



I Should Know Better

an autobiography

FRED MARX

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Photo Credit: Fred Marx 2017 Winter Carnival Fireworks Steamboat Springs Colorado
(because I like the picture, that's why)

for Christopher, Sydney, and Yukito

Introduction

I was born to communicate. And over a lifetime, I have done that in just about all of its forms. Communicating is my happy place. At a minimum, it implies that I have something to give. But I must also be able to receive... a conversation is nothing if at least two people aren't equally involved in it. And listening with understanding and empathy comes from study and personal experience.

I am blessed with it all. (Please note that the blessing doesn't come from me; it was planted in me from the first breath I ever took on this earth.)

These days, most of my communicating takes written form. Writing has been the basis for most of my productive life: white papers, market research, business plans, marketing plans, technical writing, instructional materials, letters, and maybe a thousand résumés and cover letters for others (for free). I've also written scripts for stage and broadcast media, and I have performed live.

So, with all of that going for me, why can't I write 'The Great American Novel'? The ability is here; I can write anything.

It started to bug me about fifteen years ago. The first words came about ten years ago. The last words were written about two years ago. It is all of two and a half chapters long. It's a great start – exciting, even. But for the life of me, I have no inkling where the story goes from there. If I had a clue, I could write it. No matter that all of my previous work is based in reality.

As a matter of exercising the synapses and keeping the fingers limber, I must write now simply to keep these systems from getting rusty. That would be deeply disappointing to the blessing-giver and to me.

The one subject about which I am an absolute expert is *me*. And since I have a pretty good long-term memory, that's what this writing is about. I'm going to write about the things I remember and speak the memories to you as seen through my eyes, and with my understanding of events at that time. If I have any analyses to offer, they will be age-appropriate.

I am going to write as honestly as possible; no sugar-coating the things I did wrong. No exaggerating the things I got right. No cleaning up messes. You'll be reading about my life as I saw it when I lived it.

Since I don't live in a silo, other people are necessarily involved. I've abbreviated or obscured (most of) their names "to protect the innocent."

I've had my share of fascinating experiences. Some of these came with security clearances which require background checks. I bring this up because I have had to maintain a listing of addresses at which I've lived so I can be properly investigated when necessary. And, like songs on the radio bringing back memories of a certain time of life, my domiciles have the same effect.

The average American has 11.7 lifetime addresses for a detective to comb through. I'm north of 25, and counting. That number does seem like a lot, but each address does make it easier for me to recall life events during each geographic period. So instead of chapter names, I have addresses. After I have exhausted those, I'll have observations about some other things.

I'll often use music to illustrate or support my thoughts. The tunes were important to me, and are relatable to everyone.

One last thing... If you have ideas for the continuation of my novel, please send them along. My address is easy to find.

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Part One

Chapter 1

2305 SEDGWICK AVENUE, THE BRONX NEW YORK

This is where I spent the first 2½ years of life. The stories I can tell from this address originate from my mother.

It was a 5th floor walkup in a triangular brick building in a city dense with people of every kind. On a daily walk, I pointed to a man on crutches and said: “Mommy, that man is broken.” She responded: “That man is a creation of God who loves him as much as he loves you.” I won’t be giving my mother a great deal of praise in this tome. But as a foundational point in life, this did set me on firm ground.

How does a full-size upright piano find its way to a 5th story apartment? I never questioned it. But I did climb it. What’s worse, it was located next to an oft-open window without a screen. That was called ‘air conditioning’ in the day. Anyway, I would climb up the piano, perch myself on the windowsill, wave and offer a bright “Hi!” to the masses below. Some would return the greeting. Some would ignore the bother from above. Yet others would gasp. Mom was among the latter. Often.

The most enduring love of my life introduced itself to me very early on: Radio. I took command of a small transistor radio and, soup spoon in hand, entered a closet (studio), and mimicked the words coming from the radio into the spoon (microphone).

I heard a baby crying in the next room. I took my teddy bear and threw it into the crib to calm it. The crier was my brand-new baby sister. I was almost 2. This was one of the few nice things I ever did for her.

