

My House, the Neighborhood, the City

GENIUS WITHOUT GENIUS:

The Autobiography of John Franklin

Vol. 4: Living in Berkeley

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My Son, the Currency Trader

In his senior year at UCLA, Jeff had a project for one course in which he was to study the check processing procedure at First Interstate Bank in Los Angeles, and at the end of three months make a report with recommendations for improvements. But he told me he had no interest in the project, and felt they would ignore his recommendations anyway.

After graduation in 1989, however, he applied for a job at the Bank, and was hired as an apprentice currency trader. (I don't know if he specifically asked for that kind of work.) He seemed to enjoy it.) Then one day, only a few months later, he called me and said he had been fired. I was astounded. He said that apprentices are given a daily trading limit of \$15,000. They are not to trade more money than that. But he saw an opportunity, and so went over the limit, to \$18,000. He thought he could compensate for it the next day, presumably by trading only \$12,000. He was called in to the boss's office and fired on the spot. In commiserating with him, I nevertheless tried to make him understand that the bank had to have some such limit for apprentices, otherwise a beginner could do real damage to the bank.

But in any case, at the age of 21, my son had been fired from his first job. He was crushed, and so was his mother. For a while he did nothing to find another job, and talked of becoming a beachcomber. But within a couple of weeks he had pulled himself together and started sending out applications. He was invited to interview at a bank in Chicago, the bank paying for his air fare. Everything went well. The last step of the interview consisted in the interviewer calling his boss at First Interstate. The conversation, according to Jeff, went something like this:

“Hi, this is — at — . We have an applicant here named Jeff Franklin who recently worked for you. Just want to confirm a few things. Did he work as a currency trader?” [The voice on the other end apparently said “Yes”.] “And was he employed by you for the period — to — ?” [The voice on the other end apparently said “Yes” again.]” And so on it went, through a series of routine questions. When the interviewer hung up, he looked at Jeff and said he was sorry, but he didn't think there was a place for him at the bank.

My poor son was utterly bewildered. Until the phone call had been made, the interviewer clearly seemed to be interested in hiring him. His former boss, as far as Jeff could tell, had revealed nothing, in the phone conversation, about the reason he was fired. And yet suddenly the interviewer had decided against him. Weeks later, through asking questions of people he had worked with, he found out what had taken place. Juries had become sympathetic with ex-employees who had been given negative recommendations by their former employers, and who as a result were being steadily turned down for jobs. To avoid lawsuits by these employees, banks and other businesses had developed a code: if a prospective employer called asking for a reference, and if the employee had not performed well, then the former employer merely replied factually to the questions asked. *That was the blackball!* If, however, the employee had performed well, then the former employer would interject positive comments, such as, “He did an outstanding job for us”, “He was a real value to the company”, “We hated to see him go”, and so forth.

It soon became clear that Jeff was not going to find another job in the banking field anywhere in the U.S. But then he remembered something that I (or Marcella) had told him, namely, that, being the grandson of native Swiss parents, he, like his father, had Swiss citizenship, and thus could work in Switzerland. So he applied over there, and soon was hired by the Union Bank of Switzerland, in Zurich. He packed his bags and headed for the country of his ancestors. The year was 1991.

His starting salary, I think, was around \$80,000. Within a couple of years, he was earning around \$140,000. At first, he liked Switzerland. For one thing, he could go skiing via public

transportation: he would grab a trolley outside his front door, take it to the railroad station, then board a train that took him to the little village at the foot of the slopes. He also had a good social life. In one phone conversation, he said he had been dating “an older woman.” I immediately thought of Lea, the forty-plus-year-old mistress of the young aristocrat in Collette’s novel *Cheri*. My son was receiving a sexual education in the Old World style from a wealthy, sophisticated courtesan! Hesitantly, I asked him old she was. “Twenty-five,” he replied.

But Swiss stodginess began to bother him, and so, after a few years he began applying for work in London. He was invited for an interview by — . Everything went well. At the end, they said he would have to take a blood test, which he submitted to without a second thought. A few days later he was called and told that the bank would not be interested in him. Traces of marijuana had been found in his blood. He admitted to me that he had smoked some marijuana “several weeks” before coming for the interview. (I later read that the drug can leave traces in the blood for up to six weeks.) He kept sending out applications and making the most of the connections he had developed as a trader in Zurich. Eventually, in 1993, he was hired to work for Merrill Lynch in London. A year later, he went to work for Banque Paribas, then back to Merrill in 1995, all in London.

After he moved to London, he met an Irish girl named Trish who worked in the Marketing Dept. of a small company. I’m not sure if they lived together, but he rented a little two-bedroom apartment in the Notting Hill District. He was now twenty-five, and earning more than \$200,000 a year. The two of them made at least one trip to the West Coast, staying in my downstairs front room. I liked Trish immediately. She was very attractive, with a sweet, warm, personality, and the tantalizing trace of an Irish accent. (She once told me that when my mother was driving me crazy, I would refer to her, in phone conversations with Jeff, as “your grandmother”, but when she was behaving, she would be “my mother”.)

It got me through more than one day of suicidal despair to remember that at least my son would not be a lifelong victim, as his father was, of the mother that raised him. Looking at him in his early twenties, and recalling what I was going through at his age, I thought: Marcella and I did a good job. I felt I had kept the promise that I made before he was born, namely, that never would any child of mine be raised as I was. We raised a boy into a reasonably happy, self-confident, unneurotic young man — in this day and age, no mean accomplishment. It appears that, in one generation, I have stopped the river of poison that has flowed through my mother’s side of the family. But as far as I’m concerned, the jury is out until, at the very least, he speaks, without fear of my overhearing, about his childhood. I once tried to get Yolanda to ask him how he felt about his upbringing, but that turned out to be a bad idea: he felt put upon. In any case, I will consider myself to have succeeded as a father if one day he says of me, “He did me no harm.”

Living in Berkeley

For the first few years, when people asked me how I liked living in Berkeley, I would reply, “I feel as though at the age of 52 I have finally moved to my hometown.” Until then, the entire U.S. had been a no-man’s land for me. I had never felt at home in any city I had ever lived in, nor had I read descriptions of any part of the U.S., with the exception of New England, that made me want even to visit, much less move there. The backward South, the arid Southwest, the barren desert states to the North, the high-humidity, mosquito-infested, conservative Middle West, the hurricane-ridden Southeast, the depressing former coal- and steel-towns of the Middle Atlantic States — I wanted no part of any of it.

My House

The house I bought was on a block of Milvia Street between Blake and Parker. As on many Berkeley streets, there was a barrier on the Blake St. end consisting of four bollards — pear-shaped movable pieces of concrete with a cavity in the center where flowers could be planted. More on attempts to plant flowers there later in this chapter. Around the corner, on the other side of Blake, was a welder's shop, the welder a tall guy with a long pig-tail who rode motorcycles; he always had left-wing signs in his grimy window; then Timberline Geodesics, which made and sold kits for geodesic domes, the building made of shabby, gray, corrugated metal; next Skylight and Sun, which made and sold skylights, the building of white stucco, with a false front as in the Old West. Two blocks north on Milvia was the Psychiatric branch of Alta Bates Hospital. I remember thinking, as I debated whether to buy the house, that for someone like me, it was definitely an advantage to be living a couple of blocks from a hospital that specialized in mental disorders. The house was a three-bedroom A-frame of the type that were built in profusion throughout Berkeley and Oakland around 1900. It had 1700 sq. feet of floor area. According to records in the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA) it had been built in 1906. (The records were not clear on whether it had been built before or after the San Francisco earthquake.) The cost had been \$1500. I did some superficial research and concluded that that was about the annual income of, for example, a plumber of the time. Since by 2004 the house was worth about \$500,000, and a good plumber working alone probably made less than \$150,000 a year, we can conclude (what we already took for granted) that there has been a definite inflation in the cost of housing.

The man who inspected the house before I bought it included the following in his report. According to a barely legible hand-written note in the upper-right corner of the page, the report is from "Rehab Right, City of Oakland Planning Department, 1979".

Eastern Shingle Cottage (1895-1910)

The Eastern Shingle Cottage is so named because its A-frame shape and shingle surface are holdovers from a larger, east coast style. Its details, however, are strictly classic, and firmly in the Colonial Revival tradition. In fact, close examination shows that the ground floor of the Eastern Shingle Cottage is almost identical to the Neoclassic Row-house: a raised first story, a recessed front porch with classic columns, and a bay window to one side. But the second level is astonishingly different. A gigantic gable twice as tall at its apex as the height of the first floor, and as wide as the house itself, dominates the scene.

The front and sides of the gigantic gable meet at a perfect seam. If this were more of a Craftsman house, the eaves would extend beyond the face of the gable, and the supporting beams would be exposed. The concealed structure and flush edges are among the reasons the Cottage belongs in the Colonial Revival category instead of the Brown Shingle Style, despite its frequently brown shingled surface.

The gable is pierced by one or two windows, which are surrounded by broad, flat trim. This is similar in spirit to the attic window which interrupts the hipped roof of the Neoclassic Box because emphasis on the window compensates for the ungainly expanse of the roof plane. Several design techniques are used to accomplish this. On many examples, the double-hung window is underlined by a wood railing with closely spaced balusters [as in

the case of my house]. The function of the window and railing composition is to complement the proportion of the enormous isosceles triangle in which it sits. Unfortunately these railings are often removed when new siding is installed. The window has no visual anchor without it, and the gable looks miserably empty.

On other examples, the window sill is exaggerated and supported by protruding brackets, something like a pouting lower lip. On still others, the window panel is recessed within the gable, and the shingles curve inward to meet the sash.

On the side of the house, which is to say on the side of the gigantic gable roof, there is a large dormer-like projection with several double-hung windows. A dormer is a window placed vertically in a sloping roof, with another sloping roof of its own. The name derives from the French word “dormer” (they pronounce it door-may) which means “to sleep” because the space the dormer window affords usually serves as sleeping quarters. Sure enough, in the Eastern Shingle cottage this feature is the upstairs bedroom [one of three upstairs bedrooms in my case].

Architect Ernest Coxhead, an English expatriate, practiced in the Bay Area during the Colonial Revival period. His rather eccentric designs for churches and residences are characterized by an over-sized gable for the roof, sheathed with shingles and punctured by carefully placed windows. His influence on the merchant builders who distributed the Eastern Shingle Cottage throughout Oakland and Berkeley is obvious.

Around 2004, Daniella Thompson of Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA), who had become something of an expert on these houses, and had devoted an entire section of the BAHA web site to photographs and descriptions of them, decided that such a house should not be called an “Eastern Shingle Cottage” (still less an “A-frame”) or a “High Peaked Gable Cottage” but a “High-Peaked Colonial Revival”. She wouldn’t allow you to call it anything else.

Five steps led up to the front porch, at the front of which, on the right-hand side, was a white, wooden pillar. The carpenters, those long years ago, had apparently suffered a lapse of attention when they placed the square piece of wood that the pillar stood on, because it was at a slight angle, the sides not parallel with side and back of the porch. I often wondered how such an error could be repaired. Probably the simplest way would be with triangles of wood to compensate for the angle. A low wooden balustrade ran from the pillar to the front wall of the house.

The design of the first floor was in accordance with good design practice in that you didn’t have to walk through the living room in order to get to the kitchen, as you did in many of the stucco bungalows in Berkeley and surrounding areas. When you entered through the front door, the stairway to the second floor was on your right, and to its left was a hall that ran straight back to the kitchen. Immediately on the left of the front door, behind a pair of creaky sliding doors (technically called “pocket doors” because they slid in and out of a “pocket” in the wall), was what used to be called “the parlor”, where guests were entertained. The upper half of each of the three front windows had lattice frames above and below vertical, straight-sided lozenge frames — very English, I thought, proudly. After this room, on the left of the hallway, was a door to the living/dining room. Then a doorway straight ahead to a little square floor space, and, on the left, the door to the kitchen proper. Because of the settling of the house over the years, none of these doors closed properly. The kitchen was small, containing nothing but a primitive gas stove, but since I considered cooking for myself largely a matter of killing the germs, this was not a problem for me. A separate pantry, with cabinets and two sinks and a window looking onto the driveway of my neighbors Steve and Jane, was at the north end of the kitchen. In the wall between the pantry

and the square floor space was a little doorway perhaps four feet in height. No one who ever visited the house, and no member of the staff at BAHA was able to figure out what its purpose originally was. A place for a refrigerator? But then the back of the refrigerator would have partially blocked the built-in drawers in one wall fronting the floor space. A short-cut from the floor space to the pantry? But the walking distance around through the kitchen was a matter of a few feet! At various times, I offered a monetary prize to the first person who could come up with the correct explanation, but there were no winners.

In the parlor, another pair of creaky sliding doors led to what to me was the living room, but which had originally been a dining room. In the early days, I was told, the family lived in the dining room during the winter, closing the sliding doors to the parlor, and to the hallway and kitchen (I later found the kitchen door in the garage). Next to the stove in the kitchen was a little rectangular opening with a pull-down door, long since painted shut, through which dishes of food had been passed to the dining room.

The small fireplace in the living room had originally been designed to burn coal; the ancient cast-iron basket to hold the coal pieces was still in place. In the center of the hallway, in the wall on the left, was a single large vent from the furnace that was directly underneath. (“Furnace” may be a misleading term, since it was simply a long gas burner a few inches below the level of the floor, with a metal covering that was heated by the flames.) The vent had a primitive metal baffle that could be adjusted, using a small chain, so as to vent more or less heat to the living room or up the stairwell to the upstairs. There were no heating vents in the second floor. I soon discovered that the thermostat was apparently located in the front parlor (many years later, my computer consultant showed me that it was right behind the plastic panel containing the lever by which you turned on the furnace), and the front parlor was a room that always remained much colder than the living room or the upstairs. And so the thermostat never cycled the furnace on and off to maintain a more or less constant temperature — in fact, it rarely shut the furnace off at all. As a result, over the years I became a living thermostat, turning the furnace off after half an hour or so, which was enough to heat living room and upstairs, then turning it back on when the rooms became cold. When I started renting out an upstairs bedroom to a UC Berkeley student (always a female), I gave her an electrical space heater so that she didn’t have to keep the door of her room open in order to allow some heat in. In order to save money, I turned the heat on as little as possible, instead walking around in my jacket or reading while lying under the bed covers. So the house was almost always cold in winter, although, fortunately, when the heat was on, the living room grew warm within a few minutes. A fire in the fireplace often made it unnecessary to turn on the furnace.

When I bought the house, the back yard, which measured about 25’ × 45’, was covered with long grass. Bamboo bushes and an ugly six-foot tall cactus grew against the garage on Steve and Jane’s property. In the middle of the yard was a Eureka lemon tree, and behind it a fruitless cherry tree. The lemon tree was loaded with lemons year round, and every day or so would drop at least one or two onto the lawn. The tree reminded me of those dogs who come up to you in a park and drop a slimy ball at your feet, then stand there, looking up at you with pleading, doggy eyes until you finally give in and throw it (no one can resist indefinitely being looked at by eyes like that). You hope that the dog will find some other human to bring the ball to. But no, it always comes back to you; you feel the wet prize drop softly onto your shoe, you pick it up between finger tips and throw it as far as you can with your out-of-condition arm. And inevitably, back it comes. So with the lemon tree: year-round it dropped its lemons at your feet, hoping, always hoping, not that you would throw them so the tree could retrieve them, but that you would

take them into the house and make some lemonade or a nice lemon pie. Which I never did, but which my student housemates, to be described later, sometimes did. Once every few months or so a neighbor would ask if he or she could have a few lemons, to which my answer was always an enthusiastic yes.

A family of raccoons lived for years somewhere in the yard or in the garage of the neighbors behind my back fence or on the north side. We never found out where. Often, but not always, when I buried kitchen scraps in the compost heap, I would find the next day that they had dug them up and taken a few. (If I poured a little gasoline on the dirt above the scraps, the raccoons left them alone.) More than once, when I heard a noise in the back yard at night, and went out with my flashlight, I would see the glow of their eyes in the dark, and there they would be, on my lawn, near the house: mom, dad, and two kids, all masked to conceal their identities. I would shine the light in their faces, they would make not the slightest move, but instead give me a look that clearly said, “Do you *mind*? We *are* having a family meeting. (God! humans have no manners...)”

There were also birds, year-round: robins, blue-jays, sparrows, humming birds, mourning doves (like the ones I used to hear at our house on 14 Elm St. in Valhalla (I didn’t know they had moved to California)). In August, 2008, in the course of adding to this chapter, I called the Lindsay Wildlife Museum in Walnut Creek and asked them what kinds of birds frequent back yards in South Berkeley. (It’s always good to know who’s who in the chirping classes.) They said that in addition to the ones listed above, there were house finches, starlings, towhees, and cowbirds. The sparrows were English house sparrows.

And there were abundant squirrels (an uncouth species).

In the front yard was a ginkgo tree that was at least forty years old, and, in the planting strip next to the street, two fruitless mulberry trees. Spring, summer, and fall, passersby walked through a leafy glade when they passed in front of my house. In late fall and winter the pavement was covered with fallen, yellow leaves. I didn’t have the energy to rake more than once or twice, preferring to rely on the windy days we sometimes had. These swept the pavements clean. (Nature was my leaf-blower.)

I loved the house from the start, but grew to hate the neighborhood, as the reader will learn.

Preparing the House

The first order of business when I moved in had to be, I felt, protecting the house against earthquakes. Somehow I got the name and number of a man, Jim Robison, who knew how to fasten the frame of the house to the foundation using special bolts. He was thin, articulate, with a deep voice pressed into the back of his throat that is a sign of shyness. He had a seriousness about him that made clear that he considered his only justification for living to be the doing of excellent work¹. Soon after he finished his work on the house, I heard that his daughter had drowned in a swimming pool, and that, in his grief, he had gone into seclusion for over a year. I hired a neighbor who was a contractor to put in what were called “sheer-walls” in the basement, which meant pieces of plywood nailed over the vertical beams, in order to prevent the frame from shifting forward and backward during an earthquake. In addition, the contractor reinforced the joints of the big beams by nailing pieces of aluminum over them.

I should mention that whenever I had a chance, I asked those in the business of making houses more resistant to earthquakes (“earthquake retrofitting”) what percentage of homeowners in Berkeley they believed had had this done to their homes. The answer was always around 30%.

This was nothing short of astounding for a city with a major university and a large proportion of wealthy homeowners. In the early nineties, the San Francisco Chronicle published an article on living near the Hayward Fault, which is the earthquake fault that runs through the Berkeley Hills (about two miles from my house). The article included interviews with residents of some of the beautiful homes. The reporter asked one woman if she was worried about living so close to a major Fault. She replied, with a laugh, “Oh, no. It’s fifty feet away!”

The second order of business I felt had to be installing insulation in the attic, and this I had done next (R30 level, I believe, which is one step above the minimum).

Ordeal by Fireplace

The third order of business was to get the fireplace working, since I could not live in a house without a working fireplace. (I would rather have a good fireplace than a bad relationship with a woman — even a good relationship!).

The previous owner had said she and her husband “believed” the fireplace worked, but that sometimes it smoked “a little”. I asked my realtor if he knew any fireplace experts; he said he had heard good reports about one, and gave me her name and number.

Thus began a ten-year ordeal which I will try to describe in detail in a future edition of this volume. Suffice it to say that the woman — a short, blonde bull dyke with a Philippina girlfriend (for several days I thought she was a young man) — charged me \$5,000 to rebuild the firebox (using new firebricks) and the upper end of the chimney (using the existing bricks), an outrageous amount, I later found out from talking to other fireplace experts. When she was done, the fireplace smoked. She called in an “expert” from Palo Alto who attempted the fix the problem, but was unable to, even though she charged me for this additional consultation. The expert said I would have to have several inches of the upper end of the fireplace opening covered, either with brick or with a metal barrier. I somehow put in a six-inch metal barrier. The fireplace still smoked. For years I tried to figure out how to build the fire so that the fireplace wouldn’t smoke, tried to force myself to believe that the smell of burning wood was not really smoke, or, if it was, that it added to the homeyness of the house. Finally, someone told me about a woman who really understood fireplaces, and so I called Sally McKnight at The Irish Sweep in Oakland. She arrived with her then-husband, Jan, they looked at the inside of the firebox, then put a ladder against the side of the house, climbed up to the near-flat dormer roof, then put another ladder from there to

1. In August 2007 I hired Dan Szumski, a civil engineer, to go through the basement of the house and recommend further structural work that should be done to decrease potential damage from earthquakes. In the course of his examination, he probed the bolts holding the frame to the foundation, pronounced them to have been expertly installed. I told him who had done the work, he said he wasn’t surprised: he knew the quality of the man’s work. In fact he recommended that I have Jim handle all the new structural work, calling on contractors as necessary. He said Jim was a perfectionist. When I called Jim, he said immediately, “Oh, yes, you have the house on the west side of Milvia, with plenty of room underneath [i.e., more than the two or three feet of crawl-space that was typical for Berkeley houses].” I was utterly amazed at his memory. “You must have done a thousand or more houses since you did mine,” I said. “Oh, no, only a few hundred.” Later, while he was underneath the house, preparing an estimate based on Szumski’s text and drawings, he remarked that he had a PhD in penology from UC Berkeley and had worked for several years in the California prison bureaucracy, eventually giving up out of the hopelessness of any kind of meaningful prison reform. As it turned out, another project he had bid on came through as he was preparing the estimate for the work on my house, and so I used another contractor, Structural Renewal, Inc., of Richmond, Calif., also recommended by Szumski. As far as I know, they did a good job. Total cost: about \$24,000.

the top of the chimney. I went back inside the house, since I couldn't stand watching them discover that I would have to replace the entire chimney. Perhaps a quarter of an hour later, they called my name from the front hall. I came down prepared for the worst. Sally said the whole problem had been that the spark arrestor had been installed wrong, that she and her assistant had removed it and that I shouldn't have any more trouble. By way of proof, she and her assistant built a small fire; there was not a trace of smoke. She suggested that she send someone around to add another six inch barrier to the opening. She charged me, I think, a couple of hundred dollars. Since then, I have had a perfectly working fireplace that is one of the few sources of happiness in my life, and was largely the reason I was able to endure the depression of winters, even though Berkeley winters were nothing to complain about.

When I had started a fire on a cold fall or winter day, I would sometimes go outside and look up and watch the gray-white smoke — not very much, since the carpenter's scraps I used always burned well — lazily emerging from the chimney, with the blue-gray sky in the background, and feel proud of being a real man of property.

I was always intrigued by how fundamentally *interesting* a fire was. Part of this was due to the ongoing worry over whether the fire was in danger of going out, and the skill then required to keep it burning. But when the flames were busily at their work, with a sound like flags in the wind, and conversing in their private language — “OK, you guys, I'll work on this kindling here; a couple of you start on that big log; yes, I know, I know, they are very difficult to burn, but just try; and you, Billy, see what you can with that scrap of kindling underneath the andiron, atta boy...” — they brought all the contentment of a beloved old dog. I decided that another reason why fires in fireplaces are so interesting is that the hearth has been a part of mankind's existence for hundreds of thousands of years, and those who hated the evening fire and preferred to go sit in the cold, probably had much lower reproduction rates (due, for example, to being eaten by wild animals) than those who stayed with the family and kept warm.

It took over an hour for the bricks inside the fire box to become sufficiently hot so that the fire actually heated the room on a cold night. As a result, I typically turned on the heat when I lit the fire, which gave the illusion of the fire warming the room within a few minutes. I was sure the efficiency of the fireplace was down around the 10 percent level, as it was for most fireplaces, but, on the other hand, this meant I could have a nice fire in the middle of summer without being too warm.

Interior decoration and Furnishings

The fourth order of business was to turn the place into an intellectual's home. Somehow — possibly through an article on home decorating in the *San Francisco Chronicle* — I got the name of a decorator who would come to a house, talk to the owner, to find out exactly what the owner wanted, then come up with a set of plans. At the appointed time, two women showed up: a skinny older one with long blonde hair who was still imagining she was beautiful, and an attractive younger one. We talked for perhaps half an hour, then they set to work, exchanging words among themselves as they busily took measurements and made notes. Several hours later, when they were done, they gave me a packet with the plans¹: everything had a wicker, vaguely tropical-climate, vaguely-Asian, look. I remember there was a Tonsu chest. They had given me a design that would have made the interior of my house be what they would have wanted it to be had they lived there. They reminded me of the realtor, Hyman, who kept showing me the houses he wished

1. They may have mailed them to me later, I don't recall.

he could afford to buy. Their charge was around \$500. I never implemented any of their plan, just as I never implemented the landscaping plan that a young landscape designer had drawn up for me at the Richwood Drive house in Cupertino. Instead, I placed the old, shabby furniture I had moved over from the Queensbrook townhouse, where it seemed best, then went out and bought wooden bookshelves from Kantor's, an office supply store then in West Berkeley. I made sure the distance between the shelves could be adjusted (the shelves rested on metal pegs that fit into holes in the wood). For some strange reason, I bought the shelves unstained. Possibly I imagined that I would stain them myself, with all the loving care of a new homeowner. I never did. But I carefully placed my books in them, bought more shelves as the years went on, salvaged any that the neighbors wanted to get rid of. By early 2009, a rough count revealed that, including the volumes in storage that I inherited from my mother, I had a library of more than 2,500 volumes.

After a visit years later, Marcella said my house was furnished in "Salvation-Army Modern".

The Street in Front of My House

Milvia St. was what the City called a "Bike Boulevard". I was never able to understand why the bureaucrats had decided such a designation was necessary for various streets throughout the City. Years later, they would mark the pavement, block after block, with some thick, white, paint-like substance that formed an enormous, crude symbol of a biker and above it the letters "BLVD". I was furious at this, and called various departments to protest. I asked why the tasteful metal signs that already existed along the curb, and that said the same thing, weren't enough. I was told that the lettering on the pavement was necessary to remind drivers as they backed out of their driveways. I replied that they would only see the symbol and the lettering after they had pulled out of their driveway, so wouldn't it be better to put the reminder in each driveway? An auditory shrug greeted that question, and so I gave up.

Milvia in our part of South Berkeley was also one of the two corridors from Berkeley High School to the East Campus, where the worst students, most of them black, were spent several hours each day for remedial instruction. I soon resigned myself to the daily sound of the jungle voices beneath my window, because around noon and again around 3 p.m. the street was filled with the screeching laughter of black, teenage girls, and the guttural shouts of the males ("Hey, whutchoo sayn muh fuckuh, ahm own..."¹), as they slouched past in their low-slung jeans with backpacks containing who knew what.

Walks Among Beautiful Houses

Some people are exhilarated by walks in the woods. I am exhilarated by walks among beautiful houses, and there were parts of Berkeley that had an abundance of these, which is not surprising, given that some of the nation's best architects were living and working in Berkeley in the first part of the 20th century. For several years, I often walked up the Rose Walk, designed by Bernard Maybeck in the lower Hills in North Berkeley in what was sometimes referred to as "Professorville". It was an area of Berkeley that made people like me know to the depths of our souls that our decision to go it alone, outside the university, was the worst decision we could possibly have made in this life.

