

## **Math Wars**

### **Ed the Physicist**

In March 2004 I posted an ad on a Physics Dept. bulletin board at UC asking for help in understanding Special and General Relativity. I received an email reply from a fifth-year graduate student who was working on a PhD in string theory, then considered the most promising means of unifying quantum mechanics and general relativity. He answered my physics questions in an exchange of emails. I then thought: “Why not have him take a look at my Fermat’s Last Theorem and Syracuse Problem papers?” He was willing to do this, and thus began a consulting relationship that has lasted to the time of this writing (September 2008). His name was Ed and he proved to be the sharpest, the most acute, critic of my work that I had found, with the exception of the UC mathematician in the late nineties. He found errors that even the graduate students and a couple of other professional mathematicians overlooked. He also had none of the pedantry that drove me to distraction in professional mathematicians. And he was by far the most loyal consultant I ever had. After receiving his degree, however, he said (Aug. 26, 2004) in reply to my asking him what universities he was applying to:

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

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

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

One of the pleasures of a trip to New York City to visit Gaby was my morning coffee break at a little restaurant a few blocks from her apartment called *Le Pain Quotidien* (The Daily Bread). It had an interior of bright wood, and a long, wooden table on one side, where diners could sit and eat communally. I would have a cup of their delicious, rich coffee, which was served in a white cup the size of soup bowl, and read in the company of the local upper class. One morning in

2005, the man sitting next to me asked what I was studying. I said, “tensor calculus” (I think the book was P. A. M. Dirac’s *General Theory of Relativity*<sup>1</sup>, which I found very difficult). He said he was a math professor and that he could “do that stuff with my eyes closed”. I didn’t ask him what exactly he meant by that because I could see that the whole point of existing, for him, was to prove to one and all how brilliant he was, and I had no patience with mathematicians like that.

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

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

On April 11 he added:

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

So I felt a little better after yet another humiliation at the hands of professional mathematicians.

### **A Graduate Student**

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

### **Another Me**

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

Just Googled on FLT<sup>2</sup> and came upon your very recent paper on the possibility of the exist-

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1. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1996.

ence of a simple proof of FLT.

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

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

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

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

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

Richard

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

There and then began an exchange that continues to the time of this writing (August 2008), although with gaps of several months. Over the next few months, I learned a little about him. He was in his sixties, and had an invalid wife he had to take care of.

My professional experience has been primarily in Army facilities maintenance management -

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2. Standard abbreviation of "Fermat's Last Theorem"

structures, housing, utility systems, roads etc. Budget wise, maintenance is always underfunded, the priorities going to training and weapons systems. When unprogrammed events pop up like Katrina, Bosnia, Iraq [sic] etc. they steal the money out of maintenance and then never put it back. My job was to keep the inferstructure [sic] functioning with inadequate resources. This forced me to take short cuts as a way of life. That has been my training. So, I am interested in problem solving, and doing it in the simplist [sic] possible way. While I see and appreciate the beauty of pure mathematics, I am programmed to take short cuts. My last 3 page paper was a short cut. The formal paper was an attempt to explain the solution to a problem so that a layman like myself could understand it, someone who didn't know what a lemma meant."

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

Let the unknown quantity be augmented by five and then this entire quantity multiplied by itself twice. Now let the unknown quantity be multiplied by itself and subtracted from the previous product, and the whole then decremented by thirty-five, and set equal to zero. Find the unknown quantity.

This is not wrong, it is simply a long-winded and potentially ambiguous way of saying:

Solve the following equation for  $x$ :

$$(x + 5)^2 - x^2 - 35 = 0.$$

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

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

Andrew Wiles was able to prove the Theorem for all exponents  $n$  greater than 2. His proof was part of a much larger proof of another theorem, and Fermat's Last Theorem could legitimately be said to be merely a footnote to that larger theorem. But the amateurs did not give up. Since Wiles's proof covered some 200 pages, the amateurs, including me, now set out to find a "simple" proof.

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

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

The reader will recall the proud contempt of my co-worker, the mathematician Ian McGregor at HP Labs (first file of Chapter 2 in Vol. 3) for any amateur attempting to prove the Theorem. Having received a few crackpot "proofs" of the Theorem over the years via the Internet, I could not be unsympathetic to the attitude of professional mathematicians. And yet I made it a practice not to humiliate these poor souls, but instead, if their work showed the slightest sign of being coherent, offering to look at their papers in return for shared authorship, and in any case always saying, "It is entirely possible you have discovered something that no one else has thought of."

### **A Flicker of Hope**

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

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

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

### **Another Flicker of Hope, Soon Extinguished**

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

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

## *Retirement*

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

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

here is the correct version.

...

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

now the lemma is fixed (i think).

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

...

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

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

### **A Nasty Professional**

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

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

...:

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### Outline of Strategy

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

...

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

#### “Conditions of My Offer of Shared Authorship

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

Needless to say, I can supply references as to my ability to work cordially with others, and, of

*Retirement*

course, as to my not being a crackpot.

“Pages Describing Proposed Solution

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

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

Regards,

-- John Franklin

Almost immediately I received the following reply.

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

Hi,

I'm not interested in taking a look at your strategy for the Syracuse problem.

Good luck, ...”

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

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

...:

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

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

- 1 -- You think I am a crackpot.
- 2 -- You simply can't believe that I have a promising strategy.
- 3 -- You have your own solution to the Problem.

- 4 -- You don't have time to work on another paper.
- 5 -- Something I said in 2001 offended you.

Regards,

-- John Franklin”

Again, his reply was prompt:

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

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

### **I Attempt to Write in the Approved Style**

As I have said earlier, I always felt that in mathematics, what counted most was *ideas* — ideas like the one underlying the calculus, namely, that if you want to find the area under a curve, you can line up a bunch of vertical rectangles side by side under the curve, and compute their area, which is easy; then you can make the rectangles thinner so you can put more of them in the same space, and again compute the area; and proceed in this way so that “in the limit” you have the area under the curve (calculus gives a method so that you don't have to repeat the process an infinite number of times); ideas like the fact that if you want to know if the number of things in one set is the same as in another set, you don't have to count them, all you have to do is see if the things in the first set can be matched one-for-one with the things in the second set; if they can, then both sets have the same number of things (even though you may not know what that number actually is); if not, then they don't (no counting needed!); ideas like Cantor's marvelous, and simple, proof (based on the previous idea) that there are more decimal numbers than there are fractions (rational numbers); ideas like the one that lies at the basis of probability, namely, that the probability of something is the number of ways the something can happen divided by the number of ways anything (in the set of things under consideration) can happen; ideas like jagged lines and rough surfaces that have the peculiar property that if you look at a piece of them under a powerful magnifying glass, the piece looks just like the big piece (self-similarity, the basis of fractal geometry); and many others.

Of course ideas are not in themselves mathematics, they only become mathematics when they are placed on a firm logical foundation, but for me and at least a few other mathematicians, the idea comes first.

““Mathematics is not about symbols and calculations. These are just tools of the trade — quavers and crochets and five-finger exercises. Mathematics is about *ideas*. In particular, it is about the way that different ideas relate to each other.”— Stewart, Ian, *The Problems of Mathematics*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1992, p. 10.

“Logic is the means by which I convince the world of the correctness of my intuitions.”  
(Jacques Hadamard, I believe).

Surely, I kept thinking, there will be a mathematician who will recognize the originality and insight of my ideas, and disregard my inept writing style, knowing that that is something that can be corrected once the concepts and the arguments are correct. I could simply pay someone to convert my papers into the approved style, as I had done on several occasions in the past.

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

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

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

### **Another Final Blow**

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

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

Dear John Franklin,

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

*Retirement*

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

We appreciate your consideration of [journal name].

Sincerely,

[managing editor's name]

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Dear Dr. Fraenklin[sic],

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

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

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

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

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

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

Best wishes.

[name of editor-in-chief]”

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

*Retirement*

Dear Dr. [name of managing editor]

Naturally, I am disappointed about your rejection of my paper, "A Solution to the Syracuse Problem". I am even more disappointed about the reasons that [name of editor-in-chief] gave for the rejection, since I don't understand two of them, and since one I think I can legitimately disagree with. My (respectful) reply to [name of editor-in-chief] is given below, in the form of bracketed comments to his email. If you feel it is appropriate to forward the reply to him, then I hope you will do so. Please assure him that I will not reply to his response without his permission.

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

Thank you for considering the paper.

Best regards,

-- John Franklin

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

Dear Dr. Fraenkin[sic],

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

incomplete.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-- John Franklin

On 9/21/2006 I wrote:

Dear Dr. [name of managing editor]:

Before I terminate communication with the editorial staff of [journal name], I feel I have to do what I can to prevent another author from receiving the kind of treatment I did, because, in the

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long run, such treatment can only hurt the reputation of the journal. (I will certainly never recommend the journal to any mathematician or computer scientist.)

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

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

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

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

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

Regards,

-- John Franklin

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

Dear John Franklin,

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

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

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

I find myself disinclined to explain our editorial policy because of the hostility of your latest message. However, I will state that [name of editor-in-chief] did not "fake" a reading of your

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paper, and to assume that he did so because you disagree with his comments seems to reflect some defensiveness on your part.

Sincerely,

[name of managing editor]

That same day I responded:

Dear Dr. [name of managing editor]

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

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

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

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

Thank you again for your email.

Regards,

-- John Franklin

I immediately began searching for another journal. I don't recall how, but I found one that, from its title, seemed ideally suited for my paper. Furthermore, on searching the list of editors, I saw that one of them was a mathematician whose work I had studied extensively years before, and for which I had the highest respect. So I sent an electronic version of my paper to him, mentioning in my email how delighted I was to find that he was an editor of the journal, and telling him

about my extensive study of his work. In keeping with the journal's policy, I sent a copy of the paper to the editor-in-chief. I quickly received an email back from the editor-in-chief — “ok, good luck with the referees” — but received no acknowledgment from the editor. I assume this was because he knew the editor-in-chief would send the acknowledgment.

