

CHAPTER 9

MY TAKE ON FAITH, RELIGION, AND SPIRITUALITY, IF YOU'LL ALLOW ME AN OPINION

I think it's good to believe in a Supreme Being that is supportive and caring. Life is hard enough on this planet and it's good to have some friendly backup. I can't believe in such a thing. Plus, families have been torn apart by Religion. Politics are divisive. Wars have been fought over whether God (metaphorically) wears a hat, a skullcap, a fez, or a turban. Countries have been torn in two (**Fig. 11**). Me, I don't believe in the "God" that everyone prays to. I can't. If I *had* to be a believer, and given the extreme inconsistencies of my life, it would make sense to me to believe in several Gods – both good ones and bad ones. Monotheism doesn't multi-task well, and its one God tends to be an authoritarian who won't tolerate questioning of his authority. He wants no other Gods before him, and his thinking and planning carried out. That's scary, but do I really need to point that out?

Fig. 11 Rabbit God vs. Duck God.

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 in charge of it, and those . . . what? Good? Misguided? Narrow-minded? Mindless and Fanatical Degenerates who support those degenerates? Well, they are certainly all wanting authority and power. I've never claimed to be sure as to what life is all about, and/or for, but it does seem to me that not being a destructive being has to be on the short list for anyone with two or three hundred brain cells. So, all in all, I'm much more Buddhist these days than I am anything else. It's not competitive and it's the most forgiving system of thought I've found. Jesus Christ tried to spread that message some 2,000 years ago, but the Church that grew out of his death is pretty sure that it represents the good guys, and that everyone else – the Jews, the Muslims, the Hindus, the Pagans -- are the bad guys.

SCARY HUNGARY

I knew that I'd been born in Hungary -- whatever that meant -- and I was vaguely ashamed of being associated with that. I thought there was something wrong with it. And whatever that was, it was a secret. Well, you can't build anything if you're given only a few Lego pieces, right? In my case, not being told about a past that I could not only not claim but also felt hidden from me, I felt incomplete, and never sure of my own ground. I mean, you have to "*be something*"; and, as I said, we avoided any mention of it, or the war, or anything from the past from before the time I was born. I knew that my family and I were different. I looked and spoke and did my homework in Spanish just like all my school friends, but I knew I wasn't one of them. And, out of this mental dissonance, I started to tell my teachers and friends that I'd been born in England; it was at least a country that I had some conscious and formative memories of and it "didn't feel unsafe". When my third-grade teacher discovered this lack-of-accuracy in some paperwork she was doing, and asked me about it, I

didn't know how to answer. I had no idea of what was so bad about Hungary; I just knew that it was forbidden territory. So I said the first thing that came to mind: *es mas elegante* (it's more elegant). The look she gave me when I said that has stayed with me all these years.

Having being so cut off from stories, musings, anecdotes, aunts, information about grandparents, uncles, cousins, memories, mementos, celebrations, other countries and peoples, and any sense of THIS IS MY PLACE to sink roots into enough for it to be a starting point, I've had to put my history together out of overheard clues and fragments and, later, reading accounts of those times that other people had written. And "my place" has always felt like it was somewhere other than where I was. All of these things the Holocaust gave to me. Or took away from me. Take your pick. And if you're not an immigrant I think this sensation will not make much sense to you.

BRINGING THE NARRATIVE AROUND FULL CIRCLE

My "real-life" stuff has always been private. I took three things on, from my parents: (1) a mindset and lifestyle of isolation, solitude, non-communication, and privacy. This was in part because we moved so much when I was young and I grew up without the usual long-term male camaraderie that boys who live in stable environments have. I wish that had been different, but it wasn't. So . . . I did things with and by myself. I read a lot; I built and made things; I assembled kits and models and jigsaw puzzles of all kinds; I worked with real clay, and modeling clay, and mud, and wood, and plaster, and with toy soldiers. I read a lot more. I painted. I collected things. And I read yet more. I whittled. And so on. I liked to understand things (I think to a greater extent than most other kids do) – as I'd tried to understand the chaos that my parents had both suffered and created -- and how things fit into any greater scheme of things. I still do that.

