

CHAPTER 12

BEAUTIFUL & EXCITING ROCKFORD. NOT.

I'd thought that I could be useful in doing some alternative service; but, as it turned out, I couldn't take working at the H.D. Singer Mental Health Center for more than six months. My job was in the Alcoholism Rehabilitation wing, where the work was oriented to helping alcoholic patients to straighten out their lives. The levels of dishonesty and incompetence I saw among the staff there were too much for me. Even I, green as I was, could see that. And I also noticed that no one ever mentioned the poor quality of the services we actually offered. The Party Line was "we're all doing our jobs" and everyone pretended that things were going well. If the staff and administration had been competent and honest – or at least professional -- I might still be working there. But, overall, the S.A.D. of the coming Winter tore my guts out. My stay in Rockford was the lowest point of my life, ever. Well, other than having been in the Holocaust of World War II.

More to the point, five of the staff of my department at the H.D. Singer Mental Health Center in Rockford, and two others who were instructors/ consultants who'd been brought in from outside, were seemingly blind to how bad their level of supervising was. Two of them told me (in different ways) that it was o.k. to manipulate patients and their families – and showed us how to do it. A third one was quite unresponsive to anyone regardless of what was going on. The head of the department was the same, except that he wasn't treating people; he was a bureaucrat who had a job description and an agenda to maintain come hell or high water.

Well, I was new there and I didn't really know anyone. One of the staff once invited me to his home for a dinner; it was an evening to forget. He was a good-looking ex-baseball player . . . and his wife, quite honestly, was one of the homeliest-looking women I'd ever seen. I'm not putting her down; I'm describing her. She stayed at the far end of the dinner table and eventually retreated to the living room without having said a single word all evening, except "hello" when I walked in. She didn't speak to him at all. Needless to say, I didn't get to learn anything about her at all that evening except that she and he had NOTHING to say to each other. I recognized that kind of home environment within a minute of arriving; I'd grown up in a very similar one myself. The fellow and I talked and, later that same evening, he *confided* to me (braggingly, proudly, in an attempt to impress me) that his wife was worth \$10,000 a year to him! \$10,000 was a lot more then than it is now -- and that piece of confided information, given to someone they barely knew (i.e., me) certainly didn't help my sense of interpersonal equilibrium any. It would have been most helpful to me if the staff and administration had been competent and honest -- or at least professional – and thus helped to make the work seem worth doing. They didn't. And it wasn't.

One thing about the H.D. Singer Mental Health Center was that it was really two agencies. The basement was the office(s) of one of the State Budgets and Statistics department. It was there that data from all over the state were sent in order for the state to have any idea of what was happening in matters of Health, and other things, throughout the state. No one talked about that Office, although it was in the same building. Another thing that was weird was that if you had an Illinois driver's

license your driver's license payment was made out to Paul Powell, head of the state's Department of Driving Licenses. Powell died not long after I was in Rockford, and after he died the apartment he'd lived in was found to contain *hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash* hidden away all over the place . . . from his having cashed automobile licensing checks from all over the state, and then keeping the money. That's what happens when you make uncounted numbers of checks out to an individual person, you know. Sheesh.

And, mostly, I just didn't like Rockford. Every element of culture that I bumped into was unsatisfying to me. The work was o.k., but not really. The mismanagement of the place certainly didn't help things any. Also, I'm from California, which is reasonably sunny . . . but in Wintertime in Rockford it was pitch black outdoors at 4:30 in the afternoon, and subzero. Neither did it help that I couldn't connect with people there . . . so that I was more and more feeling that I was living in a place that felt to me like I should be living far away from it. Like the Turkish student I was just telling you about. Yeah.

It didn't help, either, that I felt a subtle but constant pressure of expectations from my parents . . . to do something serious and make something of myself . . . or if not that, then something that would make them happy and redeem their lives. I'd always felt that. I was aware of being 25 years old and quickly going nowhere. Neither did it help that my parents, having no lives of their own, came to visit me for a week in Rockford – before Winter set in -- to keep me company, check up on me, and remind me of the life I ought to have been and could have been having . . . while they bickered as always. They stayed in the exciting, glamorous, and gorgeous Faust Hotel, which was the tallest building on the outskirts of Rockford. It wasn't any of those adjectives. It had a brooding Sing-Singian look even if you factored in that there was no barbed wire around it. It's not there anymore. I checked.

