

CHAPTER 15

Well, I've told you some things about my parents and my sister . . . and my ex-wife. I guess she deserves a few words. My wife overpowered me from the very first; I had no defense against her attacks. She was the embodiment of the least functional characteristics of both of my parents. She was clinically disturbed (well, what other signals would my radar ever pick up, that felt familiar?). It was a difficult marriage that was soaked with dissatisfaction, inflexibility, punitiveness without forgiveness, lack of openness, clinging dependency, impatience, rage, tantrums, and controlling authoritarianism . . . exactly like those I'd grown up with. A happy union it wasn't. But I had nothing to compare such a thing to. It was just my bad luck and not-knowing-who-I-was to be caught up in such a net.

You might remember that I'd mentioned in Chapter 1 that I think of Luck and Opportunity as being like the two sides of a coin. And here is where I can tell you in a coin-like way that I was, outside of my marriage, slowly and steadily acquiring a reputation for my lutherie work – which was, along with all kinds of other craftsman-like skills, slow, attending to detail, exploratory, and experimental. I learned *a lot* from working in this way.

That wouldn't have happened if my wife hadn't been working, and owned the little house that we lived in. She was [mostly] the breadwinner in our house; she made more money than I did. And because she owned her house her contributions to our marriage included doing away with the need for me to work extra hard just to help pay off a mortgage. That gave me the time and space to putter and learn lutherie in the way that I did, instead of my having to focus on a more normally efficient and money-producing work ethic; that would have prevented me from having to work to just pay the rent every month, and in the process becoming who and what and where I am today. From one point of view that was all bad luck; from another point of view it was the opposite.

I can honestly think of my professional life as being a child of both [good and bad] Luck and [also] Opportunity. And I think it's a genuine hoot to think that if I'd been happily married in any normal way then I wouldn't be the luthier that I am today. Just what kind of luck would you call that???



I've mentioned that I have a daughter. And I've told you a bit about my present partner Karen. You might be wondering why I haven't said a word about the rest of my relatives, though. Well, I don't really have any aside from a few second cousins in Hungary and in England. My narrative has already described my heavy-ish load of isolation and insulation. We *never* had anything like a family Thanksgiving dinner. And despite all the reports of family disfunction that people talk about -- as far as their own families go -- I wish I'd had more of a family that I could either like or dislike. Our family really was that of strangers in a strange land. We were strangers even to ourselves and to one another.

I met Karen, through a singles ad, in 1990. She is a Phi Beta Kappa from an ivy-league school. I never achieved Phi Beta Kappa myself; but I can truthfully tell you that I was in the top 99% of my graduating class. (Ka-boom chuck.) When I first bragged to her that I'd been to grad school *twice*, she gave me a patient look and said she'd been to graduate school *three* times. Hah! We do come from somewhat different cultures (how not???) in subtle matters of emphasis and expectations. I remember that early on in our relationship -- you know, when you're getting to know one another and doing the dance of feeling open and vulnerable, and then backing off, and then feeling open again -- there was a moment of closeness in which I told her, as openly and candidly as I could, that *I really liked* her. She was a bit disappointed by that; she'd wanted to hear that I *loved* her. I had to explain to her that in my life I've loved some people whom I haven't liked. I'm still not sure if she got that one. On another occasion in that early period I confided to her that I'd feel really bad if I lost her, and she replied that it would certainly be careless of me.

We get along and make each other laugh. We've worked quite a bit at rubbing the sharp edges off of our respective pricklinesses, and it has paid off. We've really worked at it -- and it was useful to go get some couples' therapy. There, we learned a skill that neither of us had ever gotten even a hint about: *how to listen to each other. To just listen.* As you might imagine from my description of my family life, I'd never seen nor heard of any such behavior. Karen hadn't either. And if my extensive research into the world of popular movies and television programming is reliable, neither have you ever seen anything of that kind of behavior modeled. Not from anything that ever came out of Hollywood, Mexico, Europe, or India. So, if nothing else, it seemed that Karen and I were at first well-matched in not knowing how to listen to one another.

