

CHAPTER 10

As I've said, my parents fought all the time, loudly and sometimes very scarily. I learned at an early age to be the calm adult-surrogate whose job it was to separate and calm them down. I was sort of the family referee from an early age on. My parents were not adults on the inside; they just looked it from the outside. Me, I was a kid on the outside, who was given the job of acting like an adult on the inside. I have to say about my dad, though: regardless of what stressors, betrayals, injuries, humiliations, and trauma he'd been on the receiving end of, *he never complained or indicated that he felt sorry for himself*. He could explode viciously, but he didn't complain. Mom, on the other hand, complained and whined a lot. I am not at all certain that my father's never complaining was any function of courage or bravery. I think that except for very basic things like paying bills, I don't think the idea of personal responsibility ever entered his head. Not as we might think of it, anyway. He took on personal responsibility in the guise of rigid instructions to behave in certain ways. In other words, like the Nazis who resented being held accountable for their behaviors after the war, and who didn't think anything was their fault because they'd merely been following orders, dad had no idea that he caused any harm. He was only doing what he'd been trained and tortured to do. And if nothing you've done is your fault, then you certainly don't need to apologize for or rethink any of it.

My mother was a basket case in a different way. She might have behaved differently if she ever (1) had a friend to talk to and commiserate with. Even one. She never ever had anyone like that. She really was (2) a friendless and lonesome stranger in a strange land -- in every country we ever lived in. She (3) had household responsibilities. Period. And (4) she was always subordinate. She had no power, authority, opinion, or say-so in anything. She was (5) a person who had an unusual life history and who (6) came from a different culture, who (7) had a limited local vocabulary that was furthermore (8) spoken with a foreign accent, who was (9) married to a tyrant, and who (10) didn't know how to talk to people or (11) even had a right to do so. Her (12) loneliness must have been off the charts. Oh, and (13) she had massive P.T.S.D. too.

As for me, as I've been telling you, I was caught between those trauma-lobotomized parental factions, neither one of whose jobs included giving me comfort and safety. I simply got very little caring, and I needed to learn to get around as best I could on my own. One ridiculous-seeming but otherwise suggestive fact that's related to that is how I part my hair. Most men part their hair on the left side. Look around and you'll see that it's true. And do you know why that is? It's because their mothers will have been right-handed. I part my hair on the right side of my head. And do you know why that is? It's because I'm right-handed. I learned hair care on my own, independently of any support.

SCHOOL(S)

I've been to school(s) a lot. I have memories of having attended school in England and in Cuba. I attended six years of primary school in Mexicali, during which time I thought, calculated,

wrote, and spoke Spanish – except when I spoke with my parents; we talked to each other in Hungarian. But in the world outside of our apartment or house, everybody spoke Spanish and my sister and I were indistinguishable from any Mexican schoolkids. After I graduated from six grades of Mexican elementary school my parents transferred me to the American Junior High school in Calexico, directly on the other side of the border . . . where I functioned entirely in English. My mother, using the family car, dropped me off at school every morning and picked me up when school was over . . . every day for three years . . . for one year through Junior High and two years through High School. . . until we entered the United States in 1959. She gets points for having made those efforts.

What being driven to school and back across the border meant, though, was that I had no school-friends outside of school. They all lived in a separate city on the other side of the border! I was twelve to fifteen years old in that period; that's a time in which young boys learn all kinds of new things about themselves, and their friends, and about girls . . . and have adventures. That is, if anyone else is available to share those experiences with. I didn't have anything like that. What I had was a five-years younger sister -- which rigorous scientific studies have determined to not exactly be the best companions for boys of young age.

LIFE IN MEXICALI, MEXICO vs. LIFE IN BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

We had moved from Havana in Cuba, to Mexicali in Mexico, in 1950. Mexicali is a swelteringly hot border town, at Southern California's border with Mexico, in the middle of the Imperial Valley desert. That Imperial Valley is considered to be the United States' cotton and salad bowl. It's all desert country, and its cotton and green leafy salad products are made possible by water from the Colorado river -- supplemented by the labor of many Mexican farm laborers. Temperatures reach 120 degrees in the Summer, and it rains two or three days a year whether it needs to or not.