All in all, I was just not in good shape and I really didn't know what I was doing. I saw racism, alcoholism, self-serving power, and human stupidity up close. The few people I managed to talk with didn't really know what they were doing either – outside of living their lives *as they thought they should be living them*, without knowing that there was or could be anything more to life. Finally – and I may well be overstating it -- from what I remember from casual talks, no one seemed to have a personal life. It was (1) work, and then (2) . . . what? I would have remembered any personal information; that kind of thing has always felt real to me.

I once made up a complete, professional-looking chart for an imaginary patient, at the H. D. Singer mental health facility – for fun. The chart listed a series of personal quirks, references to conversations with space aliens, over-the-top staff evaluations and diagnoses (all fictional, of course), clinical notes full of mis-spellings, tallies of prescribed medications (and how he bartered them with another patient in exchange for Spanish lessons), and made note of some really unusual allergies, and his earlier life history of epic alcohol and drug abuse, as well as a history of the most off-the-wall behaviors that bordered on the unbelievable. I didn't tell anyone I did this; I just stuck the chart in with all the others. The mental health facility that I was working at had two wings, and when this phony patient chart was discovered no one knew who the patient was; everyone assumed it was someone in the other wing and whose chart had somehow wound up in the wrong place. This chart

was a professional-looking list of over-the-top things, all written in different handwriting and in different colored inks, and when it was discovered and seen for what it was, it was passed around as an example of the level of fun and cohesiveness and *esprit-de-corps* that the workers in our department ought to have been having. I think that was in reference to the not-all-that-high level of these that was already in operation. The place really wasn't *esprit-de-corps*-friendly, and it was joyless. I felt badly for some of the patients, because they were in really bad situations and without family support. I really couldn't help them any. The Hospital couldn't help then either.

The department once gave a workshop in a new technique of visualization. The room was full of people who worked there. The lecturer invited someone from the audience to come forward and talk about a painful memory that they carried. A woman volunteered. She told a story of when she'd been nine years old, she and her father and her brother were walking, in the middle of nowhere, headed toward Los Angeles. It was in the middle of the Great Depression. They had only the clothes they were wearing. They had no money, no possessions, no home, no mother, no future. And they were walking toward Los Angeles -- with no resources or contacts -- in the hopes of finding some way to survive. It was a long-buried memory that was very painful for this woman, and she began to cry. The insensitive idiot who was giving this workshop ignored the crying woman completely, even though the volunteer was in public, at center stage, and crying her eyes out from pain. That *f&#?µçf~q @?8!!!!* group leader turned to us and continued talking to us about the workshop and its techniques. Not a word of comfort was given to the woman who was crying. After five minutes I went up to the crying woman and put my hand on her shoulder. I felt badly for her. I'd failed to find any human culture in Rockford.

Rockford city itself was humorless too. There wasn't a lot to do there after work hours. Everything shut down by 9 p.m., after which the options were to go to a shooting range, go drinking, or watch television. I never saw any place that was open all night. A group of H.D. Singer Mental Health Center employees would go to a strip-club/bar several evenings a week and drink beer and gaze at the scantily-dressed strippers. If memory serves, one of them went by the clever name Connie Lingus. I joined some of the group a number of times, mostly out of there really not being much else to do if you weren't married. Mostly, I found a great emptiness in Rockford.

I disliked being in that city for other reasons too. Even if I'd thought that the work itself was o.k., I really hated the weather. I'm from California, which is reasonably sunny . . . but in Wintertime in Rockford it was pitch black outdoors in the mid-late afternoon, and everything is frozen solid. It didn't help that I just didn't seem to have much in common with the people I met. They all had their "I'm on a career path" perspective, and I wasn't doing that. And I couldn't find the kind of spontaneity, warmth, and candor that would, uh, lubricate my gears, if I can put it like that.

There was something else, too, that added to my sense of living in the wrong place at the wrong time, that I felt but could not have put words to then. I'd spent two interesting and engaging years in Peruvian towns and interacted with people of all kinds and of all ages, educations, and importance. Having been in school for most of my young life until then, I had always spent my days surrounded by people of my own age, educational level, culture, life experience, and maturity. My

Peace Corps experience was the first I'd had of being in the real world, surrounded by and interacting with all types of people: old, young, educated, laborer, male, female, married & with family, single, smart, dumb, lived in a house or a shack. Well, every type except overweight people; the food was all locally grown, fresh, organic and healthy, and most people lived their lives, not their agendas. Rockford didn't offer me any such variety. I didn't meet anyone who showed any interest in my having been in the Peace Corps! No one I met had ever been anywhere, except if they'd been in the army. I spent all day long with my work colleagues . . . and Rockford was also weird in that there were no people of ages between the late teens and mid twenties there. I was 24 and when I drove around Rockford I wouldn't see people of my age, such as you can see anywhere.