I couldn't have explained why I did any of these things in the past; I didn't have words for any of it. These were just things I did. I now know that it was because I was left alone every day between returning home from school and dinnertime. My teachers talked to me about all kinds of thing every day. My parents ignored me. It was confusing. I needed something to do, and my young brain instinctively and unconsciously found things for me to do – and, as it happened, without either of my parents' knowledge, or even interest.

(2) The second thing is to have learned throughout my childhood how worthy of being ignored I was. I barely had any sense of existing; that is learned by having whatever you are and do being reflected back to you by those around you. I only existed at school. I didn't exist at home. I wouldn't have survived if what I said about being ignored and neglected were literally true; I got mechanical -- not personal -- things, like rides to and from school, and to doctors, and playtime with cousin Bob, food, and clothing. I got driven into Calxico every week or two, just to visit the public library and check out and return books. I got to know the two ladies who worked at the library, and I liked them. They'd organize library-sized exhibits of "interesting things" every now and then, and I twice made contributions to that. Once was my collection of arrowheads, and the second time I brought my collection of coins and paper money from different countries. It was weird: others

recognized me as existing. But not so at home. I don't know whether you know what I'm talking about; and I hope you haven't grown up so that you do. It's awful.

Well, these circumstances were my preparation for having become the authority in matters of the guitar that I am considered to be today. I had learned to hide from the world. It's not that I had an inferiority complex; I'd just learned that I was unsafe no matter how great, smart, charming, or creative I was. Much like the Nazis didn't give a shit about which or what kind of Jew they killed. I withdrew into myself while maintaining normal-seeming appearance and behaviors to the outside world. It was like dressing up nicely and staying in a room with four empty walls, all by myself . . . with a box of crayons to play with. I'd learned that adults were not there for me. My teachers were all nice, but they weren't there in the afternoons and evenings.

The third thing is that with that withdrawingful mindset, I did . . . and noticed . . . things. Details. Really, I had nothing better to do. I noticed details about where I was and what I was doing, that would have seemed trivial to anyone else, and that had not been noticed by anyone else, but were noticeable to me, and that I remembered. When I started to make guitars I already had the manual skills to do that work without feeling like a ship out of water; so I didn't have as steep a learning curve as others would have had at the start of such work. That freed me, though, to find the other and road-less-traveled learning-curve that wasn't focused so much on the '*how*' of things, but rather on the '*what can one do here?*' with these things. I somehow wasn't afraid to think "what will happen if I do it this way, and not that way?". In this, I think, I got to experience some of the exploratory impulses that had always been denied me by my family. And of course the life conditions under which we lived.

As time went on I noticed that some of those minutiae, connected together in clumps of two or three, could connect to/with other individual details or small clumps of them. The how-to book I'd learned from – like all the others that have appeared since – stopped at telling readers what parts to connect to others with glue. So, some years into this, after I had made umpteen guitars, I was able to have a somewhat workable wholistic understanding of the soundbox that had comparatively few parts and pieces . . . but in which every part and aspect had some connection to something else, and did something specific that was useful to know about. I don't know that this was because I was so brilliant, so much as it was that being curious and having little else to do, I could connect dots, as it were.

Largely, I couldn't tolerate being around people . . . and think at the same time. I was too ill-at-ease to relax sufficiently so as to function. That's pretty pathetic. But it's honest. No one noticed any oddnesses in my social behaviors, of course; they were just impressed by my big vocabulary. I otherwise just stumbled through whatever I did, by myself. Sure, I made a lot of mistakes. But I kept on noticing things, in my work, that others would have thought negligible. *Doing it by myself* had been my template for learning, all along. And I of course made mistakes that I didn't know were mistakes. Especially in things concerning girls, for example.