Elizabeth was injured by a staph infection received from her delivering physician (who, we were told, died of it a short time later). An old couple from New Jersey was alarmed by this and insisted we move there to get good care. That’s how we wound up in Ridgewood.

Chapter 2

446 NORTHERN PARKWAY, RIDGEWOOD NEW JERSEY

All I remember of the house is that it was yellow, and my father was rarely in it – though the lawn got mowed, somehow. And there was a particular kind of protective metal grating in front of the radiators that is still available at Lowe's Home Center today.

Mae and Jack lived down the street with their kids, Bob and Maureen. Mom and Mae long held that Maureen would one day become Mrs. Fred. And while she did teach me to blow bubbles with my chewing gum, that, apparently, was not enough of a hook.

We and the other neighborhood kids spent lots of time on Joanie and Pattie's swings, and at Graydon Pool, swimming, running in the hot sand, and begging money from our mothers so we could buy ice cream from the Good Humor truck parked near the high dive.

We had frequent need of a dentist. Dr. Tannenbaum was pretty close by, and after each visit, we got to choose a prize from a small chest on the front office counter. Oh yeah... we also got a lollipop. This was before sugar-free anything. Call it Dr. T's job security.

Chapter 3

240 LAKEVIEW DRIVE, RIDGEWOOD

This was a Dutch Colonial, green and white. Bushes all around. The unfinished basement had a washing machine, an open area for hanging wet clothes or for playing in, an oil-burner furnace, tool & work bench, and a wine cellar. The first floor was a living room, dining room, dinette, one-butt kitchen, a multi-purpose room and a half-bath. The second floor had three bedrooms and a full bath including a tub with clawed feet. And the attic was where the wasps lived. The single-car garage had a big white door you pulled open from the bottom.

The front yard was split in two with a sidewalk from the street to the front porch steps. The back yard was split into four ascending levels: the first had a grotto of the Virgin Mary; the second had a grapevine, a vegetable garden, a never-used flagpole, and a shack used for housing garden implements and rodents; the third was lawn and another (empty) shack; and the fourth was lawn, and a place for dumping grass clippings. Behind that was a wire fence, a large weeded area unused by the Midland Park Lumber Company, railroad tracks, Ackerman Avenue, and the southern border of Wyckoff.

The homes on Lakeview Drive had septic tanks mostly under the front yards. Then the city put in sewer pipes and finished the project leaving a freshly-paved street with a pronounced crown. I mention this only because this arch made accuracy difficult when throwing grounders to your friends. The city's motive was to prepare the street for increased traffic – leaf hauling trucks heading for a composting site for all the city's leaves.

When I wasn't throwing grounders or sky-high fly balls replete with play-by-play, I was probably in my room reading a growing collection of Hardy Boys Mysteries. Must've read all 40+ of them at least five times each. I liked the characters, but I *loved* the critical thinking and the locations. I learned so much from these books, not least of which was a vast new world of words and the grammar that put them together.

To nourish my love affair with radio, I listened to it under my pillow overnight as so many kids do. But I wasn't listening to music; I was DXing (distance listening) for stations spread from Montreal to Miami, Cincinnati and Chicago, and, sometimes, even Dallas and Denver. Big cities with strong stations and important things going on. I wanted to explore all of these places. (And by the mid-90s, I had, indeed, visited all 50 states.)

The musty wine cellar was unused. So, I took it over and built a large and sophisticated Aurora H.O.-scale slot car track. Built and rebuilt on a 4'x8' plywood slab sitting on top of sawhorses, my designs had stretches of track for both speed and difficulty. I spent countless hours playing with that set. I can still smell the heated oil used to lubricate the little electric rotary-engine cars.

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When I was old enough, I got the job of mowing the lawn. I think I wanted to do it because it gave me power over something powerful – a 2½ horsepower Briggs & Stratton engine. I still enjoy operating machinery, and devices of all kinds.

A brook snaked its way down the length of our street, feeding into “the pond.” How it eventually got the name “King’s Pond” I do not know. There was a dam at the end of the pond which spilled into a continuation of the brook.

There was also a forest in which to build tree houses and forts and play hide-and-seek and make your sister get lost and cry and to start a forest fire (which I once did. Oh *boy*, did I ever get in trouble for that.).