Karen had tried putting in some ads in prior efforts to find suitable male companionship. She met and dated a whole bunch of men . . . but without yet finding anyone permanently suitable. And, when she ran through that bunch, she put in a next ad. Putting ads in and meeting the men who respond can be a dreary business, especially if you do it repeatedly. And SO MANY ads sound the same. This was at a time when the average classified singles ad would get about thirty responses -- through which one had to comb in order to find any keepers. Karen had been around this block several times already and didn't want to go through the same stuff again. So, before she ever met me, she had decided to post an anti-ad. She worded it along the lines of " . . . *shrewish, greying woman . . . wants to meet anyone who could stand to have her . . .* "

Karen got two hundred responses to that ad!!! A lot were from people who understood where she was coming from and congratulated her on having had the guts to put an ad like that in the paper, and they wished her good luck. But an awful lot of them were answered by men who took the ad seriously, who were very deeply lonely and felt terribly about themselves, and had lost hope, and who were as desperate for companionship as the ad itself sounded. Two hundred responses! It blew Karen away. But more than that she was sobered by getting a glimpse of the enormous loneliness, misery, and isolation that many people -- men, but also women -- live with. It made her sad. It made me sad when I heard about it. It still makes me sad when I think about it. Karen's ads appeared in the 1980s. Things will have only gotten worse since.

JUST PLAIN BITTER LUCK

I've mentioned luck. I'm very ambivalent about luck despite the fact that I've had a lot of it. My ability to comprehend Luck is limited to the words like "good" and "bad", but otherwise my capacity to make sense of it is on a par with a toad's ability to sing Frank Sinatra songs in rap-music style. Moreover, luck cannot be planned on; it does whatever It (He? She? They?) wants and shows up whenever It wants. It is either insane or asleep or high on drugs or alcohol most of the time and is not likely to listen to your prayers. I survived the Holocaust. My parents survived it too – while at the same time *millions* of other people were killed. We survived in a number of Lucky ways. But luck is, aside from that, unfathomable . . .

. . . sort of like the phrase "one million". These are just words. If you opened up an average-sized book and thought of every word on every page as being one person, then *the number 1,000,000 would not be reached until you'd read more than 2,200 pages*. A book of that many pages would be hard to pick up. And if you were curious about what 85,000,000 is, you'd have to go through almost 10,000 books of some 250 pages each.

NOW . . .

My parents and I *were* lucky to have survived and made it to the United States. Now, a long time after the above events happened, I find myself in what I used to think of as my future. I seem to be one of the better-known luthiers around. I've pioneered a number of structural and design elements that didn't exist before I came along but that are now pretty freely used, and even improved on. I've learned opaque things about the guitar that are obvious once one knows about them but that most people simply have never considered; and I've taught these no-one-ever-mentions-them functions of the soundbox to others and their guitars are better than most others'. In my twenties I learned that this work fits me well, and it has been an effective means of both learning and self-expression. It never occurred to me to do this mainly to make money. That bug never bit me. I'm either brilliantly creative or a deficient moron for doing business. I always had enough, it seems. Or even if I didn't, I don't have the kind of mind that would ever do well in business. Artistic, yes. Financial, no. The difference between these is that I compete with myself, not others.

I think one *might* understand my overall lack of interest in accumulating money as coming from the fact that my parents had explosive arguments about it. And we NEVER discussed money in any way that had any connection to life, other than to complain about the cost of this or that. I was late to the idea of any connection between money and effort, or labor, or work, or doing something. Money just appeared, wordlessly; sort of like dinners appearing on a regular schedule -- but without knowing that someone made them. I was six years old when my father took me to see that classic film *Gone With the Wind*. There's a scene, sometime in the Civil War, of acres of wounded people lying around outdoors, near what I remember as a railroad station. It is clearly a scene of great suffering, and of many people having been injured. I remember asking my father why those people did that? He said, "*for money*". I've evidently never forgotten that.

One of the things that make me different from most other Americans and Europeans is that I don't really have much interest in things of large or grand scale. I've never been interested in big material objects. Big ideas, yes; small ideas also; but not big things. I'm a miniaturist at heart. I take pleasure in examining minutiae, and thinking about details, and working on things are usually considered too small (or silly) to pay much attention to. I think I'm a bit Japanese in that way (and what else would one expect from an infant who spent his earliest 1-1/2 years in a baby carriage? . . . where pretty much everything he could see was up close?) I'm inclined to believe that I was a late developer in moving around; where was there that I could crawl or walk around in, in any event?

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

As I said, I grew up being afraid of women. I was attracted to them but deathly afraid of them until I was in my forties. Well, I'm over that by now and I know that females can be just as (insert any adjective or phrase you want) as men are.

