

CHAPTER 6

We immigrated into the U. S. in 1959 – we were immigrants once again, but for the last time. As newbies, we had green cards. My dad bought a modest house, the price of which was a princely \$15,000 . . . which today will get you a few dinners at some of the exclusive Michelin-starred restaurants in San Francisco. As I said, my dad had had experience in and with the furniture trade and he was on his way to making a living from then on as a traveling furniture salesman -- through which he got to know people in the furniture trade from San Diego all the way to Phoenix. He was – as with the Lion’s Club – successful and funny with the people in that network, and interesting, and he could be gently insistent . . . and even gently seductive! . . . in matters of business. He was liked everywhere.

For all of our differences, I must say that dad and I have one dimension of our work lives in common. My dad could shine in his demographic because everyone else was blue-collar and working class. He was educated and could well have been doing other work had the war not squashed him. My own work has also been such that I’ve managed to shine in the guise of a blue-collar person, in what is almost entirely a working-class and blue-collar world. I didn’t plan it like that, but here I am. I have a College degree. I was not interested in science or academic stuff in my early years; I was captivated by tinkering with my hands and putting together kits, jigsaw puzzles, and models of airplanes, cars, houses, tanks, kites, animals, bridges, etc. . . . that were all made of wood, plastic, modeling clay, mud, plaster, and glue. Be all that as it may, I myself am not above being a blue-collar American. I’m smart, and I’ve been to college and all that, and I am nonetheless a working guy all the way through. I work with my hands. I’m a bona-fide blue-collar worker and I put in long hours; and I’m not even close to being rich. Also, I don’t have upper-class values or aspirations. I don’t take exotic vacations, and I don’t wear suits and ties. I’m blue-collar all right.

Blue-collar is not in any way inferior to white-collar, by the way. It’s merely a cultural trope to believe so. The working people are those who get everything done. Imagine a world in which the office managers, financial guys, and lawyers have disappeared. Then imagine a world in which all the plumbers, contractors, and electricians have disappeared. I’ve met lots of entitled, opinionated, and not-all-that-competent white-collar and College-educated folks over the years. My colleagues in the blue-collar world mostly didn’t go to college, and are down-to-earth, and I’ve not met many stupid ones. But then they’ve never been in a position to make far-reaching and influential decisions, so I don’t really know.

My dad would take me on his sales rounds every so often, to meet with and be shown off to his “clients”. Those were really boring experiences for me. But sometimes interesting, too. I once accompanied dad to a store that owed him money, and I got to witness my dad in persuading mode. The owner insisted that he was in difficulties and had no money to pay him with . . . and my dad gently and patiently, without ever getting angry, and in a friendly but firm voice, repeatedly assured this man that non-payment was unacceptable; that he had to pay the debt. He didn’t take no for an answer. And he did that very skillfully. At the end, the man gave in and made out a check to my

dad. I'd never seen that side of my father before. And I never did again; whenever he came home he left that part of his brain at the front door.

Little Mike from Vancouver, whom I'd told you had been struck by my father for some infraction or other (in Mike's own family!!!) that had nothing to do with my father . . . and who had been brought up by a troubled father who had just as few parenting skills as my dad had . . . didn't do well. I was 14 when I'd met him in Vancouver, and he was a few years younger than I was . . . and I am inclined to believe that his family life was just as empty and surreal as mine was. I remember hearing about how his dad, big Mike, had had a couple of meltdowns in which he freaked out and threw food and dishes at a wall; he told me of an instance where he remembered dinner peas slowly dripping off the wall, onto the floor. I cannot think of any reason to believe that there was any more meaningful communication between members of Mike's family than there was in mine. In due time young Mike got married, and had two boys, and at one point he and his family moved to Las Vegas – where we visited them once, in the 1960s. But he was not well. He was very skinny by then. Gaunt. He didn't eat, and he kept on losing weight . . . until he died, mainly from starvation . . . and, I think, from a lack of desire to live. May he rest in more peace than he had in his lifetime. I'd mentioned that I'd been part of a Children of Holocaust Survivors discussion group a few years before any of these things happened, and all the participants' families had histories of major dysfunction. Well, everyone that I knew of in my own family certainly fit into that troubled group. The relationship between violence and dysfunction has got to be the most obvious thing on Earth, but almost no one seems to have ever noticed that. Ever. At least, no one who has any power, authority, or clout has acted to do anything about it.