Speaking of trouble... fences are meant to be climbed. And heavy lumber-moving equipment was meant to be played on. And ignition keys are meant to be turned. And I, and the other neighborhood kids, did all of these things when the lumber company was closed. God knows, we could so easily have killed ourselves.

Yes, Lakeview Drive seemed a darn-near perfect place to be a kid.

When I became mobile (I had a 3-speed bicycle!!!), I explored Ridgewood endlessly. What became evident right away was that everyone else’s houses were much nicer than mine. That meant that I was somehow lesser – something I would have to prove otherwise. Until then, I wore clothes purchased at The Thrift Shop which was located just down the street from the vehicle inspection station and just beneath the train tracks. I hated that store. It meant that I was poor. When it became possible to buy my own clothes, they were always new.

But I did like the town. I liked the rolling terrain, the trees, the downtown, the train station (what faraway places might a train take me?), and the fact that some of the New York Yankees and the Commissioner of Major League Baseball lived there. (I was actually a Mets fan, though.)

Ridgewood was considered a bedroom community of NYC in that many of the highflyers – Wall Street C-levels, big corporate muckety-mucks and such – lived here. Nobody in Glen Rock or Paramus could make that claim, I thought then. One of these guys was also the mayor of Ridgewood for a time. And his

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son was in elementary school with me. And his son stomped on, and broke, my toe with his wood-heeled boot in 5th grade. Good times.

Having a bicycle was freeing. I could go anywhere. I delivered papers for the Bergen Evening Record. I rode to ballfields all over town and played center- and right-field with a team in the Ridgewood Baseball Association. I consistently hit homers to deep center. Every. Time. That doesn't make me a power hitter, and not even a cleanup hitter. I was just an uncanny hitter.

While I was growing up there, New Jersey was often mocked as a smelly place. I guess the refineries in Linden fit that bill, and the swamps of East Rutherford before its development, and Secaucus because... Secaucus. There were parts of Newark – industrial Frelinghuysen in particular – and the blight of Central Avenue, or Weehawken or Jersey City.

But if you lived in my north Jersey world, it was green leaves and clean air almost all the time. The farther west or south you went, the less 'The Garden State' deserved its bad reputation. I had so much to learn about it and was eager to get to it.

Thus, it was not at all to my liking that I was required to sit in a classroom to learn... *anything*. Our Lady of Mount Carmel School seemed so parochial to me, no pun intended. 1st, 3rd and 5th grades featured reasonably nice teachers, but 2, 4 and 6 were brutal. The Nun teaching 1st grade unknowingly set me up for a theological crisis (to be discussed later). As encouragement to excel at piano, my 3rd grade teacher asked for an occasional classroom recital (I hated being forced to take piano lessons for five years, though I love music very much). And my 4th grade teacher, a shrew, hit my knuckles with a ruler so often, I still have scars.

Also in 3rd Grade, Mrs. Ryan would excuse me from class to go across the street to perform the duties of an altar boy. The privilege of being legitimately excused from school was motivation enough for me to learn the Confiteor – in Latin! (“...mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.”)

Mom felt I wasn't getting enough physical education at Mt. Carmel, so she put me in a ballet class. This was good exercise for sure. And I got to play the actual “Nutcracker” character. But it didn't last very long; I was persistently, sometimes destructively, trying to get the attention of the girls. Speaking of...

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I became the only person I know of who got kicked out of the Cub Scouts for being a nuisance. So proud.

While I was in 6th grade, President Kennedy was assassinated. My then-crush in the next row was sobbing. That's how I knew this was something I should care about. We watched the coverage on the television usually used for French lessons broadcast from WNET Ch.13 in NYC, pre-PBS.

Mom correlated JFK's death as an opportunity to eliminate the cost of private education, and transferred me to public school. This was a bit more to my liking, though still confining. My friends, Jack and Larry, were always trying to out-fart each other without being identified by the teacher. A year later, at Washington Junior High School, I learned to hate soccer, learned to like social studies and geography, and marveled at a music teacher who served as my first example of someone who was passionate about his job.