I waited three months, pleased that the paper had survived at least the initial perusal by the editor and probably a referee. But I felt I should be sure that, in fact, the editor had received the paper, so I wrote him, apologizing for bothering him and, to reduce that bother to a minimum, asking him to inform me only if my paper was no longer under consideration. (If that were the case, he by rights should have informed me already, but I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt.) I received no reply. I waited another two months, then wrote the editor-in-chief asking him how long it typically took for an author to receive a decision on his paper. The editor-in-chief replied, “when you choos[sic] an editor, you may ask him: usually 4-5 months”.

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

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

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

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

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

The editor-in-chief never replied.

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

As I lay tossing and turning in bed, I tried to figure out what had happened. The answer I came up with was this: probably there was a grapevine among journal editors, and so when my paper arrived, the editor checked it and found my response to the rejection by the previous editors. He then went to my web site, saw that it contained papers on some of the hardest problems in mathematics, including Fermat's Last Theorem, and that it also a book that strongly criticized the contemporary academic mathematics culture (though written by a person with a different name)

and decided that I didn't even deserve the few seconds it would have taken to send a one line rejection email.

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

Ironically, during those terrible days, I wrote an email to another world-famous mathematician I had admired for many years, telling him how much I had enjoyed his latest book, and offering a few additional thoughts of my own. He wrote back:

“...let me say that I've read your e-mail word by word, and your remarks are all remarkably perceptive. Of course, we are both going against the current zeitgeist/esprit des temps/spirit of the times. But who cares!

“You may not be a mathematician, but you are my kind of intellectual. Ignore the madness of the world... “

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

### **A Mathematician Who Cared About Amateurs**

In June 2007 I did a Google search on “amateur mathematician”, got the expected hundreds, if not thousands of hits, idly started going through them, and came across a web site that offered advice to amateurs — advice that had been written by a professional mathematician. There were probably not ten professional mathematicians in the entire world who had anything but contempt for amateurs. I assumed that one explanation for this exception was that, although this mathematician had a PhD from one of the best mathematics departments in the country, he was not an academic, but instead worked for a software company.

He said he had no time to read any of my papers, so I picked his brain for advice on dealing with the culture of the professional mathematicians. And, on two occasions, he resolved a dispute I had with Ed the Physicist, my most loyal reader. In both cases, he decided I was right.

### **A Real Son-of-a-Bitch**

In January 2008 I received the following email:

Subj: the link to your papers posted on the [name of web site] discussion [sic] page Date: 1/18/2008 9:02:25 PM Pacific Standard Time

From: ...

To: [My name as derived from my email address]

...where I have added my comments.

There was no signature nor indication of professional affiliation. There was also no link in the email, so I wrote him back asking him to explain what the email meant. He sent a long reply from which I gathered that on a certain web site someone had referred to my Syracuse Problem paper,

and that in the course of reading part of my paper, the author of the email decided that my paper was wrong, and on the web site he had posted an extensive explanation why.

I eventually found my way to the web site, and was shocked to see his critique begin with some nasty language indicating his contempt for my entire approach. He then argued that my proof was wrong because it applied equally well to functions related to the Syracuse function in which counterexamples were known to exist, and thus that my paper proved a falsehood. He provided several pages of data and equations about these other functions. He then took me to task for not dealing with all the generalizations of the problem. In other words, any attempt at solving the Problem was invalid unless it provided a complete analysis of all similar functions.

He then rewrote several of my definitions so that they would fit the general case, then, using these revised definitions, argued that my proofs of lemmas were invalid. This is of course a completely illegitimate practice. My first impulse was to reply to his criticisms in kind, using even nastier language, but Ed the Physicist and one of my computer consultants advised against this, urging me instead to post on the web site a calm, reasoned, rebuttal of his remarks. This I did. I said that mathematics would come to a standstill if a new rule went into effect that every proof must be accompanied by a proof that it does not also prove a known falsehood in a similar problem, whatever “similar” might mean. Several months later, I received another unsigned email claiming that my proof was invalid, and using the same arguments, if even more frenetically, as the first author had. I strongly suspected the email was written by the same man.

He was not a crackpot. He was a man obsessed with a problem who didn't have any good ideas for solving it. He reminded me of my nemesis. If you can't solve the problem yourself, if you don't have a good idea, then become an expert. If you don't have a good idea for solving the problem, make sure that no one else solves it either — or, at the least, make sure that no one else solves it except on your terms which include that the author of any proposed solution demonstrate wide reading in the literature on the problem. My nemesis published a number of respectable papers. (There is no limit to the publishable papers that a competent mathematician can come up with while circling around a problem he can't solve.) He also developed a reputation for catching errors in other proposed proofs and, as I can attest, in keeping out of consideration anyone that he felt did not fit the mold of a professional mathematician with proper credentials.

Now I know the reader will say, “What can be more rational — if you don't have a good idea for solving a problem — than to try to read everything that has been written on the problem?” The reader will remind me that there are journals that will not even send a paper out for refereeing unless the author has demonstrated, in his list of references, that he knows the literature on the problem. In the search for a cure for cancer, people try to read as much as they can about past attempts. I can only say that I have never been able to work like this. Temperamentally, I am unsuited for such a plodding approach. Late in life I found that at least one great mathematician, Poincaré, had a similar aversion to plowing through all the previous literature on a problem. I can summarize my attitude by saying: If you haven't got an idea that your esthetic sense tells you is a good idea, then read the literature. If you do, then don't waste your time reading the literature except as necessary to develop your idea.

### **Another Shameful Refereeing Job**

After the year-and-a-half ordeal with the journal whose editor didn't respond to authors' emails, the above-mentioned mathematician who had sympathy for amateurs recommended another journal. And so, after fixing all the errors the previous referee had found, I submitted my paper (May, 2008). Unlike the previous journal, this one sent me an immediate acknowledgement

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of receipt of the paper, with an identification number for it. I was so overwhelmed that I wrote to the editorial office expressing my appreciation, and even received a thank you email from one of the office staff.

But in three weeks an email arrived from the editor saying the paper had been rejected. He sent a copy of the referee's report. It was the same old story and then some. The referee had given the paper the usual superficial reading, but in addition he or she had decided to redefine the Syracuse function according to another definition that was well-known in the literature, then base his criticisms on that redefinition. Just as the reader with the nasty language had done. The referee openly admitted he or she had not understood several key concepts, as was clearly evident by the outright falsehoods he claimed the paper asserted. I immediately wrote an email to the editor.

Dr. [name of editor]:

First, I would like to express my appreciation for the promptness with which [name of journal] reviewed my paper....

Naturally, I was disappointed to learn that the paper had been rejected, but when I read the referee's report, I was more than disappointed -- I was astounded. Although the paper has been read and commented on by dozens of qualified readers, never before has anyone read the paper with such a lack of comprehension as that of the referee.

My first reaction was that somehow I must have sent a garbled version of my paper, with pages missing, and so I immediately checked the file I had sent. But it seemed to be entirely intact.

I fully realize that your rejection decision must be final. Nevertheless, I simply cannot allow the matter to end without sending you a detailed response to some of the referee's comments. A glance at the attached .pdf file will reveal that I am not arguing about trifles. The referee admits (see start of file) that he or she did not understand [two] of the most fundamental and important concepts in the paper ... , even though all this is spelled out clearly and precisely on the pages indicated in the attached file.

Then the referee insists on basing his or her criticisms on a definition of the Syracuse function that is different from the one used in the paper! Numerous other misconceptions and flat-out false statements are cited in the attached file. Perhaps most serious of all, the referee gives no sign of having understood the basic idea on which the proof of the main theorem is based.

Obviously, you are under no obligation to forward the attached file to the referee, or read it yourself, or have any other member of the editorial staff read it, but I am hoping that someone will at least spend a few minutes seeing just how bizarre -- there is no other word for it -- the referee's review of my paper was.

Best regards,

-- John Franklin

I didn't know if I should be happy or sad that the referee also said in his or her report that the structure I had discovered that underlay the Syracuse function was "too simple" to be of any use in solving the Problem — not that it was wrong but that it was too simple. This from a person who had not understood most of the paper to begin with.

The reader may perhaps be wondering why journals hadn't long ago instituted the practice of not revealing to the referee the name and affiliation of the author(s) of each paper, thus ensuring that the referee's decision would be based on the merits of the paper alone.

The state of refereeing is revealed by the reactions to a recent<sup>1</sup> decision of the American Mathematical Society. Up to 1975 all papers submitted for publication in the several journals supported by the Society were sent to referees with the names and affiliations of the authors recorded on the papers. The Society decided to try, for one of its journals, blind refereeing, that is, submitting the paper to the referee without the name and affiliation of the author. The protests of referees and even of two of the associate editors of that journal were vehement. They pointed to the thanklessness of the work, the difficulty in finding competent referees, and the problem of judging the correctness and worth of a paper. In the ensuing debate, partly through published letters, the opponents of blind refereeing admitted that the name and affiliation of the author helped immensely in the refereeing process. What these opponents were really saying is that they were not judging papers on their merits but were relying on the reputation of the author and his institutional affiliation to aid in determining the correctness and value of his work. If one may judge by the protests, many referees used no more than this information to make their decision. This debate brought into the open all the weaknesses of the refereeing process. — Kline, Morris, *Why the Professor Can't Teach*, St. Martin's Press, N.Y., 1977, p. 63.