At the top of the Rose Walk, a few houses north on Tamalpais Road, was an English-Tudor-looking house with diamond-paned, leaded-glass windows. The house had a special importance

1. "Hey, what're you saying, mother-fucker? I'm going to ..."

for me, because already in the nineties I had decided that, when I committed suicide, it would be on the street in front of this house. I planned to pin a note to my shirt apologizing for the inconvenience and explaining that I wanted to die in front of one of the houses I never could afford to live in,

I was convinced that people who lived in the beautiful areas of Berkeley were happy. They were the old-time Berkeleyites, I imagined, with classical music playing throughout the day in their beautiful homes, and Dickens or another great author from the past read aloud in the evenings. One of the neighborhoods that always had this appeal for me was between The Plaza Drive and Parkside Drive near the Claremont Hotel. Strangely enough, the neighborhood was *below* the surrounding streets, in a kind of little valley or hollow. There was a small park at one end, and in the years when I was running long distances, Parkside, then Plaza, then up Domingo was part of my running route. I often thought that maybe I should change the locale of my demise to this one, but for some reason, the English house above the Rose Walk drew me more.

The Dogs of Berkeley

From the very start, the dogs of Berkeley — particularly the large ones, e.g., golden retrievers, black labs — were unlike any I had seen in other places I had lived. As they lay on the sidewalk, leash secured to a parking meter, many of them looked so wise and contented that I couldn't help thinking that they were reincarnated Berkeley professors. But there were also some who were in a state of grave anxiety over the absence of Master or Mistress. Pulling on their chain, trying to see into the restaurant, sending out pitiful cries, you could see that the anxiety was almost unbearable.

And there were the chihuahuas, shih tzus, terriers, and God knows what other varieties of small, not to say, tiny arfy dogs (as I called them when my son was a child, to distinguish them from woofy dogs and growly dogs and ...). With quick little legs they trotted along beside, or behind, the person who was walking them — “Gotta keep up, can't fall behind, but wait, that is such a nice smell, no, no time, gotta keep up, oh, why do they walk so fast? ...” I heard some sad stories over the years about dogs who were obtained from the pound. A young woman outside the Main Post Office on Allston Way had a little dog who barked uncontrollably when she went inside the building. A man was able to comfort it by petting it and talking to it. The woman said that, although she and her husband had had the dog for a year, he still became terrified when her husband took off the belt of his pants at night.

I couldn't stand the way some, perhaps most, of the owners or professional dog-walkers didn't allow their dogs time to sniff when they took them for a walk. Apparently these people had no idea that for a dog, sniffing is Getting the News (and leaving some of their own News by raising a hind leg and urinating — “Hi! I was here! Let's meet for coffee!”).

It always seemed amazing to me that a sub-species that was less than 15,000 years old, had learned to please humans, comfort them, be a companion for them, so well as dogs had.

My Neighbors

I had moved into South Berkeley — what some of the local histories referred to as the “working class” section of Berkeley. It was, in fact, the half of Berkeley closest to the Oakland black ghetto. It, and West Berkeley, were the least attractive parts of the City. Successful people lived in North Berkeley, and very successful people lived in the Berkeley Hills or in the Claremont District, which, strictly speaking was in South Berkeley, but was at the base of the Hills.

Across the street lived a piano teacher, and the sound of his students', and his own, playing filled the air from morning to night, helping to offset the lower-middle-class atmosphere of the neighborhood. Immediately to the south of me was an A-frame house like mine that had been converted into three rental units. Upstairs lived a woman in her fifties who worked in the office of Berkeley High School. Downstairs in the front unit lived an attractive blonde, marginally financially independent, and in the back unit a guy who played tenor sax in local jazz groups, and thumped away on an old, out-of-tune piano playing ancient bebop tunes. In a separate cottage in the rear lived a woman who was a hypnotherapist while working toward a PhD and credentials in psychology.

The next house to the south was a duplex. On one floor lived a friendly black guy who worked at the Berkeley Repertory Theater, I don't know in what capacity, and on the other lived a woman named Elaine who managed the Asian Botanical Gardens at the University. She once gave me an antique rose which she said came from a cemetery in one of the Carolinas. It was unique among the roses I had seen: only a few feet high, with clusters of little white blossoms. Elaine was initially friendly and outgoing, but as time went on, she seemed to become rather strange. Some twenty two years later, one of the neighbors told me that the reason was that she had contracted Lyme disease.

Across Parker lived a retired academic couple, Dave and Vera-Mae, in a dark shingle, Craftsman-style house with a tall fence around it. They very seldom spoke to their neighbors. He had been the head of the Anthropology Dept. at Sonoma State College, and was an expert on California Indians; she had been the head of the Lowe Anthropology Museum at UC Berkeley until she left as a result of a political fight; Esther, her next-door neighbor (see next paragraph), got her a job at Laney College sorting a room full of relics, but funding ran out. (Esther told me once that Dave and Vera-Mae had a bizarre psychedelic ceiling in their bedroom.) A few doors east on Parker, in a house set back from the street, with an overgrown fence along the sidewalk, lived a short middle-aged guy named Mark (I never learned his last name). He was bald on top, but with a thick hair sticking out from the sides and back of his head. He joined briefly with us in our battle against a proposed hardball field, as described below. When you spoke to him, you got the impression that for him, a conversation was an opportunity to interrupt. He seemed to wait for you to get a few words out, so that he could be sure you were actually trying to say something, and then barge in with rapid speech. He soon lost interest in neighborhood activities, but he didn't want to admit it, and so when you met him in the street and gave him the latest news, he would say, as he walked away, "Yeah, well I've got to get more involved, keep me informed." Someone said that he was an expert blues and/or country music harmonica player.

With the exception of the woman, Leda, who lived in the house behind mine, and Esther and Chuck, who were Jewish and who lived, with their daughter Hannah, on Parker next to Dave and Vera-Mae, I felt alienated from everyone in the neighborhood. What with the unpredictable sound of power saws at any day in the week — nothing ever seemed to improve in the physical appearance of the houses where the sounds were most frequent — and the wretched Arab music and rock 'n' roll that in the nineties occasionally came from the Apartment from Hell behind the northwest corner of my yard, and the shouting into cellphones of renters standing on their balconies¹ — I resigned myself to living among the lower class: "living with a dirty face", as I thought of it. And though many of my neighbors were home-owners, including Steve and Jane, and Chet, to be introduced in the next sections, for them the neighborhood was, as it is for most Americans, simply the wasteland that lay between their house and shopping. In more than 22 years, I never once saw a neighbor pick up a piece of litter from the sidewalk or street. Steve and Jane would

spend close to \$150,000, in 2004, having their kitchen remodelled (\$90,000) and the interior of their house remodelled and painted, yet leave candy wrappers, paper cups, various scraps of paper, on the sidewalk, and even in their front yard, for days, until I picked them up. And so every few weeks I would put on my old, torn gardener's gloves, get a brown paper bag, and go through our block, picking up litter and removing the trash that the blacks stuffed into the bollards (flower-containing barriers) at one end of the street. (On a couple of occasions, I found hypodermic needles stuck in the soil.)

I must not fail to mention that long after I had moved into my house, I found out that Malvina Reynolds, the famous folk-singer of the sixties and seventies, had lived within a block of me, namely, around the corner and near the far end of the block, at 2027 Parker St., which was a few houses from Shattuck Ave. In one of her songs, she said:

"I'd rather live on Parker Street
Than fly around where the angels meet"

— "This World"

Her most popular song was "Little Boxes", inspired (if that is the right word) by the tract houses in Daly City that she saw on a drive up Rte. 280.

"Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky tacky
Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes all the same,
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same."

Steve and Jane

In the house on the north side of mine lived a couple, Steve and Jane, who were the owners of a Berkeley restaurant. They were at the time in their forties, she several years younger than he. They were not married, though they had been living together for ten years. He was short, probably not more than 5' 7'', but still with a full head of hair.

1. One of them, a woman, was so unbearably loud, that I wrote to the apartment manager. I told him that we (the "Milvia/Parker Neighborhood Association", a fictitious organization created for the purposes of the letter) did not want to cause trouble, but that if the noise didn't stop, we would be forced to contact our lawyer, who in the past told us that the Berkeley courts are very sympathetic to complaints about noise. (A lawyer actually told us that in the past.) I supplied only my phone number, explaining that we had received death threats in the past for making similar complaints (not quite true, but...). Within a day I received a phone call from the manager, who apologized and said that he had been on the verge of calling the police himself about this tenant, but she has decided to move. I told that many of us would like to come over and cheer as she left the building for the last time, but that we would refrain from doing so.

Conversations With a Marxist

Steve was a Marxist, and had been a high-ranking member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the sixties, the group that was infamous for, among other things, taking over college classrooms and refusing to allow professors to teach if SDS thought they weren't teaching the proper revolutionary ideas. As an undergraduate he had studied economics, then decided to get a PhD in American foreign policy at a university in Iowa, but gave up when he realized that it would be virtually impossible to get a job as an academic, at least in any city he would want to live in.

Over the years we had countless long, and I must say, cordial, conversations (thanks to a shared sense of humor) mainly about Marxism. We would stand on the sidewalk in front of our houses, walking back and forth, I (as was my habit) sometimes placing one foot carefully forward on the pavement when I was trying to formulate a point. I did my best to try to convince him that Marxism had failed too often, that at the very least it was not a science. He would always reply that what I was calling Marxism wasn't really Marxism. I was setting up a straw man and then knocking it down. In other words, whatever you criticize about Marxism is not Marxism. Whatever you agree with is real Marxism. A devilish logic indeed.

He didn't vote because doing so would imply that it was possible to change the system. What had to be changed was not the individuals in the government, but the entire economic system. There was a certain irony here in that he was a successful businessman in a very competitive business; later on he also became successful in a small bookkeeping business that he ran out of the converted garage in the rear of his property. Of course, we both knew that, despite these successes, he wasn't a capitalist, since he didn't own any means of production, except insofar as he owned stocks. He told me that he was what Marx defined as *petit bourgeois*, and that Marx had had a grudging respect for this class.

He clearly had no doubts about the truth of Marxism. After 9/11, he shrugged and said "I could have told you so." (I wanted to say, "Then why didn't you, so that we could have saved all those lives?") It was obvious to him that the downtrodden of the world are driven to such extremes. When the Enron scandal broke, he shrugged and said it was inevitable in a capitalist system. I told him that our system should not be judged by whether or not crooks sometimes get control of companies, but by whether there are mechanisms in place by which this can be brought to the attention of the public and the authorities. I reminded him that nothing like that had been remotely possible in the Soviet Union, but he waved my argument away on the grounds that Marxism had never existed in the Soviet Union.

One day, almost casually, he remarked that the best thing that could happen to the country, or at least our part of it, would be for all the capitalists in Silicon Valley, and in the Berkeley Hills, to be sent to the gas chambers. He didn't mean it as a metaphor. I found it particularly shocking and repellent, given that he was a Jew. Even more shocking was his casual remark that the best solution to the problems of the Middle East would be if the Israelis were driven into the sea, because they were carrying out a program of genocide against the Palestinians just as we carried out a program of genocide against Native Americans. He agreed that the number of Palestinians killed each year by the Israeli military could not be called "genocide": he was referring to what he called their policy of keeping the Palestinians in poverty and on the verge of starvation. I asked him why it wasn't genocide for the Palestinian leadership to hold back the billions — or at least the hundreds of millions — of dollars they have accumulated, instead of using it to pay for food, hospitals, and schools. He shrugged, said he wasn't defending them. (The conversation had begun with my asserting that what we are facing is a battle between two groups of religious fanatics: the

Evangelicals in the U.S., and the radical Islamists in the Middle East. He disagreed, saying that the problem in the Middle East was political, not religious.)

I continued, because I regarded it as an intellectual challenge, to try to convince him that Marxism didn't work. I brought up Scandinavia, got him to admit that cradle-to-grave medical care, very generous unemployment benefits, public education and public sanitation, and pensions, housing, and other benefits for the elderly — that all this surely was what Marx wanted to see. And yet it had been achieved without revolution. He shook his head, said it was all irrelevant. Why? I asked. Because the workers don't own the means of production. They may *think* they are happy, but they are not, and can never be, without that.

Another time I thought I had discovered a brilliant argument. I suggested he try to picture someone in the Middle Ages who was furious at the suffering and death caused by the Black Plague, a disease far worse than any we have known in modern times, since more than once it wiped out at least a third of the European population. We could well imagine that this person might decide that the cause of the Plague was sin (as we could be sure many people in the Middle Ages did decide), and that this person would therefore become a lifelong enemy of sin, railing at it whenever the subject or the spectacle of human suffering arose. If only sin could be stamped out, then there would be no more Plague! And whereas we can admire his compassion, the fact is that it is not sin but a bacillus carried by fleas living on rats that is the cause of the Plague. So my question was: Why couldn't he view Marxism in the same light? I had no doubt, I said, that his hatred of poverty was genuine. But then why didn't he devote his life to trying to make the most scientific study possible of its causes and possible cures, without any prior commitment to any ideology?

He then said something astonishing. He said the Middle Ages were a much better age to live in than ours. I couldn't believe my ears. I asked him if he had any idea what life was like then, with most of the population going hungry most of the time, disease a constant threat and no effective medical treatments available, the houses smelly, and also dark because only the rich could afford glass windows, and ignorance and superstition and religious fanaticism rampant. He nodded, but said that was all irrelevant because in the Middle Ages there was no private property or capitalism.

As always he spoke with a self-confidence that could almost make you believe he had been there and seen the truth of his beliefs firsthand.

I racked my brain trying to come up with an argument that would at least raise a doubt in his mind about Marxism. I brought up Popper's Criterion of Falsifiability, which says that that scientific theory is best which is most easily falsifiable. Thus, I explained, if I have a theory that water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit at sea level, this theory is a good (though minor) scientific theory because to test it, all I need to do is boil some water at sea level and stick a thermometer in and see if the temperature is 212 degrees or not. The theory is easily falsifiable if it is wrong. I mentioned the test of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity that predicts the bending of starlight by the gravity of the sun. I told him that the Theory was tested in 1919 during an eclipse of the sun, when it was possible to see a star only slightly above the sun's perimeter, then compare its actual position, which was known, with the position as measured during the eclipse. Here again the theory was easily falsifiable: if the measurement did not show the bending of the star's light as predicted by the theory, Einstein's Theory would have been proved wrong (false). But the Theory passed the test. I asked Steve to ask himself what a test of Marxism would be. I then proposed one: get a sufficiently large group of people and move them to a desert island and set up a Marxist state there. But he rejected the test, arguing that the state would be corrupted by influences from the

outside world, for example, TV and films. Only if there was absolutely no contact with the outside world could the experiment be considered a fair one. And in that case, he was absolutely certain it would prove that Marx had been right. I don't recall how far I pressed him on the fact that his state would be at the Stone Age level if he refused all contact with the outside world, since that would certainly mean no electricity or gas or oil or modern medicine or appliances.

I tried an argument based on business, since he was a successful businessman. I said: suppose I told him that I had what was probably the best business idea ever conceived. Wouldn't he ask me if I had made any money from the idea? Suppose I said that I hadn't, but the reason was that the public wasn't yet ready for my idea. Suppose, years later, I told him again how great my business idea was, and suppose, in response to his inevitable question, I admitted that none of the numerous attempts at implementing the idea had worked. After more years of this, wouldn't he say to me that he couldn't believe the idea was a good one? He replied that, first of all, there were many dot-com companies that didn't make money for years, and then did. But second of all the analogy wasn't valid, because Marxism is two things: an analytical tool for understanding history, and a political theory. When he was young, he came to the conclusion that meaningful change in the U.S. would not take place without a violent revolution, but that there was no chance of such a revolution taking place in the foreseeable future. That was why he had given up being a political activist. Later in the conversation, he repeated an assertion I remembered he had made several times in the past, namely, that recessions and other ills of capitalism would not exist if "goods were produced for use, instead of for profit."

Finally, in late 2006, I came up with an argument that at least had him nodding with a smile — which meant he didn't have a reply at the moment. I began by quoting Marx's slogan, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" and asked him who is going to decide on what a person's legitimate needs are. I cited the example of Ronald Lauder, who at the time had just paid \$135 million for Gustave Klimt's portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer. I said that there are people in this world who simply need to have beautiful paintings in their houses¹. Or what about Shostakovitch, who simply needed to compose, and therefore needed a grand piano in his apartment.

Steve said that Marx was vague on details of the society he wanted to call into being. In any case the slogan I had cited only applied to the Communist state, and not to the transition period called the "dictatorship of the proletariat". In that period, all that would be required would be that people contribute according to their abilities. After the Communist state was in place, all paintings would be in museums, none would be allowed to be privately held. Shostakovitch would be allowed to compose and to have a piano, but not to have any yachts.

I said, OK, let's assume that the Communist state has arrived, and that you are the first among equals, or one of them. There are not enough hours in the day for you to decide which needs are justified and which are not! It will take a huge bureaucracy, and even then it might not be possible. Furthermore, even if you and everyone else in the bureaucracy is 100% good-willed and honest, your decisions are bound to cause anger in at least some of the petitioners. How will you deal with that?

1. After the sale, the painting was on display in Lauder's *Neue Galerie* in New York City. Gaby, a woman I met in 2000, and who is introduced in a later chapter, and I saw it there.

Fantasies of Revolution

I would tell him, “Steve, I hate to say this, but I cannot believe there is the remotest chance of there being a revolution in this country of the kind you are hoping for.” Once again, he was already ahead of me. “I know. It’s not going to happen now.” But he said it in a way that made clear he believed that sooner or later the time would come, and the poor would rise up, and a Communist state would be installed in the U.S.

He and Jane took a trip to Mexico in the early 2000s, and when they came back, and I talked to Jane about the trip, she shook a finger at me and said, “There is going to be a revolution!” And she then explained that she meant not only in Mexico, but here too. She was convinced it was only a matter of time before the poor would rise up and go after those wealthy industrial executives in their enclaves in the Berkeley Hills and in Silicon Valley who are earning hundreds of times what the lowest-paid workers in their companies earn. Since she had no knowledge of 20th-century history, her only reading being mystery novels and the daily paper, I didn’t bother to bring up the likely fact that the first ones who would be stood up against a wall after such a revolution as she had in mind would be people like her, and that even if she were willing to make this sacrifice, the history of the century offered absolutely no reason to hope that the social problems that so bothered her would be solved, or would not be replaced by far worse problems.

His Defense

I never called Steve a hypocrite to his face until an incident occurred that I will describe shortly. But I certainly did, more than once, ask why, if he felt as passionately about the poor as he did, he didn’t devote his life to helping them, why he didn’t open his house to Uhuru¹, the black organization in Oakland that demanded that whites with extra space in their houses give it over to blacks to live in. His reply was always a raising of his hands, and an immediate acknowledgment that he knew he was a hypocrite, and that he wouldn’t try to defend himself. He even said that Tom Hayden (radical leader in the sixties, later a member of the California State Assembly) at a meeting in New Jersey in the sixties had called him a hypocrite because, unlike Tom, he was not living in the ghetto, although Steve was as active as Tom was in promoting the radical cause. (Later, Tom moved out of the ghetto.) When we discussed the homeless, and I complained about the panhandlers, most of them black, on so many downtown Berkeley streets, he said that when any of them planted themselves outside his restaurant, he didn’t hesitate a moment about asking them to leave, and if they refused, about calling the police. On the other hand, he said, and I believed him, when he passed panhandlers on the streets of downtown Berkeley, far from his restaurant, he always gave them something.

Thus I felt his defense was like that of the drunken Christian who fends off criticism by always being there first, saying, with a shaking of his head, “Oh, yes, I know I am a sinner”.

His Views on Blacks

On several occasions I tried to get him to agree that blacks, especially in Berkeley, the most liberal city in the country, could do a great deal more to help themselves. I pointed out how hard-working the Latinos were, how, even though many of them could barely speak the language, they accepted virtually any kind of work, bussing tables or washing dishes in coffee shops, manning leaf blowers, whereas you almost never saw blacks in these jobs. I told him that in all the years I had lived in Berkeley, I couldn’t recall a single black working in a coffee shop, yet there were

1. Swahili for “freedom”.

Latinos who stayed in these jobs year after year.¹ I reminded him that the vast majority of street beggars in Berkeley were blacks.

His response was always a shrug and the comment, “They’re incapable,” with the clear implication that this lack of capability was directly and entirely due to white racism. I argued that it wasn’t a case of either/or and eventually got him to reluctantly agree that there might be a sliding scale of ability even among ghetto blacks. But I always thought that his readiness, his *eagerness* to regard blacks as helpless practically guaranteed him, and all liberals and radicals who thought similarly, a position on top: *they need us* is just another way of saying *we should be in control*.

At one point I asked him about his experience hiring blacks in his restaurant. He shrugged, said he had tried on numerous occasions, but none of them worked out: either they proved incompetent, or else they simply left without notice.

In September, 2007 he and Janewent for a week’s vacation to the South, visiting Savannah and another city whose name I have forgotten. When he returned, I asked him what his impressions were. He replied that one thing that especially pleased him was seeing all the interracial couples. I refrained from reminding him of what he had observed in such relationships in Berkeley, for example, the death threats that one of his waitresses had received when she tried to break up with her black boyfriend (see below under “Black Men, White Women”).

Three months later, when I yet again remarked on how much I wanted to leave Berkeley, I asked him what his biggest complaint was about the suburbs, his reply was, “No blacks”.

His strange ambivalence toward blacks was evident in an incident that occurred in early January, 2008. He was carrying in a box of soda from his car. I stopped to talk to him. We were both on his front porch, he on the landing, about to enter the house, I on one of the steps. Several black teenagers came down the sidewalk and one of them, seeing the box of sodas, said to him, “Hey, can I have one of those?” Steve: “Sure, if you pay for it.” But the kid apparently had not heard anything beyond the first word, and so he put down the bike he had been pushing, and started up the steps. Steve: “I said if you pay for it.” Black: “I ain’t got no money.” Steve: “Then I’m afraid you can’t have any soda”. The kid’s friends were gathered around him and I was worried that they were going to attack Steve. But by that time, he had opened the door and was halfway into the house, so they apparently decided they wouldn’t be able to get to him before he was able to close and lock the door. After they had continued down the street, I praised him for his courage, but he clearly regarded it matter-of-factly: If a black wants something, he should pay for it.

His Views on Israel

I don’t know if it would be correct to call him a Jew-hating Jew, but I do know that he had no sympathy for Israel. When I brought up the extraordinary survival of the Jews through the centu-

1. And yet, the word “brilliant” is not the first one that leaps into my mind when I think of Latinos in business. In the coffee shop Espresso Roma at the corner of College and Ashby Aves. in South Berkeley, they routinely sell out of their coffee cake by late morning. I asked one of the counter men (who had worked there for years) why they don’t bake more of it, since they obviously could sell more? He simply smiled and shook his head, and I got the distinct impression he was thinking, “These gringos understand so little about the restaurant business.”

I should also mention that originally they bought their baked goods from an outside supplier. I never had any complaints: the pies were especially good. Then I heard that they had decided they could make more money by doing the baking on the premises. The quality plummeted. As far as I was concerned, the pies were inedible. For a while I left notes to that effect on my tray, but it did no good. I assume that sufficiently many of their regular customers were too insensitive to notice the difference, or preferred a piece of inedible pie or poppy-seed cake with their coffee than none at all.

ries, and remarked that the blacks should study their example, he shrugged and simply said that the Jews have a long tradition of valuing education. In September 2007, when I happened to mention the Palestinians, he suddenly became very angry, asked if I realized that Israel is an apartheid state, that the fence that the Israelis were then building was encircling Palestinian communities. I thought of this rage to *flatten* that is so typical of the radical left — hatred for anything, like Israel, that excels, stands out, that refuses to place itself at the mercy of the fury of ignorant have-nots.

Trying to Figure Out the Reason for His Views

Throughout these discussions, I asked myself how such lunacy could reside in the mind of an educated man, and I couldn't help placing a major part of the blame on a liberal arts tradition that does nothing to teach rational thought, including scientific thought, and furthermore makes its ignorance of science and mathematics a point of pride. (“We are not in the enemy camp! Ours is a different kind of truth! [even though we expect to get the same credit for our truth as the scientists and mathematicians get for theirs]”).)

It is a measure of the appalling dereliction of duty on the part of liberal arts academics that I feel I have to explain to readers with only a liberal arts education what “rational thought” is. It is not primarily “taking into account all points of view”, so that the mythology of a black African tribe is “just as valid” as Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity as far as explaining the universe is concerned. It is not primarily the ability “to write well”, although virtually every liberal arts professor considers that ability to be the equivalent of rational thought.

I am inclined to say that rational thought is thought that understands what a statement is, and what evidence or proof for the validity of a statement is, and what a logical argument is (on several levels, not only the mathematical or scientific). Rational thought understands the value of Popper’s Criterion of Falsifiability. Rational thought understands the nature of probability and statistics, and when they can be legitimately invoked in an argument. Finally, rational thought at least understands how the scientific method works: that one comes up with a theory about how something will behave, and then one devises tests for the validity of the theory, and specifies how the results will be measured, and what will constitute convincing evidence for the truth of the theory. (The rudiments of scientific thought can be taught in activities as simple as fixing a bicycle.)

But neither in my own liberal arts education, nor in that of the liberal arts students I rented a room to over the years, or their friends, was there a course in anything remotely like such thinking.

I searched for a reason for Steve’s views in what I knew of his childhood and youth, and could find nothing. He had been raised in a middle-class town in New Jersey, his father having been a pharmacist. Apparently his father had a net worth of only a few tens of thousands of dollars when he died, but Steve never mentioned if the reason was that his father had been cheated by capitalists, or that he had lost a large amount of money in the stock market.

For a long time I believed that his was just another case of projection on the part of an ambitious man with no ability in science or engineering, a man who knows that these subjects are the really important ones in the modern world, and that the liberal arts are, relatively speaking, for losers. Thus the liberal-arts-oriented person sees in the poor, the downtrodden, versions of himself. But business also has real importance in the modern world, and he was always a successful businessman, so my projection theory didn’t seem compelling.

Then I thought that maybe he was simply a man who was appalled at the suffering he saw in the world, and in particular in the wealthy country he had been born in, yet at the same time was a

man who didn't want to spend his life working in the trenches — working on a day-to-day basis at the dirty and largely frustrating job of helping the poor — and so he bought his way out by finding a philosophy that declared such efforts to be futile anyway, because the only real solution was overthrowing the system altogether, which, since he knew it would never happen in his lifetime, provided him with a way of having his rage without having to do anything to fix the problems that aroused it. Marxism was the fist he raised against the world.

Or perhaps his views were a way for him to deal with the anger he felt in his youth over the realization that he would never do anything exceptional in the world. How much better, if this is what you must bear all your life, to have an alibi for being near the bottom: "It could be better than this. This is not real. It is not my fault." It gave him a reason to swagger. I wondered if his political views would change if he suddenly came into a large amount of money — say, \$10 million or more.