But aside from that females are, in their own right, amazing creations of nature. PEOPLE COME OUT OF THEM!!! You feed one of the human females some pasta, pizza, soup, potatoes, pickles, sushi, hamburgers, noodles, tiramisu, Mexican food, tomato soup, and broccoli . . . and then toss in a sperm . . . and eventually Oh my God!!! a new person comes out of her *that's made up from the same pasta and pizza and potatoes and hamburgers and sushi and broccoli!!!* And MILK THAT THEY DIDN'T DRINK comes out of their breasts!!! FEMALES CAN DO THAT!!! Do that with a male and throw in as many sperm as you want, it all just comes out the other end. Such things seem most miraculous and awesome to me. As for me: the best I can do is merely to behave myself and make guitars. I can't actually create anything -- even a blade of grass -- that has life. But the females of every species can reproduce more of those species. It seems sacrilegious to me that in Orthodox Judaism there is a specific prayer in which a male thanks God for not having been made into a woman.

THE 'DAY OF THE DEAD' GUITAR

I may not excel at making money, but my behind-the-scenes brain can come up with creative ideas in my work. And some of those have to do with the things I've been telling you about. I had an impulse a few years ago to scratch an itch from my, uh, darker side, as it were, that got me to make unique guitar . . . just because I felt like doing it. No one had commissioned it. It was my *Dia de los Muertos* (the Day of the Dead) guitar (**figs. 15 – 21**). It is a fully functional instrument that [looks like it] pays homage to all the images of skulls and death-heads that the Hells Angels and other motorcyclists, deadheads, and grunge guitar players like so much . . . and also imagery from my early life which takes up a good amount of space in my mind.

NOTE TO PAGE LAYOUT PERSON: THE FOLLOWING 8 IMAGES NEED TO BE INSERTED HERE, MAYBE AT A SIX-TO-EIGHT-EACH-PAGE SIZE, AND EACH ONE ACCOMPANIED BY ITS NOTATION (AS SHOWN BELOW).

Fig. 15 The Dia de los Muertos guitar.

Fig. 16 Dia de los Muertos guitar, back view. The wood has spots of decomposition, thus making it only suitable for this kind of project.

Fig. 17 Dia de los Muertos guitar, side view. The heel, normally a smooth surface, has been carved into the shape of a skull.

Fig. 18 Black mosaic soundhole rosette with *bas-relief* mosaic skull, and a hand-carved ebony bridge.

Fig. 19 Back and side woods show decomposition. What else would one use to make a Day of the Dead guitar?

Fig. 20 The heel (at the end of the neck) is represented by a carved skull, which is of one piece with the neck itself.

Fig. 21 The teeth are real human teeth.

‘The Day of the Dead’ guitar is a fully functioning and even good-sounding guitar for which I used plates of wood that showed decay and decomposition, as can be seen in the above photographs. Such wood seemed like the most appropriate choice for such a project. Outside of that, everything is hand-carved and shaped, and the teeth are real human teeth. The skull in the rosette is a mosaic that is made up of about 500 little strips of white fiber-paper. It also seemed inappropriate to decorate this guitar with any bright, festive colors such as the red/white/green of the Mexican flag. I actually tried a multi-colored rosette at first, but it didn’t look right. So I made a new rosette in which everything is of a dark color. This guitar is now owned by a Mexican collector, such images being taken somewhat seriously to people of that culture.

ANOTHER DIFFERENCE, AND SOME THOUGHTS

I have survived a lot of things in my life that could have ended much worse. This is usually considered to be a good thing. And I guess it is. But I’m not quite sure of what I’ve survived into, to be honest. I think that we should all be deeply ashamed of ourselves for leaving the planet in the shape that it’s in. We’ve been, as a species, really shitty caretakers. We’re guests in a wonderful house that we leave in shambles and messes. It’s not really our house; we act as though we own it and we leave litter all over the place -- and no one cleans them up. What disrespectful and stupid manners! Really: what other species destroys its own environments and ecologies? From what I can see we are the only parasites known who kill their host; the technical word for these is “viruses”. I

don't know whether humanity will still be alive fifty years from now, given the degenerating state of the world, and all the degenerates who are running it. I never been sure as to what life is all about, and/or for. I don't claim to know that. But it does seem to me that not being a destructive and unaware being has to be on the short list for anyone with a few hundred brain cells.

