

CHAPTER 1

I am, in real life, a well-regarded full-time guitar maker, writer, and part-time artist. Guitar making is an unusual occupation and, regardless of how big a fish one might be in this line of work, it is a comparatively small pond by everyday standards. So, why and how did I get into this? Well, I can think of three best answers. **The first** was the fact of having survived World War II and its traumas, together with having grown up being very neglected and ignored by the people whom life put me in the hands of. Both of my caretakers had serious cases of P.T.S.D. and they were unable to function in a way that would have amounted to having a “normal” family life; they were licking their own wounds 24/7. They were, underneath their outer appearances (which were “normal”), massively damaged people. It didn’t help, either, that even though the war had officially ended when I was about a year-and-a-half old, my parents and I continued for several years to live among people who would have been happy to see us dead. Between the P.T.S.D. dysfunctions and the after-war life of hiding from the world, my parents did not have the mental or physical wherewithal with which to deal with a child. Or each other, really.

The Best Second Answer – which of course is the result of the First Answer -- arose out of how bleak a family life we had. We were immigrants. We were poor. We had no family or community here to rely on for support. My parents spent 100% of their time just surviving. They never played with me. I cannot remember a single occasion, ever, where we sat together as a family, chatting and laughing about things. Laughter was virtually unknown in our household. I never ever saw my parents kiss or hug one another, or either of them even putting a hand on the other’s shoulder. Or mine. I was fed and given clean clothes, and told what to do and what not to do, and pretty much denied the right to speak to them, or ask questions of them, unless I’d been spoken to first. This was as true when I was a kid, an adolescent, a teenager, and a college student, as it was when I was an infant and a toddler.

SO?

So, my home life was a vacuum. I had few stimulations or entertainments that I didn’t find by myself. I learned how to do that from lack of another option and I became an inward, bookish kid. I was quite smart, but nerdy. I read, whittled things in wood, sculpted with modeling clay, molded things out of plaster, glued wooden and plastic kits to be cars and airplanes and people, collected things, built models of all kinds, painted and drew, etc. When I was eleven I made a cigar-box guitar; it collapsed at first stringing, but I’d done everything else on it correctly. Then, I read more. I did these things throughout all my early years. It is not hard to see that this might form a basis for later life activity. In fact, I think I am still sculpting and assembling models and kits, only with strings attached. I might mention that my work in these hobbies was made easier by there having been so many hobby shops around. They’re rare today . . . and youngsters don’t learn to use their hands for anything. That’s bad, because non-use of one’s hands retards one’s mental development.

I made my first real guitar when I was in my mid-twenties; it began as a hobby project. It took me back to my younger artsy-craftsy years, which I'd abandoned as I grew older and spent more and more time in school. But my choice of occupation has been shaped by more than just my being a nerd and loving to putter. One of those factors was that, until I was in my mid-forties, I'd been temperamentally unable to tolerate much contact with people. They were too scary and dangerous, for me, to be around. I'd learned from my parents that people were dangerous. And, really, they themselves were dangerous. And toxic. But no one ever knew this of me (and my teachers weren't sophisticated enough to pick up psychological/body-language clues), and even I wasn't consciously aware of it myself until I was halfway through life. Outside of feeling myself to be empty and absent, I've always managed to look and act normal. And smart.

My parents, like my school teachers, never noticed my being withdrawn and unspontaneous. Had anyone asked them what I was like they would have reported that I was a superior, happy, studious, talented, and entirely satisfactory child; they had no idea of who I was. But the result of all that was that I grew up without much ability to mix with other people except for comparatively brief periods of time. Being with and near people has, for most of my life, tired me out; I've been too unsure of myself and too defensive. And, weirdly, if you'd asked *me* what I was like I would not have known what to tell you other than what my parents and teachers always told me I was. I had no actual, personal, idea of who or what I was . . . outside of feeling invisible, or if not invisible then something that was just barely seen. Not that most young people have an idea of who or what they are . . . but they are usually allowed spontaneity, which helps them to learn things. I was not allowed that. And outside of that, I can agree with the idea that an awful lot of people – I know this is true of males – don't know who they are, and aren't aware of not knowing that, or have some idea but are too embarrassed to talk about it. Me: I didn't have permission to be anything other than obedient. And I grew up feeling that I had no right to think good thoughts about myself; my parents had exclusive rights to assign me value.

I liked stumbling into the hobby-project of making the "real" guitar that I mentioned. It seemed an answer to my conundrum of not being able to tolerate being around people, in that it gave me something I could do, and also couldn't get anywhere else: a safe haven that I could be alone in and be in control of. It was my turf, and I wasn't accountable to someone else who had their own schedules, desires or priorities. This was, for me, an essential need that I had no words for. . . that no one whom I knew or who knew me had any idea about.