It shouldn't mystify anyone that being an immigrant and starting from the ground up in a foreign country is not easy. It is famously not easy for adults. And living in Mexicali and working for my uncle -- while probably being better than being in a Nazi concentration camp -- is something I only in middle age had the capacity to comprehend how utterly dismal an experience those things were for my parents. Mexicali wasn't exactly a hellhole for them, but it was close to that. Whatever the deficits of growing up in Hungary may have been, they had at least grown up in Budapest, which had been on every imaginable level considered to be the Paris of Eastern Europe, as I've already described

Mexicali is the capital of the state of Baja California, so it gets some points for that; but outside of that it was (and probably still is) a cultural backwater. The city has a Siamese twin, Calexico. These two towns are really one single large-diameter city with the American-Mexican border running through it, with little Calexico being on the American side of that fence. Much larger Mexicali itself is a poor, aging, and sweltering void of a border town that is not a tourist destination. At least, it wasn't then. There were no hotels there. There were no tourist spots or fine

dining there. It was, technically, a city . . . but it didn't look like one; it looked like a very large town. It was very large, dusty, and desert-flat, and didn't have many central-area buildings that were more than three stories high. It had, and maybe still has, limited social resources, no Symphony orchestra, no theatre or museum, not much of a Downtown, and no cultural life to speak of outside of a few movie theatres, and a bullring that doubled as both a boxing ring, and a Mexican wrestling arena where the wrestlers wear those colorful masks. If Mexicali had a library, I never knew of it. I Googled Mexicali recently; it looks a little more modern, with some higher-than-one-story building additions; but it's still mostly mile after mile of single-story buildings. That are spread out as far as the eye can see.

We lived in Mexicali for nine years. And in the nine years that I lived there I never heard anyone speak of it with civic pride, sense of it being of any importance, or just a point of destination. My parents certainly didn't think much of it. We lived in a *bona-fide* slum for the first three years of our stay there . . . while my uncle and aunt lived in a two-story house that, while not large, was quite palatial in comparison and had a great back yard. As for us, we for years never lived in any house that had a back yard. Space -- at least domestic living space -- was unknown to us. As far as the Imperial Valley's climate was concerned that entire region was desert, and it really was hot as hell there in the Summers. Air conditioners were just starting to come in, in the 1950s. We didn't have one in our house until we'd been in Mexicali for six years. But my uncle and aunt had air conditioning. Sometimes it was so hot that it was impossible to sleep at night; and sometimes, especially in my pre-teen years, and the heat was unbearable, we drove across town to my uncle's furniture store -- to which my father had a key -- and slept there. The store had air conditioning.

I liked my cousin Bob. We were about the same age and we played well together. His parents didn't bring him up with any kindness or regard either, though. I don't think his parents liked him very much. He didn't get a lot of schooling, and he unfortunately grew up to being something most people would have called a failure. But I liked him and I wouldn't have described him in those terms. As an adult, he ran a card parlor. Bob married a very troubled woman, and together they brought a daughter up in such a way that she was exceptionally dysfunctional. I remember one time, about the age of nine or ten, when I was staying over at Bob and my uncle and aunt's house, I walked into the bathroom . . . and was surprised by seeing Bob and my aunt, completely naked, and soaping each other off, in the bathtub. It was the first time I'd ever seen breasts. As far as my own mother's body was concerned I don't think I ever saw anything more of it than her head, neck, arms, and legs. Ever. Dad walked around the house dressed in underpants and a tee-shirt all the time; but not her. Hmmm. Well, I never bathed with either one of my parents, either.

As I'd said, we lived in a bona-fide slum when we moved into Mexicali. We were about as poor as one can get and still live in anything that could be called a home with electricity and running water. And yet, my parents did something that I never saw anyone else ever do: once every several months they packed up as much used clothing as they had been able to scrounge together, into big cardboard boxes, and sent the boxes to Hungary -- to relatives who had even less than we had. My parents never, of course discussed what any of that was about, with me. I just saw them do it

repeatedly. And I don't know where they got all those clothes from, nor how. They just did it and never said anything about it. Those memories are also noteworthy, in part, because they were just about the only things that I ever saw them do in which they were cooperating with each other.

LIFE IN MEXICALI ITSELF

The reason that we spent nine years in Mexicali was due to bureaucratic bungling. It takes five years to establish legal residency in Mexico. Toward the end of our fourth year there my father went to Mexico City to check about our impending legal status. He was told that no one had recorded our entry into Mexico when we moved there. So we were forced to start over again, from zero. Four years, plus five more . . . adds up to nine.