Any given matter that needed to be sensibly thought out has things that should be prioritized or organized. Sadly, I don't think that my dad could think his way out of a paper bag when there

were two or more pieces of anything. This is not a put-down; he was far from stupid. He just couldn't do logical/ linear/ connective/ critical thinking. He could not think for himself in the sense of sorting the pluses and minuses of something out, and connecting if-this-then-that. It's what I observed. At least, I never saw him do anything that I'd call critical thinking – which means that you're thinking about at least two things, two choices, two options. My dad didn't understand choosing. He'd instinctively grab one option (maybe just the first thought that came to mind) and hang on for dear life – as any authoritarian personality would do. And he brought me up to grab onto any option *that I thought he'd want me to pick*. I had no ability to think for myself, and no permission to *try* to do that, either.

ABOUT MY FATHER AND HIS STYLE OF MENTAL FUNCTIONING

I don't know if European education from that generation included anything about how to think in a problem-solving way. That might be too modern a concept. From everything I have seen, read, thought about, and know, European pedagogy was for turning people who obeyed orders and lived out roles – and that's true of basic American pedagogy as well. As I said, my dad would grab the first scheme/ idea/ thought/ possibility that he came across and then follow it full force without wavering or having second thoughts. Dad's thinking was rigid and geared to functioning in-the-moment . . . but not before it or after it. And so much so that I don't recall that I ever knew my father to rethink or change his mind about anything. Anything. I don't think he understood the idea of there being consequences to anything. I don't believe that he ever had anything like a plan other than *to struggle through*. I honestly cannot say that he *ever learned* anything. Not after World War II was done with him. I can think of him as being like a starving coyote sitting in the tall grass, waiting for any food (idea) to come along . . . and grabbing the first food (idea) that did, and not letting go of it no matter what. And he never even once apologized or voiced regret for anything. He just "moved on".

But dad also showed me something that I cannot do at all. Reaching a desired end by toughing through as many obstacles and closed-off bridges as my dad met . . . would require someone of insane amounts of determination. Or narrowness of vision. Or Drive. Or someone who, like someone lost in a desert, *had no other option or thing to do, or goal* in the moment, than to climb up the next sand dune and hope there'd be an oasis behind it . . . and having to function with such a narrow focus day after day after day, and sand dune after sand dune . . . after sand dune . . . for a year and a half in whatever camp or camps my dad was in during the war . . . and for two years in Austria, and for half a year in England, and for two years in Cuba, and for nine years in Mexicali . . . being repeatedly betrayed and kept disadvantaged . . . Yeah. I think I get it. And I'm not talking about someone who has made a decision of any kind. I'm talking about someone for whom keeping on going would be literally THE ONLY THING to do – helped along by some real or imagined voice of either Authority or Desperation. That was my dad who, after years of struggle, got us into the promised land. As to my mom, I never knew or understood how she functioned, and I am certain that she never learned anything either.

Once, toward the end of our stay in Cuba, a friendly American immigration official there advised my dad to wait a bit longer in Cuba, so that he could immigrate directly into the U.S. instead

into Mexico. It would be a better choice. But dad didn't listen to that. Or maybe I should remember that he didn't know how to think, evaluate, and choose a best option. I think he took the immediate option a lot. And at that point the best-looking choice was to take my uncle's offer to leave Cuba and live in Mexicali, Mexico. But also, my uncle represented a choice that my dad could understand; and he could not argue against that. Looking back, going to Mexicali wasn't a good move. On the other hand, the offer of a job must have seemed irresistible. And my uncle did represent AUTHORITY. Or at least an open door.