Our children are well on their way to continuing our same way of living life. We behave as we do because that's what we've been taught and have internalized. Those who taught and indoctrinated us were taught . . . and indoctrinated . . . by people who were taught the same things . . . in the same ways. And they were taught those things by others . . . and all for a long, long, long, long way back. And do you know what that does in the long run? It makes real *competence* (i.e., independent thought) impossible. I saw an old film, A Bridge Too Far, recently; it's a World War II movie with a fantastic cast, about an Allied campaign against entrenched German armies in France. The attack was to be multi-pronged and coordinated, and that campaign was supposed to be resolved in three days. I think the movie was based in historical fact. One reason that I believe that is that it shows how badly both armies bungled, mis-communicated, mis-delivered, mis-timed, mis-read, mis-reinforced, mis-coordinated everything. I couldn't stand watching the whole movie, so I don't know who "won". But most organized large things that I'm aware of function like that today. It's really weird for me to consider that for a long time now I've functioned at a higher level than any business, government, agency, army, or established Church that I can think of. You may have done the same too.

You might be wondering why I'm dwelling on all this early-life stuff instead of getting past it all, and moving on into my adult experiences. Well, the reason is that I never really got past the early stuff in the ordinary sense of the word. Early life experiences are the foundations on which *everything anyone has ever been, and is*, are built on. It's just that most people are unaware of their early-life . . . uh . . . programming and conditioning. Period. I was shaped into a person who expects to be evaluated harshly at every step, to be acquiescent, obedient, supportive of the boss, and who learned that he didn't have any right to his own opinions or feelings or thoughts. That was me for a long, long time. Sympathy and all of that aside, I hate/resent my mother and father for having done that to me. And I hate those who did the same to them and turned them into what they were.

CONTRIBUTIONS

I've added to the lore and practice of the work that I do. I did a lot of elementary-looking work at first . . . but now, many years later, I have become one of the remaining and now aging American pioneers in this field of work, whose work has influenced that of many other contemporary luthiers. When Americans first got interested lutherie, no one – me included -- knew anything about this craft. Really. There were no people or books to learn from. There were no schools or websites or discussion groups. Computers didn't exist. Shortly before, only factories and production shops made metal-string guitars. So, if only by default, the lutherie learning-curve started with making copies of the factory-made steel string Guilds, Gibsons, Washburns, Fenders, Martins, etc. -- that were the only guitars around that anyone could copy. The factories turned out guitars that were pretty much like the previous year's models, and would pretty much be the models for the next year's

production. So both individual and factory steel-string guitar makers from the 1960s on were all, basically, making copies of copies of copies of copies . . . of very early available guitar models.

Knowing as much (or as little) as I did after making my very first guitar -- with the help of Irving Sloane's how-to book, which was about how to make Spanish guitars and not steel-string ones -- I didn't feel any reason to make guitars that looked like all the others. I liked to putter with design ideas, and while it seems to have been tacitly assumed that handmade should look like the non-handmade ones, I didn't mind making more "arty-looking" guitars that took a bit more time to execute. And then, Sloane's second book about making steel string guitars came out and it was all about how the Martin Guitar Manufacturing Company makes theirs; it was not a very informative or useful book.

I've never played the steel string guitar; that was an unknown species to me, so it's ironic that I've become a well-known steel string guitar maker. I'd played Spanish (nylon string) guitar since High School; I was familiar with and liked its aesthetic. And Spanish guitars looked more like I thought an American guitar should look. For anyone who has a sense of line and classical proportions in design, Spanish guitars are nicer to look at. What familiarity I had with the steel string guitar was primarily from doing repair work on every brand and kind and learning about them -- for about six years -- before I turned to seriously making them. Well, repairs brought in money, and since no one had ever heard of me no one was going to approach me to make a guitar for them. I had already made a few Spanish/classical-like guitars that I put steel strings on . . . and I'd learned that that really doesn't work. But I liked the look of the Spanish-guitar mosaic rosettes, and the use of wooden bindings instead of plastic ones, and the shape of the Spanish guitar heel, and how makers of those guitars personalized their pegheads with easily-distinguishable-from-across-the-room proprietary designs, etc. I brought such ornamental touches to my steel string guitars. I thought they were worth the bother because of how much those things added to the look of my guitars. It's not as though my first guitars were artistic marvels, though. They looked pretty humble despite my best efforts. And I'd discovered a bunch of building techniques that don't work. But bit by bit I managed to improve my work, and in doing so I seem to have created a new aesthetic that was accepted. I think that what I mainly did was to give other luthiers tacit permission to do work that showed their own personalities, in ways that weren't copies of copies of copies of copies of copies of copies of copies of copies of commercially made guitars. I think I can, in a way, consider myself to be a beautician.