### **A Kind Mathematician from the Past Helps Out**

The reader may recall from the first file of Vol. 5, under "Two Kind Mathematicians", the UC mathematician who for several weeks in the late 90s consulted with me on my paper. Thereafter I tried not to bother him more than twice a year so that I wouldn't wear out my welcome. He usually said he had no time to spend on my paper at the moment, and he never commented on my repeated offer of shared authorship if he helped me get the paper published.

I wrote him in June of 2007, more than a year since I had bothered him last, asking him if he would take a look at the latest version of my paper. I was surprised to receive a reply saying that he might have time in late summer or fall to return to the paper. In my email expressing thanks, I asked him if he had any thoughts on the bad treatment I consistently received from journal editors. His reply is worth quoting at length:

Concerning the lack of response from journals: I assume the explanation is that you have gotten a reputation as someone who repeatedly comes up with invalid proofs of the Syracuse conjecture, and that it is better to ignore such people than to get into long arguments about whether a proof is valid. You also have to understand that journals decide whether a paper is worth publishing by sending it to a referee -- a person in the field who is asked to read it and critique it, but is not paid for that work. So journal editors do not want to lose the good will of people willing to serve as referees by repeatedly sending out material that turns out to be

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1. as of 1977.

invalid, or too unclear to make sense of.

You write that "Last September, half a dozen graduate students and professional mathematicians" went over "all or part of my paper", but you don't say what conclusion they came to! If reputable mathematicians concluded that your proof is correct (not "too vague for me to tell", or the like), then they could certainly write to friends who are editors of journals, saying "This time, Mr. Franklin really seems to have a valid and comprehensible proof", and those editors should then be willing to put it through the refereeing process. If the people who read your paper agreed it was correct, have you spoken with them about this?

If the current situation is that you believe the proof is correct but that you still don't have it in a form that other people can evaluate, you might try auditing a course in "proof-writing" at some local college or university...

Anyway, if, at the point when I have the time, the situation is still that you think you have a paper worth reading, but haven't been able to get it looked at by a journal, then I will try to read it, and if I find it readable and correct, I will certainly inform people who are editors, and/or are important in the area and whose opinion would be decisive with editors. Incidentally, having had it on the web certainly will establish your priority if there should be any question about this.

> ... I am willing to refrain from submitting the paper to any journals until you have made a  
> decision regarding co-authoring, ...

I would only be a coauthor if I thought I had contributed some original mathematical content to the paper. But as I say, if I think you have a valid proof, I will inform others of this, and there should then be no problem with getting it published. I would only be a coauthor if I thought I had contributed some original mathematical content to the paper. But as I say, if I think you have a valid proof, I will inform others of this, and there should then be no problem with getting it published.

I thanked him profusely. No other mathematician had ever written to me at such length, or in such a helpful manner. In December 2007 I received an email from him that began:

I had written that I would send you general suggestions on writing "after the question of the correctness or correctability of your present proof is settled between us". Since I haven't heard from you for a long time, I suppose that you are either struggling with whether you can get your arguments into an acceptable form, or doing something else; but in any case, that it may be a long wait before you send another version of your argument. Since I have a bit of time at the moment (I'll be out of the country for a week and a half starting Thursday, and I've done almost all the preparations for my departure, and this isn't the time to start something bigger like a new paper), I thought I would take an hour or so now and write up for you some of the notes I had jotted down."

There followed several pages of notes, both on writing style and on matters I might look into in the course of working on my proof. I set to work implementing all his recommended changes,

and meantime continued to try to make the proof meet the approval of Ed the Physicist.

At the end of June of 2008, I wrote him again. There ensued a month of email exchanges that resulted in a major improvement to my paper. His skepticism did not diminish, and I had no reason to believe that he understood the idea underlying the proof. But there was none of that thinly-veiled contempt that I had grown accustomed to from professional mathematicians. There was also no encouragement. I had the impression that he had a grudging respect for someone outside the university who wasn't a mathematician but who had put a great deal of effort into trying to solve a very difficult problem. He seemed to believe that the most honorable way to treat such a person was to help him improve his paper until he saw that his proof would never work.

Already in 2007 he had made the same criticism as the nasty reader described above, namely, that I needed to show that my proof didn't prove a falsehood about one of the functions similar to the Syracuse function. In July 2008 I decided that I had to respond to this criticism. I was surprised to discover that not only could I prove that my proof didn't apply to two of the similar functions that both men had explicitly mentioned, but that my proof didn't apply to an infinity of functions that could reasonably be called similar to the Syracuse function! Our exchange of emails during June was one of the most productive in my life.

At the end of July, I wrote up everything carefully and sent him an email telling him the revised paper was on my web site. He didn't reply. I did not think he would simply curtail communication the way others had, without an explanation. Perhaps he had not received my email, or had gone on vacation, or could find no errors in my argument but didn't want to go on record, despite my guarantee of confidentiality, that I had solved the Problem.

I decided to give him a little rest, and went back to Ed the Physicist, who had returned from travels in Japan and China, and asked him to look at the latest revision of the paper. Like the mathematician, he had not accepted my proof, but he also had never understood the underlying idea. Perhaps my latest revision would change his mind. It didn't.

Months later, in response to an email from me, the kind mathematician said he had become involved in other work and had forgotten to reply to my email of the end of July. He had no time to look at my paper during the fall semester of 2008, but perhaps after that. In November and December of 2008 I made what can legitimately be called a major improvement in my solution of the Syracuse Problem. I wrote him early in January 2009, when I knew he would have completed end-of-semester grading. He wrote back a courteous email saying that he said he had to write several letters of recommendation, one of them for a student whose PhD advisor he had been and who was coming up for tenure, then he had to prepare for a talk at a conference, then he had to prepare for the next semester's courses, but that he would get back to my paper when he could.

### **The Need for a Sense of Humor**

In fall of 2009 I placed a notice on one of the math department mailing lists that I had finally been allowed access to after years of effort. I asked for readers of a paper-in-progress; I would pay any reasonable hourly fee, etc. I received two replies, both from Asian graduate students. I told them where they could find, on my web site, the proofs I wanted checked, and gave them the terms of a potential contract, which included that they spend at least one hour a week on the reading and that they send me their comments at least once a week. We agreed on a price (\$50 an hour), I gave them the go-ahead. Incredibly, in less than a week they both replied, giving thoughtful comments, albeit in broken English, on the background material in the paper that was needed to understand the proofs. Both students lectured me in no uncertain terms on the need to improve my writing style. When the students got to the proofs themselves, they had difficulty understand-

ing the concepts, which is not surprising, since almost certainly the concepts were unlike anything they had run into before. The students made suggestions as to ways to better express what I had not said. And there were again strong urgings, in broken English, that I learn to write in a professional manner.

### Why Continue?

When, in the eighties, I began working on the most difficult math problems I could find, and came up with several ideas that I felt would solve them, I thought, “The mathematicians will see immediately what I am driving at and finish the work in return for shared authorship.” As the reader knows by now, nothing could have been farther from the truth. The mathematicians did *not* see what I was driving at (the two main reasons being my abominable writing style and my lack of credentials), nor did they have any interest in doing so. In 2009 I came across an observation by the physicist Lee Smolin that would have done me enormous good if it had been uttered 25 years earlier and if I had known about it then: “No one but you can develop your ideas, and no one but you will fight for them.”<sup>1</sup>

I am always bothered when an intellectual’s tenacity is admired because I strongly suspect that people imagine he somehow knew he was right, and that is what drove him on. Equally important, perhaps more so, at least in some cases, is the power of vanity and the determination not to let years of work come to nothing and the craving for revenge against those who slighted him.

### Not Even a Linguistics Professor...

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

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

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

Dear Prof. — :

You may remember that we had a conversation around noon at the Musical Offering during the week of Apr. 24: it began with my asking you if a book you were holding was about linguistics. I found it a very pleasant conversation, and I hope you did too.

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1. Smolin, Lee, *The Trouble With Physics*, Houghton Mifflin Company, N.Y., 2007, p. 291

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Since then I have wanted to present, in a clearer and more concise form, the main ideas I brought up. I will certainly understand if you have no time to reply. In any case, please be assured I have no intention of dragging you into a long email exchange. I will do my utmost to be brief.

To begin: several years ago, it occurred to me that Wittgenstein's famous assertion, "The meaning is the use", could be interpreted as "Semantics is pragmatics". I then began wondering if syntax could not also be interpreted as pragmatics, and decided that the answer might be yes: a natural language grammar describes how one says what one wants to say in the circumstances that it is appropriate to say it.

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

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

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

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

So I decided, a few years ago, that it would be far better if the form of a book for learning a foreign language were closer to that of the phrase book that tourists use. All the most common phrases and sentences in the language would be listed, in alphabetical order, by their equivalents in the native language. Thus, under "H" would be found "How are you?", followed by the equivalent phrase in the foreign language. Under "W" would be found, "What time is it?", followed by the equivalent phrase in the foreign language, etc. (Of course, in

some languages, e.g., German, in which the noun typically comes first, and the verb last, a "frequently-occurring phrase" might well have other words between the elements of the phrase.)

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

I said above that I was aware that the academic discipline of linguistics is only incidentally concerned with the learning of foreign languages, and so now let me get to more abstract matters. One test of the academic value of a set of ideas in linguistics can be obtained by considering the problem of computer translation of natural languages. Using the above ideas, a computer program for this purpose would consist of a data base containing a large number of the most-frequently-occurring phrases in the target language along with, possibly, a representation of the corresponding semantics. Parsing would be a last resort, when the above data base failed. Furthermore, the program would make it easy for new phrases and sentences to be entered manually, with appropriate semantics. (I am simplifying here, for clarity. Certainly something along the lines of "grammatical rules" would be required even with the data base.)