I asked about that and was told that students left Rockford as soon as they could . . . and returned after they've graduated from college and found work. There's no city anywhere I've ever been in where you can't see teens and people in their twenties everywhere you look. But not in Rockford. I undoubtedly came away from Rockford with only a minor sampling, but it was the only sampling I got. Someone once said that the majority of men lead lives of quiet desperation. That certainly seemed true of the people I lived among and worked with in Rockford. I had not been aware of the stench of desperation in the Peruvian far-from-the-urban-centers that I lived in. But I did get a strong whiff of it in Lima and some of the other big cities. Today I feel the desperation, and read about it, in cities everywhere.

The Winter of 1969 was coming on, and my case of S.A.D. was worsening. It's a condition that can bring people down to the point of their becoming non-functional. I was withdrawing into myself to the point of having Tunnel Vision, and I was thus even more inhibited in relating to the people around me. It didn't help that no one at work noticed this change in me. Finally, I remember that toward the end of my stay in Rockford, in the dead of Winter, I felt so depressed and unalive that I called the Rockford Mental Health Services to ask for therapeutic help. The woman who picked up the phone asked me some basic questions; and when she asked where I worked I told her that I worked at the H.D. Singer Mental Health Center. She laughed out loud. Yeah. Midwestern culture sure felt foreign to me.

Tunnel Vision is when you see things that seem like you're looking into a tunnel; the field of vision narrows so that you can't see anything outside of what's straight ahead; everything around the visual center fades out. I really experienced that. I was at that stage where even my eyes and brain were A.W.O.L. I was hitting rock bottom. I called an old and wise family friend who I knew was living in San Francisco and working as a furniture salesman for one of the big chains. I called up locations of that chain until I found him, and told him how miserable I was; and he said "*then why don't you come out here?*". I grabbed that lifeline. I quit my job in Rockford, packed my things up, and drove back to Northern California (where I'd graduated from U.C. Berkeley two and a half years before) . . . without telling anyone. I had told one of my colleagues at work that I had given notice; he asked me what I would be doing next. I told him that I didn't know. And he gave me a pitying look and said "jeeezzzz . . . ", but nothing else. It didn't occur to him to ask "*why?*" or to say "*I hope you find something nice*". Yep, Midwestern culture sure felt foreign to me.

I'd mentioned, earlier on, that making guitars seemed an answer to my problem of not being/feeling seen. I think that my subconscious pushed the idea of making guitars because if people couldn't see me they might at least see my work. The guitar making solution came to me after my experiences in Rockford, of course . . . but those earlier experiences were also of not being seen.

In leaving Rockford I was, in a way, running away from home. That is, I returned to California without telling my parents; contact with them didn't work for me and I simply disappeared from their radar. That transition was complicated for me, because I was fleeing from something while I was heading toward something; and I did that out of both desperation and initiative. But it was a desperation move that turned out to be one of the best things I ever did. I'd had it, in Rockford; I'd had more than I could handle. One of the two good associations that I have with Rockford is that with the help of my "professional" salary I was able to pay off my college loans. And leaving Rockford enabled me to begin taking deeper breaths. I remember that I was singing as I drove out of town.

P.S.: I looked up the H.D. Singer Mental Health Center in Rockford, Illinois, recently (in 2026). I discovered that that facility had been shut down in 2012 and has been abandoned since then. There was mention of discussions at that time concerning its demolition, and redevelopment, with help from the state of Illinois. I don't know what came of that. I also learned, news-wise, about four abandoned housing complexes in Rockford having burned down "within the past two weeks"; and about the increasing problem of poverty in that city. There are now homeless people standing on street corners, begging for help. The work of Rockford's various nonprofit organizations has furthermore been diminished by budget cutbacks. There are gangs operating in Rockford now, too – and I doubt that the police department's budget has been cut. And there are also warnings about brush fires – which have been increasing on the city's outskirts, and which had not been a problem before.

There was nothing at all like these things when I was there. Reading about this has made me sad; Rockford deserved better. Fucking Capitalism has ruined it as it supports and benefits its own 1%. In fact, Rockford's own 1% has been getting richer and richer. I've heard a rumor that CBS is thinking about making a documentary on the subject of the deep nation-wide woes, difficulties, and hardships of the ruling class. They're just having trouble finding a sponsor.