I think I've made a contribution of another kind too. If you can visualize any business area or shopping center and all of the things that they sell -- cars, tools, toys, clothes, kitchen equipment, furniture, athletic equipment, food, tires, lamps, office equipment and supplies, radios and t.v. sets, computers, bedding, books, etc. etc. etc. -- consider that 99.99% of all that will be in a landfill within a few years. Well-made guitars have a much longer shelf-life.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Fast-forward some 54 years -- during which time I've put in some 150,000 hours, working long days six days a week for most of that time. I'm near the end of my story both as regards this narrative, and also my life. I'm taking time at this point to think, assess, and sort out its various contents. I never had time to do this earlier but I'm surprised to remember all the things I've done that I consider to have been worthwhile things to do. I'm intelligent; I've travelled; I've done the things one generally does between adolescence and maturity; and I've learned and accomplished things. I've been a husband, a parent, a partner, and a provider. I started out being immature and ignorant, as well as an immigrant . . . but I grew and learned and matured past most of that. I'm also generous and kind, and pretty interesting as a person, overall. And I've added to the identity of the work that I do. If this can be seen as a hill of beans -- *my* hill of beans -- it's a pretty good one.

Aside from that, for anyone who is looking for anything resembling *the meaning of life*, I can honestly say that I have, so far, found the answer to at least one of life's important questions. That answer is: empathy. Or at least a capacity for it. Or if not empathy, then sympathy. Or respect. From what I've observed, a lot of humanity lacks any of these. And if I may put in a personal opinion, "Capitalism" is toxic to empathy. Maybe "Communism" too, but I don't really know; we don't have that here.

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I do try to balance the negatives with the recognition I've been given many gifts, that I'm fortunate in many ways, and that I have much to be thankful for. It's a tricky balancing act to maintain, though, largely because of being a member of Nature's perhaps most ambitious but failed creations: (1) the only species of parasite that kills its host, and (2) a species that does not learn from prior experience. All other mammals learn from experience; we don't. On another level, I am caught in the web of life, just the same as you. A sense of humor helps one to keep on going. And so does any way of expressing one's tensions that's not harmful, that serves to let some of the steam out of the pressure cooker.

It's complicated. And painful. I've been telling you how massively deformed my parents' lives were. I've also been telling you about my parents' serious challenges year after year after year. Whatever their lives had been before World War II, *my parents never again had any of the good things that they'd ever had. That world was gone.* My parents didn't kill anyone. They didn't steal. They didn't lie or cover things up. They didn't blaspheme or sin. They didn't engage in perversions or subterfuges. They wanted to survive. They deserved better. As did my sister and I. I am not able to reconcile these many factors that my parents dealt with *and that never ended*, with anything that makes any cumulative sense . . . outside of feeling **this section redacted** for humans who follow orders and cannot think -- which, from what I can see, is most of them. Most of us, really. It's complicated, as I said. And painful.

AND FINALLY

How to sum all of this up? I really don't know. Life is mostly not as simple as can be described in a few sentences or a few chapters. I might mention that it's taken me a long time to write, tweak, and rewrite my autobiography. And it's taken me again as long to write the rest of this book. I'd hope that reading anything I've written will/ may/ should/ could/ ought to/ might have/ served as a little push for you, in a good direction . . . and into the future . . . for as long as the species and the planet survive. I'd say: do what you can to make that last for as long as you can. Amen.

POSTSCRIPT: JESSE OWENS, AMERICAN HERO

You may or may not know the name Jesse Owens. He was an important American hero in the 1930s and 40s and even the 1950s . . . for having won four Gold Medals in the 1936 Olympics, which were held in Berlin, Germany, and that became (through Jesse Owens' efforts) a showcase for American superiority over the Germans. Germany was at the time being led by Adolf Hitler, whose nationalist movement attracted people who bought into the idea that Germans were supermen and superwomen and without question better than anyone else. That idea had great appeal, as Germany had gotten badly torn up in a criminally devastating world-wide inflation of the 1930s that hit Germany particularly hard. Germans suffered greatly.