Or perhaps the best explanation was that given me by a man who came to inspect my house. (After fifteen years living in my house, with its cracks in the walls and foundation, decaying shingles, I thought it would be a good idea if I had the place inspected again by the man who originally inspected the house, since there was no doubt about his thoroughness.) We went through the place, he pointing out matters that needed attention, and wound up talking — in the crawl-space, or rather the stooped-walk space — under the house. We talked about the house, the neighborhood, Berkeley, his job (he said he was going to resign in a year or two and devote himself to writing). I told him about Steve's political philosophy. He said, without a moment's hesitation, "That's not a political philosophy, that's mental illness."

There are times that I think that if God were to grant me only one wish, it would be to understand minds like Steve's — I mean understand them "from the inside."

A Shared Sense of Humor

Our sense of humor, and our willingness to be cooperative neighbors, got us through the years. I would come out my front door, see him walking up his driveway with a preoccupied look that indicated he really had no time for conversation, and I would call out: "Steve! I have nothing to say! And I'm saying it!"¹ Or, "Steve! I won't say anything. Except, of course, 'I won't say anything.' Except, of course, 'Except, of course, 'I won't say anything.' ' Except, of course, 'Except, of course, 'Except, of course, 'I won't say anything.' ' ' Except, of course...' !" Or, when I would stop in at his garage-office at the rear of his property, I would knock (always), go in, and say, "I'll be brief, because time is money." And he would laugh and say there was no need for me to be brief. Or sometimes I would tell him, as I entered, "I am embarked on the New Taciturnity, so I'll be very brief." And the resulting conversations were always cordial. During one of these, when I was bemoaning my problems, present and past, with women, he quoted a variation that I hadn't heard before on an old line: "Women: you can't live with 'em and you can't live with 'em."

He had the habit, which was common among those who argued about politics, of using the phrase, "the fact of the matter" whenever he felt he was making an indisputable point. I remember in July, 2008, a conversation on the sidewalk in front of my house, he leaning against his car, in which he said that, although the Right Wing advocates free trade, the fact of the matter was that our economic success was *built* on tariffs, and only when we had gained market dominance did we talk about free trade. I had no knowledge of U.S. tariff history, so I didn't argue with him.

1. A remark by the 20th century American avant-garde composer, John Cage

In the spring, when Jane experienced the annual female need to rearrange furniture, I would come over and move the few items that had to be moved (we men had not the slightest idea why she needed to move them, nor did we hold out any hope that one day we would understand why) — tables, chairs, sometimes the bed a few feet. Prior to parties they gave, he would ask if they could use my garbage can afterward, as they would easily fill theirs, and of course I said yes. Once in a while in the summer Jane would ask if she could use my green bin¹ and I was glad to say yes if it wasn't full. Steve routinely helped me with certain matters connected with annoying citizen responsibilities. When they traveled, I always took in their newspaper each morning (if the papers were allowed to accumulate on their steps, burglars would have a clear sign that the house was empty). He took in my mail (I had an external box hanging on one wall of my front porch.) We watched each other's houses as part of our never-ending vigilance against burglars.

His Family

Steve had been married once, and divorced many years ago. His daughter, a lesbian, was a reasonably successful organizer of conventions. His son seemed to have a hard time finding a career he could devote himself to. He was a primary school teacher for several years, then later went into film making briefly. Steve's sister, also a lesbian, was a gifted jazz announcer on a local public radio station, and was without question the most talented speaker at pledge drives for PBS TV stations that I have ever heard. Most of the personalities who performed this function were dull beyond belief, but she could have you sitting on the edge of your chair while, let's face it, she said the same things. I praised her often to Steve, and would say hello to her when she came to parties at Steve and Jane's.

Neither Steve nor Jane were readers in the accepted sense of the term. They both read the daily paper (the *San Francisco Chronicle*), and Jane read mysteries, but that was about it. I can only recall Steve speaking enthusiastically about one book (apart from *Das Kapital*, which I am not at all sure he ever read in its entirety), and that book was *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, by Barrington Moore, Jr. He had read it in his student days, and possibly had taken a course under Moore. He urged me to read it; I bought a used copy, but lost interest after 80 pages. During baseball season, they watched the games at night and on weekends on TV. They also went to several games in person each season. (I to Steve: "Seen one baseball game — seen one *inning* of one baseball game — you've seen 'em all.") They watched American films on video tape and, of course, in theaters, and Steve in fact knew a lot about American film, could always tell you who starred in some film you had all but forgotten. They travelled two or three times a year: to France, Italy, South America, once to China, another time to Turkey.. (I to Steve regarding travel: "Someone's gotta do it, and I'm only glad that you are willing to take on the burden and the responsibility.")

I don't know what their life together was like. He often worked in his garage-office in the evenings, when there were no interesting games on TV. Most mornings, he was in his office by six². But I do know they had some fearsome fights. Not often — every couple of months or so. I could easily hear them in my house with the windows closed: Flying crockery, Steve screaming

1. A large plastic container for grass and plant cuttings that the city provided and that residents could leave out on their garbage collection days for emptying by a truck that went around.

2. Three sounds I associate with his working in his office: the slamming of the back door of his house as he left to go to the garage; the muffled ringing of the phone, and his extraordinarily loud sneezes. They reminded me of a teenager burping. They were as though he were announcing to one and all, "If I have to sneeze, then by God the rest of you are going to listen to it."

at the top of his lungs, “fuckin’ ... I told you again and again... fuckin’ ... you’ve fucked it all up...” Then I could hear her whimpering in a little-girl, please-don’t-beat-me-again voice, though I don’t think he physically struck her. In December 2007, a few days before Christmas, when they were busy giving their annual parties, including one for their restaurant employees and another to which they always invited the neighbors¹, they had another set-to that was the worst so far. Steve’s bellowing, animal rage went on for several minutes, then there was silence, then I heard Jane at first crying, and then moaning and then howling in utter heart-broken despair in a voice that immediately made me think of Middle East women after a terrorist attack has killed their husbands or sons or daughters.

And Yet, a Realist in Ordinary Life

As I have said, he was a successful businessman. Being in the restaurant business, he was forced to deal with elements of Marx’s lumpenproletariat, namely, restaurant workers, who, with several notable exceptions, were usually transient and incompetent. One of them actually stole money from him. Once or twice he hired blacks, but in both cases they proved not to be up to the job, and he had to fire them. (He once remarked that the two worst tippers were blacks and rich people.) And yet he tried to be good to his employees, offering them high pay and medical insurance if they stayed with him for more than, I think, a year. Three of the women had been with him for many years. I used to ask him why it was that people on the bottom of the economic ladder didn’t recognize a good thing when they saw it, but he didn’t know.

He was always friendly to me and unless he was racing off to deal with a crisis in the restaurant, always had time to talk, except during the first three weeks of January, when he went into seclusion to prepare the paperwork that the clients of his bookkeeping firm needed to give their tax preparers. Because he was clearly a man of the world, I often went to him for advice, not only about financial matters or neighborhood problems, but about my love life. His no-nonsense approach to this subject did me a world of good, as the reader will see when we come to the story of my housemates, and to the nearly fatal relationship I had with a woman composer. He seemed to have no particular fear of death. When I worried aloud to him about earthquakes, as I often did — especially after an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in fall 2007 predicted that the Big One would probably occur along the Hayward Fault, which was only a few miles from us, and that the damage would be catastrophic, he shrugged, said, in so many words, if it happens, it happens. In fact, he said that his plan regarding earthquakes was to die before the Big One occurred. But after I told him I had had an earthquake engineer draw up plans for major retrofitting to the basement of my house (winter 2007: cost of the plans: \$450; cost of the retrofitting work: \$24,000), he asked for the man’s name, and had him create similar plans for his house. I would like to say that he was not a fool about practical matters, but when the first estimate for the retrofitting work was, in his opinion, too high, he tabled the matter indefinitely. But at least he, unlike all but one of my other neighbors, realized the importance of having an automatic gas-shut-off-valve. My neighbor on the other side, the mentally-challenged Benny, said he couldn’t afford the \$300 to have the valve installed. I pointed out to him that he stood to lose hundreds of thousands of dollars if his house burned as a result of the earthquake, and that, incidentally, the fire would probably spread to neighboring houses, including mine. He merely shrugged. The earthquake

1. Though not me after 2008. I suppose they realized how out of place an intellectual was among their bourgeois friends, and I am sure that my seldom saying hello to Jane when I came home or left the house and she was working in her garden, was a major reason for my being removed from the guest list.

engineer who drew up the retrofit plans for my house said that, in the past, he had *paid* neighbors to have the valves installed in their houses if they refused to spend their own money. He said he would have been crazy not to.

Financial Arguments

I realized just how inflexible Steve's thinking was when I brought up two financial ideas I had found useful. In the first, my goal was to have a single number to represent my net worth, one that took into account incomes from sources other than stocks and bonds, for example, Social Security, and rent from the upstairs room. So I decided that the way to do this was to take the annual income from these sources, then divide by the interest I was making, on average, from my investments (including appreciation in value of the house). The result would be the amount of principal that *would have* brought in that amount of income. So, for example, if I was making \$4500 a year from the room, and I was earning an average of, say, 5% on my investments, then the capital equivalent would be $\$4500/0.05$ or \$90,000. I could consider the room as \$90,000 in capital, even though I couldn't sell the room (apart from selling the house). The same reasoning could be applied to Social Security.

Thinking this a rather clever idea, I told Steve about it. He laughed, shook his head, and said it made no sense. Capital — assets in general — were by definition (in the bookkeeping business) things you could buy or sell. Period. I couldn't sell the room as a separate asset, and I certainly couldn't sell my Social Security. Therefore my idea had no meaning. I explained that I had no intention of changing the rules of accounting, or of economics, I just wanted a way to arrive at a reasonable single number representing my net worth while I was alive. But he would have none of it. I then tried to argue that diamonds are not the same as acres of land, yet we have no hesitation about applying a common measure to both, namely, their current financial value. But, he replied, both can be bought and sold, and therefore that is legitimate. Finally, I tried to get him to understand that we can make any definition we want, provided only that it doesn't contradict other definitions. Mine didn't contradict other definitions because I was not proposing that Steve (or any other bookkeeper or accountant) apply it in his business. But he stuck to his conviction. Once again I couldn't help feeling that a major reason for his stubbornness was an education that knew nothing of mathematics — in particular, of the routine practice of making definitions that happen to be convenient for some purpose. (The following year, I found out from my tax man that my idea is known as "capitalization rate", and has been used for many years for exactly the kind of purpose I had in mind. When I told Steve he simply shrugged.)

My second idea, based on the first, was aimed at providing a way to calculate the real value of owning a house. I argued that, first of all, there is the value of the house as it stands — what it could be sold for on the present market. But second, I argued, if you live in the house, then you are living rent-free, apart from the cost of maintenance and taxes and insurance. So you should ask what it would cost to rent a house equivalent to yours. Let us say the answer is \$2,000 a month, or \$24,000 a year. Then, using my first idea, and assuming that you are earning 5% on your investments, the \$24,000 a year can be regarded as income on a principal of \$480,000. Assume that maintenance costs 1% of the value of the house a year, and taxes and insurance run, say, \$6,000 a year. If the house is worth \$500,000, then the cost of maintenance is \$5,000 a year. So we have $\$5,000 + \$6,000 = \$11,000$ in costs associated with the house each year. At 5%, we would need a principal of \$220,000 to cover these costs. $\$480,000 - \$220,000 = \$260,000$. So the real value of your house is $\$500,000 + \$260,000 = \$760,000$.

But Steve didn't accept that argument either.

I Attempt to Explain Relativity to Him

Even though he had no real interest in, or knowledge of, modern science, I sensed that, unlike so many humanites-oriented people (especially professors!), he was not proud of his ignorance. He seemed to accept his inability to understand science with the same resignation that he may have accepted his short physical stature. In early 2004, I was attempting to understand the Special Theory of Relativity, and when he said he knew nothing about it, I offered to teach him some of the basic ideas, for example, why time slows down and distances shrink in an object (for example, a spaceship) that approaches the speed of light. He seemed almost honored that I would be willing to make the effort. He said he would be eager to hear what I had to say, provided (1) my explanation didn't require him to study anything beforehand, and (2) it didn't include any math. I found the challenge irresistible, and came up with an explanation that he seemed to accept.

A Mutt and Jeff¹ Duo

Yet another ironical fact about the man was his friendship with a libertarian anarchist, Art S — . The friend happened to be his computer consultant (he later became one of my consultants, also, and is described under “An Electrical and Mechanical Genius” in the last chapter of this book). The two got along well together, even though they were at opposite ends of the political spectrum, unless you believe that the political spectrum is a closed circle, not a straight line, in which case they were next door to each other in their views.

I had several conversations with the consultant on the subject of libertarianism, and, like Steve, he was completely confident that eventually the world, or at least the U.S., would realize the error of its ways, and adopt the political philosophy he believed in. I told him, truthfully, that I welcomed the news, in early 2004, that the libertarians were planning to take over the state of New Hampshire, because I felt that the best argument for a political theory was to see it work in practice. But he believed the experiment could not be a complete one, because the federal government would not allow the state to set aside all the drug laws.

Once, when I was out sweeping my sidewalk, and he was on his way into Steve's house, I remarked how I wished I could find someone competent to do yard work for me, and asked how it would be if this were a libertarian state. He replied that just as I did things because I enjoyed doing them, so there would be people around who would be glad to do my yard work because they enjoyed doing it. There would be no need to pay them. If everyone were able to do what they enjoyed doing, all the needs of society would be taken care of. There would even be people around who loved cleaning sewers, and so that is how that work would get done.

I Lose My Temper

For many years, Steve and Jane had a superb plumber named Pete (whom we always referred to simply as Pete the Plumber). He also did some work for me. But in the late nineties, he was discovered to have cancer in part of his face. An operation was performed, but further treatment was required, and, for reasons I am not sure of, he didn't have adequate medical insurance. That, and a nasty divorce, reduced him to poverty. He was unable to afford any but the most minimal medical care. I considered him to be a prime example of the disgraceful misery that our medical system inflicts on so many citizens of this country. He certainly couldn't afford to live in the Bay

1. The names of a comic strip duo in the forties and fifties, one of them tall and thin, the other short and fat. For several decades, “Mutt and Jeff” was a term applied to persons who were opposites in some respect.

Area, and so he moved to a cabin in Northern California, where he lived most of the year without heat, except for a pot-bellied stove, and without electricity. But every few months he would come down for a visit to Steve and Jane. He would stay in one of their extra rooms for a few days, and they would feed him and provide the human companionship he was forced to live without. Since he enjoyed cigars, but couldn't afford them, I always made a point of giving him half a dozen or so of mine.

In February, 2004, he came down for a visit. Steve and Jane decided to have a dinner, and they invited me.

In addition to Pete, the guests included a stocky Chilean and his girlfriend. The Chilean had done carpentry work for Steve and Jane as part of their remodeling of their kitchen. (According to Steve, they spent close to \$150,000 on the remodel, and on having the entire interior of their house painted.) The carpenter opened the conversation, as we sat down to the table, by asking me, "Do you know you are living in a military dictatorship?" I said no, I didn't. (The question may have been prompted by my having said that I believed we should invade Iraq, a view that, within a year, I renounced completely.)

He soon made clear that he was a Communist, and soon he and the others, with the exception of Pete, were embarked on a fearful condemnation of the U.S. The U.S. is responsible for all the economic and political disasters in South America, the native peoples of the world should not be required to adapt to Western ways, Third World overpopulation is not a problem, McDonald's is, because it is paying for the destruction of the rain forests in order to obtain grazing land for beef cattle, and so forth.

I did my best to counteract these charges, but after about an hour, I had had enough. I slammed my fist on the table, stood up, and said "I can't take this any more. You're all a bunch of fucking hypocrites! You make me sick! You sit here at a table loaded with food, in a beautiful house, you all earn a decent living [I completely forgot about Pete], you all drive cars, you have TVs and computers, and you say the U.S. is the villain in the world because we consume more of the world's resources than the people in Bangladesh. You yack endlessly about the plight of the poor in the world, and yet you don't lift a finger in your daily lives to do anything about it."

The Chilean got up, leaned across the table with his fists clenched, and said, "Are you calling me a hypocrite, sir?" I said, "Yes, I am." He said he would not tolerate it, and then said that he wasn't affluent, etc. His girlfriend joined in and said that they give most of their income to an organization they had founded to help the working poor. The rest of the group were visibly nervous about the confrontation. I had no fear. If he had hit me, I knew exactly what I was going to do: ignore the blows, get my hands around his head, and keep twisting until I heard his neck crack. I could see the head dangling at a crazy angle, his eyes wide, as his body slumped to the floor. I would have done it with far less anxiety than when I turn on my computer in the morning.

Steve tried to smooth over the Chilean's remarks, but I was fed up and walked out. I was determined not to speak to Steve any longer. But later, I forget for what reason, we had a brief conversation. He said that in my sweeping denunciation I had included Pete, who was certainly no hypocrite. I said I hadn't realized that and that I owed him a major apology, which I fully intended to make.

He asked if we could return to our old relationship. I said I'd have to think about it. The truth was, my only regret was losing someone reliable to watch over my house when I was away. After a few days, I wrote him the following e-mail:

“Steve:

“Sorry I didn't get back to you sooner. What I would like to do is continue my relationship with you and Jane exactly as it was before the dinner, except at least for the time being no political discussions (and no discussions of why I don't want any more political discussions, and no discussions of why I don't want any discussions of why I don't want any more political discussions, and...).

“Thus I will continue to be glad to help with moving of furniture, and to keep an eye on your house when you are traveling, and to work with you in battles against neighborhood crime and the Apartment Building From Hell, etc.

“— John”

He was angry about my condition of no discussions about why I didn't want any discussions. It wasn't good enough for him. So I stopped speaking to him. Weeks went by. A neighbor of ours, in a phone conversation, said I should try to bury the hatchet again, that Steve had said more than once that he was genuinely fond of me. But I still wasn't interested. I ignored him whenever I saw him going to or coming from his car.

Then, one morning as I was sweeping leaves in my driveway, and he saw me on the way to his car, he stopped suddenly, and walked toward me. “How long is this going to go on?” I said I didn't know. I reluctantly allowed a conversation to get started. I said I sure as hell wasn't going to apologize to anyone except Pete, and that I thought I owed him a major apology. Eventually I found myself saying that we could resume the old relationship, although I would not be discussing politics as much as I had.

Jane happened to be walking to her car at this time. Steve announced the truce, and she came over to me, said, “I am so glad!” and gave me a long, warm, tight hug, as though the estrangement with Steve had been a source of deep unhappiness to her. But in the following days she was as distant as she always had been.

A year or so later, the Chilean died of cancer.

An Argument About Freedom and the Sacrifice of Lives

One Friday in January of 2006 we had a discussion that once again revealed Steve's extraordinary inflexibility of thought. The discussion began, I think, with his controlled expression of rage at the Bush administration's spying on citizens. From there it went to the subject of freedom of the press. He announced, in no uncertain terms, “We have no freedom of the press!” explaining that this was proved by the fact that the leading newspaper in the country, namely, *The New York Times*, had withheld for a year the publication of the government spying story.¹ I reminded him that the same paper had published the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971. He replied that that was over thirty years ago, and the *Times*'s holding back on the spy story was proof that freedom of the press had all but disappeared in this country. I then told him that I did not believe in unlimited freedom of the press. I cited the fact that, at least since World War II, there was a general agreement

1. “The *Times* broke the [NSA wiretap] story on Dec. 16, 2005. The interesting sidelight is that this ‘news’ was about to appear in a book by *NYT* staffer James Risen (*State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration*, Simon & Schuster), so the story was also a pretty good piece of prepublication publicity.” — J.S.

among journalists not to publish news about impending troop movements and attacks that might result in American casualties. He accepted that there might be a few exceptions like that. I then said that I didn't think it was a good idea for the press to reveal the weaknesses in our defenses against terrorism. For example, if in fact our reservoirs are essentially unprotected, I didn't see how announcing that fact did us any good. He countered by saying that, first of all, if the reservoirs are unprotected, the terrorists probably know it already, and second of all, publishing this information would be far more likely to result in protection being provided than not publishing it. I conceded that he was probably right on the second point. He said, "Freedom is like a risky investment: there is high risk, but there is also a high payoff." I didn't bother pointing out to him that high risk means that the odds are against a high payoff. In any case, a high payoff is certainly not guaranteed.

Since we were talking about tradeoffs that, in my opinion, have to be made, I brought up the standard example of the terrorist who is captured with sufficient evidence to indicate that almost certainly he knows about a nuclear device set to go off in a matter of hours in, say, New York City. I told him that in such a case, I believe torture is justified. He shouted, "Torture doesn't work! It *never ever* works!"

I then brought up the famous case of Churchill's decision regarding the bombing of Coventry during World War II, when he decided not to warn the citizens of that city of an impending German air raid because to do so would have revealed to the Germans that the British had broken the Nazi code. Churchill had decided that the sacrifice of several thousand British citizens would save more lives in the long run, through the Allies' ability to know German plans in advance.

On this he disagreed adamantly. It is never justified to sacrifice even a *single* life no matter how many lives might be saved thereby. Those who were saved might feel good, but those who were sacrificed certainly would not. I pointed out that the military at least thinks otherwise, and that it is accepted that sometimes a small group of men must be sacrificed to save a larger group. I tried to bring up examples: sacrifice 1,000 to save 10,000. "Never!" To save 100,000? "Never!" Then it slowly became clear that his argument was based on the impossibility of deciding exactly where to draw the line. "You say at 100? But not at 99?" He laughed at the absurdity of it. I told him that in real life, the numbers are never known that precisely, but this made no impression on him.

I realized afterward that his argument was fundamentally the same one that he had used years before regarding poverty. I quote the passage from the chapter, "Politics and Economics", in my book *Thoughts and Visions*, on the web site www.thoughtsandvisions.com:

A Marxist I know argues that, if you believe that universal health care is desirable on the grounds that no one should have to suffer unnecessarily because they are physically ill, since contracting illness is usually beyond their control, then you should also believe that no one should have to suffer unnecessarily from poverty, since that too is usually beyond the person's control, being the result of the class they were born into. The proof that there is no difference between the two sets of circumstances lies in the fact that it is not possible to define the dividing line between the two.

But the argument: if it is not possible to define the dividing line between two things, then the two things are the same, is fallacious, and there are numerous examples to show that the fallacy is recognized both in everyday life and in the law. For example, most people do *not* believe the following:

Since you can't define the dividing line between good manners and bad, the two are the same. Since you can't define the dividing line between great art and inferior art, the two are the same.

Since you can't define the dividing line between physical beauty and physical ugliness, the two are the same.

Since you can't define the dividing line between mental health and mental illness, the two are the same.

Since you can't define the dividing line between cases where punishment is justified even though the innocent are sometimes found guilty, and cases where it is not justified (for example, when the punishment is execution), the two are the same, that is, no punishment is justified.¹

Jane

Over the years, Jane became more and more aloof, more and more opinionated and rude. In the first few years, she would reply in a friendly way when I said hello to her as she worked in her front garden. She would sometimes call me "dear" or "hon", and she said on more than one occasion that I was their favorite neighbor. Each spring, and sometimes in the fall, Steve and I would indulge her furniture-moving needs. There was no doubt, from her manner during these exercises, that she was responding to an ancient, deep, instinctual female need that was beyond discussion.

As the years went by, she began not replying to my hellos. At first, the reason seemed to be that she was always plugged into her portable tape player, listening to mystery stories. But sometimes she wouldn't even say hello when she was walking to her car and clearly not listening to her tapes. In any case, she would never be the first one to say hello. I wondered if the reason might be her disapproval of my having attractive, young women students as renters.

When I asked her whether I could trim some branches that were blocking my cream-colored roses in front, her reply, in that hoarse, loud, cigarette-smoke² voice, would be on the order of, "Of course, you can. I'm surprised you waited this long. In fact you should rip out the entire bush." If I asked her a question about the care of plants, she would always have an answer. I remarked once that I had found a wonderful rose gardener. She: "I don't trust gardeners." Never once did she (or Steve) ever say, "I don't know", or "I'm not sure", and certainly never "I'll have to look it up". In fact, no matter what I said to her, I would come away from the conversation feeling diminished, even stupid. Her brassy ignorance got on my nerves, as did her loud, horsey laugh.

I avoided talking to her as much as possible, calling their number only when I knew that Steve would pick up the phone because he was working in his office in the garage. On the rare occasions when she answered, and I asked, "Is Steve there?" she would reply in an upper-middle -

1. Or else all punishments are justified. It is often argued that capital punishment should be abolished because death is an irrevocable punishment. But then so should all imprisonment be abolished, since the years spent in prison are also irrevocable.

2. She had tried quitting smoking several times, but always started again, explaining that she put on too much weight. Like many women, she far preferred to die early and slim, than late and fat. In the morning, around seven, when I went out to my back porch for my coffee and a few puffs of my cigar, I would sometimes hear her hacking cough coming from her porch. But neither smoking nor quitting seemed to solve her weight problem, and as the years wore on, she became rather pear-shaped — in fact, steatopygous.

class voice, “No...” which was pronounced, with pursed lip, “Newwww...”, in a tone that implied that it was not her job to keep track of his whereabouts.

In the mid-nineties, Lori, my housemate at the time (to be introduced in the second file of Vol. 4 under “Lori”), told me that Jane was a terrible manager at the restaurant, always interfering with the details of her employee’s work. Gradually, Steve became the only one of the two of them who went to the restaurant to oversee matters. Jane seemed to be at a loss as to what to do with her days. Both of them were growing tired of the business, and at one point, around the year 2000, they sold it to a man who knew next to nothing about the restaurant business, and even less about the day-to-day management of any business, his only talent being that of schmoozing with his customers. His financial difficulties eventually forced him to bow out, and, under the agreement he had made with Steve, the business became Steve and Jane’s again. Jane then decided to become an investigator for a firm that checked the backgrounds of people applying for various kinds of security guard positions. She had six weeks of training in a cave outside Washington, D.C., or so she said. But when she came home, she couldn’t find any work in her new field, or had lost interest in it, and so she spent her days reading mystery novels and puttering in the garden.

Yet there was no doubt about the high opinion she had of herself. When, in late February, 2005, I told them about the superb lunch that Gaby (my ladyfriend, to be introduced in the first file of Vol. 5) and I had had at New York’s Bouley restaurant, and asked if they had ever eaten there, she (wearing some sort of sloppy robe and apparently going upstairs to dress) stopped, turned, leaned across the bannister and said, “John, I read restaurant books, I subscribe to the five *best* restaurant magazines, I know *every* good restaurant in New York, even though I haven’t been to them all yet.” (That tobacco-smoke voice, hoarse, loud.)