Yes, I lacked self-awareness. At the same time, in practical terms, I had no idea of how to run a business, organize my work in such a way that I could pay my rent and my other bills, the necessity of keeping regular hours, or prioritizing projects, and work deadlines. Up until that point I'd not been exposed to the realities of having responsibility or deadlines – other than academic ones. So I had to learn. I'd only ever learned to pay attention to what my parents (and, later, every teacher I ever had) wanted of me. I was pretty pathetic – not in the derogatory sense of how that word is used these days, but rather in the original, neutrally descriptive and factual sense of the word: lack of content.

My Third Best Answer relates to my making of guitars. One main reason I've become the guitar maker that I am is that I have an analytical and creative mind. I don't think anything like that is necessary in the worlds of business, sports, teaching, politics, manufacturing, engineering, etc.; those activities are defined by rules and principles and habits and policies. But, to my mind, they're not all that creative. Or not usually creative. I think slowly . . . and consider options and alternatives and what-ifs. I speak comparatively slowly and haltingly, as I choose the right word. I can't do rapid back-and-forth. It takes me a long time to write an email.

It may well be that my analytical mind had its origins in my needing to be careful in anticipating the next one of my father's rages . . . and avoiding them if possible . . . as well as my need to understand what the people whom life had placed me in the hands of were all about. I've needed to know what things are and where they came from since I was very young. Like everyone, of course, I learned from making mistakes . . . and if I'd missed something, I noticed it the next time. Noticing things is helpful in the preparation and strengthening of one's mind.

The Children of Holocaust Survivors group that I mentioned earlier was "supposed" to focus on the connection between Holocaust and Career, in people's lives. That, plus the fact that we were young and hadn't really ever thought about life meant that we didn't spend much time on each other's personal histories – outside of the slowly revealed truth that our families had had histories of dysfunction, depression, and suicide. We just didn't spend much time on these aspects of life. I wonder, though, what would have been revealed had that deeper topic ever been discussed.

Three of us stayed together after the group disbanded. We remained friends and got together weekly to talk about things we'd touched on in the group, but at greater depth. We visited each other's houses for these chats. I always had a notebook with me, to make notes and jot things down. Once, after I arrived back home after one of these get-togethers, I discovered that I'd inadvertently come back with not my notebook, but the notebook of the daughter of the friend I'd just visited. The notebooks looked the same. I discovered my error when I opened up what I thought was "my" notebook and was shocked into silence at what I saw in it: drawings of figures and scenes that were full of sadistic, evil, violence, and satanic chaos. I really was shocked. I'd gotten a peek into this young woman's inner life . . . that I don't think her dad had the least idea about. I don't know how many of that group's members had children of their own; but they *were* someone's children themselves. So I wonder what these other group members' families private lives were really like.

FOUR THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ME

There are four other things about me that you should know. **The first** has to do with the fact that researchers keep on finding that an awful lot of the most disturbed and violent members of our prison populations -- the incorrigible killers and the sociopaths who are incapable of feeling anything -- have had the most appallingly violent, abused, and neglected lives at their beginnings. If you're wondering how someone with a history like mine who grew up with the deficits I've lived through has come to be the intelligent, honorable, respectable and contributive person that I am today -- instead of the suicidal/murderously unstable alcoholic druggie that I could have been, I can offer that

I've had quite a bit of counseling and therapy to help me put the various parts and pieces together in comparatively helpful and mature ways (**fig. 1**). I recommend it to anyone who is troubled enough to want some help in figuring out some of the difficulties of fitting into life.

Fig. 1 Therapy in knitting terms.

Also, aside from a lot of therapy (i.e., friendly, attentive, and supportive help), I got an education. I went to school. Those incorrigible others didn't. And I don't mean an education such as being able to read, or knowing who invented the telephone, or where Argentina is on a map. I mean the experience of having been *socialized* -- in the sense that one learns what kinds of things it's o.k. to do and what things one must not do, in both society and in life. You know, things like "*you don't go around killing people*". That's really a lot of what "schooling" does; it integrates raw living beings into modern society, at least functionally . . . despite whatever emotional conflicts rage beneath their learned social behaviors. I have my own behind-the-learned-social-behaviors things. Some of them are chaotic . . . but I don't act them out.

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The second thing is that I carry, in myself, a strong sense of . . . emptiness. Of vast and timeless nothingness. I have no better words for it. But it has to have come out of my early life experiences. The closest I've come to reading any description of anything so infinite is from having read Cosmos, by Carl Sagan. He describes the unthinkable and incalculable vastnesses between the stars and galaxies quite ably. At least, he's done so for me.

A down-to-earth example of what I just said is that our own sun's *nearest* star-neighbor (in our galaxy) is almost eight-and-a-half million times the distance between the Earth and our sun! And that's just the nearest out of some 800 billion stars; it's an infinitesimal fraction of the distance across our own galaxy -- and much less than the distance between ours and the nearest neighboring galaxy. Yes, I'd think that qualifies as being a bit vast. But my telling you this is mostly a piece of cognitive information. I don't "get" the vast emptiness because I can describe it with words; I "get" it because I *feel* it. It's a bit like "feeling" a vacuum-like silence after a lot of loud music has been playing, and it stops all of a sudden. It's hard to find words for what that is actually like.