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

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

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

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

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

All the best,

-- John Franklin

No reply. But then I thought: "Of course! She is still in the glow of beatitude at having been appointed a professor at one of the nation's — the world's — great universities! She is not going to want to reply to an informal *email* from a guy she met at a lunch counter, for God's sake. So I wrote a ten-page paper, presenting all my points as formally as I could, including appropriate references, and sent it to her. She never replied.

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

## **An Electrical and Mechanical Genius**

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

### **Physical Description, Speech**

He was in his late fifties, thin, with a pig-tail hanging down from the back of his head, though he wasn't bald. He had a wispy goatee and walked with a bit of an old man's stoop, although in a quick manner that would make you describe him as "spry". He had a Tennessee accent, an old-man voice, and spoke rapidly, with frequent repetitions of the phrases "what happens is..." and "basically" and "make a long story short..." since much of his talk was explanations of machines and technical concepts. When a mechanical or electrical part was no longer available, he would say it was "made of unobtainium". He often referred to security software, with its ever-present warnings about the customer's susceptibility to viruses, worms, spyware, Trojan horses and the rest unless he or she bought the latest upgrade to the company's software, as "nagware", or "nannyware", or "scareware". His term for Microsoft's ungainly, poorly-constructed software that was always requiring more and more memory was "bloatware". He had particular contempt for this company, often railing against the stupidity of some of their design decisions. He respected Linux's Open-Source software which, although the users could add and modify the system software on their own (with suitable approvals and checks) was much more reliable and better engineered than Microsoft's products, which were kept under tight secrecy and control.

When I expressed disbelief that a piece of software could do something he had just described, and he really didn't have time to go into the details, he would wave his hands and say, "Don't

worry. It's fairy magic." When we got onto a subject which revealed the stupidity of the government or of the software manufacturers, and he didn't want to allow it to take away time from the work at hand, he would shake his head and say, "Don't get me started". Sometimes he would point to his head and say, "See these gray hairs? I got them from dealing with these idiots. I'm really only 28."

For some reason, he didn't like the women whose recorded voices accompanied various events in the operation of a piece of software. For example, "Welcome to CompuServe!" "You have mail!", etc. When one of these messages occurred while he was working on my computer, he would say, "Thanks for sharing, *bitch*". In conversation, he referred to her as "Robo Bitch". I know of no reason for his hostility toward this woman with a pleasant voice who, after all, had only been trying to earn a living.

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

Another time, when I nervously called him about a noise in the computer (probably due to the fan blade having expanded slightly in the hot weather and scraping on something) and at one point asked him, "Am I going to have a crash?", he replied, laughing, "Probably, but your computer will be fine."

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

### **Brief Biography**

He had been born in Kentucky. The family then moved to Tennessee where they lived for his first 11 years, then moved to Montgomery, Ala. He said once that when he was 12, his father had taught him the binary code (the one used in computers, which requires only the two digits 0 and 1 to represent numbers) and the binary powers (powers of 2) up to  $2^{16}$ , whereupon he promptly rattled them off at breakneck speed: 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, 1024, 2048, 4096, 8192, 16384, 32768, 65536. He said his father had also taught him how a superheterodyne radio receiver works. I thought of my father, who had always been glad to teach me and my brother how to use mechanical tools — the correct way to drill and saw and fasten pieces of wood together (use screws, not nails!). And yet all my life I have had a morbid inferiority complex about my ability to use tools. On the other hand, the teachings of Art's father had resulted in a man who delighted in working with mechanical and electrical things, and in fact a genius for doing so. If I were forced to explain the difference in us, I would say that, as a boy, he probably didn't hold his father in the same awe as I held mine. Maybe it was no more than a case of his father just happening to know some neat stuff. I never asked Art about this, but I am guessing that his father was not an engineer who was the president of a company and who commuted to a big city every day and published papers in important journals and spent his evenings working on inventions.

Art said that in high school he had become involved in broadcast radio and had tried to get rid

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

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

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

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

In intellectual matters, his learning had a rough-hewn, home-made quality. He knew what Maxwell's equations<sup>1</sup> were about, but he hastened to admit that it had been many years since he had studied them. One day, in November, 2008, as he was using an aerosol can of compressed air to blow the dust off the fan and various parts in the back panel of my computer, he paused and held the can toward me. "Feel it!" he said. I did, and commented on how cold it was. He (delighted): "Right! Boyle's Law!" But, as I found later on checking one of my physics texts, the phenomenon was not due to Boyle's Law (which was first published in 1662 and which relates the volume and pressure of a gas) but rather to Gay-Lussac's Law (discovered in 1802 and which relates temperature and pressure — in particular, it states that if pressure goes down, which it does when some of the compressed air is allowed to escape, then so does temperature). Both laws were later incorporated into what is known as the ideal gas law. But he was in the right ball-park.

About the same time I discussed earthquake-damage protection and pointed out the rope I had run over the top of my current computer (a Dell), old LaserJet printer on the left, and Beyond 2000 clone computer from the nineties on the right. The rope ran under the work table, was pulled tight, and the ends were tied. Its purpose was to prevent my computer from dancing off the table during a 'quake. He was a little skeptical. "Let's see, kinetic energy is  $\frac{1}{2} m, v \text{ squared} \dots$ " He then argued that although the rope would prevent my equipment from falling off the table, it wouldn't prevent it from wobbling on top of the table, and the energy behind that lateral move-

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

ment would increase as the square of the velocity induced by the shaking. I told him I wanted to move the computer screen between the printer and computer, thus wedging in the computer, which he did.

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

### **Example of His Extraordinary Ability**

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

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

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

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

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

He not only knew everything he needed to know about the problems he was called on to fix, he also had an extraordinary amount of historical knowledge about technology. If I brought up the Army surplus receivers I had used in my ham radio days in the fifties, he would give me the history of these receivers. When he was explaining the signal interference that occurred because too many neighbors were on the same frequencies with their wireless routers, he remarked in passing

that the Hollywood actress Hedy Lamarr<sup>1</sup> had been co-inventor of a device in World War II which prevented the enemy from intercepting the signals to radio-controlled torpedoes, the device arbitrarily changing the frequency continually on which the control signals were transmitted, she having gotten the idea from thinking about the fact that pressing different keys on a piano represented changes in frequency. When he was fixing the second phone line in the house, which had been wired incorrectly by a phone company technician in the process of an attempt to repair the first phone line, he remarked in passing that the acronym for standard telephone service was “POTS” (“Plain Old Telephone Service”) and that the impedance on the lines was 600 ohms, and that the names of the two wires for each line were “tip” and “ring”, the latter term referring to a circular part, not to the ringing of the phone; a third wire he said was called the “sleeve”.

But he was not always right. He told me once that the word “cop” was an abbreviation for “constable on patrol”, and that “tip” was an abbreviation for “to insure promptness”. But he was aware that authorities were not all in agreement on these etymologies.

### Analysis of His Ability

More than once, after he had solved yet another problem, I would say something like, “Sheer genius!” He would shrug, say it was nothing but experience. But on one occasion he said that there are four types of intelligence: analytical, deductive, common sense, and artistic. He said he was not gifted in any one category but he was able to go from one to the other quickly. (He had not heard of Howard Gardner’s seven types of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal and intrapersonal.) I gradually came to conclude that what put him so far ahead of others in his field were three things: first, a logical mind, which of course others had; second, always having the right tools; and third, an extraordinary memory for technical details.

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

When he worked on the second phone line, as described above, he had devices to see if a signal sent from my housemate’s room went to the connection box at the front of the house; and a special phone he could attach to wires in the connection box to see if it rang when he dialed the number associated with the wires. When, after he had figured out the problem with my car battery

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

draining, I asked him where he had picked up his mechanical knowledge, he said, well, country boys in Tennessee starting messing around with cars at an early age.

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

He collected old machines, electronic and mechanical. When I told him how sad I was that I would soon have to scrap my 1979 Toyota Celica (my car prior to the 1988 Toyota mentioned above), because I couldn't stand the thought of this fine piece of machinery, this loyal servant of two decades, being crushed into a cube and tossed into a vat of molten scrap, he offered to take it if I didn't charge him anything. I agreed on condition that, when he no longer wanted it, he would give me right of first refusal on taking it back. He fixed it up and drove it for a year, but then said that the cost of keeping it going any longer would have been more than \$1000, even for him, and so I took it back. As this is written (April 2007) the car is parked in front of my garage. I am no longer able to start it, but every once in a while, as I pass it on the way to the garage, I place my hand on it as a token of affection so it will know that, even in its old age, it is still loved.

### **Political Beliefs**

As I mentioned in the first chapter of Vol. 4 ("A Mutt and Jeff Duo"), Art and Steve became good friends, even though they were on opposite ends of the political spectrum. When I pointed this out to Art, he said that the main reason was that he and Steve both wanted a just society. Art's second wife, a professor of psychology at a nearby state university, was, like him, a libertarian-anarchist, and I think had written at least one book on the history of the movement. In discussions with Art, he always emphasized the evils of government, and repeated the libertarian-anarchist criterion for just laws: "Unless you would be willing to take a gun and threaten to kill anyone who disobeyed the law, the law shouldn't exist." Thus, it was permissible to kill a burglar or someone on the street who was threatening to kill you, and therefore laws against burglary and murder were legitimate. But if you weren't willing to threaten to kill someone who didn't pay their taxes, or who refused to serve in the armed forces, or who drove too fast, or who committed embezzlement, there should be no law prohibiting these things. I told him (during the swine flu outbreak in April, 2009) that I personally was glad that some of my taxes supported the Health Dept. If a large number of people with the same symptoms began showing up at hospitals, and if tests revealed that the cause was salmonella, I wanted there to be an agency that attempted to find out the source of the salmonella, and then to shut it down and make sure all products that were likely to be infected were withdrawn from the market. He said this was perfectly reasonable, but that Health Dept.s could be supported by private contributions because people would recognize the importance of such an agency. I replied that you couldn't run an efficient Health Dept. if funding was unpredictable. He said that we often hear stories of government meat inspectors accepting bribes, but never of rabbis who inspect kosher meat taking bribes. Thus private citizens with a personal interest in preventing bad meat from reaching the market, would be much better meat inspectors than the government.