In April of the same year, she called me to ask if I wanted to use her cleaning lady, Alisa, while she and Steve were in Europe. (I had used Alisa, or her daughter, on several occasions in the past.) I said no, that my new housemate wasn’t due to arrive until August, at which time I was planning on having Alisa clean the house. Jane’s hauteur and contempt were all-too-audible over the phone. “John, I have my house cleaned every two weeks.” Then a suppressed laugh, as though it were almost unbelievable that everyone didn’t do the same. She said that Alisa had told her that my house is always so dirty when I hire her that she can’t do a good job. I tried to recover some of my dignity by explaining that I sweep the floors and clean the toilets regularly when I am living alone, and that when someone moves into the rented room, they sign a contract in advance that they will share the cleaning with me and that, furthermore, I have the house professionally cleaned when they move in. But it took all my self-control not to say, “I may not know much, but one thing I know for certain is that God did not put me on this planet to spend my time trying to win your approval about the way I clean my house. And while we’re on the subject of cleanliness, why don’t you start picking up the litter in your front yard and on the sidewalk and street in front of your house, *bitch*.”

For several years, they had a Christmas party for their employees, and then a second party for the neighbors. One of the flyers they put in neighbors’ mailboxes had, below a colorful Santa, the words:

Cookies, Egg Nog, Pickles on the Tree

All the usual stuff...

OPEN HOUSE

Sunday, Dec. 18th [2005]

5:30 - 10:30 p.m.

Please join us...

2|-- Milvia St.

(at Parker)

Berkeley

Jane and Steve 12/18/05

I tried to be a good conversationalist, but most of the talk was about kids and other family matters, and sports, and jobs, and food, so I wound up spending most of the time talking to Steve. But even so, about an hour was all I could stand, and so I slipped out when everyone was gathered around Steve and Jane discussing the egg nog or a new baby. Around 2008, they stopped inviting me.

Starting in the spring of 2006 Steve and Jane spent thousands having two rooms in the back of their house remodelled. (This was a new project having nothing to do with their near-\$150,000 remodelling of their kitchen.) There was no real need: they weren't planning on having guests or relatives staying over for any length of time, and the house already had more than five bedrooms. Steve told me the project would take about two months but in fact it took close to nine. So I had to endure, for that entire time, six days a week, from morning till night, the infernal racket of power saws. I strongly suspected that the reason they undertook the project was that it was a way for Jane to relieve the intolerable boredom of her life.

Chet

Across the street lived a piano teacher who, like Steve, had no doubts about what the solution to poverty was. Only in his case it was to abolish private property. He wasn't a Marxist (he had been raised a Mormon and had grown to hate the Church) and, as far as I know, he had next to no knowledge of economics, but he was convinced that private property (and Republicans) were the cause of the nation's ills.

At first, I enjoyed talking to him about music. He was a graduate of Juilliard and a very able pianist. It is hard for me to say how good he really was because he had a morbid fear of performing in public — to the extent of vomiting prior to a recital — and as a result, at least to my ears, his public playing was forced, virtually always forte or fortissimo, and at too rapid tempos. In fact, in more than eighteen years of listening to him across the street, not once did I ever hear him play *piano*. I always felt that his message to his audience was, "By God, I'll show you I can get through this!" I attended several of his recitals at the Berkeley Piano Club and at the house of one of Berkeley's outstanding piano teachers, Sharon Mann. She was married to a UC Berkeley chemistry professor, and although the exterior of their house in the Berkeley Hills was not particularly impressive, the interior was, especially with its little recital hall, which, she always told us prior to a performance, was the kind of venue that Chopin performed in. Not only did her students give recitals there during her springtime "salons", but also the noted performer of avant-garde piano music, Sarah Cahill, who had been one of her students.

I always had the impression that for Chet, classical music was a hammer to hit the world with — a collection of prestiges that could be used to intimidate others. He had a distinct contempt for French classical music, with the one exception of Ravel. I also never could get the slightest indication of praise or respect out of him for Vivaldi or Telemann. He hated Michael Naimann, who composed the music for many films, including several of Peter Greenaway's, among them

Drowning By Numbers (which I saw many times), and Jane Campion's *The Piano*. (I had to make an effort not to say what an outstanding composer I thought he was.) He played Bach in his loud, undistinguished manner. Among the few composers he admired was Rachmaninoff. He never had any doubts about his opinions, never admitted to not understanding anything. He dismissed anything remotely atonal, including the works of Webern, as "academic squeak and squawk". It was impossible to talk with him about music in the way that I used to with jazz musicians, or as I did with Gaby, who will be introduced later. Music was a commodity that brought you prestige.

He had excelled in physics as an undergraduate, and had been encouraged by one of his professors to consider a career in that science. As a result, like Georgia¹'s husband, he assumed that he was smarter than anyone else, except, possibly, for a few Berkeley professors. So he never really listened to you, at least not if you talked for more than, say, 10 seconds at a time, because then it was his turn to talk. If you went over that limit, especially if you were talking about something you were interested in, he would start yawning. A little physics is a dangerous thing.

He liked science fiction and modern novels, and clearly indicated his disdain when I told him that, since so many great novels and other books had been written in the past, and since I only had a finite time on this earth, I wanted to spend most of my time reading the classics. On the other hand, for most of the time I knew him, he had no interest in modern classical music, meaning, anything written since 1950 or so. I never quite had the courage to exhibit the same disdain for his attitude toward modern music as he did for mine regarding modern novels.

Like all Berkeley liberals, he was strongly sympathetic to the plight of the blacks. So determined was he to avoid thinking negatively about blacks that, early in 2000, he stood on the sidewalk in front of his house and watched a black man calmly load \$5,000 worth of electronic equipment from my next door neighbor's apartment into his van, then drive away. (The thief had broken in through a window that was not visible from across the street.) Chet didn't want to assume the worst about the black, and so hadn't called the police.

In May of 2000, his house was burglarized and I said a few things about blacks that angered him. Soon after, he left the following letter in my mailbox:

"John,

"I am infuriated by your racism. Are you really such a fool as to believe blacks are insufficiently stigmatized in our society?

"When you confidently predict the neighborhood will go to hell because a young black man is moving in, when you say you want to live on the second floor so you don't have to deal with blacks, or when after I was burglarized you respond 'goddamn blacks', I am put in a very difficult position. If I say nothing, I feel you have made me a participant in what is a truly loathsome world view. If I respond, I find it difficult to control my anger at such monumental stupidity. And being a moral standard-bearer is goddamn tedious anyway.

"I am frankly far more disturbed by your persistent racism than I was by being burglarized. I suppose this is because it is easier for me to understand how someone could become a burglar than a racist.

"We have argued this before. Your points, as I recall them, were:

"1) You once heard a cop say that any young black male who does not turn to crime is foolish, because it is so easy for them to get away with it. This statement, on which you seem to have

1. She is introduced in the next file of this volume.

based your entire world view, does not come anywhere near the most minimal standard of objectivity, and your defense of baldly racist statements on such flimsy evidence gives the lie to your claim of being an intellectual. Even if it were true, using it to defend racist statements is absurd.

“I once spoke with someone who worked in the juvenile justice system who said rich white kids always got youth corps or community service, and poor black kids got jail. Does that convince you of anything? Of course not. But it is fully as objective and well documented as your ‘evidence’. Clearly you choose to believe the cop’s statement not because it is by any objective standard more true, but because it is in sympathy with your own racism.

“2) In this neighborhood, the majority of crimes are committed by black people, so you feel perfectly justified in saying that any crime which occurs here must have been committed by a black person.

“The reason blacks commit a higher percentage of crimes has to do not with their skin color, but with the environment in which they were raised. Your insistence on identifying criminality with skin color rather than social conditions, and thus condemning a group of mostly innocent people, leads again to the conclusion that you are a poseur rather than an intellectual. I believe your actions, and the actions of other racists like you, are at least as damaging to the fabric of society as the crimes you deplore.

“So goodbye. Best wishes. I just can’t deal with you any more.

“Chet

I responded with the following letter.

May 26, 2000

“Chet:

“Your letter demands a reply.

“My “racism”

“I’m afraid I must disagree with you: I don’t think I am a racist. But I am definitely a culturist. In particular, I am strongly prejudiced against contemporary black urban ghetto culture, because not only is it a major cause of urban crime, but, even worse, it is largely self-destructive for those who participate in it.

“The reasons I do not think that I am a racist include the following:

“• In the sixties, when I was a manager at several Peninsula companies, I went out of my way to hire blacks, and, in particular ghetto blacks (from East Palo Palo). I even hired a Black Panther, and attended, at his invitation, several of the open houses that were held at the then-new Cultural Center in East Palo.

“• In the early seventies, I was a member of a radical Marxist group in Palo Alto which was strongly sympathetic to the efforts and goals of the Black Panthers.

“• Both on the Peninsula and in the East Bay, I worked with black engineers and programmers without difficulty, and certainly without animosity. I don’t think anyone who has observed my behavior toward hard-working blacks could call me a racist. I suggest you talk to Todd Ridley,

our mailman, some time. Tell him you think I am a racist. See what he says. I doubt if he will be in sympathy with your opinion, because he knows I always take time to talk and joke with him, and he knows that I never lose an opportunity to praise him and encourage him in his efforts to get a law degree.

“• At Hewlett-Packard I worked for several years for a black manager, always got high performance ratings from him, and to this day consider him one of the best managers I ever had.

“• In my youth, when I was in the music business, we often hired black musicians, and considered ourselves lucky to get them when they consented to play with us. In addition we were playing a form of music whose roots lay deep in black culture.

“• When my son was reaching manhood, I often asked myself how I would react if he announced he was going to marry, or even that he was just dating, a black woman. My answer: I would have no problem with it.

“• Throughout my life I have been glad to see qualified blacks obtain high office in government and business. I would gladly vote for a qualified black candidate for president (I always thought that Gen. Colin Powell would have been one such candidate).

“• I recently became an opponent of capital punishment because I believe the evidence, especially recent evidence, is simply overwhelming that innocent people, and primarily poor blacks, are being sentenced to death in large part because they are provided with thoroughly incompetent legal counsel.

“It goes without saying that I expect you to mention the above facts to people when you tell them what a racist I am.

“Reasons for my anger against urban blacks

“I think it is fair to say that, when I came to Berkeley, I was one of the best friends the black man ever had. I assumed that blacks living in Berkeley were well aware that they were living in the most liberal city in the country, and hence would respond in kind to the tolerance and absence of prejudice they experienced from white residents. So confident was I of this that I thought nothing of leaving my car unlocked when I parked near ghetto areas. Needless to say, I was soon robbed (twice, both times of knapsacks containing math books and a calculator).

“Later, my house was burglarized. When I asked a black police officer “Who does this kind of thing?”, he replied without a moment’s hesitation, “Unemployed black teen-age drug addicts.” Later my house was burglarized again. So was Steve and Jane’s (twice), and yours, and several others in the neighborhood. When I asked another police officer why the burglary rate in Berkeley is so high, he said the reason was the extremely lenient policy toward teenage criminals. “In Berkeley,” he said, “a black teenager would be a fool *not* to go into burglarly, because even on the days he is caught, he will be home in time for dinner.” He said there are teenagers with *ten and more arrests for burglarly* on their records who are still walking the streets.

“By this time, my attitude toward blacks — and liberals! — had definitely changed from the one I had held all my life.

“Why liberals are so willing to tolerate bad behavior in blacks

“It is one thing to live in safe, all-white communities, as I did my entire life before coming to Berkeley, and have liberal views about the black situation. It is another to confront the consequences of these views firsthand, as I did when I moved here. When I saw how my attitude toward blacks was changing after the above-mention[ed] burglaries and other crimes and distur-

bances in our neighborhood, I began wondering just why it is that (a) wealthy liberals are so willing to tolerate bad behavior on the part of blacks — behavior they wouldn't for a minute tolerate in their own families, their kids' schools, or in their businesses —, and (b) why it is that intellectuals in the humanities, and artists, have always been so willing to do the same.

“In talking to my wealthy liberal friends over the years, it began to dawn on me that this admirable tolerance and “understanding” of the black situation did not arise entirely from all the good motives that these friends so confidently believed they did. (I couldn't help starting to think of La Rochefoucauld's aphorism, “Our virtues are usually only vices in disguise.”) It seemed to me that what was really going on was that this tolerance and understanding were serving to ease guilty consciences over being wealthy. Here, on the one hand, were people whose parents had been able to send them to the best schools, and then who had been able, through their own natural gifts and drive, to become supremely successful. But now they were in the category of “rich people”, and that is a category which, particularly in the progressive circles they wanted to consider themselves members of, is a dirty word. But who can despise a rich person if his or her attitudes toward the poor and, in particular, toward blacks, is one of infinite tolerance and forgiveness and understanding? Certainly such persons are not like the heartless rich people of old! Certainly no one can hold their wealth against them, given such kind and generous attitudes.

“As to intellectuals in the humanities, and artists, something different is going on, I believe. In the sixties, people sometimes asked why it was that virtually all the campus protests were led by, and were participated in by, students in the liberal arts. Why so few students of engineering and the hard sciences? The answer usually given was that the latter were not only more likely to be excused from the draft, but could look forward to well-paying jobs when they graduated, while the former couldn't, and hence that was fueling their anger. I no longer think this is the heart of the matter. What I think is really going on — and keep in mind that, in my life, I have lived in both worlds: artist (musician) and liberal arts student (English) in my youth, then programmer later in life — what I think is really going on is that liberal arts students, and their professors, and intellectuals in general, and artists, know only too well that in this culture, they are have-nots relative to engineers and scientists and business people. In a very real sense, the modern world has bypassed them. (Witness how readily music and art programs are cut from primary and secondary school curriculums.) Blacks, and the poor in general, are thus like them, because blacks and the poor are also have-nots who have been left behind by the modern world, only they are far worse victims than are the students, and intellectuals, and artists. *They are us*, is the feeling. *In joining them in protest, we lift our voices in protest against our own have-not status*. Eliot's lines seem appropriate here:

“I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.” — T. S. Eliot, “Preludes”, IV

“But to use the condition of the poor and down-trodden as symbols of one's own condition is one thing. To find a way to help alleviate their condition is another. Sound social policy does *not* begin with the question, “What makes me feel good?” It begins with the question, “What works?”

“What works?”

“After thirty years of liberal social policy in Berkeley, and many millions of dollars spent, the

dropout rate among blacks in Berkeley High is 60%.¹ Close to 40% of white students eligible to attend Berkeley High go to private schools instead (the figure is from a school administrator I talked to).²

“The liberal social policy that has produced these abysmal results, and the crime rate we know all too well, is I believe precisely the kind of social policy that you urge — an all-forgiving, infinitely tolerant and patient one based on the belief that blacks cannot be expected to do better because of their having been slaves, then the later prejudice they faced and the wretched conditions of the ghettos at present. Yet liberals in their homes, and offices, and schools adopt just the opposite policy: they emphasize to their children that there is a right and a wrong, that good behavior is rewarded and bad behavior is punished (poor grades mean no sports, the broken window must be paid for out of the child’s allowance); as managers, they make clear to employees that there are company policies and department goals, and that employees who meet the goals get higher raises than those who don’t, and employees who fail to meet a minimum set of goals are fired, etc. The crippling policy of eternal forgiveness is reserved for the poor.

“Blacks, in particular teenage blacks, are not fools. They have learned to make the most of this liberal largesse which is bestowed upon them. A teacher who attempts to set standards, who requires homework to be turned in on time, and who gives low grades for poor work, is called “racist”. (I know this from published articles and have heard it personally from several teachers whose veracity, and dedication, I have no reason to doubt.) A law enforcement policy that puts repeat offenders in jail — or, better still, assigns them to do community service work — is called “racist”. Members of a Neighborhood Watch who call the police when they see black teenagers shouting at and threatening neighbors, are called “racist”.

“I think that the liberal message, “If you are not succeeding, it is someone else’s fault” is pure poison. It is worse than traditional racism because there, at least, it is clear who the enemy is.

“I think that people like yourself in a very real sense are solving their own psychological and social problems on the backs of the poor, in particular, poor blacks. You use blacks as symbols of your own have-not status, and perhaps that is why you are so indifferent, if not actually hostile, to

1. (Added later) A member of the School Board who prided himself on being a progressive told me in September, 2004, that *several hundred* out of the 3000 students at Berkeley High were chronic truants. In order to prevent the school from trying to contact their parents, these students didn’t give their correct addresses and phone numbers for school records. But, the main problem, he said, was that “black families still don’t see learning as an advantage.” So, often as not, when the (usually single) parent was informed that the son or daughter had been skipping school, the parent went on a rampage *against the school*. I replied that surely the average black kid knew that if he didn’t get a good education, he was going to be flipping hamburgers for the rest of his life. “They don’t think that far ahead,” was the reply.

2. (Added later) For several years, the School was in danger of losing its accreditation because of the dumbing down of courses at the insistence of black parents. (The situation seemed to have improved by the end of 2004, thanks to the hiring — for the first time in years — of a competent principal, Jim Slemm. At least, school administrators felt confident that accreditation would be granted in 2005. But I heard from a veteran activist that Slemm had a reputation for excusing violent black behavior. However, the flight of white students into private schools continued to lower the academic performance of the student body as a whole, and threaten the physical safety of the students. The process was as follows: since the School District was paid, by the State, in accordance with the number of students attending school each day, the School District was faced with the problem of filling the seats vacated by the fleeing white students. So the School Board decided to fill these seats with black students from Richmond and Oakland. But since, according to school policy, it would have been “racist” to take only the highest-performing students from these cities, the School tended to wind up with some of the worst students. This led to a further drop in academic performance, driving out still more white students, forcing the School Board to bring in still worse black students.

the kind of statistical argument I often make to justify my inclination to be more suspicious of blacks than of whites or Asians in our neighborhood. I think it is why you couldn't bring yourself to believe that a black man walking out of Lynaire's apartment carrying bags that he put into his van might have been a burglar. You may flatter yourself that your reluctance to form a negative judgment sent a message to the black in question, "See? Not all whites are automatically suspicious of you." I say that the message you sent was, "See? You can get away with burglary in broad daylight in some parts of Berkeley. Why worry about getting a job?"

"I think that before you call people like me "racist" you should (a) find out what they have attempted to do to help solve the black problem (what have *you* attempted to do, by the way?) and how they behave toward blacks in ordinary life, including on the job; (b) find out what social policies these people advocate for the blacks, and what criteria of success or failure they intend to apply to these policies; and (c) be able to give a cogent argument why these policies will not improve the black situation, while yours will.

"Conclusion

"I have always enjoyed our conversations, and would hate to see them come to an end. I am perfectly willing to refrain from discussing the black situation with you, or to using language in reference to the blacks that upsets you. You are welcome to continue to use my washer and dryer. (I need the money.) I would like to continue to have the VCR here. You are welcome to continue to watch videos here if you give me a few hours' notice. But if you want the VCR back, then I will ask you to pay me in full for the repairs I had done. I think I still have the receipts. Total cost, including tax, was around \$70.

"But if you require conformity to your own views in the area of the poor, and in particular of blacks, then we have no future. It's up to you.

John

"P.S. I guarantee you that *at least* eight of your neighbors hold views like mine and that several of the eight hold views that are far more negative. Some of these neighbors will not be so rational and self-controlled in their replies if you give them a letter such as you gave to me."

The following was his reply.

"John:

"Thank you for your letter. I appreciated the relatively calm reply to what was certainly a harsh letter. It was very thoughtful and well reasoned. It has absolutely nothing to do with the reason I got so angry at you. I'm surprised you went to all this trouble to prove something that I mostly agreed with. Where were you during all our conversations? Busy lumping me together with the Berkeley Liberal Establishment, and making assumptions about what I believed, instead of listening to what I was saying? The same way, perhaps, that you lump together people of certain racial groups?

"The opening line of my letter did not say, 'How dare you malign these poor misguided underprivileged criminals?', but 'Are you really such a fool as to believe blacks are insufficiently stigmatized in our society?'. I asked this because I could not see what else you were hoping to accomplish by speaking about blacks the way you do. After reading your long letter I am no more

enlightened. Does saying you want to get away from blacks, or that it was the goddamn blacks who robbed me, improve the spirit or livability of the neighborhood? Does it somehow reduce crime? Does it do anything to wake up the all-powerful liberal establishment to the dangers of black urban culture? Has anyone called to thank you for awakening them to the threat of the goddamn blacks? Are you kidding?

“Please explain the connection between this disgusting language and the letter you wrote me. It is evidently so obvious to you that you don’t see the need to explain it, but it’s completely lost on me.

“I am a liberal, and yet I am not willing to tolerate criminal or abusive behavior in any element of society. I have said this to you many times, and I have thanked you for your efforts to make this neighborhood safer and more livable. I will take this opportunity to thank you again, because I sincerely appreciate it. I have also said to you at least once, and considering how fond I am of thinking on this, probably more than once, that few people are intellectually sophisticated enough to hold both the liberal and conservative ideas about crime and environment at the same time. Yet our society, if it is ever to make progress in these areas, must do exactly that. Environment does play a profound role in an individual’s moral and mental development, and any remedial program which does not recognize and attempt to deal with this fact is doomed to failure. But the ‘conservative’ idea that individual adults must finally be responsible for their own lives and their own actions is equally true, and must equally be a part of any successful program. This is something I have believed for a long time. You evidently were too busy classifying me as liberal to hear what I was saying.

“I am outraged that you imagine I require of my friends that they share my ideas about the roots of criminality or the mitigation of urban desperation. Where did you get such an idea? I would never do such a thing, if for no other reason than that I am not arrogant enough to imagine I know much about it. This is without doubt an area in which intelligent people of good faith can have profound disagreements. And I would be happy to call any such person my friend.

“I have said to you that I believe a scientific and not an ideological approach is the one likely to be successful, and also the only one certain never to be tried. In other words: I care about results, not ideology. Were you listening? Apparently not.

“With regard to Todd: yes I know you like him. We all do. But if he knew how you had spoken of blacks (of course I would never tell him) he would without doubt call you a racist. He is extremely sensitive about it, and hated one of his law school professors as a racist because the professor put his arm around him once. I don’t understand why Todd reacted that way, and he didn’t seem willing or able to explain it to me, but the incident shows that Todd is probably a hell of a lot more sensitive about racism than you imagine. I suspect that most blacks, jews, arabs, gays and asians are far more sensitive to slurs, real or imagined, than you can begin to understand. I have been very surprised and dismayed on quite a number of occasions when otherwise perfectly stable and reasonable friends who belong to these groups have said things that, like Todd’s comments about the professor, seemed wildly overreactive. It has made me very sensitive to anything smelling the least like racism.

“I too have reasons for being angry at urban burglars and hoodlums. I was mugged in New York and threatened many times. Here I was twice burglarized, I have had a rock thrown through my practice room window while I was practicing, I have had graffiti scrawled on my house on several occasions. I have had my new and expensive parking strip plantings vandalized, and I have been threatened several times by such hoodlums. I found some of these things terribly upsetting. But they are no excuse for racism.

“Are you a racist? The answer of course depends entirely on definition. Here’s a definition I might suggest: A racist is willing to condemn an individual for his membership in a racial group, or is willing to condemn an entire racial group for the actions of some of its individual members. I have seen your hostile attitude toward individuals whose only evidence of criminality was skin color. I have seen you make assumptions about the perpetrators of various crimes where you had no possible knowledge of their race, and where their race had no possible significance. And I have heard your repugnant language.

“Or how about a functional definition: A non racist is burglarized and says, ‘a goddamn burglar took my stuff!’. A racist is burglarized and says, ‘a goddamn black took my stuff!’. A non-racist has graffiti scrawled on his house, and says ‘some goddamned kids’, and the racist says, ‘some goddamned blacks’.

“Please don’t try to say the difference is only in the words. That argument would disgrace even a non-intellectual musician like me. You of all people should understand the power of words.

“Still, racist is a term with extreme emotional charge, not unlike goddamn blacks, and if you really feel you do not in any way qualify as a racist, I apologize and withdraw this appellation. I was angered by your insensitivity in continuing to shove this shit in my face after I had clearly showed you how much it bothered me. A friend wouldn’t do that.

“I am not surprised at your list of past activities on behalf of the poor, or your Marxism, etc. To the extent that they indicate your present good will toward blacks and underprivileged people, it is certainly a fine list. But the implication that you changed when you saw the light re urban crime isn’t a particularly strong argument. I am not impressed by conversion stories. From Saul to Paul, from drug addict to born again Christian, people’s changing sides doesn’t by itself validate their arguments. It is easier for an addict to change his addiction from Cocaine to Christ than it is for him to cease being an addict, and it is easier for an irrational liberal to become an irrational conservative (for example, Ronald Reagan), or vice versa than it is for him to become rational. I was raised conservative and Christian, and my very first presidential vote was cast for Richard Nixon. (Please don’t tell the neighbors!) But just look at me now. Part of the Berkeley Liberal Establishment, by your estimate, anyway. You don’t think that makes my argument more valid, do you?

“With regard to my inaction while Lynaire was being robbed: I feel very bad about it, and I apologized to her. Your psychic reading of my thought process is no doubt just as accurate as your psychic reading of who robbed my house (really, John, do stocks — you certainly could not lose. Or open a psychic intellectual’s hotline — on the Web! You’ll have that house in Ross in no time!), but in case you are interested in knowing what I think I thought that I was thinking at the time (you’ll need to think that phrase through), I was excited and distracted because I had just received a call from the *Chronicle* saying they were publishing my letter to the editor. And I was blinded not by his blackness, but by his audacity, since there were four of us watching him. Had he been white, my reaction would have been no less stupid. What I needed was not fucking racial awareness, which you seem intent on providing me, but awareness of criminals. Your psychic psychoanalysis, while it seems to please you by dovetailing so nicely with your image of me as feckless Berkeley liberal type (have you been listening, John?), is horseshit.

“You have persisted in a seemingly willful misunderstanding of the reasons for my anger. You have ascribed beliefs to me that I not only have never stated, but which are in direct contradiction to the things I have, and you have gone so far as to delve into my supposed psychological motivations for those beliefs. You seem to have created a generic Berkeley liberal straw man whose

opinions and beliefs are so ridiculous that they can be dismissed with little effort, and then have placed my name on him. This is a classic Rush Limbaugh trick. I'm surprised to see you using it.

"Kindly reread the second and third paragraphs of this letter. They contain the central point of my disagreement with you. I reiterate it here because you seem to have missed it the first four or five times.

"I don't think you are a bad person, and I certainly don't wish you ill. I have no desire to turn the neighbors against you, and would not dream of doing so. I sincerely hope things have been going well with Gabrielle. When I run into you outside I will be cordial. I too have enjoyed almost all our conversations. All the ones where you didn't make moronic statements about blacks.

"Chet"

...

May 30, 2000

"Chet:

"I would like to reply to your second letter, and I will be glad to read your reply to this reply, but then I think I would like to end further debate on this subject.

"I have now re-read both your letters, especially, per your request, the second and third paragraphs of your second letter.