DAD'S FRIENDLINESS AND CHARM

I am pretty sure that my dad learned his own effective approaches for securing this or that benefit from some official, in one or another of the wartime concentration/ labor camps he was in. And he used these skills after the war, when he was facing new kinds of survival tasks. He knew how to be friendly, winning, and charming. He had the ability to say "*please . . . do it for me*" that was heart-melting and that I doubt that any actor could have outdone. Well, he had a family to take care of that he . . . well . . . didn't take all that good care of in ways other than financially. He used behaviors that were not so friendly but that he'd learned in order to not be killed. For all of his shortcomings, though, I have to admit that my dad had it in him to be (1) an amazing charmer and (2) an excellent traveling salesman, and (3) a crazed and tormented head of household. Then again, what other kind of authority-imbalance dynamic had he ever seen or lived with?

My father's immersion into the world I'm describing – that of his being charmingly friendly company -- was usually short-term and with a certain understood social distance between him and the people he was talking to. These weren't friends. They were all colleagues of a sort, and not there to share deep life stories and confessions with. They were there for my father to impress and keep his personal distance from. And to make a living from. Also, during the time my dad had worked for my uncle, and dad was eventually given supervisory responsibilities, and he did better with subordinates of every kind, within that context. My dad was different from them, of course. For one

thing, he could only relax to a certain degree with others who were not subordinate to him. He could distance himself. And none of these others had any background that would have helped to understand him as he really was. And may the people who ruined him rot in Hell. Of course, it would help if I believed in a Hell that was somewhere other than here.

As part of this package, dad had also managed to have a very workable guy-type sense of humor. A lot of it was really dumb. But it worked to break the ice with people. Whether it's silly or profound, it is a coping mechanism. You might have noticed that the people with the most sense of humor are those that have the most difficult upbringings. As I said, they need it the most. There's a line from comedienne Joan Rivers that addresses this phenomenon: *"there's not a single woman who is a comedian who was beautiful as a child"*. Amen to that. It's equally true of guys who were imperfect oddballs early on.

At this late point in my life (I might not be alive by the time you're reading this) I'm spending more time than ever before in trying to understand some of my life's imponderables. Generations age and pass, and new ones come along. I can't think of anything more sensible to do than to help make those cycles easier for anyone in the next generation. Even if one is *not* making life easier for new arrivals, it's still a good idea to at least not complicate life for them – as we as Capitalists are doing by making a future for them that is impoverished of things that the Natural world has always offered – by *adding* something. Or at least by not *reducing* something. I think I have managed to make life a bit easier, as much as I could, for some of the younger generation. By doing a bit of contributing. Life's hard enough. But I don't need to tell you that, right?

Some years ago I signed up for a meditation group; there were 30 of us in it. We sat in a circle at the first meeting and introduced ourselves, and told the group why we were there. I was struck by how EVERYONE in that group – young, old, male, female, light skinned, dark skinned, fat, thin, tall, short, healthy or not, educated or not, working or student, and everything else in between -- carried heavy burdens. Even the ones you'd look at and think that they couldn't have a care in the world. I've not ever forgotten that.

FROM ENGLISH TO LUTHERIE

Not having had any information about my history, my family, my past (or future), or anything like that, I had had to learn to figure out a lot of things by and for myself. And that's the mindset I've brought to my guitar making work. I graduated from U.C. Berkeley in 1966 with a degree in English, that laughably fungible certificate that people joke about because it's not all that directly useful for anything unless you want to teach or try to survive as a poet. But it's been helpful. I learned a method of thinking about something that is in front of me – in this case something written – and analyzing it, which is a skill that most people are not given any training in.