I always concluded by saying that my mind could be changed if the libertarian-anacharists could point to a case where their philosophy worked in practice. I repeated what I had said earlier, namely, that I was enthusiastic about the idea that had been circulating several years before, of the libertarians taking over the state of New Hampshire. He said that a town or city or state could not

serve as a convincing example, and cited the case of Amsterdam, in which liberal drug laws have resulted in drug dealers from throughout Europe descending on the city. Only an entire nation could serve as an example, and this could only happen when the people gradually began to realize that anarchist-libertarianism was the best foundation on which to construct a society.

### **Success of His Business**

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

### **A Child's Scream**

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

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

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

### **My Net Worth, 2007**

In 2005 I began walking around with a slip of paper in my wallet that contained a tally of my net worth. I enjoyed updating it each month after I got my monthly report from Shufro, the New

## *Retirement*

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

**Table 1: Net Worth in Early 2,007**

Financial Category	Monthly income	Annual income	Annual Capital Equivalent
Room rental	\$375	\$4,500	\$90,000
Social Security	\$1,214	\$14,568	\$291,360
House			\$725,00
IRA Acct. at Shufro, Rose & Co.			\$782,030
Living Trust Acct. at Shufro, Rose & Co.			\$501,993
Checking account, avg.			\$9,000
Total net worth			\$2,399,383

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

Unfortunately, the greed and stupidity of lower class home buyers, and of the crooked brokers who were only too glad to cater to them, provided the risky mortgages could be passed on to other, greedy investors, soon ended the pleasant upward climb in my net worth. In May of 2008,

the value of my house was almost certainly down to \$550,000, if not lower, and my Shufro accounts had dropped also, though proportionately much less. In August, 2009, my net worth was about \$2, 036,000.

## Daily Life

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

...[the Goncourt brothers] wanted to provide future generations with a compendium of all the minutiae that were missing from accounts of ancient Rome: “A period for which one has neither a dress sample nor a dinner menu is dead and gone, and cannot be revived.” They knew that incidental details were often the most precious and that too deliberate an attempt to enhance the diary’s historical importance would diminish its lasting value.

Without the Goncourts, we might never have known, for instance, that Paris theater audiences could be just as cruel to child actors as they were to the adult actors, that by 1867, bookshops no longer provided their customers with chairs, or that gaslight shining through *fleur-de-lys*-shaped holes in the metal walls of a urinal created beautiful effects “on the violet paper of a poster advertising a cure for venereal disease”.<sup>1</sup>

But the results of several attempts to record the minutiae of my current daily life — including the thousand trivialities that daily life is heir to— have been insufferably smug, despite the misery they describe, and these can be summarized in a few words: boundless anxiety (I will be a nervous wreck even in the grave), suicidal depression, worry over when my heart attack or stroke will come and when the inevitable major earthquake will come and the daily loss of my life’s savings due to the economic meltdown; frequent thoughts about the horrible death of my brother<sup>2</sup> and about my lifetime of failure and the impossible task of preparing the books that constitute my life’s work for posthumous publication and doing such a good job at it that my son will be willing to carry out my wishes. Activities of a typical week are quickly summarized: up at around 6:30, the day spent working at the computer and lying in bed reading, tea and donut break at around 12 noon, kidney beans in early afternoon, PBS News Hour at 3, dinner of canned soup or soup at Au Cocquelet around 6; a few puffs on my cigar on my back porch, and a few sips from my cognac and ginger ale as I looked up above the neighbor’s bay tree at Orion’s Belt or the odd star and watched my cigar smoke drift up to the galaxies, I sometimes thinking that I am a success after all, that a man who can enjoy a good cigar and a glass of cognac in the evening cannot consider himself a failure; then watching a British detective series; or on the rare occasions when there was

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

2. See “Death of My Brother” in the first chapter of Vol. 2 of this book

a good Nova program or, even rarer, a good new film had become available on DVD, watching that; typically nodding off during the detective series; waking, filthy with sleep, watching Seinfeld, then dragging myself upstairs, sometimes watching Charlie Rose. Fitful sleep often with the TV on all night. Friday evening dinner of vegetarian lasagna, red wine, and vanilla ice cream at Fat Apple's, then Mystery Night on KTEH. Sunday morning breakfast with the twins, as described below, and then, in subsequent years, at Rick and Ann's. Phone call to Gaby on Wednesday and Sunday evenings; afterward, on Sundays, Masterpiece Theater.

## Breakfast With the Twins

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Retirement

On rainy days, they arrived in shiny plastic raincoats, one girl's red, the other's green, with colorful decorations. They wore multicolored rain boots. I always told them how nice they looked and thought to myself, "Their mother could be couturier to the nation's children!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Retirement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Retirement

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

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

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

She knew "Jack Sprat", finishing it after I said a few words; also "Hickory Dickory Dock". Then, one Sunday in the middle of June, 2007, Naomi (who had had some tears over an orange-juice-glass incident) suddenly launched into "The Lady With the Alligator Purse":

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

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

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

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

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

Penicillin said the Doctor,  
Castor oil said the Nurse,  
Pizza said the lady

With the alligator purse.

Shot said the Doctor,  
Pills said the Nurse,  
*Nonsense!* said the lady  
with the alligator purse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As they were getting ready to leave, and their father helped Alice on with her little cloth jacket, Naomi suddenly wanted *John* to help her on with *her* jacket. Her father said that John wanted to eat his breakfast, but Naomi insisted. And so I was granted the honor of helping milady

on with her street attire. In the process, I received a brief lecture on how I should *always* take my jacket *with* me whenever I left my table because otherwise I will *forget* it and drive all the way home and then have to drive all the way *back*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Retirement

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

Alice then recited (several times):

“The horse he slipped and fell on the flea  
‘Whoops’, said the flea, ‘There’s a *horsey* on me.’<sup>1</sup>

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

Sometimes, as I read my paper, I would sense a small presence at my elbow, and, when I turned, I would see Alice’s two big eyes looking up at me with an expression that seemed to say, “I like you”.

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

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

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

Another Sunday in the fall: Naomi shyly approached me, asked if I would like to come to their house. I: “Yes, I would like that very much, but first you need to ask your daddy and mommy if

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

“A horse and a flea and three white mice  
Sitting on the curbstone shooting dice...”

it would be OK. “ Her father smiled, said “Well, we can think about it....” I told Gaby that I was sure both parents were genuinely afraid of having a possible child molester know where they lived.

Both girls, but Naomi especially, liked knock-knock jokes, including some I had never heard before: She: “Knock knock.” I: “Who’s there?” She: “Orange.” I: “Orange who?” She: “Orange you glad I didn’t say ‘banana’?” But one of them was downright spooky. She: “Knock knock.” I: “Who’s there?” She: “Nobody.” I: “Nobody who?” She: “Just...nobody.”

Naomi was not shy about commenting on my food. She would come over to my table, and announce, “That’s yuckie!. We *hate* omelettes “ Then, pointing at the ketchup on my potatoes: “That looks like *pooh!*” She was always delighted at a chance to kid me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am convinced that both he and his wife were glad to have been given an opportunity to get rid of me, since I am sure they worried that this old man who so obviously delighted in their daughters, might well be a child molester — a not unreasonable concern given the news reports. The one time that the mother came into the restaurant, and shook hands with me, I had sweaty palms, and that could only have reinforced her suspicions that I was a pervert.

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

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

“The soul is healed by being with children.” — Dostoyevski

## **Other Children at the Restaurant**

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

Then there was a Chinese brother and sister. The father, who gave me the impression of being in some high tech job, sat at their table talking on a cell phone. The mother sat facing him, listening to the kids at the blackboard behind her. The boy began writing the alphabet, and after each additional few letters, he sang the alphabet song up to that point. His sister, meantime, was writing down in the corner of the blackboard. Around “r”, he got stuck. He stood there, thinking, tapping his chalk on the board, then said, “Hey, mom, what comes after ‘r’?” She turned, told him in her quiet way, and on he went. Then, when all the letters were written, he sang the song all the way through. I resumed reading my paper. When I next looked up, he had written the lines of a musical staff on the board, and was writing notes on it — all F’s, true, but it was a promising start.

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

## **Another Old Song**

The reader will recall the sudden emotion that swept over me in JFK Airport when the old song “Dance With Me” was suddenly played as background music over the loudspeakers<sup>1</sup>. This being suddenly moved by old songs continued. In the late summer of 2008, a TV ad featured The Monkees’ “Daydream Believer”, which had first been released in 1967, and which until that summer, had never made little impression on me. But then I became obsessed with it, especially the chorus,

“Cheer up Sleepy Jean.  
Oh what can it mean.  
To a daydream believer  
And a homecoming queen.”

and would often listen to it on my computer after Steve, my neighbor, pointed out that such things were possible. The lines seemed to recall the sweet, sad teenage years that the other kids had experienced, but that I never did.

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1. See “Visiting Her” in the second file prior to this one.

In passing, since the subject is old songs, I should mention several that were anything but pleasant to hear again. I am referring to Christmas carols. Certainly one of the torments of growing old is having to listen to these, over and over, for at least two months of every year. In restaurants, I was often driven to ask the server to please turn the music. As often as not, she said she couldn't, because the music was for the customers' pleasure.

How many times had I heard some Christmas carols by the time I was, say, 70? Very conservatively, I heard some of them ten times each Christmas season. So that means 700 listenings to music that was mediocre or worse.