I'm thinking about this to help me understand the more pivotal episode that I brought up earlier, where the authorities informed dad that the family's entering Mexico had not been recorded and that therefore he would have to start over again at the zero mark -- right then and there, in 1954. That added a five-year penalty to our bondage in Mexicali. That is all I know about that incident. I don't know what the authorities said to dad, nor what he said to them, or whether this was a simple case of bureaucratic mistake that no one wanted to take the time to correct. But we really had been in Mexicali, full-time, since 1950, and it wouldn't have been difficult to verify that. There would have been paperwork, statements by neighbors and landlords and colleagues and co-workers, receipts, bank statements, and even my uncle and aunt, that would have let the authorities know that we really had been there. Maybe the authorities were bureaucratically insensitive and rigid and maybe there wouldn't have been any talking them into changing their minds. But it's possible that dad, knowing nothing outside of getting through the day so as to be able to get to the next day, didn't try to argue with authority and saying that we'd already complied with *most of* the Mexican legal residential requirements. Who needs to argue with authority? That had certainly never paid off for him before. It's possible that he simply said one version or another of, "*o.k.. If that's what you want*". I'll never know anything about how that got played out . . . other than that we lived in Mexicali for five more years after that. But whatever had happened in Mexico City about this, my dad came back home at the end of the summer having gained many pounds . . . that he never managed to lose.

Well, that was my dad . . . even without the obstacles of being married to my mom and having me (and later my sister) to take care of. From a not-entirely-unreasonable point of view *I was lucky enough to have such a father*. Otherwise I wouldn't be here to tell you about any of this. I might have grown up in Austria, or Cuba, or Mexico . . . and become God knows what. Or perhaps I wouldn't have grown up at all.

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As I've been telling you, my father frightened me when I was young. He could be terrifying. As he got older, though, and I'd left the home, he slowed down some and no longer needed to function in survival mode as he had most of his life. Some of the good stuff in him that had never previously had a chance to come out, started emerging. He liked to eat. He liked to laugh. He liked to tell stories and did so with gusto. He could be warm and generous. He loved dogs; he liked them and trusted them more than he did people. And his life experiences had long since justified that attitude. My father also had stories to tell. And the more I saw that side of him the more impressed I was with the strengths of his will and focus in keeping his family together through very hard times,

as our family basically pilgrimaged through, and was not wanted in, six countries around the globe. He'd survived things that are hard to imagine.

My dad had excellent mechanical skills when he was young; but in the time I knew him he would start some kind of home project or remodel and never finish it. Still, despite both his rough parental treatment and his war experiences, my father was educated and smart and I wish I could have an hour or two to talk with him, to tell him that underneath my fear and antisocial behaviors I very much loved and admired him. I still do . . . although at the same time, if I could talk with him now, I'd be leery of his sudden outbursts of rage. He'd been beaten up a lot in life, and what else had my father ever learned about treating people who couldn't fight back? And, given the things that my father lived through during the Second World War, which dented him quite badly, he had managed to somehow hold on to a very guy-type sense of humor underneath it all. You might have noticed that the people with the most sense of humor are those that have the most difficult upbringings; they need it the most. It's a coping mechanism. I use that coping mechanism every day.

Dad didn't talk much about his life; but something or some anecdote would slip out every now and then. He once told me about an incident in one of the labor camps that he'd been sent to. There were a bunch of prisoners standing around and doing manual labor with shovels and pickaxes, and my father was talking to one of the guards there. The fellow didn't seem bloodthirsty, so they chatted. The guard asked my father about one of the other prisoners, and he answered that the man had been a professor of philology and classical literature. The guard asked my dad to ask that man if he could recite the first twenty lines of the Iliad. My dad looked at him and said, "I don't need to ask him that. I can tell you those lines myself". And he did so. In the original Greek (my dad really had had a good classical education, in which he learned Latin and Greek. He also knew [at least some] Hebrew, even though in all the time I knew him he avoided Jewish rituals of any kind. He was once asked, by a nearby temple, whose Rabbi he knew, to lead their Sabbath services. And he did. He knew all the appropriate Hebrew prayers by heart! My sister was there to witness that and she was, as they say, blown away. I wish I could have seen that). The labor camp guard was so impressed that he gave dad a chit to go to the kitchen and get a garbage can full of bread to take back to his cabin to share with the other prisoners. My dad remembered that episode because when he went to the kitchen he had to deal with a rabbi -- a smug fat pig who was in charge of the kitchen and who didn't want to give anyone any food. It was, after all, HIS food! Whatever opinion my dad might have had about rabbis up until then . . . he had contempt for them after that incident.