A degree in English Literature is, in part, about learning how to read -- in the sense of thinking about, interpreting, and analyzing what you are reading. That is, one is alert to consistency/inconsistency, resonances, subtext, metaphorical or psychological or linguistic

interpretations, stylistic analysis, etc. – that one is called on to figure out by one's self. This is different than remembering and problem-solving, which use the brain more like a manual that explains methods. Analyzing is helped by having imagination. And unless you're reading junk this means being open to (and thinking about) what you're reading so that it makes more than strictly cognitive sense. This might sound utterly uninteresting to you; but to a dedicated English Major this stuff is fascinating and makes the heart beat faster.

MY PARTNER KAREN

As I'd said, I met my present partner, Karen, through a singles ad.. I'd gotten divorced in 1988; it knocked the stuffings out of me and left me coping rather poorly with daily life. I worked at putting myself together . . . and in a year or so I felt able to get on with my life, and desiring to meet women – which I don't meet many of in my line of work. So I looked into, and responded to, singles ads (this was before computers and the internet, and the ads were like classified ads in a newspaper: a few lines describing who one was and what they wanted). The men's ads were often ridiculous and said something like *"male, 55, looking for a serious woman, no older than 29, to enjoy life with. No fatties, please."* I answered some two dozen women's ads in the next few months, and met a lot of women for coffee, a walk around the park, lunch, conversation, etc. The women's ads were more serious and less ridiculous than the mens' (even the one that said she was looking for a man who was tattooed!) and, as I said, I answered about two dozen of them. The best thing I did in that time was to not have any expectations of any individual meeting. And that attitude really helped.

One day I saw two ads that sounded equally interesting. I answered one of them; it read *"I'm looking for a complicated, grown-up (more or less), funny, sexy, smart man, 43 or older. You don't have to be good looking but a photo would be helpful"*. It was not unreasonable, it was to the point, and it had no spelling errors.

Well, I met the lady who had placed that ad; it was Karen. We liked each other, and saw more and more of each other, and had better and better conversations each time we talked. In one of them I mentioned that I'd seen two ads that seemed equally interesting, in the same paper that hers had appeared in . . . and that I'd answered hers . . . but not the other one . . . and I wondered what would have happened if I had. (Really, I can only do one such thing at a time.) Karen asked me what the other ad had said. I told her. And she responded *"oh, I wrote that one, for my friend Elaine!"*. Wow. Who would have guessed??? I subsequently met Elaine, who was nice, and attractive . . . but Karen and I were a much better fit. But . . . what are the odds of anything like that ever happening? If I'd answered the other ad I might never have met Karen. *How lucky can a guy get?*

Karen and I 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 can laugh at our sillinesses these days . . . having now been together for 35 years. Do we love one another? Mostly. Do we care for one another? Yes. Are we grateful to have what we have? Yes. As far as the hackneyed and very overused word "love" is concerned, it doesn't quite describe nor capture what we have. It's

more like: *we're in Life with each other*. And that phrasing is appropriate. Along with everything else, we are lucky to have had competent medical attention over the past few decades. It has certainly saved my life more than once. I've had open heart surgery; I have a nice long scar in the middle of my chest from that. I've had a heart attack too. And I now wear a pacemaker too; it adds very nicely to my scar collection. (I once sat down with a well-known woodworker and we compared scars, lacerations, healed cuts, etc. It was fun.)

Perhaps the single most useful thing Karen and I did a while back was to get some Couples/ Marriage Counseling to get us over some of the rough spots we couldn't get over by ourselves. We learned a skill that neither one of us had ever gotten even a hint about: how *to listen to each other*. And *to just listen*. And it has paid off. Neither one of us had ever seen adults do that – and neither of us had done that in our previous marriages. I must say that I noticed something interesting in my meetings with the ladies whose ads I responded to. We were all in our forties and had pretty much all been married before. Those ex-wives who had borne no children were of the opinion that they'd be happy if they never saw that no-good-for-anything bum they 'd divorced; those women who had become mothers were of the opinion that the fellow had been decent but the marriage, regrettably, just hadn't worked out. I thought this was an insight about people that was worth having.