WOMEN

The second good thing I experienced in Rockford was getting to know a very nice young woman, Margaret McDonough, who I was, lamentally (intentional pun), way too immature to treat as she deserved. She was smart and pretty, and she was genuine in what and who she was, and fun . . . and I didn't treat her well. And I soon managed to alienate her. I had been brought up to think *that I needed to be perfect, and to project perfection* in every way and on every level. I wasn't; but, I'm sorry to say that this was my thinking at the time. And this lovely young woman was imperfect. She had a limp. I felt ashamed and embarrassed to be seen with her because of how that would reflect on

me. My conditioning outweighed how nice she was in reality. Really. How pathetic. She had a visible flaw. Ms. McDonough was not the only person I treated so cavalierly, but she's the one I have the biggest regrets about doing it to. She deserved better. I think a lot of politicians, stars, and famous people feel and believe and act as I was acting then; they act like they're above those around them. They're really not. But . . . this young lady was worth keeping. I very much regret having treated her as I did. I liked her more than I realized at the time; but I was unable to handle my conflicting feelings. And my limitations caused that relationship to fail. Part of this was, as I've previously said, that my reality had no awareness of equality among people. People were either better or worse, or stronger or weaker, or smarter or dumber, etc. than I was – but not equal. I'm sure that there are plenty of relationships like that among humans.

I also got friendly with another woman at around that time, Winifred-last-name-forgotten; she was nice and friendly and smart, and fun. We didn't get involved. She preferred to attach herself to Afro-American con men, and she'd tell me stories of how they cheated and hoodwinked white people. She was white, and she was o.k. with all that. Jeezzzzz . . . what thrills, eh?

LIFE IS A ZERO-SUM GAME

If I had been more mature and sensitive with Ms. McDonough, our friendship would have continued . . . and grown . . . for who knows how long, and who knows in what ways.

But, if I'd behaved better, and developed a deeper relationship with her, I would very probably have stayed in the Midwest, at least for some longer period of time, and my life would have gone off in who knows what direction . . . and I wouldn't be here writing this . . . and you wouldn't be reading this. If I'd only come back to the Bay Area from Rockford later than I did then NONE of the things I did would have been of the correct/best timing for me to have wound up being who and what and where I am. If I had been more grown-up in that relationship I would never have found the work of making guitars. Which has been my life. Man. *I mean, Jeez: how . . . lucky? . . . can a guy get?* Really. I caromed off that painful and embarrassing failure, as well as my failure to bond with Rockford, at just the right time to wind up how and where I am now. It's humbling to think of how the flow of anything . . . like deciding at the last minute to go to a different restaurant where you'll meet someone special, or *buying a ticket to some event at the exact right moment* that gets you to the seat next to the person who'll be the love of your life. Everything we do is a thread somewhere in the fabric of life.

That was all in the late 1960s. Many years have passed since those events. My gut sense of the Midwest was and is that it was full of people who are of a culture so different from mine that I didn't know who they were, or what they thought they were really doing. I suspect that they themselves didn't really know either of those things. But that might just be my inadequate perception. And all of that is in the past. The training group that I'd originally been hired as part of were all of about the same age, and every other person who already worked at the H. D. Singer Mental Health Center was older. So I've been telling you stories about ghosts and memories. Everyone in this latter group is dead now.

BACK IN CALIFORNIA #1

Once I quit my job in Rockford I headed back to Northern California, where I still had some friends. I was headed toward something while at the same time also fleeing from something. But it turned out well. When I got back to Northern California I was able to contact some old friends, who allowed me to sleep on their couches. I did so for several months while I figured out which way was up. Mostly, I was NOT wanting to be in contact with anyone in my family; they represented too little love and caring and too much pressure and expectations. I'll can tell you that year or two later, when I had reconciled to some extent and was talking to my parents on telephone in conference calls, they fought and bickered with each other during those calls *while I was on the other end of the line!* Yeah. It was like old times.