## **I Find My High School English Teacher, Mrs. Spettel**

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

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

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

In the course of our conversation, I learned that she and her husband had married in 1950. He was amazed when I told him I remembered that she had said once that he had been with Picker X-ray in White Plains. Yes, he had been in the International Division. He said that the rumor we

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

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

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

### **“What If My Whole Life Has Been Wrong?”**

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

In my desperation, I re-read Tolstoy’s story, “The Death of Ivan Ilych”, which is about the life and death of a judge whose success was due largely to his having always done what was expected of him. Then, as he is dying of a terribly painful illness, he asks himself, “What if my whole life has been wrong?” I had asked the question, in one form or another, throughout my life, but now it seemed to demand an answer, even though I knew that Tolstoy had written the story after his conversion to a Buddhist-Christianity, and even though it is clear he felt that if Ivan Ilych had lived a spiritual life, he would not have asked the question in his final days — “Ivan Ilych’s life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible.” “But why”, I wondered, “should we believe that his life would have had meaning if, instead of adhering to bourgeois values, he had adhered to the values of this or that religious sect? If it is wrong to live one’s life conforming to others, then that applies to living one’s life conforming to the dictates of those who say that one must be true to oneself, one must believe in oneself, one must go one’s own way.” Or was Tolstoy saying that the judge should simply have “been himself”? But that is the view of the artist. Certainly the life of writing great novels is preferable to the life of working as a judge and doing what other people expect of you — if you prefer literature to the law and to the status that can bring. But suppose one is not an artist. I thought: “Just as, in the gambling casinos, they ring a bell whenever someone hits a jackpot on the slot machines, but never when someone *doesn’t* hit a jackpot, so we only hear about those who believed in themselves and accomplished something, never about those who believed in themselves and accomplished nothing.” I thought of English professors, those prestigious bureaucrats with lifetime guaranteed incomes, lecturing their stu-

dents about the importance of intellectual and artistic courage and of going it alone. I thought of the hope pushers of our time, telling eager college-educated audiences during public television pledge drives, that they can have it all if only they will be true to themselves.

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

### **I Should Have Stayed at Beckman Instruments**

I could have faced the loss of 25 years' work if I knew what I *should* have done with my life. I now think that my biggest mistake was leaving Beckman Instruments in the late sixties. At first, technical writing had been my loser's solution to the problem of having no talent for technical subjects (especially engineering). I had told myself, "The reason I don't understand this subject is that it is not clear! So I will devote my life to making difficult things clear!" And because I knew I had more writing skills than the vast majority of engineers, I also was able to believe, "Only *I* know how to make this clear!" In old age, I no longer have this self-abasing attitude regarding the task of presenting technical information. I think that task is of paramount importance because it relates directly to the efficiency with which technical work of any kind is done — especially operating a computer and solving problems in mathematics (including problems which are at the moment unsolved). To work on rectifying the things that profoundly trouble you is to live a meaningful life.

To this day, I believe that the book I wrote describing a new kind of technical documentation — one that enables users to find the instructions they need in a few seconds<sup>1</sup> — was an important book, though at this writing, some 14 years later, not a soul in the technical documentation community has tried to implement even the basic ideas.

Had I acknowledged to myself in 1968: (1) that in Manny Gordon I had the best boss I would probably ever have; (2) that although my management work had become routine, and that at least one or two of my employees had hopes that I would leave so that they would have a chance at my job, that in no way required that I move on, the fact was that I was a good manager; in fact it would turn out that management was the only thing I was ever successful at; and (3) that I could pursue my interest in symbolic logic (see "A Seminar That Changed My Life" in the first chapter of Vol. 2) and then, later, in programming and mathematics, without having to be the slave of my vanity by becoming a programmer or getting another degree. Had I acknowledged these things, then I would have been in a position, because I was a manager, to start implementing my early ideas regarding a much better way to write manuals and textbooks. I know that the book I wrote on a new way of doing technical documentation that enables users to find the instructions they need in a few seconds<sup>2</sup> is an important book, even though at this writing, some 14 years after the book's publication, not a soul in the technical documentation community has tried to implement even the basic idea. But if I had stayed at Beckman, I would not have had to spend thirty years trying to convince insufferably dim technical writers that I had come up with an important idea (as late as 2007, a veteran technical writer asked me, in all seriousness, "Why would anyone want to be able to look up instructions in only a few seconds?"). I would have been in a position to say, "It will be tried *now*."

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

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

On the other hand, staying at Beckman would have meant having to endure the cultural sterility of Palo Alto and the Peninsula, which may not have been all that bad compared to living among the lower class in South Berkeley, in a city run by corrupt politicians, and with the black problem always present.

A book derived from mine by another author applied the same ideas to mathematics and indeed all technical subjects. Using that book in my own studies convinced me, in old age, that I had made the right decision in staying out of the university, because the book made clear the inefficiency by which the university justified itself — the inefficiency of professors teaching courses instead of finding a way (that the book described) of enabling students to access far more quickly the information they needed to solve problems — an inefficiency that the professors made the most of to justify their paychecks and tenure and exalted status (“without us, how could they learn?”). I could not have brought myself to work for an institution I had no respect for. But still, there were times when I couldn’t help thinking of the professor I might have been — imagining snow flakes falling outside the window of my elegant house in New England, my daughter home from college, my slender, gracious wife preparing dinner, I, a venerable, beloved professor at a nearby famous university...

### **I Should Have Stayed With Jazz**

But then, looking back across the years, I thought: “I should have stayed with music — yes, even with Dixieland!” If I had had the courage of my convictions, I would have begun making a catalog of phrases in improvisations (the building blocks), and attempted to arrive at an answer that I could accept to the question that dogged me throughout my jazz career, namely, “What is improvisation?” I would have written down the phrases, just to see what they looked like on paper. Here as elsewhere, I could have refused to allow myself to be bullied by the prejudices of better musicians I played with, in particular, Heim. Make it your own! I could have made an all-out effort to play like Sidney De Paris — not to the exclusion of other styles, and by no means, because I should have, and could have, patiently learned the progressive idiom, meaning, in particular, the way the accents fell to get that old-time, but updated, Arban’s self-accompanying effect<sup>1</sup> (the effect that that so fascinated me). Nothing would have prevented me from getting a low-level job in industry — for example, technical writing — while I settled down to become a jazz musician on my own terms.

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

### **I Should Have Been a Servant**

And yet, when I watched a film about servants, for example, *Upstairs, Downstairs*, or *Remains of the Day*, or *Jeeves and Wooster*, I thought, “I should have been a servant!” It would

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

have been the perfect job for one so desperate for approval as I was. I thought back to those days in my childhood when I imagined what it would be like to Be Perfect. (See first chapter of Vol. 1 under “The Two Dilemmas”.) If I had been a servant, every movement, every thought, every word I spoke throughout my life I could have made Perfect. There would have been a perfect intonation for saying “A gentleman to see you, sir. He did not give his name. He said he was a representative of Pendergast and Co.”

“Show him in.”

“Very good, sir.”

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

On the other hand, the truth is that the only times in my life when I was successful in a job was when I was a manager<sup>1</sup>.

### **I Should Have Made My Life My Own**

What neurotics like me fail to do all their lives is to make their lives their own.<sup>2</sup> Even when they attempt to do this they fail. They ask themselves, whether in words or feelings, “Am I making my life my own *in the right way*?” Certainly my lifelong ineptitude at using hand tools arose from my conviction that I could never use them in the right way. How much this conviction can be blamed on my father, the best craftsman I ever knew, is irrelevant. Similarly, in jazz the question for me was always, “Am I being original in the way that the best players would call ‘original?’” And similarly with writing. Less so in mathematics, strangely enough. There the question was, “Will I be able to convince mathematicians of my originality?”

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

And what must be mentioned, too, is that in contemporary American culture, if you are deeply neurotic and failing at everything, you at least are never alone. An entire sub-culture exists to hold out the hope that your illness can be alleviated and to console you and explain why you are the way you are. When I observed my son, who was always thoroughly competent in the management of his life and in that of his family — a man who was not driven to thoughts of suicide at the prospect of having to plan a trip, or of buying a house, or maintaining it — and thought of myself being the same kind of man, the sense of loneliness convinced me: it’s much better being a victim.

### **What Will Happen to This Life After I Die?**

I began thinking of death even more than usual. I felt it coming toward me just a few days

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

2. See the section, “Who Possesses My Experience?”, in my essay, “Psychology”, in *Thoughts and Visions*, on the web site [www.thoughtsandvisions.com](http://www.thoughtsandvisions.com).

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

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

I thought: “I don’t remember my birth, and I probably won’t remember my death.”

I asked, like just about every human being who has ever lived, “What is death *like*?” I thought: “It is impossible that all this awareness — and this awareness of awareness, and awareness of that awareness, and ... — could suddenly disappear. Maybe it’s impossible to die if one is aware as I am!”

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

### What Have I Accomplished?

Before I pull the trigger, I should certainly answer this question. One thing I know for certain is that if the time I have spent thinking about sex and suicide had instead been spent on thinking about something constructive, I might have accomplished something in this life. But, in any case, I and my ex-wife must count as an accomplishment the fact that we raised a son who has none of the mental ills of his father, and who seems a genuinely happy and admirable human being who has also achieved great success in his field. Certainly that must be counted as a major accomplishment. Second, I wrote five books that I am not ashamed of: this autobiography, the collection of essays, *Thoughts and Visions*, a book describing a way for computer users to find the instructions they want in only a few seconds, a book applying that idea to mathematics and technical subjects in general<sup>1</sup>, and a collection of papers on mathematics and computer science ( I now believe I wasted thirty years on these papers and achieved nothing except to demonstrate the degree to which we can live in self-delusion when we are desperate).