"Second and third paragraphs of your second letter

"I didn't hope to "accomplish" anything by speaking the way I did about blacks (specifically, about blacks who pass through our neighborhood). I was venting my frustration and anger. As I said in my previous letter, you have a perfect right to ask me, or anyone else, not to use such language in your presence. It seems to me that these two paragraphs of your second letter would have been far more justified if I had used such language in a speech or article addressed to many blacks and/or whites, because then I would have certainly been contributing to increased racial tensions. But I was only speaking to one person at the time.

"Definition of "racism"

"(page 2, second letter)

"Let's begin with the dictionary definition (Webster's New Collegiate, 1982): "racism: 1 a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. 2 racial prejudice or discrimination"

"I consider people to be racist if they make statements like, "Those blacks [that is, all blacks] are no good." "If I found out my son had a black girlfriend, I'd kill him." "Why bother to educate blacks? They're all dumb." "All blacks are criminals, or have a tendency to be." "I'd *never* vote for a black president." (Incidentally, I have never heard any of the eight neighbors I mentioned in the P.S. of my previous letter, make statements like these.)

"The statements of mine which you allude to are based on (1) my experience in this neighborhood; (2) the testimony of Berkeley police; (3) national statistics, for example, one in three of black males between the ages of 20 and 30 are either in jail, on parole, or under indictment; the proportion of blacks in U.S. prisons is much higher (50% I believe) than the proportion of blacks in the population.

“In this neighborhood, and in other neighborhoods in South and West Berkeley, the statement, “A goddamn black took my stuff!” is *probably* correct (based on local statistics), whereas the statement “A goddamn Asian took my stuff!” is probably incorrect (based on local statistics).

“My “conversion” to a negative view of urban ghetto blacks

“(pages 2-3, second letter)

“I’m not sure I understand your argument here. I *think* what you are saying is, for example, that if in my youth I was highly prejudiced in favor of blacks because “they’ve all got rhythm” and are such excellent jazz musicians, whereas in my old age I became highly prejudiced against them because “they’re all criminals”, then, in either case, I am prejudiced, and not judging them “as individuals”.

“But the fact is that most of us who are not racist by my definition above judge groups in accordance with the rough statistics of their behavior, and not “as individuals”. I am fairly certain (correct me if I’m wrong) that if someone invites you to the North Berkeley home of a person you have never met who has a Jewish or Asian surname, you will assume the person is educated, intelligent, successful, probably a lover of the arts. And the reason this assumption will probably be correct is Jews and Asians who live in North Berkeley probably (on a statistical basis) have those characteristics. Why is it acceptable for you to make that assumption (if in fact you do) but wrong for me to make an equivalent assumption about blacks in our neighborhood?

“Or let us take what I think it is fair to call your sweeping denunciation of Republicans. I can assure you that, over the course of my life, I have known several Republicans for whom I have had the highest admiration and respect. (One of them was my father.) Why is it acceptable for you to denounce Republicans as a group but wrong for me to make an equivalent denunciation of blacks in our neighborhood?

“My analysis of your thought processes during Lynaire’s robbery

“Given what you say (page 3, second letter) I retract it.

“My recommended starting point for thinking straight about blacks

“Several years ago, I came to the conclusion that the only way for a white person to think straight about blacks is by asking him- or herself the question, “If I were a black leader, say, with the stature of Jesse Jackson, what would I be telling my people?” Among the things I would be telling them would be the following:

“Every time a black man commits a crime, he is doing the white man’s dirty work for him. He is justifying the white man’s prejudice — ‘All blacks are criminals.’ When you commit a crime, you disgrace your own people and give the white man further reasons to keep you down.

“No minority in the history of this country has ever legislated its way to affluence. There is only one way to escape from poverty, and that is by acquiring skills that someone else is willing to pay you for. You have no difficulty in understanding this when it comes to sports and entertainment. Why is it so difficult for you to understand it when it comes to life in general?

“The way to acquire skills is by going to school and learning something. If you intimidate or beat up a black student for ‘acting white’ when all he or she is doing is studying and trying to learn something, you are doing the white man’s dirty work for him.

“The skills you need to acquire include the skill of speaking standard business English. When you are at home, or with your friends, you can speak black English. There is nothing wrong with that. But if you want to get a job, if you want to advance in the world, you must be

able to speak standard business English. Anyone who tells you otherwise is lying to you.”

“Etc.

“OK. As I said, I will be glad to read your reply to this letter, but then I would like to end all further discussion of this subject.

“ John

His reply:

“John,

“You didn’t bother to respond to most of the points in my letter. Do I assume you agree with them?

“1) Definition of racism. I’m sure you’re aware tht God did not dictate the dictionary. While that fact of course does not give us license to twist meaning arbitrarily, it does imply that the meaning of words is open to discussion. In any case, I agreed to withdraw the term. I chose the definition from what I suppose is a sociological viewpoint: how a particular statement impacts the recipients.

“2) Your conversion. The reason I wrote this paragraph is clearly stated within it. Try reading it again.

“3) Your recommended starting points. The black leaders I have heard have been saying all this for the past 15 years or so, and I pretty much agree. Your statement that no minority has ever legislated its way to affluence demands a bit of discussion. Many individuals and corporations have throughout our history used the government to enrich themselves at the expense of everyone else. In many cases, the tools and powers of government were exerted specifically against minority groups. It is not surprising that some of these groups have felt justified in attempting to reverse the damage done by these actions. Are minority groups still trying to do this? With the exception of the movement for gay and lesbian rights, I am unaware of any serious (i.e. not ebonics) contemporary efforts of this nature.

“4) Why is it fair for me to make sweeping denunciations of Republicans? Practically everyone in my extended family is Republican, mostly of the Reagan/Rush Limbaugh type. I have one brother who is suspically [sic] moderate, but that’s about it. I respect my family members as people, but not as Republicans. The two parties have been moving toward the center, but to the extent differences remain, the Republican party stands for tobacco and guns, against all minorities black, female, gay or undocumented, for Bible thumping Christianity, against any form of environmental protection, against education spending, for increased military spending, and for corporate political hegemony. These seem to me pretty much all that they stand for, and I assume that the reason a person belongs to the party is that either they agree with these things, or are not bright enough to figure them out. Either one is tough for me to take.

“There are obvious differences between the two categories which I would think you might have noticed. A) Republicans are generally much more affluent, much more a part of the mainstream culture, and have much higher status in all respects than blacks. I feel a lot more easy about attacking a comfortable and frankly self-satisfied group of people than one which in general still has a miserable time of it. B) An individual Republican can change his beliefs, an individual black person cannot change his skin color. One chooses to be a Republican. One does not choose to be a black. C) The threat that anti-Republicanism poses to our society is rather minimal (or so it seems to me — perhaps you disagree?), while the threat of racial schism and community break-

down from inflammatory rhetoric is very real. D) Skin color is perceived by almost everyone as a more intrinsic part of a person than political beliefs. There would certainly be an enormous difference in being attacked for your political beliefs (which you can at least defend), than your skin color.

“Coming finally to the central point, you excuse what is to me inexcusable language by saying you were angry and frustrated, and that you were only speaking to one person ‘at a time’. Why do I find your language intolerable?

“1) It condemns an entire group of individuals based on the actions of some of the group.

“2) Your grouping, while it evidently makes you feel better, is arbitrary. Why not use the terms criminals or hoodlums or some term which actually has to do with the problems which so annoy you? Why in God’s name is this so difficult for you to comprehend?

“3) You continued to use this language after I had clearly showed you how much it offended me. As I said, this is not the action of a friend.

“4) You do not seem to care, or perhaps understand, just how inflammatory and hostile your language is. I feel that it is fully as damaging to the fabric of society and to the sense of shared community necessary in a democracy as the crimes you are so obsessed with. I stated in my letter that I have been shocked and deeply upset when friends who belonged to some minority group have said things which indicated a perspective so radically different from mine as to be incomprehensible. Examples:

“A) Todd, who you so confidently said would not see you as a racist, said his professor was a racist because he put his arm around him.

“B) Durwynne, who has a PhD in molecular biology from Cal and is a professor at a junior college, has high social and economic status by almost any measure. One does not think first of Asians when one thinks of underprivileged racial groups. Yet he fantasizes about having plastic surgery to change [sic] his looks to Caucasian. Why? Because years ago some football player types at Cal came up to him and asked in a Charley Chan type accent how to get to the bus stop.

“C) Joanna’s Korean friend was writing a very militant paper on stereotypes of Asians in movies, in particular the Disney film *Julan*. *Julan* was a movie I loved. Even Joanna, who is about as much of a militant leftie as you can find, found her friend’s campaign baffling.

“D) The O.J. Simpson trial. Like almost all whites I think his guilt was obvious and the evidence overwhelming. But the majority of blacks felt he was framed. Why did blacks believe that the police would frame an innocent man? The only answer, that their perspective is incomprehensibly different from mine, I find enormously disturbing.

“E) Naomi hated the movie *Get Shorty* because of the chief characters, a Hollywood producer type (Danny de Vito) whose main crime is expensive bad taste, wore a Star of David around on a gaudy chain around his neck. She felt it portrayed a negative stereotype of Jews. I thought it was a very funny movie and barely noticed the necklace.

“F) My former tenant Mourad felt everyone here in Berkeley kept their distance because he was Arab, and therefore a likely terrorist.

“People can be hurt by words. People matter. Dignity and respect matter

“Chet”

Before I could reply, he sent me another letter.

“John,

“My apologies for yet another letter. Consider this an addendum to the previous one. It will be my last.

“I have read that the existence of a large and growing black middle class in the U.S. was largely brought about by legislation: civil rights laws and affirmative action. I have conflicting feelings about affirmative action, but if this statement is true, it certainly would counter your assertion that no minority group ever gained affluence through legislation. Two chief black Republican poster boys, Clarence Thomas and Ward Connerly, both were given a significant boost by racial preferences. They are certainly not alone.

“My final, final, final point: You ask why it is acceptable for me to denounce Republicans as a group but wrong for you to make an equivalent denunciation of blacks. If the arguments in my last letter have not convinced you that there is a huge difference, let’s try an experiment.

“I am not ashamed of my statements about Republicans, and would be happy to repeat them at any appropriate time to any Republican. And I would be very happy to have you repeat my statements — my real statements, not the ones you fabricated for me — to anyone, even those eight neighbors you ominously said would not be as rational and self-controlled in their responses as you.

“Would you be equally happy for me to repeat to Todd, or any other of the black friends you claim, the things you have said to me? I am referring, of course, to your proposed dedication of the barrier planting to the memory of Martin Luther King as a way of preventing vandalism, your automatic response of ‘Goddamn blacks’ after I was robbed, or your statement that you would like to live on the second floor so you could ‘get away from the blacks’. I would certainly include your justification for making those statements, which I believe are that you were only speaking to one person at a time, and that statistically you were probably right and elected to include all blacks in your condemnation. Wouldn’t this be a fair test of the equivalency of our statements? I’ll wait for your go ahead.

“I try not to say things about people behind their backs that I would not say to them directly. None of the Republicans who are close to me, and that includes my whole family with the possible exception of one of my brothers, would be in the least surprised at my statements. I tell them to their face what I think of their politics. That’s why I wrote to you in the first place. It would have been disrespectful to you to simply say these things behind your back. I consider it ordinary human decency to do so.

“Chet”

My reply:

June 2, 2000

“Chet:

“This will of necessity be a short reply to your latest letter as I am racing to complete a math paper that must be on an editor’s desk before a paper by another author is published.

“Re the degree to which the existence of the large and growing black middle class has been brought about by legislation

“I don’t know how such a thing could be determined objectively, so I can’t really agree or disagree. (Which is not to say it couldn’t be determined objectively!) Some companies, for example, Hewlett-Packard, have had quotas which they attempted to meet. I don’t recall how binding these quotas were, that is, who issued them: government or the companies themselves.

“The real test will be in the children of those black families now in the middle class. In other words, will these families teach their children what it takes to stay in the middle class?

“I don’t recall reading that Ward Connerly was given a significant boost by affirmative action. I thought he came from a fairly well-off family to begin with. I do know that he is an outspoken opponent of affirmative action.

“Re what we say to, vs. behind the backs of, members of certain groups

“Only you can decide if you would, in fact, say what you have said to me about Republicans, to, for example, Republican parents of your students, or adult students of yours who are Republican, or to someone like Gordon Getty on the eve of his donating money to a musical cause in Berkeley (an unlikely event, as I understand it!) if he knew that you were intimately associated with that cause.

“And no, of course I don’t want you to quote my negative remarks to Todd.

“All this heat and fire

“Let me repeat: you have a perfect right to ask me, or anyone else, not to use certain language in your presence about certain groups. If you did explicitly ask me this in the past, then I have forgotten it, and in this case I owe you an apology.

“But I still can’t help wondering what the underlying cause of your rage over what I said really is. (Recall some of your language: “I am infuriated by your persistent racism. Are you really such a fool...?” “I am outraged...” [my] “disgusting language”, etc.) If it is sympathy with the blacks, in particular, poor blacks, then I must ask why this group and not another, for example, Latinos? If it is outrage at man’s injustice to man, then I must ask why you have not devoted your life to fighting this injustice, for example, by working for the United Nations, or Amnesty International, or one of countless other organizations.

“Actually, if either of us has a justification for *irrational* outrage, it would seem to be me: in 1963 my brother was killed in a truly horrible car accident in South Carolina. He was literally cut in half when a car driven by a drunken black guy drove off the road and hit him as he was attempting to repair his car engine.

“Where we go from here

“I spelled out my position in the conclusion of my first letter. I hope we can remain on cordial terms, though I will decline to participate in any future discussions of blacks, including via letters. (I am willing to read your reply to this letter, but then that will be the end of the exchange.)

John

“P.S. You will note that I have *not* asked you to refrain from calling me a racist. The reason is that the term means little to me. It has become nothing but a heavy stone that both sides have learned to throw at those who disagree with their views (including their views on what is permis-

sible language to express those views). I gave you my definition of racism in my second letter. By that definition, I am not a racist. You are free to think otherwise, of course.”

His reply:

“John,

“I don’t recall how well substantiated the idea about the rise of the black middle was. It seemed fairly solid, but of course I didn’t claim it as positive evidence against your statement. Merely suggestive, as was your statement.

“Ward Connerly, as I recall, had real estate and/or construction ventures that benefited from minority-owned business preferences.

“Again you seek to psychoanalyze my motivations. Obviously the fact that I could get so angry about this is really incomprehensible to you. I think the reasons for my anger are already pretty well laid out in my letters, and I don’t see the need to repeat them. I will repeat that I was far more disturbed by your statements than I was by being robbed.

“Of course it’s not just blacks I care about. The reason they have been the topic of my letters to you is because they were the topic of your stupid remarks. If you wish to start in on some other minority group, you will find my reaction just as vehement. You may recall how outraged I was, and still am, by the Mormon Church’s support of anti-gay legislation. I wrote two letters to the *Chronicle*, one of which was published.

“I assume your contention that if I care so much I should be working full-time for a human rights organization is just a bit of rhetorical hyperbole. You aren’t serious, are you?

“With regard to your brother’s death, I obviously can only say how tragic and senseless it was, like all traffic deaths, and that I am very sorry.

“Chet”

We didn’t speak for several weeks, then he began saying a distant hello when we both happened to be in front of our houses at the same time. Eventually a guarded speaking relationship resumed, and has continued.

I wasn’t the only person in the neighborhood with whom he had arguments. He had an ongoing battle with his tenant, an internationally-known blues guitarist and singer, that almost came to blows. The guitarist, Charles W — , rented the little ground-floor apartment next to his garages. He was often on the road with the group he usually played with, the Mark Hummel band, so his contact with Chet was minimal. Even so, Chet often drove him crazy, for example, through his stinginess. He refused to install a new carpet in Charles’s apartment even though bare feet would become dirty just from walking on it. He also tried to get Charles to pay for the plumber when something was wrong.

Another time he tried to raise Charles’s rent without warning.

When Chet was away, typically to visit relatives in the Southwest, he would ask Charles to watch his apartment. One weekend, Charles went upstairs and used Chet’s computer to send email to a woman, instead of using the computer in the public library. When Chet returned, he saw a copy of the email in his email History file. He tore downstairs, told Charles, “I want you out of here...*this week!*” In itself this was against the law, since tenants had to be given at least 30

days' notice. After a heated argument, Chet agreed that Charles could stay for two months while he found another place. But he would not be allowed to use the kitchen any more.

When it came time to return Charles's \$350 cleaning deposit, Chet, refused to pay the 10% interest he had promised Charles he would pay four years earlier, when Charles first rented the apartment. "Show me the contract!", Chet insisted. But Charles had misplaced it, assuming that Chet could be trusted to keep his word.

Charles called him "a neurotic little man", and would talk of his "jutting chin, his gash of a mouth". He had nothing but contempt for Chet's inability to perform easily in public.

Charles and I had a number of interesting conversations, not only about music — He: "Once it's a mistake, twice it's jazz" — but also about his background (he was raised in England; his father had been a fighter pilot; Charles had studied accounting in this country, couldn't stand it) and about English customs. He told me that the worst thing you could do as a tea-drinker was pour the milk in first. "You don't want to be a milk-firster!", he said, because that is regarded as strictly working-class. While writing this, I found out in Google that in the old days, the lower class couldn't afford good quality crockery, one characteristic of which is that it can withstand sudden temperature changes. So they would pour the milk in first, since the milk would absorb some of the initial heat and prevent the cheap crockery from cracking.

Charles went on long tours with the Hummel band, some through God-forsaken mid-western states (where the blues still had a following), some in the northwest, some in the eastern states, some to Europe and Scandinavia. When a tour was in the offing, he became very friendly, very willing to talk. He invited me to hear him perform at an Oakland club. The band was, at the very least, thoroughly competent. I was amused by the fact that, although Charles normally spoke perfect BBC English, when he sang, he pronounced the lyrics in an accent that was almost indistinguishable from that of a Southern black.

Later, after he moved around the corner and half a block up Parker St. in order to get away from Chet, and now had a place to park his car off the street, he suddenly became distant, and remained so for several years thereafter. However, in May, 2016, I wondered what had become of him, and left a note on the front door of the house in front of the little place where he lived. A couple of days later, my front door bell rang, and there he was, heartily friendly as I remembered him prior to his move. He had left the Hummel band in 2006 and started his own group. Another musician in the Hummel band (I forget what instrument Charles said he played) left Hummel a few months later and joined him. His band (occasionally a quartet, usually a trio) had several jobs each week in the East Bay area.

Chet may have been a bastard as a landlord, but he was extraordinarily successful with women. During the three years a young student named Naomi rented a room in my house (details are given in the next file of this chapter), he was sleeping with her on a regular basis even though he was more than 20 years older than she was. (For some reason, I find it difficult to say that she was his "girlfriend" because that implies a level of tenderness and intimacy which I can't imagine him having with a woman.) Then, when Naomi went off to graduate school, he took up briefly with Joanna, an undergraduate at UC. He was so young looking that even in his forties, when he went to buy a bottle of wine, clerks would ask him for proof of age. Around 2003 he gave up the undergraduates and began a long relationship with a woman his age. I remember sensing electricity between Chet and this woman, whose name was Rebecca, at one of the recitals at the home of Sharon, Naomi's piano teacher, in North Berkeley. She was even ruder than Jane. I detested her from the start. There is no doubt in my mind that one reason she was attracted to Chet was that he could be very useful in promoting the career of her son, who was a musical prodigy, winning

national competitions in composition already at the age of thirteen. Chet told me that, when her son was ten or so, and Rebecca asked Chet to begin instructing her son in piano, Chet asked him to bring along one of his latest compositions. The boy brought him several pages covered with sixteenth notes. The opus number, in the upper right-hand corner of the first page, was 140. He had already written 140 pieces of music. At the age of twelve he composed an opera. Rebecca was one of those women who, upon finding that you are not accomplished in something she thinks extremely important, in this case, music, lets you know in no uncertain terms that as far as she is concerned, you don't exist. When she and Chet were first together, she had waist-long white hair which she wore with the expression of all women who keep their hair at girlish lengths even after it has turned white: "See? Still a young girl! Some of us simply don't grow old!"

Charles detested having to put with the loud noises of Chet and Rebecca's love-making at all hours.

A Republican in the Neighborhood

On Parker St. there lived a middle-aged couple who I'm sure were the only Republicans in the neighborhood — perhaps in all of South Berkeley. I was attracted to the wife, Ingrid, with her short haircut and baby-talk voice, though she was by no means beautiful. I sensed at parties that she was drawn to me. The husband, Sam, was a contractor. Soon after I bought the house, and had had the frame secured to the foundation as described above under "Preparing the House", I called him and asked if he knew anything about measures to lessen earthquake damage. He said he did, and so I hired him to install shear panels and to strengthen the junctions of basement beams with pieces of sheet metal. The work seemed competently done, but I had no way to compare.

It became clear on days of heavy rain in winter, that not only the quarter basement but the dirt elsewhere at the southwest side of the house, collected water, and so I asked him if he could install a sump pump, which he did. It worked for more than fifteen years, albeit requiring at times during the winter that the floating mercury switch be repositioned.

He did other work for me: ran a rainwater drain pipe into the side of the house and around to the front, then dug a trench, ran it under the sidewalk to an opening in the curb. It worked well for ten years or so, then began to leak. Plumbers and contractors who looked at the work said it was mediocre.

I later asked him to strap my water heater firmly to the house, this being a standard recommendation by earthquake authorities. He sent over a high school kid who ran a thin metal strap around the heater and fastened it with two thin screws that weren't even screwed all the way into the wall. He never checked his employee's work afterward.

I routinely said hello to him and his wife when I passed one or both of them on the street. Several times a week he walked the nine or so blocks to the Y in downtown Berkeley, for his exercise program. He had close-cropped gray hair, bald in back, and a way of walking, of carrying himself, that I have to describe as regal. Or perhaps it was the expression on his face, which seemed to say, "I'm not sure if I should really deign to walk among these ordinary people." I came to the conclusion, from the events to be described, that he had a precarious self-esteem held together by uncompromising views.

They participated briefly and sporadically in our Neighborhood Watch, but whereas she was

always friendly in meetings, his reserve made clear that he did not like to spend his time talking about trivialities, meaning, anything that didn't interest him.

Once they invited me over for dinner. As they prepared the food, I brought up global warming. He shook his head with a look that said, It is clear how naive and easily led you are. Then he said that global warming doesn't exist. It was all a liberal plot. Taken aback, I made my usual lame protests, namely, that an overwhelming majority of the world's climatologists believed it was real, and that there is a Nobel Prize waiting for the first scientist who can make a convincing argument that it is not real. But he just shook his head with that condescending smile. I changed the subject to the energy problem and remarked how difficult it was to solve. Again, quickly, with no hesitation, he proclaimed, There is no energy crisis: That too was a liberal plot. I was reminded more and more of conversations with my HP friend, Jason.

In the late nineties I approached Chet and a neighbor on the corner about planting trees on our little block. Since most of Parker St. had grand old oaks along it, but the section in front of Sam and Ingrid's house was barren, I suggested they join us and plant some trees there, emphasizing that the City would do much of the work. He shook his head, laughed, and said. "*Trees drop leaves!*" The implication was clear: No one but a dim-witted liberal would want to actually plant *more* trees, and especially not near their *house*.

In the early 2000s, the roots of the big magnolia tree on Steve's property threatened my foundation, and so I called Sam to ask if he would be willing to perform some work. He didn't reply to my calls. Then said he would do the work. Then grew angry when I called to ask him why he had not gotten back to me as to when he would start. I had had enough, and wrote the two of them the following letter.

“ May 12, 2003

“Sam and Ingrid:

“This marks the end of a long and cordial neighborhood relationship. I will not speak or otherwise communicate with either of you from now on.

“Let's review the course of events that led up to my decision and my anger.

“1. Several weeks ago I mentioned the tree problem to Sam. He said that in his experience it was often possible to cut offending roots without killing the tree.

“2. Three times last week (two in personal conversations with Ingrid, once in a phone message) I stated my request that Sam come over and give me his decision regarding the tree. Both times Ingrid said she would convey the message.

“3. By Monday, I had heard nothing from Sam. I felt this to be at the very least rude, since I am a long-time neighbor, and since this is clearly a matter of some urgency and importance for me. I also felt it to be unprofessional on Sam's part. If he didn't want to come over here, he owed me a phone call giving the reasons why.

“In our phone conversation today, it was clear that Sam felt it was none of my business why he didn't even have the common, not to mention professional, courtesy, to explain his reluctance to look at the root situation.

“With considerable effort, I was able to extract from him:

“• That he thought Steve and Jane and I were in some kind of war over the tree, and that he didn’t want to get involved.

“I explained that, on the contrary, no such war existed; that I had agreed to have the roots excavated, and to call in experts, and that then the three of us would arrive at a mutually agreeable decision. Norm has agreed to pay half of all costs. There is no conflict.

“• That he didn’t have any knowledge in this area.

“Based on the earlier conversation that Sam and I had (see 1, above), that is pure bullshit.

“• That he was under considerable financial pressure.

“What has that got to do with the present situation? I made it clear all along that I was perfectly willing to pay him for his time.

“I am utterly appalled.

“You both can go to hell as far as I’m concerned.

“— John”

I was surprised that subsequently, when I passed one or both of them on the street, or when they were at a neighborhood gathering that I attended, they would say hello. I never replied, or, at best, gave a nod and a grunt and turned away. The pleasure of hating one’s neighbor is not easily relinquished.

Blacks Burglaries

One late afternoon in the early nineties, as I came home from work, I noticed that the front door of my house was partially open. I thought: something has gone wrong in the house, and the neighbors have gone in to try to fix it (Steve had a key). When I went inside, however, there was no one there. I walked down the hallway to the kitchen, saw a couple of banana peels on the floor. I went into the living room, saw the doors to the liquor cabinet open, and my bottle of cognac and bottles of several other liqueurs gone. I raced upstairs, saw that the window to my study was wide open and the screen was dangling to the side. The little portable tape recorder I had been using to record conversations with Nellie the Poet (to be described in a later edition of this book), and phone conversations with my mother, was missing from the shelf below the record player, along with all the tapes of the conversations. I ran to the bedroom, looked in the night-table drawer, saw that my .38 Ruger revolver, which I kept there in case burglars broke into the house at night, was missing. The thieves must have realized that my ten-year-old Sanyo computer was worthless, as was my 15-year-old Pioneer cassette player and FM receiver, and all my cassette

tapes. I quickly checked the closet in my bedroom where most of my old mss. were kept, found that they were still intact. As far as I could determine later, none of my books or other mss., or my blue, three-ring binders full of notes, had been touched.

I was beside myself with rage and revulsion. I called the police. A number of them arrived soon, along with a fingerprint van. As the fingerprint technician dusted the window sill with a yellow powder, I asked one of the police officers — a black — “Who does this kind of thing?” As I reported in the above interchange of notes with Chet, he replied, without a moment’s hesitation, “Unemployed, drug-addicted black teenagers”¹.

The police speculated that the kids had climbed the magnolia tree next to Steve and Jane’s garage, then dropped down onto the roof over my laundry room, and from there were able to pry the window open, tear out the screen, and enter the house through my study window.