OUR EXPERIENCES AS IMMIGRANTS: AN OVERVIEW

My experience of being an immigrant into the Midwest was different mostly only in degree from my parents' experiences as immigrants into Austria, England, Cuba, Mexico, and the U.S.; they got a much bigger dose of it than I did. Aside from all the specifics regarding their lives I've written about, I'd like to offer a paragraph to sum up their core experiences – their *essential* experiences -- as arrivers, which they had repeatedly, and without the opportunity to put down roots. Plus, they had to start from the bottom up each time . . . without credentials, licenses, degrees, permits, certification, or even passports. My parents were officially *Stateless*, non-citizens everywhere, while being fucked over during and by the war, and by my parents' English friend from 1938, and my uncle who was dad's insensitive boss who abused and stole from him, and the Mexican government that hadn't noticed that we'd moved there in 1950.

Most immigrants, or at least many of them, have family somewhere in the U.S.; and that family will likely have been part of some community of people of their culture. Or at least sponsors. My family had nothing like that. Most of our relatives were dead, and the few that remained were in Hungary under Russian occupation. My parents didn't have any friends. I'll repeat that: my parents didn't have any long-term friends, and very few short-term ones. They couldn't make friendships; they didn't trust people enough to be friends, not to mention that we always lived in places of 99% different culture . . . and different language, food, weather and seasons, money, men's and women's roles, holidays, and even work. My parents experience as immigrants was a long, troubled, isolated, and lonely one. They had no backup or support of any kind. My mother had saved boxes of letters, so I presume that during the times she was not around me she was reaching out to people in far away places, typing (and receiving) correspondences endlessly. My father never reached out to anyone. That's worth repeating too. He had painful memories of the past; his family and friends had been killed long ago; and he had no reason to revisit any of that. Really: unlike almost anyone else, my father didn't have anyone he'd known for years and years. Other immigrants have difficult lives too; but I think that most of them have a main transition happen only once . . . and on the whole easier than my family did. And they usually have *some* backup or support. Despite all their dysfunction

and mayhem, I have it in me to feel for my parents. They weren't evil people; they just acted like they were. They'd never been shown how to act any differently. They had no idea about any different way of being than any rising out of fear, rage, feeling rejected and abandoned, and being closed off. I think that my father, under all of his dysfunctional exoskeleton, loved me. I don't think my mother loved me so much as that she saw me as an occasional comfort object . . . I guess like I'd been for her, somehow, since 1944. Overall, one could say that in the card game of life my parents were dealt many jokers. The only three good things about any of that were that (1) we survived all of that . . . somehow, despite the odds . . . and that (2) until we came to this country we ate only fresh, unprocessed, and un-sugarloaded foods, and (3) hadn't been taking in much industrially-polluted air or water. Agri- and Corporate business hadn't taken over yet. Really: how lucky can you get? In my case, speaking of fresh, un-sugared, and unprocessed food, I was thin and healthy while in Peru; but I started gaining weight immediately after I came back to an American diet.

MY FATHER'S ESSENCE, REDUCED DOWN TO A PARAGRAPH

I've been telling you about how unsatisfactory both of my parents were. Well, they *were* unsatisfactory. I never understood my mother; she was a primeval-level narcissist who had no awareness of anyone other than herself. Not really. If I can put it like this, she never had a personality of her own that took up any space. She had feelings, but they were the feelings of a starving beast. She had otherwise been so damaged that I don't think I was ever aware of her being able to think. I believe I have come to understand my father, though.

My father was shaped by his concentration camp experiences (as well as a brutalized early life) . . . which he NEVER spoke about, so I can only guess what they must have been like . . . but a good guess would be based in the fact that he had multiple personalities, and that the lesson he learned was to always (and only) relive and act out two roles. The first was his home life, where he was a punitively sadistic concentration camp guard who demanded ABSOLUTE obedience from the rest of us, his prisoners. The second was that when out in the world he was a concentration camp inmate who had learned to charm and cater to, and not offend, and impress, his guards -- so as not to be killed. We, in the family, were his captives and he could do anything that he wanted with us. But others weren't his captives. So while *he never trusted anyone* enough to become actual friends, he did put out a very impressive act of intelligent European acculturation informed by an equally impressive show of knowledge of classical Greek and Roman cultures -- which he'd learned about in school years before. Stupid he was not, and he behaved very differently toward his colleagues, co-workers, acquaintances, and anyone with any status or power, than he did with us. I repeat: two entirely different personalities lived inside his skin, one of them rabidly angry and paranoid, and the other hiding behind a convincing façade of being smarter and more sophisticated than the lower-middle-class-working-people among whom we lived. He could be charming, interesting, manipulative, and impressive . . . but *not ever* forming real ties . . . not *ever* . . . with others who might have had *any* power to fuck him over. He'd had enough of that. And all the while, in private, he abused his ~~captives~~ family. We were under his thumb and were subject to his arrogant rages and frustrations. I was terrified of him. We were terrified of him. He had an undiagnosed Dissociative Identity Disorder. But outside of all that, he worked any job he could find in six countries over 15

years, regardless of difficulty or humiliation, and without ever deviating from that, in order to support his family. In that regard, my father was a giant. So, no: life with him was not simple.

