

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 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, the curiosity, 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 suffering was good for the poor

because it built character. However, he 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.

He had nothing but contempt for books like Charles A. Reich's *The Greening of America* (1970), with its strong praise for the 1960s counterculture. He said that liberals promoted the environmental movement because it gave them another excuse for building ever-larger government bureaucracies.

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 memory 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 Kevin 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, 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 ever 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 music¹. 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.

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.

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:

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,

Retirement

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 for-

Retirement

eign 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":

Retirement

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.

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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.

Retirement

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 tell-tale 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 —

Retirement

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 movements 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

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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 (particularly 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. But I still found it difficult to believe that a man of his intelligence had

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:

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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 Ensemble¹ (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.

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

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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. 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,

Retirement

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 solos¹. 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 1954², 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 resemblance 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.

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 regarding 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!".

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 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 ,

Retirement

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 Brahm’s; 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 her 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.

Retirement

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 second 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 happened. But for some reason this just doesn't work. It is boring and confusing. Churchill, 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 demanding 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.

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

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 remembered 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 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 (BAHA). 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, and therefore does not have 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

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

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 Bulbin" by simply hearing in my mind Michael MacLiammoir's reading of it on cassette tape¹. Once again, Gaby 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 BAHA², 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 things³, 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

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

2. Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association

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

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 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!

I should also mention a kind of memory failure that will probably be more familiar to the reader, namely, one in which a scene is remembered very clearly, but for which details connected with the scene — for example names and dates — have been forgotten. In the eighties or nineties, there was a charming little restaurant in I think the Russian Hill area of San Francisco. I can see it clearly: it was on a corner, in fact the northeast corner of an intersection on the side of a long, downward-sloping area of the city. I remember several sunny weekend afternoons, a vast panorama of house roofs down toward the Golden Gate and the ocean. I know that I always went to this place with a woman I was fond of. I can remember opening the door, stepping inside. There was a bar facing you as you entered. Warm brown wood everywhere. You turned right and walked a few steps into a small dining area. Above the tables along the wall between the dining area and the bar were bookshelves containing various 19th century works including one I remember always opening and reading with amusement — the memoirs of a British military officer of his years in India. The book was hardbound and had a green cover. There were windows along the sidewalk wall. All this is very clear. But what apparently has been completely lost is the name or image of the woman (Kathy said in 2009 that it wasn't her), and the years when we enjoyed going there, and the address or even locale of the place and the name of the restaurant. The name "Petit Cafe" keeps coming to mind, but the restaurants by that name in Google (2009) seem far from where I remember ours to have been, and much larger. The food was not exceptional, but the feeling of those sunny afternoons has remained with me, the pleasure we took in the quaint dining room with its books from the previous century, and the walk we always took before or after our meal.

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 pri-

vate 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 eliminate 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.

Although I could joke with one of my consultants about my fear of computers — he said I belonged in the Institute for the Very, Very Nervous ¹— I told him that the only way I could get through my days with these wretched machines was with the help of various superstitions. I told him, for example, that when things went well for few weeks, I became more and more anxiety-ridden because I knew that at any moment the machine would decide to punish me. The anxiety was part of its plan. I told him that in the morning I often didn't press the power button if I felt I was having a negative thought — “I know it's going to crash”— because the machine always punishes users, or at least me, if they doubt its ability to work flawlessly at all times. I told him that

1. in the 1977 Mel Brooks film *High Anxiety*

sometimes, especially when working with CompuServe, a negative thought would in fact make it lock up. I could almost believe, especially with that program, that the way I touched the key, the degree of gentleness, my failing to wait a few seconds after issuing the previous command, could affect whether the email was sent or not, so that the little hourglass simply remained on the screen until a message appeared long minutes later saying that something had gone wrong, and that I should re-load CompuServe, an impossible task. Usually, trying again and perhaps a third time, or exiting and restarting the program, would eliminate the problem.

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

Beginning in the early 2000s I had three computer consultants: two for the computer itself and one for the wordprocessor, FrameMaker, that I used. One of the computer consultants told me that among his colleagues I was known as an “appliance user” because I had no interest in understanding how the software (and hardware) worked. But he was perfectly willing to accept my abhorrence of the kind of knowledge because at 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.

Then 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 this technology 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.

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 published 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.

In May, 2009, I called the same official to ask when destruction of the Dam would begin. He said it had been postponed until Spring 2011. I asked again about any histories that mentioned it, and this time he recommended Thomas Aldwell's *Conquering the Last Frontier*. He said that the book emphasizes how well-constructed the Dam was in comparison with the one below. For example, my father had apparently insisted that no concrete be poured before they had dug down to bedrock, whereas the designer of the lower dam had permitted pouring of concrete before bedrock had been reached, with resulting major problems over the years.

And so, at the time of this writing (May, 2009) I have until Spring 2011 to see the Dam before it is torn down. 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,

Retirement

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?”