It wouldn't have been hard for dad to show that we'd already been there for four years. I don't know how that Immigration-status conversation went, but it was a real blow to us of a kind that makes me think of dad's childhood. My aunt once told my mother that she'd never known of a child being beaten as severely and as often as their parents beat my dad when he was too young to defend himself. I've also mentioned what a split personality my dad had; he was charming to others, but a tyrant in our own home, where he functioned as a dictator and a concentration camp guard: rigid, punitive, prone to rages, dictatorial, and his word was LAW and unquestionable. At the same time, he was very scared of authority figures. Having had a brutalized childhood as he had had, plus then living and being mistreated in an actively anti-Semitic country, and being under the thumb of Nazi concentration camp guards for almost a year and a half . . . fear and resentment of Authority is a certainty. So it's possible for me to believe that, when the Mexican Immigration Authorities told my dad that he needed to start from scratch, he simply tucked his tail between his legs and went away without expressing any resistance. Authority was plutonium to him. That bureaucratic "oversight" landed on us heavily, and I never heard a peep of protest about it from either dad or mom. I can imagine that dad's simply walking into the National Immigration Service's headquarters in Mexico City would have felt like walking up the steps of the Nazi High Command, too.

My dad once told me a story that made no sense to me at the time, but that stuck in my mind because it was so . . . uncharacteristic. He had been cheated by one of his buyers, and dad took him to court. On the court date dad and this dealer were lined up in that day's queue of litigants. They heard the judge make judgment after judgment in favor of claimants who were working people -- and against their employers, companies they worked for, and/or people who owed them money. This guy my dad had sued knew what was coming; and he said to dad that they'd had an unfortunate misunderstanding, and he offered to pay him the owed money, by sending him a check later that same day. My dad told me that he -- this angry and vindictive son-of-a-bitch who was my father -- turned to this guy, who had cheated and lied to him and who was about to get run over by the Law Bus (and have that forever be on the record of his legal history), and in a friendly and even conciliatory voice replied with something like: *"well, o.k., just send me the money and let's put this matter behind us"*. And when they got in front of the judge they told him that the matter/issue between them had been dropped. And they walked out of the courthouse. The story of this court

episode, as told to me, completely baffled me. Dad had backed off in two seconds. Had we in his family done something objectionable to him, he would have unhesitatingly and unapologetically crushed us without a second thought. This attitude of fear of authority-or-potential-authority suggests to me that he couldn't have enjoyed working for my uncle for eight years. He was much happier as a traveling salesman who "worked" somewhat independently (for several furniture makers). And safer, too.

My mother also once told me a story about dad's work at my uncle's store. Dad had been ignored and passed over a bunch of times, but not as obviously as when one of my uncle's cousins escaped from Hungary during the 1956 uprisings, and came to California. He was told (by my uncle) to live on the American side of the border, and even though he spoke no Spanish was given a management job in the furniture store – such as my father had been denied for six years and would continue to be denied – right off the bat. That was a humiliation and dad had no defense against it. But if nothing else, that incident showed the advantage of having some family; it's just that we never had any other than my not-at-all helpful aunt and uncle. My parents once visited my aunt at her house, and they happened to show up when there were several friends of my aunt visiting. The guests were confused by the fact that their hostess' brother and sister-in-law had shown up, because she had just told her guests that they'd both been killed in the war. She so much wanted to distance herself from my parents that she couldn't even acknowledge their being alive.

Mexicali itself was, as I've said, poor. And it had some extensive slum neighborhoods that are easy for me to believe are still there, and that will have gotten bigger. I'm sure that Budapest had its bad neighborhoods, but I don't associate the word "slums" – as we think of them in this country -- with any European city. Mexicali's slum areas were in land that was lower in elevation than the rest of the city (it was a lowland and I think a dry riverbed), and the few times that it rained every year those slums got flooded out and became uninhabitable seas of mud. Parts of them were often washed away. Most of the "homes" and lean-tos were made out of cardboard, wood, corrugated sheet metal, and old plywood, and built directly on the ground without masonry, paving, or normal wood house-framing or foundation. When they got flooded the city's schools would close and flood victims would live in them until the water subsided. My school was completely filled with flood victims each rainy season. I think the government provided some money for food. I don't know what the displaced people did for clothing or anything else. It never occurred to anyone – certainly not to anyone in the government -- to create shelters for victims of disasters. My family was never rich, and was often very poor. But we never lived in a cardboard and plywood lean-to.