In succeeding days I experienced what most people do after being burglarized: overwhelming feelings of having been violated, and of virulent hatred for the black bastards who had invaded my house. I found some comfort in talking to police officers on the street and in coffee shops about what had happened. When I asked one why the burglary rate in Berkeley was so high, he said the reason was the extremely lenient policy toward teenage criminals. “In Berkeley,” he said, “a black teenager would be a fool *not* to go into burglarly, because even on the days he is caught, he will be home in time for dinner.” He said there are teenagers with ten and more arrests for burglarly on their records who were still walking the streets. Steve and Jane’s house was burglarized twice in the next few years, the thieves taking TV, stereo, and computer, all of which were new. Steve didn’t seem to be bothered at all. He shrugged and said, in so many words, that that is one of the costs of the capitalist system, and seemed amused at my rage. I felt he was almost delighted at having been robbed, because as everyone knew, whites were the oppressor class, and here he had had the opportunity to be punished by the underclass, which one day would rise and take over. Of course, in Berkeley, such an attitude was by no means unique. Being robbed was a badge of distinction among the radical left: you could almost see the eager hands go up when suspicious-looking blacks were in the neighborhood: “Ooh! Do us! Do us!” Besides, you could always go to the Flea Market at Ashby BART Station, near the Oakland border, and sometimes be able to buy back your stolen stuff.

Then my house was burglarized again, but again none of my books or mss. or electronic equipment was taken. By this time, Steve and I decided that it was time to get burglar alarms, which we both did. After that, neither of our houses was broken into, although if the teenagers who committed these crimes had had the intelligence to ask the simple question, “How long does it take for the police to arrive once the alarm goes off?” they would have come back again, because the truth is it typically took at least fifteen minutes, and skilled burglars can remove everything worth stealing from a house within eight minutes. But the teenage burglars who preyed on our neighborhood were not smart.

Around 2004 the police and the City (or county) government put through a regulation that required burglar alarm companies to call a second person on a customer’s call list to confirm that a burglary was in fact taking place, thus further prolonging the police response time to close to half an hour. (In Fremont in early 2005, the police department announced that because of the number of false alarms, it would no longer respond to burglar alarms at all! The police chief

1. Someone said later, when I told them that they had stolen my cognac, that this was a strong indication that the thieves had indeed been black, because “they go for that”.

claimed 6,000 false alarms a year, and that this cost his department \$600,000 a year. I called someone in the Fremont city government and pointed out that if the police instituted a new rule that each false alarm would cost the homeowner \$100, that would pay for the false alarms, and no doubt reduce their number considerably. The man I spoke to thought this was a good idea, didn't know why the chief hadn't thought of it, and suggested I talk to him, which I tried to do to no avail.

In response to my expressions of outrage at these rules, Steve reminded me quite rightly that the main purpose of having a burglar alarm sign in your front yard was to encourage potential burglars to go to the house without a sign.

I am now confronted with a major decision that may well affect the ultimate fate of this book. If I honestly describe my change of feelings toward blacks — in particular, toward black criminals — if I say that after thirty years and many millions of dollars to fund liberal policies in the most liberal city in the country, the drop-out rate among blacks from Berkeley High in the early 2000s was 60%, if I say that I don't believe it is a good idea for black juveniles with ten arrests and convictions for burglary to be roaming the streets, I risk losing all chances of acceptance in the universities. ("He is a racist. Ignore him.") On the other hand, if I were to confess, in these pages, that I advocate the violent overthrow of the U.S. government, or that I think that it would be a good idea if capitalists were rounded up by the hundreds, by the thousands, and executed without trial, or that I had murdered a Silicon Valley multi-millionaire, his wife, and their two children, out of a passionate conviction that the ruling class is evil and an oppressor of the poor, the academics would be falling all over themselves trying to study me and analyze me and show that my feelings, and my terrible act, conformed perfectly with their social theories.

So I face an ancient decision for authors: say what will please and increase your chances of success, even though it forces you to lie, or be honest, and risk ostracism. I choose the latter.

The Neighborhood Watch

As a result of the burglaries, we formed a Neighborhood Watch. I had had only one previous experience with such an organization, and that was on a walk on charming Solano Ave. in North Berkeley soon after I moved to Berkeley. As I walked down the street, a young woman came across the front yard of one house and shyly asked me what I was doing (she probably said something like "May I help you?" or "Are you looking for someone?", I don't remember). When I asked her why she was asking me, she said that she was a member of the local Neighborhood Watch. I told her that I was only taking a walk, that I lived in South Berkeley, and that I was impressed by a neighborhood that had such an organization. There was a procedure that a neighborhood was supposed to follow in order to form a Neighborhood Watch: we had to make an appointment for a police officer to come and talk to us, which we did. He gave a brief lecture, answered our questions, then handed out numerous pamphlets and flyers and instruction booklets that none of us read. We were given a non-emergency number to call when we saw potential trouble. Because of all the neighbors I was clearly the most obsessed with burglaries and street crime, and certainly the most neurotic, I was elected Captain of the Watch. We held monthly meetings, first in Steve and Jane's house, then in the house of the neighbor behind me.

Leading the meetings was agony, because, unlike in business, I had no authority and could not use the urgency of a product release to cut short long-winded conversation. I had to be ... nice, had to allow the meeting to be a social occasion, otherwise many of the neighbors wouldn't show up. (The hostess typically had coffee, nuts, and cookies on the coffee table.) I had to listen to all

the chatter (including that of a non-stop talker), fight blushing at the occasionally dirty jokes and off-color remarks, and above all appear not to be riddled with anxiety, as I in fact was. On the other hand, since Chet and a woman on Parker St. hated sitting in meetings, I had to do my utmost to keep the meetings short, or, in other words to cut down on the socializing. So I had an impossible job, and I hated it. (Chet and the woman stopped attending after the first couple of meetings.)

We all agreed to adopt a policy (those who hadn't already done so) of never opening the front door in response to a knock or the ringing of the doorbell, without first calling out, "Who is it?" If the voice was unfamiliar, as it sometimes was, then we were to say, "I'm sorry, but I'm on a long-distance call. I can't talk now." At least twice, I then heard a quick scraping sound on the surface of the door. When I went out later, I found a large scratch on it; someone told me that this was done with a key by way of retaliation for my not having opened the door.

I heard of only one actual incident of a black forcing his way into a house. This happened to the neighbor in the house behind me before I moved into the neighborhood. She said that she had been working in the kitchen. She heard a noise, looked up, and there was a big black man. He had come in through the back door. She was able to talk him back out of the house; I don't recall if she gave him food or money.

As I was first going through the house before buying it, I noticed a two-by-four piece of wood across the door to the basement, held in place by brackets screwed into the wall, so that it could be lifted up and put aside when someone wanted to go down to the basement. The previous owner had explained that several years before, a black had been seen going through the back yards in an attempt to escape the police. Since the crawl space under the house was high enough to almost stand erect in, she was worried about someone making his way to the quarter basement and coming up the stairs and entering the house, so she had her husband install brackets and the bar.

I promoted the slogan, "You watch my house, I'll watch yours", but it soon became clear that it was beyond most of the neighbors' ability to remember to check each other's back yards several times a day. Even I found it difficult: you had to set aside a few times each day, and then say to yourself, "OK, now look at —'s yard. Do you see anything strange? Now look at —'s yard..."

I also made up a verse to enable the members to remember the police phone number to call:

When you're walking down the street
Don't just look at your feet!
Look to the left and the right
Any burglars in sight?
If so
You know
What must be done:
Call 644-6161!

And who are those dudes checking out cars?
Maybe they should be behind bars!
You know what must be done:
Call 644-6161!

I promoted the buying of burglar alarms, but when the others heard that the cost of installation was \$500 and that the annual fee was around \$300, they said they couldn't afford it. I asked them

to estimate the dollar cost of replacing what would likely be stolen from their houses — TVs, computers, cameras, jewelry, cash — and then compare that to \$800, and the \$300 annual fee, and see which was less. (Lynaire, who rented an apartment next door, and said she couldn't afford the annual burglar alarm fee, had \$5,000 worth of electronic equipment stolen from her house.)

Heads nodded, a few people wondered aloud about the idea of just buying a fake sign, but I did my best to discourage this, arguing that once the word got out among the burglars that some signs were not backed up by actual alarms, every house with a sign would become a target. Of course, if someone stole the sign of a house that did in fact have an alarm... and that is what happened to me later. No doubt the thief was simply trying to save the cost of having the burglar alarm system installed. I then chained the replacement sign to the ginkgo tree in my front yard. I came home one evening and found the sign lying in the ivy: someone had tried to steal that one too, but had been foiled by the chain.

In any case, nine years after we started the Watch, Steve and I and one other neighbor were the only ones with burglar alarms. (Steve called me the Captain Emeritus of the Watch.) Of course, burglar alarms can only have a deterrent effect if the burglar alarm sign is *visible from the street and in the back yard*, since burglars, as in my case, can just as well get to a house through the back yard as down a driveway. This other neighbor, a woman, was a young, attractive blonde who lived on Parker St. She had broken up with her boyfriend, and was living alone with her two kids and the family dog. She had gotten a burglar alarm, but unfortunately she allowed the bushes in the front of the house to obscure the sign. She had no sign in the back yard. One Sunday morning, she was awakened by the dog, who was jumping up and down excitedly, clearly trying to get her to follow him. She told it to go lie down and she went back to sleep. The dog returned, again tried to wake her, she again responded in the same way. A couple of hours later, when she went down to make breakfast, she found that burglars had broken in through a back window and taken TV, computer, and other valuables. (Because the alarm was a motion detector, she turned it off when she was in the house.) The dog had sensed the trouble and had tried to wake her. I thought: against stupidity of this magnitude, Neighborhood Watches, entire police forces, strive in vain.

Beginning around 2005, there was a notable dropoff in burglaries in the neighborhood — in fact none for several years, at least that we were aware of. I told Steve, “This is just the burglars' clever new trick! They are deliberately *not* burglarizing our houses in order to throw us off guard. You see? They may go on like this for five, ten, 20, 30 years — maybe forever! Devilishly clever.” He thought this idea highly amusing.

A Neighborhood Under Siege

We knew that potential burglars were casing the neighborhood on a regular basis. I made a point of approaching cars that had been parked on our block with a driver inside for more than, say, half an hour and, asking, “Can I help you?” I always approached from the rear on the driver's side, like traffic policemen did, and for the same reason. When the driver, typically a menacing black, would reply, “Who are you?” I would say, “I'm a member of the Neighborhood Watch.” The driver would mumble something, I would politely withdraw, making sure he saw that I was keeping an eye on him. I encouraged the neighbors to do the same, but they felt it was too dangerous, and also racist, even though I emphasized that we should approach any driver, black or white, who had been parked for more than half an hour.

Far more important to the neighbors than protecting their property was protecting their self-esteem — their image of themselves as above all not racist. One morning at around 10:30 I was out in front of the house talking to Lynaire, who lived in a first-floor apartment in the house

immediately south of mine, and Chet. A black rode slowly by on a bicycle, and seemed to be studying each of the houses on our street in turn. I remarked on it, was told that I was allowing my racism to come to the fore again. I had an errand to run, and left around 12. When I came back in mid afternoon, Lynaire was in front of her apartment, obviously distraught. I asked her what happened. She said that someone had stolen all her stereo equipment and her lap top — \$5,000 worth in total. Later it turned out that Chet had been standing in front of his house on the other side of the street, talking to someone, and had seen a black guy drive up in a van, get out with a bag, and make frequent trips between her apartment and the van. But he had been reluctant to call the police because he didn't want to assume that all blacks were thieves. (See above exchange of letters with Chet.)

The police warned us of some of the tactics that the blacks used, and I personally witnessed one of these several times: a mother would park her car in our block, then send two little kids, aged, perhaps, between four and seven years, from door to door, asking if they could use the bathroom. If the neighbor said yes, the kids then went in, looked around for possible entry points. Later, older kids came back and burglarized the house.

I stopped one black kid who was walking up the walkway leading to an apartment behind Chet's house. I said to him, "Can I help you?" He, sullen, suspicious, said he wanted to buy a car from a resident in the apartment in the back. He asked me why I had stopped him. I said, "Because we have a Neighborhood Watch and we always stop people who don't live in the neighborhood." He said, "You be treatin' me like a stereotype." It was probably the only four-syllable word he knew.

Another time, as I stepped out of my front door, I saw a young black man riding down Steve's driveway on a bicycle. He was balancing several garden items. I, still smarting from always being called a racist by the neighbors, decided to say nothing except give him a nod and mutter a hello. Out the driveway he went, then turned down Milvia. When Steve and Jane came home, I asked them if they had hired someone to remove some of their garden tools, or if they had sold some of them. They said no. So the guy had simply seen them from the street and decided to steal them.

Then there was a tall black who went door to door, knocking and asking for gardening work, but in between houses, trying to pry car doors open.

Once, when my housemate Zoe and some of her friends had gone into the house in the midst of eating lunch on my front porch, and I happened to be coming home, I saw a black guy calmly walk up my front walk and help himself to whatever food was on the porch.

Poaching

Stealing recycling materials ("poaching") was so common, and regarded as such a petty crime, that the police didn't even bother to try to stop it. In our neighborhood, every Tuesday was not only garbage-pickup day but also recycling day, when neighbors could leave their newspapers, plastic bottles, cans, and glass bottles at the curb. The glass bottles were worth the most, and so on Monday night and on Tuesday morning before the recycling truck came, the blacks (and on rare occasions a white or an Asian) could be heard pushing their shopping carts down the street and emptying the blue plastic containers holding the bottles. It was, in fact, a direct theft from the Berkeley Ecology Center, which was in charge of the recycling program, since the Center was then forced to pay full price for what they would otherwise get for free from Berkeley residents. I mentioned to several neighbors that we could solve this problem by simply recording when the recycling truck came by, then bringing out the bottles from our houses at that time, rather than

leave them on the sidewalk. The neighbors shook their heads, said they had no time for that, and besides it was racist. I thought: to say that it is racist to discourage blacks from stealing is to say, in effect, that blacks cannot be expected to abide by the law. Which is nothing less than saying that they are inferior. I thought again of Steve's standard response when I asked why blacks can't work as hard as Latinos: "They're incapable". Of course, he meant that they are incapable as a result of white racism, but that implied that they are incapable of overcoming the injustices of the past and becoming responsible citizens: in other words, they are inferior.

Small Humiliations By Blacks

The blacks seemed acutely aware of the small humiliations they could inflict on whites. A common one was, when walking across the street at a stop sign, to deliberately walk slowly (with the cocky step that some of the Politically Incorrect called "the nigger bounce"), thus forcing you to wait. I told Steve that my impression was that this was deliberate behavior on their part, and although he was always on their side, he said yes, but that I had to understand why (and hence forgive them).

On the other hand, several times when I was crossing the street at a stop sign, a black driver who was turning left into the street, would see how close to me he (or she) could drive the car without actually hitting me.

When you were walking along the sidewalk, and you passed a group of them, one would sometimes call out to you, "Hey. What time is it?" My impulse, which I never acted on, was always to say, "Time for you to buy a watch!", but instead, if there were only a few, and they were on the opposite side of the street I would walk on as if I hadn't heard them. They would call out again, I would ignore them, and get ready to run if they came after me, which they never did.

Or sometimes, when I was walking along the sidewalk, a lone black leaning against a wall ahead, would spit on the sidewalk as I approached. (Other times on a residential street you would sometimes see a black standing on the sidewalk, facing the bushes, and relieving himself.)

It became common knowledge, and was written about in the national press, that ghetto blacks considered it an insult to be looked in the eye by whites, because then they were "dissed", that is, treated with disrespect, and so I, and other whites, when we walked along the street and saw blacks coming the other way, made sure we lowered our eyes.

For several years, beginning in the late nineties and the early 2000s, I tried to plant flowers in the empty bollards at the end of our street. (The rest of the bollards had ancient geraniums that produced nice red flowers through much of the year.) Within a few days, the plants would be ripped out. I waited a while, then tried again. Same result. I proposed to several of my neighbors that we hang a sign on one of the bollards, "These flowers planted in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King", but they felt that would be insulting and racist. Finally, in the spring of 2005, I managed to get geraniums planted in all the bollards. The trick seemed to be to plant them and then remove all signs that they were newly planted — for example, by covering the soil with dead leaves. For some reason, the vandals had no interest in destroying established plants.

Casual Vandalism

In 2004, while I was sitting in the living room watching TV before a nice crackling fire, I suddenly heard what sounded like a small explosion in the front room. I went to see what had happened, noticed nothing. But on succeeding evenings the house seemed colder than usual downstairs. I checked behind the curtains on the windows in the front room, and found that one had a big hole in it. A rock lay on the floor amid shards of glass. Chet reported having several of

his windows broken earlier: in his case, he said he saw black teenagers throwing the stones.

Violence on the Streets

There were violent incidents in our neighborhood. A neighbor was stopped by a group of black kids who waved a gun at him and demanded his wallet. He gave it to them. They ran off, but he managed to quickly call the police, since it was only a few steps to his front door. The kids were caught. It turned out the gun was only a toy, but the neighbor told us how rattled he had been. The kids were released in a matter of hours.

Far more serious was what happened to Keith, a young waiter at Steve and Jane's restaurant. He was walking home along Sacramento Ave. (a main road that ran past the restaurant) around midnight one night, when a group of black kids approached him and demanded money. He gave them what he had in his wallet and the change in his pockets, but they decided it wasn't enough, so they broke both his knee-caps with a tire iron. He was unable to work for months, and never recovered full use of his legs.

A Couple of Good Blacks

I search my memory for blacks I knew whom I could respect. Certainly one was Mary Parker at Wells Fargo, who in December 2004 provided invaluable help in finally getting, after repeated bungling by the international money transfer computer mechanism, the payment for the modification to my mother's gravestone in Berne, to the stonecutter. Later she efficiently got me a replacement checkbook when I misplaced mine.

But without question, the one good black that deserves mention here is Todd Ridley, our mailman throughout the nineties. A tall, thin man with a deep voice and good sense of humor, he had been a track star in high school and, I gathered, in college, specializing in the high jump, which he did with the famed Fosbury Flop, in which the jumper went over the bar "backwards", that is, he ran up to the bar then turned and went over the bar facing upward. Since in those years I was running up to 21 miles a week, he always encouraged me to enter one of the Master's competitions, which are specifically for older men, and in which the competitor receives extra points handicap for each decade of his life. I would see him coming down Milvia and say, "Todd!" and he would reply "John!" He was studying law at night with the goal of becoming a sports attorney. I had enormous admiration for him, and always encouraged him. He failed the bar exam the first time, but I told him to try again, and not to give up. Meanwhile, he had some sort of part-time job with one of the Oakland professional teams, possibly the Raiders.

Black Beggars

By far the majority of street beggars in Berkeley were black. There were very few Latinos, since they always took whatever work they could find — running leaf-blowers, working on anything to do with trees or gardens or lawns, or serving behind the counter in coffee shops. On Telegraph Ave. near the campus and near the downtown Berkeley BART station, you saw occasional groups of young whites, men and women, with signs like, "Need donation for beer". But you heard the refrain of blacks every day as you walked the streets: "Spare change?", "Got 'ny spare change?", "Spare change for a meal?" Some of the blacks occupied the same locations for years: a guy in front of Reel Video store on Shattuck near Derby, with his plastic carton to hold his copies of *Street Spirit*, a paper containing news about the homeless that no one had any interest in reading, and that served merely as an excuse for obtaining \$1 donations.

Another was in front of Blockbuster Video several blocks north on Shattuck. A woman in

front of Berkeley Espresso on Shattuck and Hearst in North Berkeley must have said “Spare change?” thousands of times a year in the same whiny voice. A big black guy for several months in the early 2000s stationed himself outside of the downtown branch of Wells Fargo and in a deep, booming voice that penetrated into the bank, half-sang “*Street Speerit*, get your *Street Spee-rit*, oh yeah, got de *Street Speer-iyyyy-it....*”.

“Poverty Pimps”

A woman who was a long-time activist in Berkeley told me that federal and state funding to deal with black problems had produced what came to be known as “poverty pimps” — blacks who were appointed to manage after-school programs aimed at keeping black teenagers busy and therefore out of trouble. These in turn would appoint their black friends to various administrative positions usually created on the spot. Many of these people were functionally illiterate; virtually all of them couldn’t have cared less about helping young blacks. But they in turn would claim they needed larger staffs and get their friends put on the payroll. Nothing was accomplished in the way of social programs, but a fair number of the unemployable now had more money for drugs. To quote Tom Wolfe:

Brothers ... got down to the heart of the poverty programs very rapidly. It took them no time at all to see that the poverty program’s big projects, like manpower training, in which you would get some job counseling and some training so you would be able to apply for a job in the bank or on the assembly line — everybody with a brain in his head knew that this was the usual bureaucratic shuck. Eventually, the government’s own statistics bore out the truth of this conclusion. The ghetto youth who completed the manpower training didn’t get any more jobs or earn any more money than the people who never took any such training at all. Everybody but the most hopeless lames knew that the only job you wanted out of the poverty program was a job *in* the program itself. Get on the payroll, that was the idea. Never mind *getting* some job counseling. *You* be the job counselor. You be the “neighborhood organizer.” As a job counselor or a neighborhood organizer you stood to make six or seven hundred dollars a month, and you were still your own man. Like, if you were a “neighborhood organizer,” all you had to do was go out and get the names and addresses of people in the ghetto who wanted to relate to the services of the poverty center. That was a very flexible arrangement. You were still on the street, and you got paid for it.¹

Black Men, White Women

In all my years in Berkeley, I never heard of a single relationship between a black man and a white woman that worked.

The niece of Kathy, the woman I lived with in the eighties and who is described in the previous chapter, while a teenager in Chico, Calif., got pregnant by her black boyfriend. When she informed him, he told her that if she revealed he was the father, much less asked him to pay for the child’s support, he would kill her. So she raised the child on her own, with financial help from Kathy’s mother, who lived in the same town.

A long-time waitress at Steve’s restaurant had twin girls by a black man who then abandoned her and them. She raised the girls on her own. They would often be in the restaurant in the early

1. Wolfe, Tom, “Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers” in *Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, N.Y., 1970, p. 139.

morning, presumably prior to going to school. They were loud, usually giggling, and seldom if ever had their noses in a book.

Far worse was what happened to another waitress at the restaurant, who, according to Steve, “had a thing for black guys”. One of them became abusive and so she attempted to end the relationship. He threatened to kill her. She informed the police, who placed him under a restraining order. He ignored it and began stalking her. Steve became so alarmed that he insisted she not return to her apartment, and secretly put her up for several months in his house.

And yet, when Steve and Jane went on a trip to the South in 2007, visiting, among other cities, Savannah, Ga., and I asked him how he enjoyed it, he said fine: he was especially glad to see all those interracial couples. I thought: once again ideology trumps experience. There was almost a vengeful delight in the way he said it, as though these couples were proof that eventually we will all be equal. I was struck again by the fundamental loser mentality of the left: in a world of differences, they are on the bottom, so what is to be hoped for above all is a world without differences.

Blacks in School

The 1994 PBS documentary, “School Colors”, gave a good picture of the behavior of black students in Berkeley High School. While most of the white and Asian kids were working hard to excel at academics — there is a scene in an Asian home in which, after dinner, the plates are cleared from the table and the books and homework papers come out and the older kids help their younger siblings — the blacks did everything possible to avoid getting down to business. Some of the males wore white sweatshirts with white hoods and would peer out at teachers and administrators who tried to find a way to get them to pay attention to their schoolwork.¹ The school even went so far as to hire two black Marxists. In the classroom scenes shown in the documentary, it was clear that the last thing in the world these teachers were teaching their students was the importance of hard work; rather the students were getting daily lectures in further reasons for regarding themselves as victims of oppression.

I visited the High School once in the nineties. Norma, the second-generation communist described in the first chapter of the next volume, told me about an interesting friend of hers who was a teacher at the High School; she encouraged me to meet him. He was a Pole, but not a Jew, who had been sent to a concentration camp during WW II. He turned out to be a tall, strong-looking guy who gave the immediate impression of being able to maintain order in his classroom. (He taught, I think, Advanced Placement biology.) He wore an old olive-drab Army jacket and Army boots. We talked for a while, I mainly interested in getting his opinion on public school education. (He was resigned to it.)

On the way out, walking down the corridors, I peaked into the other classrooms. It was early afternoon, the teachers voices droned on; in one class I saw several blacks slouching in their chairs, feet up, making a show of their indifference to what the teacher was saying. Thereafter, whenever I thought about the problems of black education, the same imaginary scene came into my mind: two blacks are slouching in their chairs in the back of the room as the teacher attempts to explain fractions. He draws a circle on the blackboard, tells his students to think of it as a pie; he draws a line down the middle; says the pie has been divided into two pieces and that each

1. I can only assume that the hoods provided a way of hiding out from the world. An even greater extreme of this practice was employed by a black who for several years walked past my house several times a week. He wore a long, drab coat that reached to his shoes, and dreadlocks that completely covered his head, including his face, and hung down to his shoulders. It was not obvious how he could see where he was going.

piece is $\frac{1}{2}$ the pie. Then he draws another circle, divides it into three equal pieces; explains that this pie has been divided into three equal pieces and that each piece is $\frac{1}{3}$ of the pie. Then he draws another circle, divides it into four equal pieces, points at one of the pieces, and asks the class how much of the pie that piece is. One of the blacks in the rear turns sullenly to the other and says, "Hey, you know what this is?" The other says, "What, man?" The first says, "Fuckah racism, man".

I walked past the High School several times a day, and witnessed the reality that the professors on the hill made a point of dismissing if they were aware of it at all: I am referring not merely to the loud, raucous, ghetto speech of a group whose every word made it clear that the last thing in the world they cared about was school, but also to the deliberate, in-your-face sloppiness of the males: oversize T-shirts worn over baggy pants that were so long they were piled in folds around the wearer's ankles, the crotches down at knee level. I saw one male in May, 2008 who wore his pants so low that his belt was around his upper thighs. It dawned on me then that the habit of black males walking around with one hand over their crotch was probably because it was the only way they could prevent their pants from falling down altogether. (A morning news report on one of the FM stations in September, 2006, said that a thief was caught in San Francisco because his pants were so baggy he couldn't run.) Sweaters were worn with the sleeves unrolled and hanging down below the hands. And yet if you were to ask any of these individuals why black youth have difficulty getting jobs, they would reply without a moment's hesitation, "Fuckah racism, man."