GROWING UP AS A YOUNG IMMIGRANT AND ADAPTING TO CIRCUMSTANCES

If starting from the ground up is not easy for adults, it's not all that easy for children either. I knew that my family and I were different. I felt different even though I looked and spoke and did my homework in Spanish just like all my school friends. I just didn't know what the heck I really was. I was vaguely ashamed of being associated with Hungary . . . because we *never* talked about it -- and you only do such a thing with something you want to forget about. Young people need to know who they are and where they came from; it is bad for them not to have this information. If they are not

given a history of origin that they can lay claim to as their starting point, it messes with their sense of identity. I mean, you can't build anything if you're not given enough Lego pieces, right?

My parents didn't seem to have enough Lego pieces of their own, either. They didn't make friends. Well, our level of distrust and self-protectiveness was always on high alert. The only non-family members to ever have dinner at our table were other European expatriate who had gone through the war, and two of my father's (American) business associates. And one of them only came to dinner once. Otherwise . . . nada. In all the years we lived in Mexico we *NEVER EVER had a single Mexican person (i.e., an "outsider") over for dinner*. For that matter, I don't remember ever seeing a Cuban in our apartment in the entire time we lived in Cuba, nor Brits in England nor Austrians in Austria. For as long as we lived in the United States I remember our family *only ever* inviting *one* American couple over for dinner or drinks: a business associate dad liked, and his wife. If anything, as I'd said, we had other refugees and immigrants over. But even that was infrequently. And, of course, we were never invited to dinner at the home of any of the people we ever lived among.

INTELLIGENCE? WHAT'S THAT?

Fast-forward some decades, during which time I worked a lot. I'm near the end of my story -- both as regards this narrative, and also my life. I'm taking time to think, reflect, assess, re-assess, and sort out its various contents, and 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 . . . but I've grown and learned and matured quite a bit. I'm also generous and kind, intelligent, not poor but certainly not rich; and pretty interesting as a person, overall. I've added to the lore of the work that I do. If this can, overall, be regarded as a hill of beans -- *my* hill of beans -- it's not a bad one.

Speaking of intelligence, it's not at all the same thing as I.Q. I.Q. measures one's ability to deal with words, shapes, and numbers -- which things rate how "smart" you are. But not more than that. Intelligence is different. Intelligence itself cannot exist if there's no Curiosity. If you're not curious then you'll never learn anything that hasn't been taught or spoon-fed to you.

DEPRESSIONS

I get depressions. I have, and have had, and probably will continue to have, some quite bad ones. Nightmares too. I think that it's normal to have some of such just from being a human. And if you've been traumatized then there's no way you won't get depressions -- even though you might be in denial and don't know that depression lurks under all your attempts to have a normal life. I take antidepressants, too. If you ever feel the need to find a therapist to work with, I hope you find a good one. As with doctors and lawyers, there are a lot of ~~licensed incompetents~~ not-great-ones out there.

I do try to balance the negatives in my life with the recognition that I've been given 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: the only species of parasite that kills its host. In our case, it is the Earth that gives us life. In medical terms that would be called a virus. We're also a species that does not learn from prior experience. A sense of humor helps one to keep on going. And so does any way of expressing life's tensions that serves to let some of the steam out of the pressure cooker in a non-harmful way. If this way of thinking can be considered to be religious or spiritual, I could be said to belong to the Church of Non-Harmers. Well, that's what Jesus Christ believed in, no?