One indicator of a German economy in trouble was how inflation *grew at a significant weekly rate* then. I collected stamps when I was a young kid in the 1950s; I remember the German stamps of the 20s, which had had new prices/values printed on them (after they'd already been printed once) – before the rapidly expanding inflation made the old values irrelevant. I had German postage stamps being retro-printed to costing/representing 1,000,000 marks. And that was just to mail something. People would go to the market to buy bread carrying bags full of money, as the money got to be closer and closer to worthless. So yes, dislike the Germans as you might, but know that they had all (except the very wealthy, of course) been living in circumstances in which life was much harder for them than it might have been. That was, in large part, due to the brutally punitive reparations and penalties that France – following the initiatives of their anti-German prime minister Georges Clemenceau -- had imposed on and gouged out of Germany after World War I. The reparations were in fact criminal because of the conditions that were created. Germany was shredded and stomped on, mostly by the French, and World War II was in fact largely made possible by them. The French made life for the Germans so difficult that it set the stage for someone like Hitler to come into power. So, Georges Clemenceau had a hand in the disasters of my life.

Hitler and his party were gaining power in the 1930s, and Hitler's agenda for attaining yet more power included making the 1936 Olympics the showcase for demonstrating Aryan superiority to the rest of the world; especially Jews and Negroes, and other inferiors. But that didn't work out for him. It became international news at the time that Jesse Owens, *a black American track racer*, stole the gold medal away from the fastest Germans. Owens went away with *four* gold medals in track and field events – the very events that drew the largest crowds of spectators. Hitler was embarrassed on the world stage, and Owens instantly became a highly celebrated American hero.

THE 1932 OLYMPICS

Anyway, I can hear you thinking, “*so what? What does this have to do with anything?*”. Not a bad question, that one. It has to do with the fact that in the very same track event that Jesse Owens stood out in in 1936, one of the track contenders of the previous Olympics was another young American Black track athlete, Ralph Harold Metcalf. Metcalf ran in the same races in 1932 as Owens did four years later – and in one of the important ones he came in second. But it wasn’t until after the race that officials noticed that Metcalf’s starting block was set several feet back from the others. I know this because I saw a documentary about the 1932 Olympics, in which the uneven line of starting blocks was clearly visible. Honestly, I don’t know how anyone there could NOT have seen that misalignment, and not ask some questions . . . but that’s what seemingly happened. I mean, those track events were seen by thousands of spectators. I really don’t get it. And I would not believe it had I not seen that documentary.

Word about that embarrassing fuck-up got around *after* the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place winners had been awarded their gold, silver, and bronze medals . . . and the officials now had a problem. Clearly, Metcalf *had run farther in the same amount of time* as the other runners. Had it not been for his badly placed starting block, he would unquestionably have come in first. But the officials had already awarded the gold to someone else . . . and they couldn’t make up their minds as to whether to complicate their own lives and re-assign the medals, and explain their mess . . . or forget the whole thing ever happened. Officials have been known to do that kind of thing every now and then, you know. As it turned out, Metcalf decided to act nobly and he said he was fine with the silver medal; he’d come back in the next Olympics and get the gold. Well, that didn’t happen. In 1936 Jesse Owens swept the track and field prizes all by himself. “*So what are you saying here, exactly?*” you might be thinking. “*That one should not give up on a win too easily? That Metcalf -- in some way misguided or not thinking right -- caved in too early? And passed up a chance at the Gold?? He had a legit argument after all, you know!*”

No, that’s not what I’m saying. I’ve been telling you about my life in these chapters. I’ve had low points and high points. I’ve been lucky and unlucky. And speaking of Jesse Owens and Mr. Metcalf – and I keep on saying this because it is true -- I’m lucky in that I am a White person. And I’m lucky only because we, as a culture, think as we do. We are and have always been a racist nation; and I repeat: if I had more pigmentation in my skin you wouldn’t be reading this. Every guitar maker I’ve ever known or even heard about has been Caucasian. Making guitars is an artifact of Caucasian culture. I have never known of any Afro-American (non-electric) guitar makers, either on this continent or in Europe. I have been describing the effect on me and my family of the Nazi’s acting out the belief that it’s o.k. to kill any Jew that they saw. One could equally and legitimately say that the Nazis saw those behavior modeled by the American white man who felt it was not only o.k. to kill any American Indian that he saw, but that it was o.k. to eradicate all of them. There were even bounties paid for Indian scalps, in the old West -- regardless of whether they were from men, women, or children. Hmmm. And there’s that thing with the African slaves, too, where it was considered completely proper to buy sell, mistreat, lock away in servitude, fuck, and kill them like cattle, too. Racist? I’d think so. And with a big capital letter “R”. The Holocaust was racist.