MY ROLE IN MY FAMILY

I keep on referring to the fact that my parents fought all the time, sometimes quite intensely. Neither one of them knew who the other one was. I don't think that they knew who they were themselves, either. I say this realizing that "knowing who you are" is a contemporary idea of a type that didn't exist back in my parents' day. At least, not as we understand and use it. If my parents had had a better grip on and sense of who they were before the war, the war destroyed it. They weren't introspective people. I can't just dismiss them like that, though, because whatever they might have introspected about regarding their lives during the time that I knew them would not have made any sense at all. I'm not as damaged as they were, and I'm pretty smart, and I am myself unable to make sense of their conditions and histories. Every culture they ever lived in -- or that I've ever lived in -- has valued "moving forward". No culture that they ever lived in, or that I've ever lived in, has valued being introspective. Or caring.

When I was young it didn't seem strange to me that we never, as a family, talked about anything. We never had *conversation*. Of any kind. That sounds weird, doesn't it? But we didn't. You know: the back-and-forth of how was your day?; did you buy that thing you were going to get?; our neighbors are going on a week-long trip again; it got really cold last night, didn't it?; how was the movie you saw?; the vacuum isn't working; did you remember to get the so-and-so?; it's supposed to rain tomorrow; I found a \$20 bill on the sidewalk!; that's a nice shirt you're wearing; how'd you do in that last test you took?; I ran into so-and-so; we're out of coffee; I heard that . . . etc. We were cut off from the rest of the world, too. I don't think that there was a radio in the house for the first few of our nine years in Mexicali. And that was before there were televisions. My parents did subscribe to a newspaper (the Los Angeles Times), which was in English, although I don't remember seeing either of my parents ever reading it. Dad might have read it; he spoke and read at least some English.

Mom spoke more heavily accented English than dad did, but then she had little opportunity to practice speaking it. I think she knew how to read English -- but I don't know if she could write it. I don't think I ever saw her read *anything*, actually. What mom *did* do that was useful and helpful was domestic chores: drive my sister and me to school and back . . . go shopping . . . to doctors' and dentists' visits . . . to the library in Calexico to get and return books that I read, and so on. My dad never ever did any domestic chores at all. He hardly ever entered the kitchen and it never occurred to him to cook, shop, help with washing dishes, make the bed, put things away, or do any house cleaning, or laundry. Mom did all that, and she gets points for it. I don't think she could have been free of stress. She got tuberculosis once; it was serious, and my sister and I stayed with my uncle and aunt for a few weeks during that. Typically, none of that was explained to my sister or me; we were sent off and that was that; and we only learned afterwards that mom had been ill. As I said, our parents never talked to us.

Me: I read a lot, all the time. Dad had ordered a new edition of some encyclopedia at one point in the mid-1950s. It came in about 20 volumes, each one delivered a month after the last one. I never saw either of my parents so much as touch any of the volumes, but I read them. Or at least looked through them. It was something new to do. But by the standards my parents instilled in me, or that they at least let me have, they were peasants.

If either one of my parents ever showing interest in or curiosity -- or even pleasure -- about me, my life, my homework, my school projects, or what I was otherwise doing or thinking, I have no recollection of it. It's not exactly that I was unhappy as a kid; life *was* as I am describing it; I just didn't know what it felt like to not feel frightened at least some of the time. At home, that is; school felt o.k. Home had been much the same empty vacuum that I'd lived in from the beginning, and I didn't miss better treatment because I simply didn't know anything better. I imagine that Negroes who had been enslaved and brought over from Africa, as slaves, and forced to be slaves all their lives, had a lot of feelings about the losses of their worlds and families and ways of life and their land and their being able to live lives that were their own to manage freely. I also imagine that Negro slaves who had been born into slavery, and grew up being slaves, and never saw anything different in the world than slavery, wouldn't have felt yanked away from another better way of life and felt regrets about that. As it was, in our house, there was never mention made even of life in Austria, or England, or Cuba, or in Mexico. Never. Not even in reminiscing about something that had happened or that they had done. I knew we'd been in those places; *I'd been there with them*. It was something the same with my sense of my grandparents: my mother mentioned her parents very seldom; my father NEVER ever said ANYTHING about his parents, other than their names. 98% of my awareness of my grandparents was a vacuum. My sister and I really did grow up alone in more than one sense of the word.