INTO THE U.S., FINALLY

We left Mexicali in 1959 and immigrated to San Diego – where I completed my last two years of High School studies. After that I went to U.C.L.A. I didn't know what I wanted or what I was doing there, but I was being swept along by my parents' pressures to get educated, make something of myself and ultimately become a medical doctor. So, I was on the pre-Med track and taking all the pre-Med courses. U.C.L.A. is only a two-hour drive from San Diego, though, and dad came to visit

me at U.C.L.A. every now and then. I very much did not enjoy those visits. So after two years at U.C.L.A. I transferred to U.C. Berkeley, which lessened my contact with family. I remember I even stayed in Berkeley during Christmas break and other school breaks, rather than to join my family for a few days.

I've mentioned that the home dynamics I lived with had included the systemic annoyance that (1) everything my sister did was unsatisfactory and that (2) everything I did was praiseworthy . . . even though that was just the Party Line; appropriate behaviors did not come along with that description. I just got praised to everyone else. My dad, in his work, bragged about me to all of his business contacts. And they were surprised every now and then when they learned that I had a sister. She had never been mentioned! But me, I was the Golden Boy who could do no wrong, and therefore unattackable. Or at least almost unattackable. In any event, it had been tacitly agreed on that as long as I behaved (which I always did; I never contradicted or rebelled) I was on the do-not-touch list. I had internalized this Principal Rule and I believed that I was safe from ever being seriously attacked.

COLLEGE AND KA-BOOM

In the Summer of 1964 – two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis – when I was 20, things blew up and the bottom fell out of my life. About halfway through that Summer I said something annoyingly disrespectful to dad about how messy the house was with all the ash trays all over the place – for the first time ever. And I tossed in that he should take some trouble to clean up after himself. I'd never said anything critical to him, and certainly not in a teenager's annoyed tone of annoyance. But I did it then. Big mistake, that. Without warning dad exploded and threatened to kill me. To shoot me in the head.

I hadn't been prepared for such an outburst. But his death threat sounded genuine; I believed it. He had a gun. The threat itself was insanely disproportionate to the situation but, well, dad was literally insane at that moment; I just didn't know that then. But neither did he. He would have occasional dissociative episodes where he'd commit some violence, and afterwards not remember it. Had he killed me he might have been found not guilty by reason of insanity. He was quite literally someone else at times like that; he had at least two personalities. Well . . . you know that diamonds are among the hardest substances known, but if they get whacked along one of their lines of cleavage they break surprisingly easily. Sometimes a firm tap with a little hammer will do it. And that death threat hit me solidly on my line of cleavage. It broke the Agreement that if I behaved and did well in school (and whatever else they wanted of me) dad would *never* attack me. At least, not like he did to the others. But, suddenly, the main support beam that had held my tent up collapsed. I was unprotected and vulnerable. My entire life had been a lie. Dad broke me.

My dad and I never spoke of this incident again, and I'm pretty sure that he'd forgotten about it by the following morning. But I didn't. Something in me had broken in a way that couldn't be fixed, and I had nothing that I could fight back with. I had a *bona fide* nervous breakdown within a few days of that. I just slowed down and ground to a halt. Typically, I don't think either of my

parents noticed any change in my behaviors. Well, I had no friends I could confide in, and I'd never had permission to say "no" in any way. And I couldn't reconcile the threat and the relatively minor annoyance that caused it; cigarettes and ashtrays were not death-threat worthy. I arrived at a dead-end, and I stopped functioning in any normal way for months.

I went back to school at the end of the Summer. I mean, I could still speak English, drive, and even flush the toilet. But I couldn't think or focus. I was undone. I retreated to deep inside of myself and almost failed in half of my classes. You might be thinking that I'm exaggerating the matter of this one incident, but I'm not. If you're wondering how anyone could possibly have been so affected by ONE altercation, I'll tell you again: the *only reliable rule* of my home life had been irreparably violated. And *I* felt violated. My dad had shouted all kinds of over-the-top rageful invectives onto my mother and my sister . . . *but he'd never threatened their lives*. And for him to threaten *my* life . . . was . . . uh . . . for a minor mouthing off? . . . well . . . what rickety sense of myself I'd had up until that point disappeared. I really didn't know who I was . . . other than that I felt like a collapsed empty eggshell.