Have you ever wondered why there are so many survival accounts by Europeans but almost no such stories from American Indian and Afro-American authors, about their own murderous racial experiences? Well, it's mostly because the white man never let them learn how to read and write. Therefore their traditions are largely oral -- which sells few copies, and never appear on any best-seller lists. One thing I've learned in life is that when one evaluates someone -- as we all do every day when interacting with anyone, it's useful to know something of *what that person's starting point was* in their getting from there to here, and thus to you. Wouldn't you think so? I'm telling you my life story. So I should include mention of the placement of my own starting block -- and I'd think that's a useful thing for you to be aware of. In fact, having been born into the disadvantages I've had, it's remarkable that I've had the kind trajectory I've had, in which I helped to make a few things a bit better. That's all been as amazing as I can think of anything being.

"Education" is interesting too. The word means "what comes out"; the prefix "E" tells you that. But before something comes out, something must already have been put in. One only learns a certain amount about the world by being with people of one's own age -- which is 99.9% of any school experience; and many workplace experiences too. And one difference between school teacher humans and older humans is that the former give homework assignments . . . but older guides can explain to you what whatever it is that you just did, that puzzles you and/or hurts, is all about. And me: I'm older than you. I want to function as more than a schoolteacher who just hands out technical homework assignments and things to read.

BUILDING BLOCKS, IN SUMMATION: THE EXPERIENCE AND THE LESSON COME FIRST; THE WORDS ALL COME LATER.

When I boil it all down my first building blocks were, of course, my life at home. It was nowhere near anything like "normal life". It was, as I've been saying all along, surreal; it was ruled by two insane people who were at constant war with each other. Then, I'd leave the house every morning and go to school and live the life of a student; you know, all the usual school stuff in which I was praised more than I was criticized. I was always a little bit of an oddball, but not in a bad way. And, except for Summer vacations, this was pretty much my life from very early on until I went to College at age 17. Put in even simpler words, I had a childhood in which I learned that I had no voice, no rights, no initiative, no permission to follow curiosity -- and penalties for any time that I tried to do anything that was not forbidden, and/or simply irritated my guards. Everything was forbidden that I hadn't been told to do. So I grew up with no sense of *permissions* in my life. And while that was my experience in my home, I experienced a more benign version of the exact same thing at school; the Praise-to-Punishment ratio was much better.

The second layer of my building blocks was that I lived in two cultures every day; one was benign and the other was not. I was conditioned, and grew up . . . to be somewhat different people depending on which part of the day I existed in. I don't have a split personality or multiple personalities like my father did. I don't qualify as having a pathology; but my mind works differently during working hours from how it works after them. I don't know if I show that externally . . . but once I'm by myself, away from other people, "I" am not the same. This way of

being was once explained to me as that of *living in two different ego states*. I do that. I do it even now at this late part of my life. It's a bit as though your parents had died, and then living with your father's parents in the mornings, switching at halftime, and living with your mother's parents every evening. Over time such a cycle became, for me, a deeply-learned life rhythm.

AND ONE LAST THING

Aside from all the things I've been telling you about how I grew up, the fact is that I grew up to be a notable guitar maker. I've already told you that such work was, in my early years, my source of entertainment and self-soothing. In fact, my nourishment.

And I've become well-known as an innovator and authority . . . in an unusual way. And that is that I've not competed against other luthiers in any of the normal ways (a spirit of competition being such a strong element of American culture). I've always competed against myself. While this might be seen as a proof of superior moral fiber, it's really not. It's an artifact of how I grew up. And what I mean by that is to repeat what I've been telling you all along: my early life was lived 97% by myself. My home life consisted of having anything to do with my parents as caretakers maybe 3% of the time. I was fed and clothed, but otherwise ignored in the other 97%. And by the ins and outs of our fundamental mindset I never really had any school friends (for one thing, we never lived near any of my schoolmates, and I was trained to avoid Mexicans and Cubans, etc.). So I grew up without the normal playful competitivenesses of youth. I never had buddies to compare or measure myself against. And I learned, if anything, to be my own primary source of reference. I learned to compete with myself . . . which has translated these many years later into my being a guitar authority.

So if I'd had anything like a "normal" childhood I would possibly be an ordinary guitar maker, or ordinary something else. If I'd only had a "normal" childhood. *Just how Goddam lucky can a guy get?*