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

And, I suppose, some will expect me to regard as an accomplishment the enduring of more than 70 years of an unbearable life. But those who are inclined to regard that as an accomplishment, implicitly assume that others will benefit from my experience. And, in fact, when I first set out to write this book, I had as one of my goals to write the book I wish I had stumbled upon when I was 18. But now I must say to the 18-year-old self who reads this book, “Don’t waste your life believing in yourself unless you have abundant evidence by the time you are 25 there is something worth believing in.”

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

## Father and Son: a Close Call

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

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

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

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

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

I called my lawyer and we began discussing disinheritance.

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

I wrote my son a second letter, this one setting down a list of the main possibilities, with sub categories. No response. I wrote him an email emphasizing how important this matter was to me. Finally, he set a time when he would call me. The phone rang and I applied all my management skills of yore, all that I had learned in countless hours of individual and group therapy, all I had learned in numerous failed relationships: I said, "Well, I think we ought to begin with your telling me what you are feeling."

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

wrote back:

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

## I Become a Grandfather

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

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

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

My son’s 40th birthday was on March 20, and what he referred to as “the big four oh” was on his mind also. As in the past, I told him not to worry about his age. In base 16 he was only about to be 28 and in base 20 he was only about to be 20!<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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

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

the while growing bigger and bigger.

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

The question naturally came up of what the young man should call me when he started to talk: "Gramps?", "Grampa?". But after some thought I told them I would prefer "John", since I felt that, at 72, I was still too young to be called "Gramps".

My son was a warm, loving father and husband. I thought: If a father always says to his son, Young man, I have the utmost confidence that you will always do the right thing, then the son grows up taking it for granted that that is what he will do. The family spent Christmas of 2008 at Karlin's parents' townhouse in Del Mar, near San Diego. My son, ever mindful of his father's neurotic phobia about travel, took care of all the arrangements: airline tickets, a nice motel room, and chauffeuring me back and forth between the motel and the house. He also made a point of giving me several hours each day to be by myself so I could read and study.

One evening we all went to a restaurant. As we sat talking and waiting to be served, an attractive blonde came in with two young girls probably between five and seven years old. They took the next table.

My grandson, sitting in his high chair, elbow casually resting on one arm of the chair, turned to look at them. They looked at him. And then, with the other hand he gave them a slow, confident, side-to-side wave, as cool as you please. They broke into broad smiles. I thought: my grandson is a one-year-old lounge lizard!

By that time, Gabe was known as "the Gabester". It took several hours for all his presents to be opened. The times with the family that I was worried about turned out to be almost pleasant. I discovered (again) that people who seldom say much at family gatherings, e.g., Karlin's aunt and her husband, can become quite talkative, even animated, if you manage to find subjects they are interested in, e.g., *The Simpsons* TV cartoon series, and TV comedy sitcoms of old.

## Death of Big Al

The reader may recall that the manager of my band, the Christmas City Six, at Lehigh University (last file of Vol. 1) was a student named Al Waldron, but whom we call called Big Al, because of his wheeler-dealer personality. One afternoon in 2005, I was amazed to receive a call from him. He had tracked me down through one of the online phone books. We talked at length, and not only about the old days, although he did tell me that our piano player and occasional bassist, Gerry Romig, had died recently of a brain tumor. Big Al had become a successful businessman in Texas, was married to a woman he first met during his Lehigh days, but was now in the process of getting a divorce, since he and his wife had grown apart, and since he had fallen in love with a Mexican waitress. We both said we would have to get together soon. He closed with a reminder that, at our age, we had to be sure to make the best of each day.

In early January 2009, I suddenly had an impulse to talk to him again. I sent him an email. No reply. I seemed to have lost his phone number, but, with the help of the online phone books, I was able to call his home. His ex-wife answered. I gave my name, explained who I was, and after a pause she said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news. Al died on Dec. 24." I could hardly believe

it, especially since he had said, during our conversation, that he was in good health. I asked her what he had died of. She said no one knew. He just seemed to waste away. She said she would send me any flyers or newspaper clippings or letters about the band that she came across in the process of going through his papers. I thanked her, thinking to myself: the band is disappearing. When we have all died, it will never have existed.

## **Blacks**

I must begin this section by stating that I voted for Obama in the 2008 election, and that as of this writing (Oct., 2009) I am convinced he will be one of our greatest presidents. I state this in order to ward off at least some of the accusations that I am a racist from liberals who believe that that can be the only possible reason for unfavorable reports of black behavior, even if the reports are true, as they are here.

There was no escaping the black presence in Berkeley. In the early 2000s, the couple that owned AAAAA-storage in North Berkeley, where I had a vault full of things from my mother's house, sold the business and moved to southern California. They were John and Berta Teafatiller, and they had done an excellent job: John looked like an ex-Marine, heavy-set, with thick arms, and an alert manner that made you confident that no one would dare break in and steal your possessions. He was always friendly, with a warm sense of humor. I think he told me that he and his wife had an apartment in the upper story of a nearby apartment building so he could keep an eye on the facility even when they were at home.

The business was taken over by several blacks: a sullen, fat middle-aged male who clearly felt put-upon to be forced to do such low-level work, an equally-unpleasant middle-aged fat woman, and an attractive young, slim woman who was the only one who seemed to have any desire to be nice to customers.

So I walked on eggshells with the male, always apologizing for bothering him.

Then, in Sept. 2007, I went out to my vault and found that the key didn't work. The office staff didn't know why. They sold me a new padlock, cut off the old one. When I opened the storage door, I found the old lock, which my key fit, cut and lying on the floor. I saw immediately that a number of garden tools were gone and that all of the paintings that I had inherited from my mother and had not moved to my house, had been torn out of their boxes and were also gone.

I was furious, ran back to the office. The male shrugged, said he knew nothing about it. I somehow found that the regional office for AAAAA was in Sacramento. I called, spoke to a manager. He said that several years ago, they had replaced some of the doors. To do so, they had had to cut the padlocks. The local staff had been instructed to take a picture of the contents of each vault before doing any work. I should ask the office for it.

I did so. The male was clearly annoyed that I had reported the theft, and glared at me in his sullen manner as though to say, "You have a problem with your unit being robbed? What are you, a racist?" He then made a pretense of looking through the folders in a filing cabinet, then said there was no picture. I called the police.

The officer went through his procedure, took notes, said this was the first theft that had been reported at the facility. In the course of conversation, I asked him if it was true that thieves and burglars were usually released the same day they were caught. He said unfortunately, yes. In fact they were usually back on the street before the arresting officer had finished writing up the paperwork. He also said that Berkeley doesn't allow the use of helicopters and dogs because it is too reminiscent of the sixties; so the police have to call in helicopters from Oakland Police Dept. and

other cities. He said that a number of murderers had escaped for want of the dogs. He onfirmed that the Alameda County District Attorney hardly prosecuted property crimes. He said he was for legalizing drugs, at least marijuana, and I, of course, agreed with him.

Later I thought: this goes on while the professors in the Citadel build careers impressing each other with their profound analyses of crime in America.

In June, 2008, a woman neighbor who had been active for many years in our fight against the hardball field, told me that her husband, a progressive who had dedicated his life to helping the poor, had come home recently and told her, in shock and dismay, that he had just witnessed a black woman in a car trying to run over a white woman. The incident had occurred just a few blocks away. The black woman was shrieking obscenities at the white woman, and when the white woman ran up the sidewalk to try to escape, the black woman drove her car onto the sidewalk and pursued her. My neighbor's husband called the police, they came, and asked the white woman if she wanted to press charges. She said no, apparently fearful of retaliation.

Then, in early 2009, there were reports of blacks breaking down doors in broad daylight when residents were home, and stealing laptop computers, TVs, and other appliances. (This occurred in the Halcyon Neighborhood, on the Oakland border. Several murders were reported elsewhere in South Berkeley.)

In the spring, throughout the weekdays, groups of black students began hanging out in the private property across the street from my house. (The property belonged to the small apartment complex there.) The students sat on the low walls, laughing and talking, occasionally playing dice. I called the police, but perhaps understandably, the police never responded, having more important matters to attend to. I then began calling Alejandro Ramos, Dean of Students at Berkeley High School. He seemed nervous, overworked, but at least wanting to give the appearance of trying to be accomodating. The trouble was, all his staff was occupied in patrolling within a block or two of the High School itself. But he asked me to call him whenever I saw the students. I reminded him that a Special Election was coming up, that several of the initiatives on the ballot were for funding of education, and that a lot of the neighbors were now saying they'd be damned if they'd vote for more money for the schools when the students who most needed to be in school, were instead cutting classes without penalty. That seemed to make an impression on him, although nothing was done.

Meantime, during a conversation with Chet , the piano teacher across the street, about the problem he told me had seen a number of the students "using the place [which was next to his house] as a toilet".

I then hit on a brilliant idea: find something with a repulsively bad odor (but biodegradable) and spread it on the tops of the walls and the sidewalk where the students played craps! Limburger cheese in water in a pail that had been left out in the hot sun for a few days seemed promising. The neighbors thought this a great idea. But the semester ended before I had a chance to try it out, so I put the idea on hold until the fall semester (this is written in July).

That same spring, a member of the School Board whom I knew from our days of fighting the hardball field told me that a new of calculating the dropout rate at Berkeley High had been discovered, and, lo and behold, it reduced the dropout rate from 60% to 38% — the High School could therefore claim a major reduction in the dropout rate even though I strongly doubted that there

had been any change for the better at all.

One day, as I was about to leave the house, I realized I had forgotten something, so I left the front door halfway open and raced upstairs to get the item. When I came down, the face of a black girl was poking through the opening, her eyes taking in as much of the layout of the interior of the house as possible. "You got a cigarette?"