I saw an interesting psychological training film a few years after these events, in which a hypnotist hypnotized a subject. The hypnotist could make the fellow do all kinds of silly things while he was under the hypnotic spell, of course. But at one point the hypnotist instructed the subject to function as though there were no future. Or past. They didn't exist. The fellow was then 100% *in the moment*. And when the hypnotist suggested that he do this or that, the subject didn't move. He sat, sort of limp and immobile. He was paralyzed, without any ability to act. *He had nothing he could move into* – like the next few seconds of future. The hypnotist could not get this fellow to do anything except sit like a collapsed and empty sack. It was an awesome experience for me to have seen that training film, and I would never have imagined anything like that could happen. But that was just a fully paralyzing version of what happened to me when my circus tent collapsed.

IN A NUTSHELL

It would have helped if I'd ever had any longstanding friendships. But I didn't. I didn't know how to; and I'd not had opportunities to have them. And having long-term friends is one way of "knowing" that there's a past . . . and a future. With the exception of my six-year stint of my school experience in Mexicali I'd never been in *any* environment for more than two years. I may have had a friend, and then we'd soon be gone. My father's contempt for Mexicans didn't help either; and it certainly colored everything. So, I didn't have Mexican friends. Not really. The *only* connecting element that I woke with and to every day had never been anything other than my dysfunctional family with its tyrannical and unstable head. We were a hermetically sealed household and we all stayed away from pretty much everyone. My parents didn't make friends either. But then again, our level of distrust and self-protectiveness was always on high alert and on a level that I doubt that I can communicate adequately.

The only non-family members to ever have dinner at our table were (1) other European expatriate who had gone through the war, and (2) *a single one* of my father's (American) business

associates – and his wife. In all the years we lived in Mexico we NEVER EVER had a single Mexican person (i.e., an “outsider”) over for dinner. For that matter, I don’t remember ever seeing a Cuban in our apartment in the entire time we lived in Cuba, nor Brits in England nor Austrians in Austria. And I don’t remember our family *ever* having been visited by any American, let alone an American and his wife (except for the exception I mentioned above). If anything, as I’d said, we had other refugees and immigrants over. But even that was infrequently.

The conditions I just described went along with the fact that my dad was quite contemptuous of Americans and American culture -- as well as he was of Mexicans and Mexican culture . . . and undoubtedly Cubans and Austrians and their cultures. He regarded all those populations as being ignorant peasants. Well, my father had been educated in the Paris of Eastern Europe. He really had been, and he was quite well-educated -- from European table manners to languages and facts about the world. He was certainly better-educated than any of the Mexican people or American people that he/we knew. Or knew of. Altogether, it served to counteract my father’s DEEP sense of lack of security, unworthiness, and vulnerability. He had a need to feel strong, powerful, above people, and in charge. Of us. I’m sure that this need for power and authority was helped by my father’s post-graduate-school-level training in how unsafe and treacherous the world and its people were. And he was understandably able to present quite well to anyone he did not have power over. This was a hierarchical mindset, and not a personal one. One cannot have a personal relationship if there’s any significant power imbalance. And it helps me to understand how and why my dad tolerated the years of not-very-nice treatment by his boss, my uncle.

Well, as I’ve said, my dad had two modes of functioning: being obedient to someone who had authority (or some version of that), and being the authority and boss to anyone he had power over. He had no interest in trusting or befriending people, and this barrier was not a help to us in acquiring genuine friendships (in which relationships there is no power imbalance) anywhere. Dad got around that by impressing everyone, and those who knew him knew how he was smarter and more impressive – and authoritative – than anyone else. He could play the host, and maybe even the gracious host, with such people. As to my mother . . . she never expressed an opinion about anything not connected to our molecularly bonded-together family. She never mentioned England, or Cuba, or Austria, or any current events. She lacked any points of mental reference that didn’t touch the war years in Budapest, or that had *anything* to do with life outside the four walls of our house. No, I’m not exaggerating. It was exactly that. Yuck.