BACK IN CALIFORNIA #2

O.K., I'd left Rockford and come back to Northern California. As far as money to live on was concerned, I thought I'd find a job fairly easily . . . but I didn't. The economy was no longer the prosperous don't-worry-you'll-always-be-able-to-find-work-to-live-on-especially-if-you-are-Caucasian that it had been since the end of World War II. The sixties were over. The best work I found, after months of looking everywhere, was an "adult paper route" that consisted of delivering of some 200 newspapers, to some 200 or so people's porches, houses, and apartments . . . every day . . . seven days a week. I did that for 14 months. It took less than three hours each day, and I made \$300 a month, which a single person who lived simply could actually survive on in those days.

While such jobs don't sound like much of a find for a college grad, they did offer me two advantages. The first was free time, and freedom from anyone telling me or suggesting to me what to do. As you can tell from my descriptions, that was an important thing for me. My time and my life were my own for the first time -- aside from my informal two years in Peru (where I was obviously not a Peruvian). Having free time in my own culture -- where I looked and talked and dressed like everybody else -- was a new experience for me. Thus, once back in Northern California I lived in a number of "communal" shared-house situations, learned to cook for others, audited classes at U.C. Berkeley, etc., and otherwise farted around. And second, in 1971, I stumbled into the hobby project of making a guitar.

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PAUSE FOR DRAMATIC MUSIC HERE: The overture to Thus Spake Zarathustra, the musical intro to the film 2001: A Space Odyssey. [NOTE: I prefer the 1:55-long YouTube video, by the Berliner Philharmoniker orchestra, directed by Gustavo Dudamel.]

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I was still too frightened of women to approach any of them, and I was very lonely, but I'd found something fun to do. I wish I'd learned about women sooner, but I liked making that first guitar. It took me a year to make it, and I didn't yet know there'd be any ramifications from it. At the same time I was delivering newspapers, part-time, and I wasn't finding anything else more solid. But then . . . friends who played guitar and who knew that I'd made one asked me to do little fixes and tweaks on their own instruments . . . *and paid me for it!* This was a new source of income! This grew bit by bit.

I went around to every music store within driving distance and offered my services as a repairman. Some stores went along with that. I'd pick up guitars to be fixed, fix them, and then return them. That helped. I also went around *to every airline counter in the three airports within driving*

distance, offering to repair any guitars that had gotten damaged in shipping. I didn't even have business cards then; I just left my name and phone number. It helped a little. I might add that all the airlines-related guitar damage I ever dealt with or even heard about was of a guitar damaged while in the care of American airlines. I tried other ways of promoting my guitars, too. I got in touch with every jigsaw puzzle company I could find and asked them if they'd consider making a jigsaw puzzle of an image of one of my guitars. That didn't produce any results but I get points for trying, I think. All in all, I grew into this. I got so busy after a while that I quit my job as a newspaper delivery guy. Given my early life training, this was the first time I'd been able to just do things that I liked to do. Wow. Years passed.

HIGH SCHOOL, COLLEGE, GRAD SCHOOL AND MY REAL EDUCATION

I have years of formal education behind me. I did learn things in these institutions . . . but these didn't represent an education; they taught me things I could be tested on. An Education, on the other hand, is whatever it takes for one to be able to think one's way out of one of life's paper bags.

[**SIDEBAR:** My most significant education came about through the teachings of economist Henry George, who was a contemporary of Karl Marx; it is important enough to me that I don't want to leave it out of this report. Henry George's writings really were eye-openers and mind-openers for me. His principal contribution to world intelligence was/is the little-known economic Law of Rent. It's a principle that you have likely never heard mentioned, as it has been soundly discredited by people who didn't want to think about it. But it is the single most significant idea/lesson/concept/area of intelligent thought I've ever come across – because it explains how a lot of the world works. It's so in part because George clearly *defined his terms* so that the reader would know what was being said; no other writer of social, political, or economic issues does that; they just use jargon. Indeed, George's book Progress and Poverty is an economic textbook that starts out by telling the reader that the word "economics" comes from the Greek "oikos" (*the home, as in 'ecology'*) + "nomos" (*numbers*) – in other words, the studies of *the numbers of the home*, or the quantitative concerns that enable the world to function. It's about how economics really work. Not least, my style of writing in general, even today so many years later, is influenced by how Henry George explained things.]