Some of my interactions with my parents, or just being near them, got so bad that my brain shut down. I'd learned to have fugue states. I've had occasional ones in my life from my inability to deal with certain situations -- especially with my mother. I think that most of my fugue states were minor, but I've had a few major ones as well. I guess that I can claim that I have lots of things to forget about. The flip side of that coin was my being so starved for personal attention that I think I'd remember more of the "good" things than I actually do. If they'd happened. But, really, I remember

only a few expressions of domestic warmth and kindness – and they were from dad when he was in an expansive mood. I got none of that from my mother. My role was to be told what to do, and when to do it, and nothing else. I learned that role very well. My sister has told me that in those years I was likeable and she liked me, but I really felt like a somnambulist to her. And no one ever said anything about *how* I should do this or that: I was told what to do and was supposed to just figure it out. I was handed clean clothes to wear every day, and given food, and they paid attention to my report cards. My dad used them to brag about me with his friends. But, as far as I can remember, that was really it. I don't remember either of them ever having asked me anything about . . . me. When I was in High School I was on the football team, the tennis team, the wrestling team, and the cross-country running team. I don't believe that either of my parents ever knew anything about these. They never asked me. About anything.

It's not as though there were continual angry and tense silences between my parents; they mostly just didn't acknowledge each other's presence -- unless my mother did something wrong, that is. I remember one dinner where dad really lost it because mom had not put napkins on the table. I'd guess that my dad picked that kind of thing up from the murderously sadistic Nazi guards who savaged anyone who did *anything* that they didn't approve of, and under whose thumb he'd lived for a long time. The sad fact is that, aside from my bonding with my sister, none of us in the family were ever friends in any sense of the word with the others. Neither did anyone in our family ever hug any of the others, or ever put an arm around on, or ever put a hand on anyone's shoulder or back. The idea of physically touching one another was . . . well . . . foreign and unknown to us. We didn't do that. It makes one think of B.F. Skinner's experiments with the monkeys and the soft and cuddly mamas vs. the cold and hard mamas.

I remember one occasion when we were still living lived in Mexicali. I was about twelve years old; I'd been invited to a birthday party that was going to take place on a farm that was a bit away from town. One of the other invitees' parents gave me a ride to the event, which was supposed to end at 6 o'clock -- at which time my dad was supposed to come pick me up. Six o'clock came and went, almost everyone had left, and it was getting dark. One of the few remaining parents offered to take me home, and did so. All the while that we were in the car I looked for my father's car going in the opposite direction on its way to pick me up. I didn't see his car drive by. I was dropped off at my house and when I went in was jarred by the sight of my father sitting at a table with some friends, and playing cards. My dad hadn't even *BEGUN* to get ready to pick me up. And it was clear to me that if he *was* going to pick me up it would have been quite a bit later, when it was pitch black outside, and cold, and I hadn't taken a jacket along with me, and there wouldn't be anybody there except me. Nice. And dad would not have apologized for being late; he never apologized for anything. My parents showed me in many ways that I meant nothing to them; and my dad, especially, was like a politician in that he presented well in public but acted with callous disregard toward anyone he could do that to and get away with it. He was absolutely insensitive; I didn't like it but I was used to it . . . and I absorbed that message deeply through repeated exposure. Our list of nurturing domestic behaviors was short.

One of the things we never spoke of in our family was oral (or any other kind of) hygiene. One of my teachers once commented on how much greenish plaque there was on my young teeth. It

surprised her. Well, no one had ever urged me to brush my teeth, or shown me how -- aside from having been advised a long time before to use less toothpaste. As I told you: I was daily handed the cleaned clothes that I wore, fed, and given the occasional haircut. And that was pretty much it. Well, whatever caring of myself that I had ANY sense of was pretty much whatever I learned or copied from others or thought up. I might be suppressing a lot of kind memories of my parents' doing nice things . . . but the fact is that, brain-wise, that box sure looks empty. Mostly, I grew up feeling invisible -- like looking into a mirror in a vampire's house. I did have my five-years-younger sister . . . but such different-age young siblings -- especially when they are of different genders -- are not ideal companions at a young age. Rigorous scientific studies have repeatedly shown this to be true. I think it might have helped if I'd had a brother. I remember wishing I had one, for many years.