Dad did have a few other things in his repertoire. He had road rage. Once someone in another car cut him off, and dad chased him down and pulled up in front of him and stopped him, and got out of his car and started to beat the other driver with a rubber hose. Another time he was standing in a line and some young guy was smoking and irritating dad. Dad asked him to not let the smoke drift in his direction. The young punk said something dismissive and insulting to dad, and dad walloped the guy but good.

SONS VS. FATHERS

Conflicts between fathers and sons are as common as the rising and setting of the sun. Sons need to separate from their fathers, emotionally and psychologically, and maturationally, if they want “to be who they themselves are”. That includes young boys’ measuring themselves against whatever their fathers are . . . with the aim of outdoing their fathers in some way – and wanting their fathers to be proud of them. That challenge fails in many relationships, but it’s still a main goal for the young. I could never measure up to my dad as far as getting out of bed every morning and facing the world goes. I don’t have whatever it takes to do that.

THE DEATH THREAT, REVISITED

About my dad’s death threat: you may think that what I’ve been telling you is strange. How could ONE confrontation lead to such a breakdown? But it did. My family life in my home was the recreation of my dad’s experiences in the concentration camps. He had never spoken of his own concentration camp experiences, but *he’d been acting them out all along*. I don’t think he knew it. He was a concentration-camp guard and we were his captives, to do whatever he wanted with. And he’d made an important tacit deal with me . . . that he broke. As I said above, my dad understood ONLY if he was under someone’s authority or that he had authority over someone else. From what I know, my father NEVER KNEW ANYONE who had any power over him and who treated him decently.

Some years before all this happened my dad and I had gone to a dog breeder who lived about an hour’s drive away from us. We got a dog – a very pretty full-sized boxer named Judy. We put her in the car and took her home. Well, Judy ran away as soon as she could get out through our fence. It really shouldn’t have surprised any of us: she had been taken away from the only place she knew and had been taken to a new place that she didn’t know at all that was full of different people, different noises, different smells, different everything. In one afternoon she lost everything she had ever been used to. As the Nazis had made my dad feel. As I’d felt when my dad threatened to kill me. We were people who Judy didn’t know at all. And she was in a place she didn’t recognize. So she was understandably spooked and was trying to find her way home.

My dad and I got in to the car and drove all around the neighborhood, looking for Judy. We eventually spotted her. Dad stopped the car and approached Judy, and when he got to her he started beating her mercilessly with a belt . . . until I ran up to him and got him to stop beating her. My dad had been driven to fury at the fact that Judy had run away, and in so doing *disobeying his desire that she stay put*. He was *enraged* at her. And he attacked her furiously. Brutally. Mindlessly. He had lost control to a point I’d only ever seen once before. I tell you this to give you a sense of my role in the family at that time: dad listened to me, at a time when he didn’t have it in him to listen to anyone else, even himself. I could calm him down. I could do that because he let me. And I calmed him down that time, before he damaged Judy badly, in circumstances in which he was unable to calm himself.

. My dad had become insane because Judy had done something – without his approval – that he didn’t understand and couldn’t tolerate. Judy was scared and seeking anything that was familiar to her -- as you or I would in similar circumstances. And I think that later, on the occasion of my

having annoyed/enraged my father to the point that he threatened to kill me, I had become Judy. Poor Judy. Poor me. Poor mom. Poor sister Vivian. We were my dad's slaves – despite that it was all done without any authorizing paperwork.

TWO RESOLUTIONS

My first guitar was made as a hobby project in 1972. I had no idea that it might grow into something but I kept at it, and was within five years invited to be an exhibitor at the prestigious Carmel Classic Guitar Festival (that I've written about elsewhere). I'd gone to proudly show off my guitars at this first important show of its kind I'd ever been invited to, thinking that I'd wow people. But I was horrified to see my guitars as they actually were: the clumsiest and most amateurish ones at the entire exhibition. And these qualities were, moreover, revealed in public. My failure at the Carmel Classic Guitar Festival was a humiliating experience and I was in shock and depressions for weeks after that. But, within a few months, I was able to understand that *I liked this work*, and that it would be much better *if I paid attention to detail*. I hadn't been aware of that during the five years I'd been making guitars. That lesson was, in a way, an unexpected gift, and I consider it to have been my actual start in lutherie.