MARRIAGE, FAMILY, AND LIFE

I met the woman who was going to be my wife, in 1975. We got married in 1981. And we got divorced in 1988. I met her in an odd way. I was running a little guitar repair shop; I fixed whatever instrument anyone brought in: guitars, balalaikas, zithers, dulcimers, mandolins, harps, etc. She walked in one day (I don't know why; she had nothing to do with musical instruments), looked around, and left. And she came back a while later with her knitting . . . and sat and knitted quietly *until closing time*. (*What the . . . ?*) And she then invited me up to her place for coffee or tea. We continued visits like this for a while. I asked her what the staying-all-day-and-knitting episode had been all about and she said that she walked in and "liked what she saw". Hmmm.

And then one evening, after one of my visits to her place, as I was taking my leave she stood in front of the door and prevented me from leaving. She told me that I couldn't leave; and she wasn't going to budge. I think I would have had to punch her in the face to get out of the house. Well, she was not going to give in; she certainly seemed to be willing to fight. Legally, she'd kidnapped me; she held me against my will. She had been a Venus Flytrap all the while, and I didn't have whatever it takes to stand up to that. I would have had to physically attack her and I was not up to that. So I meekly stayed . . . as her slave, really. She owned me from then on. I was unable to say No. Well, I'd never believed I had a right to deny others what they wanted, in any event. Yes, it's pitiful; I got that from both of my parents, as I was always subordinate to them. Every one of my girlfriends, up until my relationship with my present partner Karen – wore the pants. But that's how it was.

I had unerringly managed to find and marry someone who was the embodiment of both of my parents' needinesses, angers, rigidities, instabilities, and need to control things. My wife was bossy, histrionic, and controlling and she could both scream and cry hysterically with little provocation -- like a lot of dictatorial heads of state who are paranoid about the least threat or sign of resistance or disapproval and then react with massive vindictiveness. My wife was monumentally unhappy on the inside, and needed that degree of control. She had what is clinically known as a *borderline personality disorder*. You can look that up if you want. Well . . . what other kind of signals could my radar ever have picked up, that was different from those that reminded me most of the people who had . . . uh . . . trained me in human matters? Duh. Ditto with her: her upbringing had been a horror show. She died of cancer in 2,000. While she was very difficult to get along with, I do hope she rests in peace. She deserved much better than what she grew up with. As did I.

Two good things came out of that marriage. The first stemmed from the fact that she owned the little house that we lived in (it had initially been a very modest-sized and not-so-solidly-built Summer cottage that had been put up in about 1911); so I didn't have to work hard to pay a mortgage. If I'd needed to have done that then I'd have spent all my time being efficient so as to maximize my/our income. But, as it was, this unhappy marriage gave me the financial freedom to live modestly and to futz and putz around with my guitar making so that I could learn a lot about it and get as really good at it as I've become. The other good thing that came out of our marriage is that we did create our daughter, who has been and is one of the high points of my life.

ABOUT MY ROLE IN MY FAMILY, AND MAKING GUITARS

Need I say it again? My parents didn't know who they were and they fought a lot. I say this realizing that "knowing who you are" is a modern phrase/idea of a type that didn't exist back in their day. Not as we understand and use it . . . but you need to be a bit introspective to do this. They weren't. But if they had been it's unlikely that they would have understood their lives. I'm not as damaged as they were, and I'm pretty smart, and I've had longer to think about the past than they did . . . and I am still unable to make full sense of the contradictions we all grew up with. We never spoke with each other about ANYTHING (news, gossip, chit-chat), and I don't remember either one of my parents EVER having shown any interest in/about my life, my homework, my school and craft

projects, my thinking and learning, or, really, me. They showed no interest in each other, either; at least, that I remember. My dad paid attention to my report cards; he used them to brag about me with. Mom never even ever showed any interest in those. If I were to sum it up in one sentence, it would be that our home was never a place for conversation. It was like standing in a line to buy something. Or sitting in a doctor's waiting room. Or sitting in your car waiting for the light to go green. And all between earthquake aftershocks.