Also, I was a member of the AudioVisual Club. If there was electronic media to be used for a school assembly, I was among the few who would operate the projector, or whatever. Likewise, if the ladies' social at the church down the block needed to watch a film, we got to leave school and take care of that little bit of business. Freedom! if only for an hour or so.

After the paper route, I got a job as a stockboy at the A&P Supermarket in Midland Park. It was managed by Jerry Greenwood, a name I will always remember. Since we all can agree that grandmothers don't count, it was Jerry who first, credibly, meaningfully impressed upon me that I was capable of doing anything. I still have a picture of his big Irish face and red hair in my brain.

And then, high school. This must be told in the context of history because, by 1967, I was a living part of it. Recall that the 1960s were a time of great social turmoil – burning draft cards and bras and buildings, of a war in Vietnam, of political corruption, and of music crafted to support the protestations of my peers. I was a denizen of this era and I definitely did not experience high school the same way most kids do.

I had, by then, discovered that the Erie Lackawanna Railroad would take me south from Ridgewood to Hoboken Terminal (which always smelled of foul cigars), and the PATH Train would take me under the Hudson to Manhattan

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where I could hook up to the subways and go everywhere. *This*, I decided, was where I could learn all I needed to know – by experiencing it. But I digress.

Ridgewood High School was always at or near the top of state scholastic achievement rankings. Had I applied myself to it, I might've come out differently, I think. I signed out of study halls in favor of the library where I could listen to the latest Beatles or Cream or Stones albums on headphones. And I was one of the legions who were smokin' in the boys room.

Despite that, I did learn how to balance a checkbook, learned the basics of American government, learned to type on an IBM Selectric, and built an AM radio that actually worked. I got my ass kicked in a fight in the middle of the football field. I would tell you who did it, but you'd recognize his name.

When the English teacher had to leave at the beginning of class one day, she assigned us to write. Anything. Just write. And so I did; I wrote the lyrics of Arlo Guthrie's *Alice's Restaurant* word-for-word from beginning to end – all 17 minutes of it. I was quite pleased with my compliance. Oh yeah, we elected a major drug dealer for our senior class president.

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During this time, I discovered skiing which I learned by reading *Ski Magazine*. No lessons. I eventually came to purchase the first all-fiberglass Toni Sailer skis ever sold in the U.S. My downhill speeds were such that the school Ski Team asked me aboard to compete. I declined. Threading the needles in a downhill course wasn't my thing. I liked whizzing through the forest (then called Alpine Skiing, it is now called Glading).

To me, it was the difference between Indy Car racing (2½ mile oval, all left turns, near-constant high speed) and Formula One (widely-varied track design necessitating widely-varied turns and speeds). Both are challenging; I thought of and enjoyed the forest trails as being the *more* challenging. Nevertheless, I did travel with the team often to Vermont and New Hampshire, and once to Kitzbühel Austria for a week of snow perfection in the very place where Sailer was born, raised, trained for his Olympic medals, and where he would be buried years later.

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One more thing. I campaigned to build a radio station at Ridgewood High School. To support this, I developed a four-page questionnaire seeking listener preferences, mimeographed a copy for each of the 1,700+ students in the school, and then had to learn how to tabulate the results. When finished, I delivered a report 'live' on the PA system.

Honest – three critically important years of my life, and that's all I remember of it. Why? Because I wasn't there for so much of it. I was in New York.

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On a bad day, New York City is packed to the gills with things to stimulate the minds of young school-cutters. These were *good* days, given all that was taking place in that time of upheaval. Anywhere I went, something important was happening for me to learn from. And all along the way, there were people, unique characters, really, to observe.

By now, my personal vibe was well-established as that of a rebel. This would later morph into contrarianism in my thinking and argument style. So, here is something I cannot explain about me: I didn't participate in the historic events of the day. I went to these happenings to witness. That, for some reason, was satisfactory to me. I believed in the causes – more, as it turns out, than most of the noise-making participants. But marching and chanting and causing mayhem on an epic scale wasn't appealing.