Second: the demoralization I experienced from my father's death threat that I've been describing to you . . . also took me a long time to recover from. But I made a decision during that time . . . that I didn't become conscious of until some years had passed. And it was a major one. It was: "*o.k., dad. If you're going to shit on me like that, I'm not going to become a doctor for you. Fuck you*". So . . . if dad hadn't lost it and attacked me as he did . . . I would have gone on to medical school, and not into guitar making, and you wouldn't be reading this. I think I'd have gotten into medical school, too; my Medical College Admissions Test scores were exceptionally good, so I could have gotten into medical school and never made a guitar. Who knew???? If you're enjoying reading this, aren't you lucky that my dad threatened to blow my head off??

I'm also lucky in another way. I would have become a medical doctor pretty much because no other thought had ever entered my mind; no one had ever asked me about what I thought or wanted. So my mind was a book with the what-should-I-do-in-my-life chapter being blank. But I'm not a science-type person; I'm not all that much left-brained -- and it really helps to be left-brained if you're going to go into medicine. I would probably have become a decent doctor but I don't have any reason to think that I would have really liked or loved being one. But by the grace of a God that I don't really believe in, I stumbled into guitar making, which I *have* loved. Holy Buddha! *Just how lucky can a guy get????* Making guitars has been my life. And I think it has also shaped and saved my life. It has given me something to do that I could make sense of at a time when almost nothing else did. Even if a lot of it came together by luck and timing.

THE VIET-NAM WAR AND THE PEACE CORPS

I graduated from U.C. Berkeley in 1966. The Viet-Nam war was escalating and dividing this country. The army was drafting everybody that it could, and anybody who wasn't doing something that was deferment-worthy was being sent to fight in Viet-Nam. Well, I really did not want to be in the military to kill or be killed, so I applied for a Conscientious Objector's classification. And I got one.

I signed onto the Peace Corps right after I graduated from college; part of its attraction was that if you joined it you received a certain amount of protection from the military draft. Also, you could see part of the world that you otherwise never would have learned anything about. I'm tempted to detour into telling you a bit about the Viet-Nam war. It was massively costly. It went on for years and cost 50,000 American lives and more than 1,000,000 Asian men's, women's, and children's lives. But I'm not going to go into any of that.

I will say one thing about it, though. Passions were high, tempers were short, and I.Q.s were low. My father, who I'd usually thought to be a smart man, and someone who had gone through Hell in the last war, thought that (1) Viet-Nam had never been anything for this country to get involved with, (2) and we had no reason, really, to send troops over there and get our hands dirty. But, (3) now that the troops were over there, we (4) should get behind the war effort and deal with the enemy and wipe those irritating and resistant people out. End of story. I thought that it was really bizarre for someone who'd been on the receiving end of war to say anything so . . . stupid. Well, my dad could spout all kinds of interesting historical facts. But he really couldn't connect dots in things that had life-relevance; at least, if he had any capacity to think ahead, I was never aware of it. He just bulldozed on, without thinking of anything other than tomorrow. Literally. And it never seems to him that he might be wrong, or just had insufficient information. He never voiced uncertainty or fault. If he thought it and said it, it was absolute. Like the Eleventh Commandment. It didn't help, either, that lots of people at that time (mostly men, I think) thought and espoused the exact same political opinion: that we have no business being there, but since we *are* there let's finish the job and kill the bad guys. Really. It was not uncommon to meet people who would have been in agreement with that.

My father was the quintessential employee. He would work hard at anything the boss told him to do. But nothing else, really. At least, I never saw him do anything that looked like forward-thinking/ sorting/ choosing/ opining/ taking initiative. He always made black/no or white/yes statements, without knowing ANYTHING about context, or evaluation of the various considerations and elements of a situation. Had he not been a fleeing animal he would have made a perfectly acceptable Nazi; they also believed that what the boss said was *the way it had to be*. My father *could* make in-the-moment decisions based in gut instinct – and follow up on them in the same way. His ability to turn on a dime, without weighing options or such, got him through the war. He was lucky in that his instant decisions in the face of danger were good ones, as even one bad one would have gotten him killed. Mainly, he couldn't be a father or a partner; he *could* survive, though. And after the war, living one day at a time was one way of getting through the week, and the month, and the year.

