis enhancement, tummy tucks, thongs and Odor Eaters doesn't have a prayer — not even a good, old-fashioned Christian prayer — against a billion fanatics who hate that country, detest its mate-

1. Total external debt as of 2003 is close to twice that figure. (Wikipedia)

rialism and have nothing really to lose." — George Carlin

I believe that we *could* defeat them if we were capable of realizing that to win a war, major sacrifices must be made — most of all, sacrifices in vanity, including:

the vanity of believing that the war can be won without major sacrifices;

the vanity of believing that with "understanding and forgiveness" we will be able to overcome the enemy;

the vanity of believing that we need not give up any of our freedoms in order to overcome the enemy;

the vanity of believing that a press that does the enemy's research for it, free of charge, by consistently revealing all the weak points in our national defense, is a good thing;

the vanity of believing that wide-open immigration can only benefit our country;

the vanity of believing that huge bureaucratic intelligence systems run by mediocrities will protect us from terrorist attacks;

the vanity of believing that God is on our side, and will ensure our victory as long as we continue to believe in him and obey him.

As has been pointed out countless times to no avail, chief among the sacrifices we should be making is in our use of oil. Yet the only (modest) reduction in Americans' purchase of gas-guzzlers came about through the increase in the price of gas, even though numerous writers had pointed out that every gallon of gas that Americans bought helped fund the terrorists. A nation that is perfectly willing to fund its enemy's war effort is a nation doomed to defeat.

Although I have the highest admiration for Tom Friedman[1], I think he is dead wrong in his belief that we should keep our doors open to the Third World, in particular, to students from the Middle East. It only takes one or two Al Qaeda undercover agents posing as PhD candidates, plus a few underlings, to create a bomb that could devastate New York City. The case of Aafia Siddiqui proves my point. She was a Pakistani woman who had graduated from MIT and who held a PhD in neuroscience from Brandeis University. When she was arrested in July, 2008, she was found to be carrying maps of New York City, including the subway system, and extensive information on explosives and biological weapons, plus computer links to other terrorist cells in the U.S. She was considered the most important Al-Qaeda capture in five years.

The question I ask Tom Friedman to ask himself is: suppose one of these students, or graduates, were able to set off a bomb in New York City: would you still believe it was a good idea to keep our doors open to Third World students? Would you seriously argue that the cost of closing those doors would have been greater than the deaths of thousands or hundreds of thousands of New York residents?

I believe that reason demands that we reduce as much as possible the chances for Al-Qaeda agents to enter this country legally. The wonderful tolerance practiced by many Western European countries likewise must go. Zero immigration quotas for Muslim countries are essential, and to those Muslims who are already within the country's borders, a clear and simple message must be sent: if you disrupt our way of life, if you murder people who disagree with you, if you commit crimes on the grounds that we do not give you enough money and food, if you plot to overthrow our government, you will go to jail for a very long time or else we will send you back to the countries you or your parents came from. No excuses, no exceptions. If you refuse to learn how to earn a living in our country, you will receive no aid from us. You and your children can starve.

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1. *New York Times* columnist and author of *The Earth Is Flat*, among other books

We did not ask you to come here.

The goal should be nothing less than to make Europe and the U.S. the last place any Muslim would want to live.

To summarize: there is no hope (none) of a country defeating its mortal enemy if: (1) the enemy is invited to live within the country's borders, and to openly advocate the destruction of the country, and to recruit fighters in the country for this purpose; (2) the country makes a point of routinely publicizing all the weaknesses in its defensive measures against the enemy; (3) the citizens of the country insist on making no reduction in their financial contributions to the enemy (which is precisely what they do every time they buy a gallon of gas).

As far as global warming is concerned, I don't see how any rational person who is capable of facing the facts can have any real hope that the problem will be solved before the planet is changed forever. It is conceivable (we don't know if it is possible) that someone might find a way to remove carbon dioxide from the air and sequester it, or that someone will find a way to make fusion power actually work on a commercial scale, but to be optimistic about the future of the planet on this basis is to be foolish indeed. If the world were full of Scandinavians, I would be capable of believing we have a chance, but it is not.

For all these reasons, I believe the future is very bleak indeed.

"Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe." — Albert Einstein

**"Look to the living, love them, and hold on."

Last Wishes

I have three last wishes: the first is that, when I am told I have a terminal illness and that the doctors may not be able to control the pain in the final stages, I have the courage to keep my long-overdue appointment with a bullet to the head.

The second is that there be no afterlife. But if there is, and if it consists in being reincarnated, then I ask that I come back as the bass parts in all the works of Bach.

My third wish is that whenever someone begins to talk about the importance of believing in oneself, of going it alone, of persevering, with the always-present implication of the inevitability of happy endings, — in short, whenever someone begins to talk about the value of the religion of achievement — someone else will tell them about my life.