Once, years ago, when I was an adolescent, I put together a photo album of images that I thought were pretty to look at. I just liked pretty things. I got the images out of magazines; pictures of flowers, desert cactuses and vistas, animals, pretty clothed and naked women posing, interesting geometric shapes, mountains and rivers, colored marbles and shiny ball bearings up close, rocks, eagles in flight, exotic furniture, glass things, colorful things, etc. None of that was for what I'd call eroticism; I was too young for that. But even then, I think, I was developing an aesthetic eye and I really did think that these things were simply beautiful to look at. I haven't found that aesthetics are a priority for most Americans, but I noticed and appreciated things that pleased the eye. And I was selective. Picky.

The main thing about this is, though, that I never showed this album to my parents. It didn't occur to me to. *They wouldn't have been interested.* I did show it to my cousin Bob when we played, but he wasn't into "beauty". Don't misunderstand: my parents actually bought me gifts and things like that; but those occasions were not all that frequent, and I was never consulted nor made to expect a surprise. And there was no real ceremony to any of it; I was handed whatever the thing was, with minimal ceremony. And as far as I can remember, that really *was* it.

One time, I remember, my fourth-grade teacher commented on how much plaque there was on my young teeth. It surprised her. Well, I hadn't really been introduced to systematic oral hygiene yet. It was one of the many things we never spoke of in our family. I remember an incident from when we lived in Cuba; I was putting toothpaste on my toothbrush and dad came into the bathroom and said that I should put less toothpaste on my brush, so that we wouldn't have to buy toothpaste too frequently. I knew the word hygiene; I'd learned it in school. But it was just a word. As I've said, I was handed the cleaned clothes that I wore, taken to school and picked up, fed, and that was it. They must have concerned themselves at least with whether or not I took showers, but I don't remember their ever communicating that concern to me. I never received advice. My mom and my sister and I had been taught that we must not ask questions. And I grew up feeling really, really, really alone. And invisible.

As far as my later guitar making was concerned I think that I was, at least in part, working under the not-fully-conscious idea that if no one was going to see me I could at least get them to see my work . . . and thus see me indirectly. I'm inclined to believe that a lot of my becoming the artistic kind of guitar maker that I am has been *my yearning to be seen*. And it has, for me, been the work of a lifetime. And one more thing: the things I just said are part of a trauma package. I really do recommend that you read [at least some of] *The Body Keeps the Score*, by Gabor Maté.

A FINAL NOTE

Aside from being the most brilliant and renown contributor to the entire field of modern lutherie, I've had a bit of trouble in my social relationships because, as I've been telling you, I'm not from around here, and I grew up learning that I was insignificant. That's really bad for a kid. I also spent my first few decades living a life of such isolation that, as far as conversational skills go, by far greatest amount of practice I've ever had is the type that comes from talking with therapists. I find it easy to talk about feelings and thoughts and motives. I'm a dud when it comes to talking about sports, the news, the weather, movies and television shows, fashion, fads, cell-phone apps, and other such things. Also, I've never quite bonded with the appeal of Capitalism. Its spirit doesn't recognize the existence of Beauty, Harmony, or Balance, in life. For that matter I have, in all my years, never heard the words *beauty, harmony, soul, or inner satisfaction* used in any news or current events program, or film, or newscast or podcast of any kind outside of maybe romantic comedy. Ever. Have you? I've only *once ever* heard *one person* in the media talk about sympathy and empathy. That was Barack Obama, in one of his speeches. Well, Capitalism *is* only about money, and *not* any of the intangibles.

Finally, I've had difficulties in my social relationships in large part because I never saw my parents make any friends; there are ways to do that that I was never exposed to. I've mentioned that my dad could be very impressive; and he *could* be very impressive. But he was unable to make real friends. Neither he nor my mother ever did such a thing. They had reason to distrust closeness.

I repeat: it's been fortunate for me that, aside from whatever luck or talent I've had, I am male and white (and reasonably smart), and not someone or something that held little value for wealthy and advantaged people, or that was of mainly exploitative interest to traditional and corporate white culture; it approaches our natural resources and advantages, as well as the lives of ordinary working people, with all the focus and care of a starving animal that smells food. And that is something that the culture doesn't really question. And almost all of us are guilty of that. My parents passed on to me, and I have, racial/political prejudices. They're not nearly as strong as they used to be; I've worked on that. The thing is, though, that there's no American, European, African, Asian, Latino, or Pacific Rim citizen past a few years of age that lacks racial prejudices. Those are all taken in with their breaths of air at home.