Yet despite my reputation as the neighborhood racist, I kept an eye out for ways of improving black education. For example, I came home one day and found a group of black teenagers playing craps on the sidewalk in front of my house. I didn't think it would be a good idea to call the police, so I just waited for them to leave. But I thought, "What a great opportunity to teach these kids some math, in particular, some probability theory! A Berkeley High math teacher could begin by simply posing some elementary questions: 'What are your chances of rolling a seven?' 'Which point is easier to make: a six or a five?', etc." I thought it would have been interesting just to know how well their intuitions matched the probabilistic facts. But then the teacher could show them how to compute the various probabilities — could show them that there are exactly 36 ways that two fair dice can come up, and then show them how to count the possible ways that a given number can come up, and then show them that the probability of a number coming up is simply the number of possible ways, divided by 36. Since only simple addition, multiplication, and division would be required, the kids might actually learn something. But I knew that a teacher in Chicago had tried the same kind of thing, in his case, teaching elementary arithmetic using various examples taken from the drug trade, and was severely reprimanded if not actually fired. So I didn't bother taking my idea to any of the teachers.

All this in the most liberal city in the country. All this in a city that had spent many millions of dollars trying to help the blacks. All this in a city in which thriving academic careers were built on finding reasons to excuse such behavior, the motivation for finding these reasons having nothing to do with professors' vaunted claims of compassion, "understanding" of the plight of the downtrodden, or a fervent commitment to fighting racism, but having everything to do with the fact that the ghetto blacks were projections of the have-not status of the professors themselves in a world in which their humanities disciplines counted for nothing compared to those of the hard sciences, mathematics, engineering, and business. "The downtrodden are us and therefore they must be forgiven, always!" And, I should not fail to add, all this also having everything to do with academic vanity — the professors, a little ashamed of their prestige and nice, lifetime-guaranteed incomes, wanted to feel good about themselves. What better way than to tolerate the most outr-

geous behavior by members of a minority? “We do not condemn: we understand and forgive! That is how wonderful *we* are.”

Fighting City Hall

The Fight Against Hollywood Video

My feeling about Berkeley began to change not only because of the burglaries but also because of the incursions — the depredations — of the City government into our neighborhood. The first one that I became acquainted with was the City’s approval of, in fact encouragement of, a huge, garish video rental store, Hollywood Video, on the edge of a residential district bordering the main thoroughfare of Shattuck Ave. (The background was that the store had made a significant financial contribution to Mayor Shirley Dean’s election campaign, and now she was attempting to pay it off.) The neighbors were afraid of the increased car and foot traffic, the noise far into the night, and yet another piece of ugly commercial architecture. A grass roots movement started; signs appeared in the front windows and lawns of houses (“No to Hollywood Video!”). The center of the movement was the Le Conte Neighborhood Association (LCNA), which had existed before, but now had a much increased attendance at its monthly meetings. I joined and, during the months I attended meetings, saw what a well-run organization needs to do to fight City Hall. The chairman at the time was Rob Wrenn, a labor journalist I believe. Also in leadership roles were the formidable Charlotte Shimura, Karl Reeh, one of those gentle souls who are determined to live the responsible, progressive life. Le Conte kept track of the Byzantine machinations of the City bureaucracy, it organized protest marches, attended City government meetings. Finally, it appeared they were nearing a victory. They found a guy named Stuart Skorman who was willing to move a video rental store, to be called “Reel.com”, into the proposed Hollywood Video store. He had owned a chain of video stores in New England. He came to one of Le Conte’s meetings. I remember him sitting on the floor, hands around his knees, a slim, balding man. He seemed determined, by not even presuming to take a chair, to show us how much he respected us and how grateful to us he was for giving him such a business opportunity. He kept telling us that he wanted to be a good citizen of the neighborhood, and would be glad to honor the requests that Le Conte put forward, for example, to wall off a driveway to Derby St., place a Yield sign at an exit, add landscaping, and close each day at 11 p.m.. We all felt enormously relieved, and congratulated ourselves on our victory.

One of the features of Reel that he had told us about, at the meeting he came to, was that it had an artificial intelligence program that would recommend films similar to those that a user specified he or she had enjoyed. I had felt it would be impolite to point out that such programs were at the very bottom of the barrel in the artificial intelligence repertoire because they were so simple, and that probably no respectable computer science undergraduate program would accept one as a course project. But the word was that Hollywood Video had paid that extraordinary sum not only for the Reel web site (which was deemed a far greater profit center) but also for this juvenile artificial intelligence program.

On July 30, 1998, Charlotte was informed that Skorman had sold Reel.com to Hollywood Video for \$100 million. We were appalled. The only thing we won was the set of conditions we had specified regarding traffic control, landscaping, external appearance of the building, and hours of business — that, and an offer of \$50,000 to the neighborhood in the way of blood money from Skorman. We had a meeting, decided the offer was an insult, and turned it down.

Le Conte fought other battles, including one against Reza Valiyee, a wizened old Iranian who owned numerous rental houses in South Berkeley, in addition to several car lots containing abandoned cars. Members of his family owned a car audio store on Shattuck, in South Berkeley. Most of his property was blighted, by the City's own definition, but he refused to perform repairs. He was fined by the City for renting his houses to students in conditions that were below health code, and he even went to jail for a night for defying the City's orders. But he would not give up. He had this utterly mad idea that BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit, whose tracks ran under Shattuck in South Berkeley) would build another station at the site of his car lots, and so he held onto the land. Actually, BART had no reason to build another station at that location because it already had two within easy walking distance, namely, Ashby Station and the downtown Berkeley station. It was said he lived like a pig, in a house full of junk, in the Le Conte neighborhood. But it would have taken a full-time effort by several people, including at least one lawyer, to make him clean up his property. So that was one battle that LCNA lost.

A City Government to Fear

Because South Berkeley was the poorer half of the City, the politicians looked on it not only as a place to pay off campaign debts, but also as a place to carry out its left-wing social programs, since affluent North Berkeley, and still less the wealthy Berkeley Hills, wouldn't tolerate such things (with two exceptions I will describe later). In South Berkeley, you could wake up one morning and find that the City had decided to put Section 8 housing next door to you, that is, housing for supposedly recovering drug addicts or for the mentally ill. Or you might find out that the City had decided to put in a 30-unit low-income housing structure in the lot down the street. In all these cases the citizens of the neighborhood had no appeal. The only way to fight the City was to have a neighborhood organization like Le Conte, run by experienced, tireless, smart, grass-roots activists who controlled a large block of votes.

Even downtown Berkeley was not immune to the laughable incompetence of City bureaucrats. In the late nineties, those who worried about the growing number of empty stores in the downtown reasoned (if that is the right word) that this was due to more and more Berkeley residents shopping at the malls, especially those in Emeryville, a virtual mall city, a few miles to the south. Therefore the obvious solution was to make downtown Berkeley look as much like a mall as possible and thus trick the straying residents into shopping in their own back yard. And the best way to make the downtown look like a mall was ... to cut down most of the trees lining the sidewalks! (The merchants liked this idea right away, since it would save them having to sweep up the seeds that some of the trees dropped on the sidewalks each year, a task they could easily have paid the homeless camped on the sidewalks to do. But such socially advanced thinking was beyond the capabilities of the merchants.)

So a plan to cut down some 210 beautiful old trees in downtown Berkeley was drawn up with the full approval of the Planning Commission. A few of us began writing letters and making phone calls and turning up at meetings. I think some of the preservation organizations, including the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA) spoke out against the cutting. Eventually the number of threatened trees was reduced to around 120. Even so, some of us publicly announced that we would chain ourselves to the trees to prevent their removal — an ultimately futile tactic, since sooner or later we would have to go to the bathroom, and the City workers could then move in and carry out their planned destruction.

The cutting proceeded with a daily whining of power saws. Someone noticed that a number of beautiful old trees surrounding the downtown Library had been cut. A hue and cry went up —

the plan had clearly indicated these trees would be spared. A spokesman for the bureaucrats eventually stepped forward and said that he was terribly sorry, a mistake had been made...

The Fight Against the Hardball Field

In the late nineties, we experienced another incursion by the City. Some of the wealthy parents in the Hills decided that they could save ten or fifteen minutes chauffeuring their teenage sons to their afternoon baseball practice if a new hardball field were built on the site of the East Campus, a tract of land two blocks from my house that contained temporary one-story buildings where Berkeley High School's incorrigible students were sent for remedial classes.

My house was on one of the two streets the students normally used to travel back and forth to the Campus. We had learned to live with their loud talk and shouts and occasional vandalism. But the proposed hardball field would bring not only more students into the neighborhood, but also more noise, for the proponents of the field made no secret of their intention to have the field open "from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. seven days a week year round". Furthermore, they intended to install overhead lights and loudspeakers for night games. Within a few days after the announcement of the City's plan, a neighbor, Gay Van Horn, had gathered 500 signatures on a petition protesting the field. She turned it in and, according to one report, was told a few days later that the petition "seemed to have been lost". So she circulated another petition, came up with more than 300 names, and turned that one in. She learned later that that one, too, seemed to have been lost. Meantime, the City began its standard practice for ramming such projects through, regardless of neighbors' protests.

A series of neighborhood "hearings" was announced at which neighbors could voice their concerns. At some of these, an environmental expert would be present, hired by the City to prepare the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) which was mandated by State law. One of the City's star performers, Karen — , led several of the hearings. She was a tall, thin woman with a crew-cut and a chiselled face that always reminded me of Chuck Connors, star of *The Rifleman*, one of the early TV Western series (1958-1963). She had the thin-lipped smile of those who know what is good for you.

She would give her little opening speech describing the field and its many benefits for the community, then go to a large flip-chart pad that had been set up at one side of the stage and invite comments from the audience. On the narrow shelf at the base of the pad were felt-tipped pens in a variety of colors, each pen with its little plastic cap to prevent the ink from evaporating. Hands would go up in the audience, she would point to one. The person would let her know in no uncertain terms that he or she did not want the field installed in the neighborhood, that he or she lived on one of the streets bordering the field, had young children, did not want them exposed to the crowds and noise, feared the increased vandalism, and so forth.

Karen made a great show of trying to get this all down on the flip-chart. First of all, there was the question of which color ink to use for the various complaints — why not green for environmental concerns, blue for traffic, black for ...? Then she had to remove the cap from the felt-tip pen of the right color, write the complaint carefully, in nice big letters, on the pad, then with oh-so-much haste (quickly, quickly!), replace the cap (with its little click of plastic on metal) and find the next color pen. "Now we need red for...oh, where is the red...oh, here it is...", more hasty but careful writing, then standing back, asking if that is what the speaker had in mind. No? Well, then, here, let's change it. You tell me the words. There. How's that?

When the sheet was covered, she grasped the lower edge between thumb and index finger, and with a great sweep of her arm (behold, the City is making progress!) drew the sheet up and over

the top of the pad to expose the blank sheet underneath. More writing, more selecting of exactly the right color pen (click, click, squeak, squeak of the felt on the paper), more pointing to upraised hands. Many in the audience were concerned about the loss of the Farmers' Market, but this servant of the people assured them that another place would be found for it. Not to worry. Unfortunately, several months later, when a member of our group asked to see the flip-charts that Karen had so meticulously generated at the meeting, it turned out that, by some unaccountable negligence, they had been lost.

There were several such meetings. Sometimes the City staff, always busy, always overworked with its projects for the public good, would neglect to get flyers into most of the mailboxes in the neighborhood, so the turnout would be quite small, and the hired experts could conclude that there was no significant opposition to the field.

The opposition grew, more studies were ordered. We pointed out that we had already done our civic duty in having the East Campus and the Farmers' Market in our neighborhood. Surely it wasn't fair to ask us to do more. But the rich folks countered that those who opposed the field could only be Against Youth. We pointed out that the field would be used by, perhaps, 40 high school students, whereas the compromise we were willing to accept, namely, a soccer and softball field (no overhead lights or speakers) would have been used by a much larger percentage of the student population, including girls. Then we were called NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard ies). We countered: Then why not put the field in your own back yard? to which they replied that they would have been glad to, but the land was too expensive (that is one of the burdens of being wealthy, don't you see).

Then the School Board decided that the field could be a source of revenue for its hard-pressed budget, namely, through renting the field to what were often called "beer-ballers" — various civic groups and clubs that liked to play baseball and enjoy a keg of beer. I came up with what I thought was a brilliant counterargument. The estimated cost of the field was \$2 million. At the time, tax-free municipal bonds were paying at least 5%. Five percent of \$2 million is \$100,000. So if the School Board merely invested the money for the field in municipal bonds instead, it would have an annual tax-free income of \$100,000 and still have its original \$2,000,000. No one I spoke to seemed to feel that the income from renting the field would exceed \$100,000, given at least \$10,000 a year just to maintain the field. But a man told me that he didn't think that the School Board was allowed to invest money in bonds, although it was allowed to invest money in a field that would bring in far less.

The fight against the field was eventually led by a woman, Pam W., who, like her husband, John S., was that rarest of creatures, a not completely unintelligent progressive. Week after week, year after year, she did what political activity in Berkeley required, namely, kept up with the ever-shifting sands, the rumors, the informal and behind-the-scenes meetings, the Machiavellian tactics of the opposition and their cronies in the City government. I never saw her lose her temper, never saw her at her wits' end, despite countless broken promises, betrayals, outright lies. The only criticism I can make of her is that invariably she told you far more than you wanted to know in answer to a question. If you asked her what so-and-so had said at a certain meeting, she gave you, from memory, a detailed report of the entire meeting, and some of the background in addition. I attended only a couple of meetings that she ran. I had excused myself from others on the grounds that I was not meeting material, tending to become bored and too outspoken, but that I was ready to make phone calls, write and hand out flyers, mine or other people's, and to participate in City meetings, hold up a sign, and give a short five-minute talk as allowed by the rules. One of the meetings she called gave some indication of what we were up against. The first part was domi-

nated by a black woman who demanded that the rats be removed from her apartment building. Pam did her best to be patient, to tell the woman that there were City agencies the woman could call, and that she, Pam, would be glad to talk to the woman after the meeting, but that the purpose of the meeting was to deal with the hardball field. The woman was not to be stopped. On she ranted, apparently incapable of understanding what Pam had just said. Pam was patient until the woman finally quieted down. At the same meeting was a middle-aged white man who believed that the purpose of any meeting was to listen to him talk, and not merely to talk, but to state in no uncertain terms what needed to be done, and boast of the power he wielded in his neighborhood. Pam allowed him to rant on until he had finished. The rest of the attendees were the bored, melancholy, half-involved typical neighbors.

The City councilmember for our district was Maudelle Shirek, a frail and elderly black woman then in her late eighties. Although she was often unaware of what was going on in City council meetings, she was definitely against the hardball field and, with four other members, constituted a majority vote against the field. The blacks in her district wanted her to stay in office, we who opposed the field likewise, and so we were not at all bothered by her growing inability to carry out her duties. She had an assistant, a millionaire progressive who was the owner of rental properties in the Hills. He sometimes answered phone calls to her office, and often helped her at meetings, sometimes summoning her from the ladies' room where she would fall asleep, so she could vote on important issues. Unfortunately, this assistant got in trouble for overcharging his tenants. Maudelle's subsequent assistants were unreliable and never answered phone calls. For the 2002 election, I wrote and distributed in our district the following flyer for a candidate named Tom Bates, since he had promised us to remain neutral on the question of the field:

To Save Our Neighborhood

vote for
Tom Bates for Mayor
and **Nancy Riddle** for School Board

and tell your friends in:
District 7 to vote for Kriss Worthington,
District 4 to vote for Donna Spring,
District 8 to vote for Anne Wagley,
District 1 to vote for Linda Maio

As you probably know, for several years the rich folks in the Hills have been intent on installing a hardball field, with the strong likelihood of future loudspeakers and overhead lights, in the East Campus area on Derby St. between Milvia and MLK. Why? So that they won't have to drive their kids so far for their afternoon sports activities. Mayor Dean, anxious to please those who provide her with campaign money, has been committed to the hardball field, despite numerous petitions clearly indicating that most neighbors are firmly against it.

Make no mistake about it: the field will destroy this neighborhood. If the field goes in, you can say goodbye to your peaceful summer evenings and weekends. Your kids are going to have to find somewhere else to study, because the racket and lights at night will certainly make it impossible for them to study at home. You will certainly see increased vandalism. And finally, your property values will take a hit, because most people will **not** want to buy a house within a block or two of such a nuisance. (Would you?) Several neighbors have told us that they will definitely be moving out if the field is installed.

The Hills people and their cronies have labelled our opposition to the field NIMBYism, but you can bet your bottom dollar that if a similar field were proposed for *their* neighborhood, they would be furious, and would be doing everything to stop it. They accuse those who oppose the field, including Kriss Worthington, Maudelle Shirek, Donna Sping, and others on the City who are on our side, of “hating kids”(!) But the truth is that the field will be designed to accommodate no more than about 40 males for varsity baseball. Furthermore, most neighbors are perfectly willing to allow a soccer field and/or softball field to be installed in the East Campus Area. Finally, there **are** other suitable locations for the hardball field, e.g., those described in the North Basin plan, which would also be able to benefit from federal funds, instead of us Berkeley taxpayers having to foot the \$1 - \$2 million bill for the field entirely on our own.

Tom Bates is definitely **not** committed to the field, and Kriss, along with persons Maudelle Shirek, Donna Spring, Linda Maio, and others, have been **fighting it** for years. Anne Wagley opposes it. Nancy Riddle is definitely not committed to the field, and we need as many persons like her as we can get on the School Board, which also has a strong voice in the ultimate decision on the field.

We must stop the Mayor and her cronies on the City Council, and on the School Board, from destroying our neighborhood. Whatever you do on Nov. 5, please be sure that you

vote for Tom Bates and Nancy Riddle

— Committee to Save the Derby St. Neighborhood

It must have done some good, because our precinct brought in the highest percentage vote for Bates of all precincts in Berkeley. Unfortunately, within the space of a year, Bates had gone back on his word, and began pressuring and threatening Maudelle to get her to change her mind. Despite advancing senility, she refused to do so.

The battle raged on, and still does at the time of this writing (October, 2008). The field was graded and grass was planted so that it could be used for soccer. We had no problem with that. Fortunately, the economic downturn left the city with no money to pursue, much less implement, a hardball field. Some of us reminded the others of a rule that groups like ours had learned over the years: perpetual delay is victory, at least temporarily. In May of 2006 I wrote the following email to the group:

To all:

A number of people at last Saturday's meeting expressed a desire to eventually be "done" with our battle against the hardball field. I would like to argue that our battles against the city government and its agencies, and also against crime, will never be done.

Like it or not, if you live in Berkeley, you have to pay what I will call the "Berkeley Tax", which means, you have to set aside a certain number of hours each week or month to keep the city and its agencies from destroying your neighborhood, and to keep Berkeley's large criminal class at bay.

The proposed hardball field is only one example of the deprivations being inflicted on neighborhoods by public officials. The mayor and his cronies, all of whom are in the pockets of the developers, are right now attempting to gut the Landmarks Preservation Ordinance (LPO) so that developers and wealthy realtors can tear down any houses they want and replace them with monster mansions that are built purely for speculation. This practice is known in some cities, e.g., Palo Alto, as "scraping", and can utterly destroy the quality of a neighborhood — just to fill the pockets of developers and corrupt politicians.

In the eighties [actually, the seventies], the developers were determined to put up ugly apartment buildings in many of Berkeley's most charming neighborhoods until Martha Nicoloff practically single-handedly pushed through the LPO. But for several years, the LPO has been under attack. The battle to save Berkeley's neighborhoods is never done.

As at least one person at Saturday's meeting pointed out, even if we manage to keep the hardball field out, our job will not be done, since we will have to keep a constant eye on devious attempts by the School Board to get around whatever agreement they have signed.

And then there is the problem of crime. After a rash of recent burglaries in our neighborhood, a (small) number of us are now doing daily patrols at times when these burglaries typically occur (the burglars are mostly students from Berkeley High and the East Campus). None of us imagines that someday crime will diminish to a point that these patrols will no longer be necessary, especially given California's wacko laws that let teenagers with ten or more burglary arrests continue to walk the streets.

So I feel that Berkeley citizens face three choices: (1) move out; (2) resign themselves to paying the Berkeley Tax for as long as they live in the city; (3) postpone paying the Berkeley Tax until one day they wake up and find that their neighborhood has become unlivable.

— John Franklin

Bates turned out to be one of the most corrupt mayors Berkeley ever had. He was in the pockets of the developers and was determined to replace as many as possible of the old Berkeley architectural landmarks with ugly, developer-boxes. And yet, apart from the cunning and deviousness that he employed in order to accomplish his ends, he was generally regarded, at least among the activists who fought his policies, as being genuinely of below-average intelligence. One of these activists began calling him "Tom 'Early-Onset' Bates", implying that he was suffering from Early-Onset Alzheimer's Disease, and it was known that that nickname made him furious. But even apart from that, he had a reputation for losing his temper at meetings. Around 2010, the rumor began circulating that his driver's license had been revoked because of drunk driving.

A City Run By “Fourth-Rate Ideologues”

A Berkeley novelist who had been fighting the City government for more than twenty years told me that Berkeley was “a city run by fourth-rate ideologues”, and I thought the phrase hit the nail on the head. The ideologues — members and supporters of the “progressive” Berkeley Citizens’ Action (BCA) — believed that whatever they saw as serving the ideology was good and should be done. This ideology was straight out of the radical sixties — straight out of the rag-and-bone shop that is left-wing political ideology — anti-capitalist, anti-business, anti-landlord, anti-private property, pro-have-not, an ideology in which *fascist* was a euphemism for *strong, capable*. The jokes made about these true believers in the sixties and seventies — that they wanted to change the traffic laws so that *red* meant go and that they wanted to prohibit all *right* turns — captured their mentality.

BCA had become a power in the late seventies when it defeated plans for a small factory in the West Side of the city and got the city to put up rental housing instead. Thereafter their base was always the renters in the city.

In the early eighties, Berkeley’s black mayor, Gus Newport, supported by BCA, believed that — since Berkeley was the only city in the country that had a foreign policy — what he should be doing with his time, and a considerable amount of the City’s money (since he managed to bring along a few friends, at City expense), was to visit cities in the Third World.

“Galloping Gus’ Newport soon attracted the media’s spotlight. He traveled to Cuba, Mexico City, and Helsinki to hobnob with others on the left, met with officials from the People’s Revolutionary Government of Grenada, and attempted to visit Berkeley’s sister city in El Salvador while it was under fire from government troops. Republicans in the State Assembly took to calling him ‘Comrade Newport’.” — Pitcher, Don, *Berkeley Inside/Out*, Heyday Books, Berkeley, Calif., 1989, p. 123.

Tricks of the Politicians

The ideologues believed that what they knew to be good for the City — for the People — should be pushed through the political process by any means whatsoever. And so these proponents of the public weal had developed a whole arsenal of tricks to enable them to get their way. (They wouldn’t have dared to do these things to the upper class sections of Berkeley. Like the capitalists they hated, they exploited the poor and the lower class.) For example, Mayor Loni Hancock (wife of future mayor Tom Bates) would, in the last fifteen minutes before the start of a City meeting that had controversial items on the agenda, suddenly change the location of the meeting, announcing that she was worried there would not be enough room for all the attendees. Her real purpose, of course, was to make sure that at least some of the opposition attendees would find themselves without a meeting to attend. (I personally witnessed her do this several times.)

Another standard practice was to put controversial items at the end of the evening’s agenda with the hope of wearing out the opposition attendees, who would not be willing to wait for three or four hours for their chance to speak (sometimes the controversial items wouldn’t be addressed until two in the morning).

Still another practice concerned ballot initiatives. After sufficient signatures had been collected to put an initiative on the ballot, the City got to write the description of the initiative on the ballot, and so if there was an initiative that it didn’t like, the City Attorney would be instructed to write it up in a manner that repelled voters — for example, through confusing language and/or through overstating the cost of the initiative to the City. This was done to Proposition S on the

November, 2004 ballot. The originator of the initiative sued the City when he found out what the ballot wording was to be, but the judge ruled against him.

And, of course, discussions and negotiations and agreements that the law required be done at public meetings were routinely done secretly in back rooms.

Anti-Business Policies

The ideologues never let common sense interfere with their ideology. For decades, especially after the sixties, the City did everything in its power to keep businesses out of Berkeley — businesses larger than retail stores — because, as everyone knew, businesses were capitalist enterprises, namely, enterprises that oppressed the People. But after sufficiently many budget shortfalls, the idea began to penetrate the ideologues' brains — very slowly — that businesses also bring money into a City, through taxes, and this money could then be used for ideologically correct City projects. And so, in the late nineties, a few small high-tech firms began finding niches in some of the downtown buildings, and in West Berkeley.

Rent Control

A cornerstone of the progressives' philosophy was rent control, this despite the overwhelming evidence of its failure in New York City, where block after block of neighborhoods in the Bronx — as a result of landlords simply abandoning properties they couldn't afford to maintain — came to look like the remains of a city bombed out during World War II. But to ask such basic questions as, "Are there cities where rent control has worked?" was to adopt the rationality of the Oppressor, and therefore was avoided.

After years of political squabbling, Berkeley voters finally passed a rent control law (Measure D) in 1980. The act was strengthened in 1982 with passage of Measure G, the Rent Stabilization Ordinance, and is now considered one of the strongest rent control laws in the nation.

...rent control has exacerbated an already serious housing shortage by encouraging students, who might otherwise leave after graduation, to stay in Berkeley. It acts as a magnet to people in surrounding areas and reduces the incentive to build new rental units. The University claims a 40% drop in city rental housing since 1980, although tenant advocates dispute this. Some landlords have retaliated by reducing maintenance on their buildings, accepting "finder's fees" and getting low-income (federally subsidized) tenants, whose rent bills are not controlled by rent control. Others have taken their apartments off the market or operate them outside the law, with tenants who are not aware of rent control or who are desperate for a place to live. — Pitcher, Don, *Berkeley Inside/Out*, Heyday Books, Berkeley, Calif., 1989, p. 345.

Long-time residents of Berkeley who were once landlords told me of the destruction done to their buildings by tenants who could neither be evicted nor have their rents raised to cover the damage. I heard that as many as 12,000 rental units were taken off the market as a result of rent control.

In my early years in Berkeley, I would sometimes get into a discussion of the subject. Sooner or later, I would ask the following question: Of all people who have been on the side of rent control because they were renters, surely a few of these, one way or the other, must have eventually become landlords themselves. There is no law against a landlord charging very low rents. How many of these renters-become-landlords did the person I was speaking with know who consis-

tently charged below what the law allowed, in order not to oppress the renters? Not one person ever said they had ever heard of such a landlord. In 1998, the state finally attempted to remedy, at least in part, the rent control scourge. It passed the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act in 1996. It was phased in over the next three years, and ultimately allowed landlords to raise rents to whatever the market would bear if a tenant left voluntarily or died. Landlords were not allowed to attempt to buy out tenants, that is, pay them to leave, but many landlords did so anyway, and were not prosecuted. Lynaire, who rented the tiny apartment in the house next door, was offered, I think, \$15,000 by the new owner of the property to move out, but she turned him down, having done the arithmetic and having found that, at the rents she would have to pay if she moved, she would be losing after two years.