I don't think the average person has such a category of response to, or association with, anything. I think mine puts me in a category much like how the people who have seen flying saucers and aliens are in a category different from ordinary people's. Ditto if you've been in combat; most people have never experienced that. But I think that I know *vastness* in the same way that a blind man might know the desert. I know it somatically. It's in me; I'm used to it and I accept it as being part of me. And I've felt it as being *real* -- as real to me as my memories of my own wedding are. I've been there, and I don't wish that on you. The emptiness, that is, not the wedding. Considering how the marriage went, though, it's a close second.

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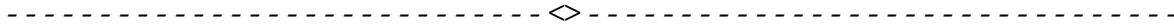
Third: I think differently from how others think. I'm not trying to be evasive or mysterious; it's just that I carry within me some not-usual principal points of self-identification and reference. For one thing you, who are reading this, probably feel that you're more or less "where you "belong". The environment you live in is as familiar to you as your breathing is. It's your place in a deep and intuitive way . . . as when you wake up you know where you are and don't have to ask "where am I?" You're *an American* (or from whatever country you were born in and live in). *You feel at Home* in a way that's difficult to explain, but that you don't usually have to try to explain to others. Whatever your life is like, you know that whatever you're going through . . . even if it's unpleasant, is *YOUR LIFE. YOUR PLACE. WHERE YOU BELONG. THE PLACE YOU KNOW.*

I've been dealt different cards. I don't really feel like I belong here – even though I look, act, and sound as though I do. But I didn't grow up here. I grew up in Hungary, Austria, England, Cuba, and Mexico before I arrived in the U.S. at the age of fifteen . . . and my personality and main points of life-reference had long before then been a done deal. The foundation for my feeling of "this is my place" isn't deep enough here, to sustain such a thing. I grew up speaking four languages. Chances are that you didn't. My family and I have lived among peoples who would have been happy to see us dead had we not blended in. Chances are that you didn't. We lived in five countries in which we were strangers, and not really wanted. Chances are that you didn't. And one's sense of one's place in the world – whatever it may be -- is not easy to communicate to others who grew up in any different way. Think of two people sitting next to each other at a bar; they start to talk; if they've both been in war, or were brought up Catholic or Jewish, or even if they're both just males, they'll understand each other better than if they didn't have something recognizable in common. But mostly, regardless of where I've been or not been, I grew up without a sense of belonging anywhere at all.

Fourth is that my upbringing has deprived me of any sense of *simplicity* in matters of life. You probably don't think of "simplicity" being a value. You probably think of it as being a *yes-no* thing, with a few *pros* and *cons* tossed in. But Yes-No is just simpler than Yes-If-And-Then-Again-Maybe-No. Yes-No isn't "wrong". But it's "right" in a way that only infants can understand. Me, I'm generally alert to *context* -- and what I mean by that is that, for me, nothing exists by itself. I believe I first noticed this because of how little care, or information about the world I got from the people that life put me in the hands of . . . and so I've had to make sense of things by myself. I've become aware that everything is part of a fabric, that nothing exists by itself, in isolation. Everything is connected to something, influenced by something, created out of something, a part of something, or a result of something. Nothing comes out of nothing or nowhere. Nothing is without a starting point. Nothing at all.

You might want to read this last paragraph again. It makes one of the more important points that I have in me to make about anything: nothing ever started all and only by itself. Even "spontaneous" things come from somewhere or something. And the roots of whatever you look at are never near to the thing being observed; you have to do some backtracking if you want to see things for what they actually are. And for me, the modern guitar – which has been my profession -- is certainly subject to that. I have an idea of the history, engineering/physics, dynamic, technical, social, woodworking, and musical

traditions that *it comes out of*, and I know those roots/ phenomena/ principles/ techniques better than most people who are in this line of work do. And that will have come straight from who I am, of course, and that will have come straight from who I was. It's always been like that.



Anyway, having told you these things about myself, here's my story. But, before I get into that, you should know why I'm writing this particular narrative . . . that is serious, that might be interesting or even fascinating to read -- but not much fun to. It is my life story, without my wanting to make it into a lecture, diatribe, whine, moral sermon, political commentary, list of advices, or any other How-To-Live-Your-Life guide. I'm not really qualified to do any of that. I began this writing as an "about the author" section of my next book . . . and it just grew and grew. And grew. It has been like a meditation that's allowed me to see my life as something coherent, instead of a bunch of pieces and experiences. Put in different words, I have not written this particular story for you; I have written it for me. My other writings are for you. But I do hope there's something in it for you that will help you in your own thinking and feeling about your own life. You don't need to have had anything like mine in order to find life to be tricky, confusing, challenging, and not all that obedient to your own will . . . but also miraculous.