Another morning as I was leaving the house, two teenage black girls, probably around 16, and thus probably juniors or seniors in Berkeley High, were passing on the sidewalk. One said to the other, "That's how swine-flu started: a white man fucked a pig. Just like AIDS started 'cause a white man fucked a monkey."

Some South Berkeley residents had seen years of their lives consumed in the battle against the black underclass. One was Laura Menard, a woman who had been fighting for close to 20 years to get the notorious Moore drug house at 1610 Oregon St shut down. Some people said that the wear and tear of the battle, year after year, had driven her close to madness. She had become an obsessive non-stop talker whose calls even sympathetic organizations like the Berkeley Daily Planet newspaper were reluctant to receive. Her efforts had intensified in the early 2000s when one of her teenage sons had been beaten up by blacks. She had called the police, but they seemed unwilling to investigate, much less arrest, those who had committed the crime. She went to her (our) City Councilman, Max Anderson, a black, and was told in so many words that to pursue the kids would be racism.

Her fury increased, and in 2004 she ran against Anderson for City Council. She told me that Anderson's campaign was racist. She lost. By then she was the chairwoman of the Russell-Oregon-California Street Neighborhood Association, which sued to get the Moore house shut down as a public nuisance. She said Anderson's wife campaigned against the lawsuit, calling it motivated by racism and by a desire to gentrify the area.

Over the years, there were shootings and murders in the vicinity of the Moore house. For example:

**Man found shot in south Berkeley drug den**

Oakland Tribune , Oct 18, 2006 by Kristin Bender

BERKELEY -- A 19-year-old man was found shot Tuesday morning in the backyard of a notorious south Berkeley drug den whose owner has been sued twice for drug activity in the last two decades.

Police did not identify the man, but said he has non-life threatening injuries and should be released from the hospital by today.

Police were called to the house at 1610 Oregon St. at 10:29 a.m. after a neighbor reported gunfire, said Officer Ed Galvan, the police department's spokesman.

Police found the man in the backyard suffering from a gunshot to the upper body, Galvan said. Police do not have a motive or a suspect in the shooting, Galvan said. They also do not know whether the man was shot in the backyard, or walked there after being shot.

Last year, the owner of the house, Lenora Moore, 76, was sued by 14 neighbors in small claims court who contended there were constant shootings, late-night fights and vandalism at the house.

In his ruling, Alameda County Superior Court Commissioner Jon Rantzman called the Moore

home “a hub for the sale and distribution of illegal drugs.”

Moore appealed but lost, and in April she was ordered to pay more than \$70,000.

Grace Neufeld, executive director of Neighborhood Solutions, which has helped groups in Berkeley and Oakland work out neighborhood problems, said Moore has paid about half of the judgment.

Neufeld said neighbors want the house shut down and are pressuring the city to deem it a nuisance. City officials are reviewing the city's options and say they hope to have some answers later this week or early next week.

Earlier this year, Moore's attorney said she was considering all of her options relating to the house.

The small claims suit was the second time a group of residents sued Moore and won. In 1992, Moore was ordered to pay \$155,000, but she later filed for bankruptcy and never paid.

Laura stopped me on the street one day and said that it seemed that, finally, after 20 years, the court was about to reach a verdict that would permanently shut down the house. I don't know what the court's decision was.

For the reader who regards my reporting of the above facts proof that I am a racist, I would like to mention that I voted for Obama in 2008 and that I think, at the time of this writing (July, 2009), that he will be one of our greatest presidents. My contempt is reserved for ghetto blacks and the white liberals who, year after year, are willing and eager to be co-dependents to their bad behavior.

## **More Housemates**

### **Y — , the Quietest Person in the World**

Because I needed the money, and because I liked having a young woman living in my house, I continued to rent an upstairs bedroom to a female student at the University of California. There was Y. —, a lesbian friend of Zoe's, whom Zoe agreed was the Quietest Person in the World.

### **Ellen, the Asian-American**

Then there was an Asian student from Southern California who stayed for only a semester so she could take a course in Women's Studies, and who was easily the Second Quietest Person in the World.

### **B — , Saving the World by Not Draining Dishwater**

Then there was B. —, a beautiful young woman who was studying anthropology and hoped to get a PhD with a thesis on the Inuit (Eskimos). She believed that the mythology of any primitive people was “just as valid” as Einstein's theories. I suspect she developed this idea out of her own need to feel that her interests were important *too*. But some academics built successful ideas out of such nonsense:

“The rise of modern science coincides with the suppression of non-Western tribes by Western invaders. The tribes are not only physically suppressed, they also lose their intellectual independence and are forced to adopt the bloodthirsty religion of brotherly love — Christianity . . . Today

this development is gradually reversed . . . But science still reigns supreme . . . Thus, while an American can now choose the religion he likes, he is still not permitted to demand that his children learn magic rather than science at school . . . And yet science has no greater authority than any other form of life.” — Paul Feyerabend, quoted in “Paul Feyerabend”, Wikipedia, Nov. 9, 2009.

(It is absolutely incredible that parents allow their children to take courses from such dangerous know-nothings.)

She believed that one way to help save the planet was by re-using dish water, and so her sink was filled with greasy gray water for days on end. I left little verses next to the sink about how her plan to save the world might be unsanitary, but they made no impression. So I asked her to drain the water, which she did, but then, a few days later, she started not draining it again.

At the time she took the room, her boyfriend was the famous nature photographer, Subhankar

Banerjee, whose photos appear in *seasons of life and land*<sup>1</sup>, about the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Her ne'er-do-well father lived a nomadic life between Japan, Australia (I think) and Southern California.

She played guitar and had a pleasant singing voice; on one occasion she sang me a song she had written. Not bad.

But then, one morning, as I was going downstairs, a short guy with black hair tied in back and hanging down to his waist, was coming up the stairs. He said not a word. His face immediately reminded me of the face on one of the shrunken heads that I had seen in the Rosicrucian Museum in San Jose. B. — explained that she had met him on a protest march in Southern California. He was a pure-blooded Aztec, he had told her. He had no education and was unemployed. In succeeding days, he kept reappearing. It was clear he had moved in. I feared for my life if I asked him to leave, so I made up a story that an old friend living in Germany had run into hard times and was returning, with his wife, to Berkeley and had asked me to help him out and I felt I had to agree. So very reluctantly I would have to ask her and her boyfriend to leave within 30 days. Which she did, apparently with no hard feelings. Eventually she moved to northern Canada to pursue her degree.

## Debbie

I had had enough of housemates. Then, in March of 2005, the phone rang, and a cheerful voice said it was Debbie, Zoe's lover for several months when Zoe was living here in 2000-2001. I remembered her smiling up at me as she lay with Zoe in front of the fireplace. She was wondering if the room was free. I said it was and that I was asking \$450 a month. Too much. More phone calls. Then she asked if I would give her the room for \$375 a month if she promised to pay me year-round. The amount was at least \$200 less than what I could have gotten, but I said yes, and furthermore I would guarantee not to raise her rent for at least two years. And so I had a housemate again.

She was strikingly attractive, a little below average height, with long, auburn hair and a perfect body: slim, her young breasts like a shelf, and a beautiful bottom. She practiced yoga, and in fact was an occasional instructor. When she was looking for something on the bottom shelf of the

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1. The Mountaineers Books, Seattle, WA, 2003

refrigerator, she did so with straight legs, bending from the waist, making me forget what we were talking about.

She turned out to be the most interesting, psychologically, of all my housemates, and also the one who aroused the most torments of sexual jealousy. She stayed for more than four years. Details will be in a later edition of this volume.

## The Future

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

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

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

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

“A country like ours, preoccupied with Jet Skis, off-road vehicles, snowboards, Jacuzzis, microwave ovens, pornography, lap dances, massage parlors, escort services, panty liners, penis enhancement, tummy tucks, thongs and Odor Eaters doesn't have a prayer — not even a good, old-fashioned Christian prayer — against a billion fanatics who hate that country, detest its materialism and have nothing really to lose.” — George Carlin

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

- the vanity of believing that the war can be won without major sacrifices;
- the vanity of believing that with “understanding and forgiveness” we will be able to overcome the enemy;
- the vanity of believing that we need not give up any of our freedoms in order to overcome the enemy;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Further reinforcing my point is the case of Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan immigrant (though not a student) living in Denver, CO., who in Sept., 2009 was arrested for being at the center of a bomb plot that would have been, according to experts, the deadliest terrorist attack on the U.S. since 9/11. And also the case of Hasam Maher Hussein Smadi, a 19-year-old Jordanian who tried to blow up a downtown Dallas skyscraper. Fortunately, an FBI agent had posed as an accomplice and made sure that the explosive device did not work.

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

I believe that reason demands that we reduce as much as possible the chances for Al-Qaeda agents to enter this country. The wonderful tolerance practiced by many Western European countries likewise must go. (You would think that by now, these countries would have learned their lesson: they were sound asleep up to 1914 and as a consequence suffered terrible losses in World War I; yet by 1925, they had returned to their slumbers, until the Germans again awakened them and caused far greater suffering than they had endured in World War I. Surely that would have been sufficient to keep them alert forever after!. But as soon as the Cold War was over, they returned to their sleep again, allowing the menace of Islam — which may turn out to be the greatest menace of all — to take root and multiply within their very borders.)

Zero immigration quotas for Muslim countries are essential, and to those Muslims who are already within the country's borders, a clear and simple message must be sent: if you disrupt our way of life, if you murder people who disagree with you, if you commit crimes on the grounds

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

that we do not give you enough money and food, if you plot to overthrow our government, you will go to jail for a very long time or else we will send you back to the countries you or your parents came from. No excuses, no exceptions. If you refuse to learn how to earn a living in our country, you will receive no aid from us. You and your children can starve. We did not ask you to come here.

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

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

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

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

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

## **Last Wishes**

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

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

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