The Fireplace Ordinance

The reader must understand that none of the idealogues was by any stretch of the imagination well-read. I never met one (not even my neighbor, Steve) who even *claimed* to have read all or part of *Das Kapital*. With the exception of Steve, none that I ever met had any knowledge of the history of progressive movements in this country. Needless to say, none of them had the slightest acquaintance with science, which was not only beyond their intellectual capacities but, as they all knew, science was one of the tools of the Oppressor. And so when it came to issues which demanded a modicum of scientific thinking, they hadn't a clue as to how to proceed. An example was the controversy over the banning of fireplace fires in the City. In the nineties, the progressive hypochondriac fringe managed to float the idea — claimed as fact, of course — that most lung cancer in the U.S., plus a major proportion of asthma attacks, was caused by particulate matter from fireplace fires. (I met several people who firmly believed this.) In the succeeding debate, it was pointed out that by far the major cause of lung cancer was cigarette smoking, and the second leading cause was automobile exhaust. I must assume that some bright soul also pointed out that in all likelihood a single multiple-acre brush or forest fire in the East Bay produced more smoke and particulate matter than all the fireplaces in Berkeley and surrounding cities in an entire year. But the whole idea of comparing the various causes of lung cancer, and then putting the most time and effort into reducing the leading ones, was alien to the proponents. If anything causes harm it must be eradicated. Setting priorities is the way the Oppressor works.

The Hills people weren't about to allow a bunch of ignorant have-nots deprive them of the pleasure of winter fireplace fires in their stately homes, and so a compromise was reached: only gas-burning, but no wood-burning, fireplaces would be allowed in any *new* houses in the City. The zealots, of course, made it clear that it was only a matter of time before they would ban all wood fires and thus all but end lung cancer within the City.

I should mention in passing that the Bay Area Air Quality Management District made the most out of the scientific ignorance of the population. The District was up against some mighty foes indeed: the automobile industry for one, and the oil refineries operating in the northeast region of the Bay Area for another. Progress, if any, was inevitably slow. Yet one had to keep one's name before the public, lest the public start wondering where its tax money was really going. And so the District likewise climbed on the anti-fireplace bandwagon. "See how much we care for your well-being! Why, as soon as we get rid of those wood fires, you will see how much healthier you will be!" And they distributed pamphlets promoting this cause — pamphlets that somehow never managed to include any graphs showing the relative damage to the public health inflicted by cigarette smoke, automobile pollution, refineries, and fires in fireplaces.

Which is not to say that Berkeley's progressive thinkers didn't hate the automobile! That

product of capitalism also had to go as soon as possible. And what better way to do it than through the City's utopian building projects? Kill two birds with one stone! So instead of just building low income housing (which, after the fact, turned out to be unaffordable to most low income people), why not build low income housing *with too few parking places*? Then, people who wanted to live in these units would be forced to give up their cars and use public transportation! Needless to say, people did no such thing, and the result was that Berkeley's already legendary parking problems only worsened.

Political Indifference and Tree Wars

And yet, as the Le Conte Neighborhood Association proved, it *was* possible to fight City Hall, provided you could get a critical mass of intelligent neighbors to commit to a month-in, month-out effort. On our side of Shattuck Ave., however, that turned out to be impossible. The one thing that people did *not* want was to be bothered. The idea that by being organized and keeping a close eye on what the City was up to, a neighborhood could curtail at least the worst of the City's mischief, was simply beyond the intellectual capacity of the vast majority of these people. A neighbor a few doors down the street told me, after we had gone to a lawyer in our fight against the hardball field, and I had outlined some things we had to do, that she couldn't spare more than 15 minutes *a month* for political work. (I turned on my heel and didn't speak to her again for years.)

Even small attempts at beautifying the neighborhood were like pulling teeth when it came to participation by the neighbors. For example, I thought it would considerably improve the beauty of our little block of Milvia if trees were planted along the sidewalk. (There were two beautiful fruitless mulberry trees in the sidewalk in front of my house, and a magnificent ginkgo in my front yard, plus a plum tree in the sidewalk in front of Steve's, and a moribund maple at the corner of Blake, but that was about it.) With a lot of persuasion, I was able to get exactly three neighbors (out of some fifteen or so) to devote the few hours of work necessary to get the trees planted. Now, at the time (late nineties) a truly outstanding person was working as the City's Forestry Technician. Her name was Diamera Bach — a cute brunette in her twenties who was everything that a person in her position should be: extremely knowledgeable and extremely desirous of helping citizens plant trees. In addition to discussing the trees on the phone, she made several trips to survey our block. We decided on Aristocrat Pears, and she instructed us in how wide and deep the holes needed to be. We dug the holes, the City delivered the saplings (a total of seven), and we planted them. That first summer, we had to water the saplings every week. I took responsibility for the ones on my side of the street, the other two guys took care of the ones on the other side. Needless to say, we overlooked no opportunity to get the sexy Forestry Technician to come out and check how our trees were doing.

After well over a year of outstanding service, Diamera went to her boss, Jerry Koch, Senior Forestry Supervisor, and asked for a raise and an elevation in her job rating. He turned her down. So she came to us and asked if we would write a letter on her behalf. I said that I certainly would, and I did. I don't know if either of the other two did, but however many letters were received by her boss, they weren't enough. So soon after, Diamera quit and found a much better job in, I think, Alameda. The City, I am sure, was glad to be rid of the one thing they feared the most: employees who tried hard to please the citizens. Diamera's replacement was a young guy from somewhere in the bureaucracy named Tim Wesig. He had been asked to fill her job on an "interim" basis. He didn't have all the required credentials, but he, too, was eager to do a good job for the citizens. As with Diamera, I often called him to ask him questions about trees, and if

he didn't know the answer, he found out and got back to me. I remember him most for the way he dealt with a damaged tree. One of the Joe Six-Packs who occasionally turned into our dead-end street because they didn't bother to read the sign saying the street was a dead-end¹, attempted to turn around his shiny new red pickup, and in the process of backing across the street, caught his fender in one of the trees we had recently planted. He saw in his rear-view mirror what had happened, but in his rage at the whole idea of a dead-end street interfering with his trip to the ball game or the liquor store or whatever, and having no patience for niceties such as newly planted trees, he simply put the truck in first, squealed rubber and nearly pulled the tree out by the roots, while also tearing away most of the bark and twigs on one side of it. I looked at our poor young tree, went back inside the house and called Tim, saying that I guessed we would have to remove the tree and start all over. "Well, Mr. Franklin," he said, "let me come out and take a look at it first, maybe we can still save it." And he did. I wasn't there at the time, so he called me back and said these trees are remarkably resilient. He would install a metal support rod, fasten the tree to it, and asked only that we continue to water it once a week. Which we did. And lo and behold, within a few weeks, there were definite signs of the wound starting to heal. We continued to water it. The roots seemed to re-establish themselves, weeks passed, then months, and soon the tree had fully recovered.

This was just one example of the dedication (and knowledge) of this young man. I frequently praised him for it. Needless to say, the City got rid of him, too, on the grounds that he didn't have the right credentials. They replaced him with a woman, Betsy Reeves, who, we were told, did have the right credentials, but, far more important, as we soon learned, also had the right attitude, namely, the attitude of always putting the City first, the citizens second, and the trees last. Two examples will suffice to show the difference between her and her predecessors. During the heavy rains of the winter of 2002-2003, the roots of one of the young trees (actually, it was probably five or more years old at the time) near the corner of Blake and Shattuck had been loosened in the mud at the base of the tree, and so, when I passed one morning, the tree was leaning over at almost a 45-degree angle. I found a brick, pushed the tree into a near-vertical position, and propped it up with the brick. I called Betsy, told her the story, and asked her to send someone out to put a metal rod into the ground and tie the tree to it. It was worth a try, I said. If it didn't work, then obviously the tree could be removed. A few days later, I passed the corner and saw that the tree had been cut down at the roots. I was furious. I called her. She said that the man she had sent out must have known that the tree would not survive. I told her that was bullshit, nothing would have been harmed by giving the tree a chance. And from then on, we were at war. I taunted her with Tim's success with the sapling.

One evening a few weeks later, after I had parked near the corner of Blake and Dana Sts., I noticed a strange brightness as I got out of the car. I looked around, could have sworn that there used to be grand old trees on those sidewalks. But maybe I was wrong. As I walked down Dana, I noticed a huge tree-stump, the result of a recent cutting, the sawdust still scattered around. Nailed to the stump was a handwritten note: "Does anyone know who cut this beautiful old tree down? Call ..." and then several phone numbers were given. Around the corner, on Blake, I knew

1. It wasn't always a man. I remember a large, heavy, old car driven by a black woman of the same description making its way down our street. The woman decided she would just squeeze between the two center bollards and thus drive past the traffic barrier and onto Blake. But God is just, and because the underside of her car was so close to the ground, possibly as a result of her weight, the small raised block of concrete between the center bollards ripped the oil pan out of her car. She stopped, emerged from the car swearing, and I looked on smiling, exerting all my self-control not to shout, "Serves you right, you stupid bitch."

that several other trees in front of a building housing dental and other offices had been cut down. I went inside, asked if anyone knew why. No one did.

I called Betsy and asked her what in hell was going on. She said she didn't know about those particular trees, but that diseased trees have to be cut down. She also said that the City must constantly be on the lookout for trees that might fall down and hurt or kill someone, since such incidents could result in major lawsuits against the City. She added that at least 50% of the calls her department received from citizens were requests for trees to be cut down, but that she valiantly fought to try to preserve as many trees as possible. I told her I didn't believe her. She told me to talk to her boss, Jerry Koch, which I did.

He said that diseased trees, for example, Dutch elms, must be cut down immediately. I didn't believe him, so I called the arborist that several neighbors and I have used for years — one of the best in the business, we all believe. He said that nowadays, the life of diseased trees can be extended for years by merely cutting off the diseased branches. He reminded me that Monterey pines have been the victim for years of three diseases that originally were thought to require the immediate destruction of the trees. Experience proved, however, that many of these trees could survive for fifteen years or more with these diseases. I certainly knew this to be true in our neighborhood, in particular of a grand old Monterey pine in Steve and Jane's back yard, and another one in Chet's front yard.

A few months later, as I was driving along Hillegass Ave, one of the upscale streets in South Berkeley, I heard the whine of power saws, saw the ominous dark green truck parked in front of a house, saw laboring Mexicans cutting up big logs. I stopped, talked to the foreman. He said that the owner of the apartment house in front of which we were standing had decided that the roots of the redwood tree in the front yard might start damaging the wall between sidewalk and yard, so he ordered the tree cut down. The wall was a pock-marked, three-foot high, concrete nothing that should have been removed and replaced long ago. I was so angry that I wrote Elliot Cohen, sponsor of Measure S on the November ballot, the Measure that would at least make it more difficult for Jerry Koch and his crews to continue his unwarranted cutting of Berkeley trees. I told Elliot that I was seriously thinking of getting my own power saw, and threatening to cut off the legs of any home- or apartment-owner who destroyed trees unnecessarily. He was impressed by my zeal, and asked if I would be willing to submit a letter, in my name, to the papers, arguing for passage of Measure S. He said this would make a better impression than if he, the sponsor of the Measure, submitted it in his own name. I said I would be glad to once I had read it. The letter was:

“Dear Editor:

“Last week I arrived at 2812 Hillegass to see a beautiful redwood tree had been cut, ground into sawdust, and loaded onto a truck. I and two neighbors were the only persons there apart from the workmen. My guess is that the tree was at least 40 years old. How is it that we have an ordinance in this town that prohibits cutting of live oaks, but doesn't prohibit the cutting of redwood trees? I know of several other cases of cutting of old redwoods.

“More disturbing is that no laws protect us from City government pork barrel practices of destroying mature healthy trees and replacing them with saplings just to grant contracts to favored companies. Why are they clear cutting 98 trees at the Berkeley Marina for a bicycle path without bothering to consider alternatives that go around the trees?

“The Marina clear cut is a make work project that will waste public funds clear cutting dozens of mature healthy trees and replacing them with pathetic saplings. The City Manager loves these projects because it[sic] allows them to use public funds to enrich favored private companies that

profit from urban redesign work. With all the serious economic problems our City faces why does the City waste money removing mature healthy trees? In July the Berkeley City approved almost \$300,000 in tree removal contracts to one company without any discussion. I estimate \$100,000 of that money is being spent removing mature healthy trees, and the contract is overly generous in the amount being paid for removal of those trees that need to be removed. Not only that, but in the event the contractor does shoddy work the City should be able to terminate the contract before spending \$300,000. Why didn't anyone on ask about that?

“Fortunately, this November we have a chance to VOTE FOR MEASURE S and rein in wasteful spending on make work projects like the Marina clear-cut. Measure S will make it more difficult to remove mature, healthy public trees, will allow a Board to raise private funds so we can plant more trees and create parks without raising taxes, and will prevent pork barrel spending by requiring proposed tree care contracts to be reviewed by a tree board to prevent wasteful spending. I urge people to vote for Measure S, the Berkeley Public Tree Act, in order to stop pork barrel tree removal schemes that allow companies to line their pockets with our tax dollars while removing perfectly healthy public trees.

“John Franklin”

Measure S was defeated, largely because of its negative, off-putting wording on the ballot. This was done intentionally by the City attorney on instruction of the City Council, which wanted the Measure defeated. See above under “Tricks of the Politicians” on page 991.

Tokenism of the Rich Liberals

South Berkeley was where the City implemented its progressive fantasies — “progressive” in the backward-looking left-wing political sense, not in the sense of being the wave of the future. North Berkeley was where the rich liberals in the Hills did the same for their liberal fantasies. For example, having read the literature on America’s social problems that was constantly being spewed out by professors who also lived in the Hills, and who wouldn’t have been caught dead spending any time in the areas they wrote so expertly about, the wealthy liberals decided that the way to end poverty and lack of achievement among the blacks was to build housing for them in North Berkeley (not the Hills of course, not in one’s own neighborhood!). It was decided to build several low-income town-house units on the site of an abandoned gas station at the corner of Martin Luther King, Jr. Way and Rose St. in North Berkeley, right across the street from Fat Apple’s, one of Berkeley’s landmark restaurants (mediocre food, but Berkeley-authentic with its dark wood panelling and posters of Jack London on the walls).

The units were small — they always seemed to me to be half-scale, as though built for a movie set — and were rented (or sold, I am not sure) to perhaps ten black families. Meantime Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, just a few blocks to the north, was made a target school for blacks. Later, Alice Waters, the founder of the nationally known restaurant, Chez Panisse, decided that what the black kids needed was to learn about growing food, and so she instituted a vegetable gardening program at the school.

When I first saw the units being built, I couldn’t help asking myself if this was really the most efficient use of money whose purpose is to alleviate the black problem. Just guessing, I estimated that the cost of the units — buying the land in a desirable part of Berkeley, building the units — was several hundred thousand dollars. I thought: let us be optimistic and assume that all the fam-

ilies make the most of their good fortune: that the kids study hard, go on to Berkeley High, graduate, then go on to college or vocational school and do not get into trouble. Ten families saved out of many hundreds, perhaps several thousand living in Berkeley. I thought: wouldn't it be a much better use of money to pay ghetto blacks not to have children they couldn't afford to raise properly? So I made up the following poster, and stapled it to telephone poles in North Berkeley and the lower Hills.

A Solution to Poverty, Crime, and the Welfare Problem

There is a simple solution to many of the great social problems that plague us. But no politician dare mention it, much less openly advocate it. It is therefore up to us, the people who are forced to pay the cost, year in and year out, of these problems, to do something ourselves.

The solution: pay the poor not to have children they can't afford to raise properly.

Consider these facts: (1) A poor woman of child-bearing age will have at least one child in five years; (2) At least one in five children of poor women will spend at least one year in reformatory or prison, at a cost to taxpayers of at least \$25,000; (3) A Norplant implant generally prevents a woman from having a child for a period of about five years. Norplant implants at present are available to poor women for around \$200 (the procedure is virtually painless and can be done in a single office visit). Suppose, that, in addition, as an incentive, we gave each poor woman who volunteered to have such an implant a bonus of \$100. Suppose, in short, that we paid poor women \$300 to have an implant — \$200 to have the implant done, and \$100 cash bonus. *Then five such implants would cost \$1,500 but they would save us taxpayers at least \$25,000.*

We pay \$1,500 and get \$25,000 in return! That is a return of **more than 1400%** on our money!

There is no better social bargain anywhere. There is no social program, government or private, that returns anything remotely like that amount on the amount paid in. It would be very difficult to find such a return anywhere in the stock market or in any other business venture in the world today.

So how can we begin? At present, agencies such as Planned Parenthood will accept contributions earmarked for specific purposes, e.g., you can say, "The enclosed donation is to be used for Norplant implants for poor women (without regard to race, of course)." That much you can do right now. The next step is to find a way to get the bonus to those women who take advantage of the contributions you make. If you are reading this, you are intelligent enough to think of ways this can be accomplished.

Poverty is extra people.

— John Franklin (no affiliation with Planned Parenthood or any similar agency or with the manufacturer or distributors of Norplant implants)

You don't have to build housing for people who don't exist.

I observed no difference in the behavior of the blacks living in the units compared with that of blacks living in West Berkeley and northern Oakland. There was often litter in the yards. Sometimes you would hear loud rap music in the early evening, and you could see hulking males in the small, low-ceilinged living rooms. But the important question was: What was the performance of the black students at the Middle School? A member of the School Board told me, in September 2004, that grades at the Middle School were about 10% higher than at schools with similar proportions (about 50%) of black students. He also told me that the students at the School are from a strip running from West Berkeley to the Hills. There is no busing of students from other districts.

The building of housing units for the poor, usually ghetto blacks, in middle class areas, was called "scattered-site housing". It had a brief vogue in parts of Berkeley and Oakland, after which it was abandoned. This was the sum of all the wealthy liberals' efforts in North Berkeley or the Hills, as far as I know. On the other hand, I could well imagine the mountains of guilt that were lifted by that little experiment in social engineering. ("Surely no one can begrudge us our wealth! Surely no one can say that we don't care (unlike the Republicans)!") I could well imagine the many elegant dinners in those homes in the Hills at which a major part of the dinner conversation was how important it is to *do something*, just as the forward-thinking hosts and guests had done with their project.

Downright Corruption in City Government

After the bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2000, the high-tech professionals left the Bay Area in droves. Berkeley was soon awash in rental space. Doug J., who rented out a duplex in North Berkeley, had to lower his rates from \$1600 to around \$1200 to find a tenant. From late spring of 2003 on for the rest of the year, the only prospective tenants for my house-share did not want to pay more than \$400 a month (down from the peak rent of \$550 in 2000), nor would they pay more than \$10 a month in utilities (average actual cost was \$45). Landlords who owned commercial property in downtown Berkeley found it more and more difficult to find businesses willing to move into their stores and offices.

Thus many of us were surprised and utterly baffled to find that the City had decided to encourage local developers to build apartment buildings with commercial spaces on the first floor (so-called "mixed-use" housing). In my conversations with old-time Berkeley activists, I learned that one reason was that BCA, facing the loss of a major portion of its constituency, namely renters, had convinced the City, and especially the Mayor (a former realtor), that building new apartments under the aegis of "low-income housing" would bring the renters back. (Which, of course, made no sense to me or to many other Berkeley residents, since the market had already created more low-income housing than there were tenants to occupy it.) The developers, facing the economic facts after they had put up their buildings, then decided to save their investment by converting the apartments into condos, and selling them. Unfortunately for BCA, however, this meant increasing the proportion of voters in the class they regarded as part of the Enemy, namely, the property-owning class.

After a little further reflection, I realized what was going on with the City's construction proj-

ects, and wrote an email to Mayor Bates to tell him that the cat was out of the bag. The fact that he never replied suggests to me that he knew I was on to the truth.

Subject: Because I have no respect for you...

Date: 12/15/04

To: Mayor@ci.berkeley.ca.us

... I must assume the worst about all the new building that is going on in South Berkeley. My neighbors say, “the Mayor loves developers”, “the Mayor is in the developers’ pockets” (this is certainly confirmed by the amount of money you receive from them as “campaign contributions”, according to the public record), “the Mayor was once a realtor”, etc.

The obvious question that we citizens ask is this: in a time when Berkeley is awash in rental space, as any landlord will tell you, and at a time when there are numerous vacancies among commercial properties in South Berkeley (take a walk down Shattuck and check for yourself), why in God’s name is the city building more and more mixed-use housing (supposedly low-income apartments with retail space on the ground floor)?

The obvious answer, given your reputation, is that the deal works like this: the city makes sure (with taxpayer money) that the developers will make a healthy profit on whatever they build, regardless of whether the apartments and commercial space can be rented; you pocket the kickbacks (sorry: “campaign contributions”). You win, the developers win, the taxpayers lose. Same old story.

— John Franklin

I learned in early 2007 that the City’s scheme was not quite as I had it in my letter, but if anything even more devious. It went like this: there was lots of federal and state money available for low-income housing. Furthermore, to encourage the construction of this housing, federal and state agencies guaranteed to protect the developers against losses: the developers would make a profit regardless of how many units in their buildings were actually rented out, and regardless of the rents. In effect, the developers were offered a can’t-lose proposition. The Planning Commission, meantime, charged hefty fees for the various permits that were required of builders, and so it was in their interest to approve just about any construction. (The Commission’s income increased by more than \$2 million in the years 2005-2006 alone.) Berkeley was thus an El Dorado for developers, and we can only speculate just how much money found its way into the pockets of the politicians, including the Mayor, who made it possible.

All this I learned from a lawyer whose intelligence and knowledge of the byzantine laws that governed (or were supposed to govern) the City enabled him and a few hard-working activists to stop a number of the City’s projects. His successes reminded me of the fact that Lenin and perhaps 40 dedicated followers were able to overthrow the Russian government in 1917. I became convinced that working year-in, year-out with not-very-bright activist plodders was a waste of time compared to what could be accomplished by joining forces with the smart few. (I reached a similar conclusion about the futility of trying to sell technical writers on my new method for doing documentation — one that guaranteed that users would most of the time be able to find the instructions they wanted in only a few seconds. Since the method relied on a few elementary pro-

gramming concepts, and since the writers regarded their trade as the last holdout of the humanities in an alien world, it was a waste of time talking to them.)

The Developers Try to Gut the Landmarks Preservation Ordinance

Starting around 2005, the developers, who were running out of downtown space to build on, turned their eyes to the residential districts, from which they had been effectively excluded by the Neighborhood Preservation Ordinance (NPO), passed by the voters in 1973. This ordinance was almost entirely the work of Martha Nicoloff, who, like many other residents at the time, was shocked at the way the developers were tearing down beautiful old Berkeley family homes and replacing them with featureless apartment boxes. Further protecting the residential districts was the Landmark Preservation Ordinance (LPO), enacted in 1974 by the City Council, to identify and preserve historic buildings.

Around 2005, the developers' lackey in City Hall, namely, Mayor Tom Bates, began proposing a revision to the LPO that would, in effect, make it more difficult to keep old houses out of the hands of the developers.

A group that was ultimately called the Berkeley Neighborhood Preservation Organization (BNPO) attempted to stop this latest depredation of the city, and eventually managed to force the proposed LPO changes to be put up to the voters. BNPO members knew what had happened in Palo Alto, when the practice of "scraping" began in the nineties, namely, the bulldozing of old homes and the replacing of them with outrageous, property-line-to-property-line speculative monstrosities that had absolutely no architectural relationship with the surrounding neighborhood. They were houses to be sold, not lived in.

BNPO Members first wrote an Ordinance, called Measure J, that essentially put the existing Landmarks Ordinance before the voters. Due to a mendacious campaign funded by the Chamber of Commerce, Measure J failed. But the Members managed to get the required number of signatures for a referendum (despite probably-illegal delaying tactics by the City Council), and in 2008 the voters passed that referendum, which was called Measure LL, and so the attempt by the mayor and his cronies to gut the LPO was temporarily defeated.

My Contempt for the Lower Class

By the end of the nineties, I had lost all respect for the people I was forced to live among, namely, the residents of South Berkeley. (One of the Fates had dropped a stitch while her attention was diverted by a passing god and that deprived me of the wealth I was meant to live in.) Sociologists would classify these, apart from the UC students, as lower-middle and lower class. I despised their stupidity — their unwillingness to join any continued, organized effort to fight crime and to stop the inroads of the City government, despite the ongoing example they had in the Le Conte Neighborhood Assn. of how to go about this and what could be accomplished.

I despised their indifference to doing anything that would enhance the beauty of their neighborhoods even though this would have, at the least, added to the property values of their homes. A few hours a month on each householder's part could have done wonders to beautify that ugly part of the city: more trees could have been planted along sidewalks — in the nineties, at least, the City was even willing to supply the trees, and provide instructions for planting them — ; flowers could have been planted (and then tended) in the bollards that formed traffic barriers at the end of some streets; the long grass which in some yards had not been cut in months, perhaps over a year, could have been cut and trimmed; trees and flowers could have been planted in barren yards.

Most of all, I despised the lower class's need for noise. Around 2005 it dawned on me that noise was in fact one of the principal ways that members of this class proclaimed their existence. "We may be on the bottom of the social ladder but by God you will not ignore us!" The loud laughter — especially the loud shrieking female laughter — through the open windows of the Apartment from Hell, not to mention the thumping rhythms of mindless music and the sound of kids crying that emanated from these windows; the booming of rap from the cars of the blacks (yet if a white person were to play classical music at equal volume in the ghetto, it would be called "provocative"); the cheering crowds at sports events; the loud, self-important talking on cell phones in coffee shops; the racket of the motorbikes and scooters that the black kids deliberately rode through quiet neighborhoods; the sound of power saws sometimes seven days a week (the barbaric yawp of the lower class homeownership male), even though after years of this ostensible home improvement, the houses were as shabby as before — all of it proclaimed the crudity and ignorance and lack of intelligence (forget about taste) of this wretched class.

The reader will therefore not find it surprising that for most of my adult life, whenever I was forced to use a toilet in a restaurant or other public place that was patronized by the members of this class, I always first covered the seat with paper — either the sheets supplied, with a hole in the center (to this day I don't know which end of the sheet is supposed to go in front, which in back), or else with strips of toilet paper — so great was my revulsion at the idea of planting my bottom where lower class bottoms had been planted.

I had never felt at home in America, had always regarded it as an ill-fitting shirt that I had been forced to wear all my life, had never had much love for Americans, but years among the lower class in South Berkeley made me realize how much I hated the American masses. One of many incidents will express the essence of the matter: in fall of 2005, I was waiting to make a left turn from Shattuck Ave. onto Ashby Ave., in South Berkeley. I was being cautious as usual, and as a result didn't try to make the turn until there were no cars coming down the left-hand lane for at least half a block. A guy in a white oversize pickup truck behind me began honking his horn. I ignored him, made the turn when I felt it was safe. As he roared past me, he rolled down his window and shouted, "You're blocking traffic, asshole!"

Let the reader not doubt for a moment that if I hadn't had my life's work to finish, and if I had had a gun in the car, I would have followed him, forced him over to the side, told him to roll down his window, and fired a bullet — several bullets — into his brain with far less anxiety than I experience when I turn on my computer in the morning.