One exception to my participatory disinclination must be noted: *The Woodstock Music and Art Fair: an Aquarian Exposition*. We knew it was going to be a big deal. But no one predicted that it would become the stuff of legend. There was no question – I *had* to be there; it wasn't very far. So I bought two 3-day tickets at the Sam Goody store in the Garden State Mall. \$18 apiece. This was the month before high school senior year began.

Everyone with a rainbow-colored pulse also had to be there. They all headed to *Woodstock* – 400,000 of them – in the driving rain. That, and the glut of vehicles pointed toward Yasgur's Farm, would bring Arlo to famously say: "The New York State Thruway is *closed*, man!" I couldn't get there. Now, there are many worse things in the world to regret, and in the long view, my non-presence at Woodstock is not one of them. But consider this: I threw the tickets in the trash! Yeah, I regret that.

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I very much wanted to be a part of the East Village scene. All the hippest venues were there booked up with all the monster musicians of the era. I was appropriately outfitted with bleeding madras shirts and elephant bells. But while I did go to The Village often, I never got too deeply into its culture fearing drugs and other consequences. It was all there – the good and the bad in one field of vision.

For better or worse, I have always thought of the time I spent in New York as a cherished learning experience.

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What I have shared so far ignores an important aspect of a childhood story: parents. All I remember of my parents' backgrounds is at least second-hand and, therefore, not credible enough for retelling. I don't recall ever being in a calm place listening (or caring enough to listen) to first-person stories of their upbringing, of their own families, or of their experiences in war-torn Europe. What I heard from Mom was, I thought, mostly delusional – and it turned out I was right.

I didn't even know I had relatives on Pop's side until well into my 30s. What I learned about my father came from his older brother. It was a story of a man given privilege, who instead *chose* a life of unjustifiable indifference. It was a story laden with conflict, regret and sorrow. Too messy and unappealing.

I do not know (nor would I care to explain) how my parents became who they were to me. I do know very well how they seemed through my young eyes. I've given much thought to how I'd make this portrayal and have decided that the only thing I can honestly do is tell it like I saw it and understood it at the time.

Mom was cute and flirty to everyone else. To my sister and me, she was a mean, screaming, hitting witch. Mom went out of her way to serve others. We became convinced that we meant less to her than everyone else, and we naturally grew to resent it. Her relationship with my father was the same – yelling non-stop. They'd fight all the way to church.

My father preferred to be called "Pop" which is old-country for Papa which, to me, was just old-fashioned. He had a serious gift for music, taught himself to play 20-some instruments, and wrote stacks of church music – Christmas and Easter cantatas and such which were magnificent, indeed. But he wrote

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many volumes of sheet music which never saw the light of day. He applied an alias to these works: Michael Farren. On two occasions, I remember riding with him to a music publisher in Fair Lawn where he strode in, deposited a bankers box full of freshly-composed original music and left without a word. When I asked if they were going to give him money for it, he said, "Nah. I don't care. They can just have it." He once said that the alias initials 'MF' stood for Magnificent Fraud. And a fraud he was; God-praising in public... violent in private.

Pop took the #41 bus into Manhattan each day to perform an office job in the garment district. I rode with him once and can still remember the desolation of the clothing factory environment and the apparent meaninglessness of his work. Years later, he moved to a multinational company in Ardsley, in beautiful Westchester County NY where his office was much nicer, but his job was, to me, just as meaningless.

And when he came home to Mom's complaining about whatever bad things we kids had done that day, well, that was the trigger to screaming and beatings with belts and an pervasive environment of fear in the house. Our presence was an imposition on him. He wanted to come home to dinner, and then isolate himself in the dining room where he wrote music. And he conducted the church choir. And he played tuba for a schuhplattler band, "The Knickerbockers" all around the tri-state area on Friday and Saturday nights. He did as much as he could to *not* be connected to his family. But he did, loyally, come home every single night. That's what society expected of him at the time.

Given this, you might imagine how family vacations went. Mom must've insisted. Pop must've resisted... then acquiesced. Vacationing, after all, is what other American families did. At once, I was eager to explore new places; and I dreaded the time to be spent in close-quarters with my parents. What should have been fun was invariably a major drag. Mom and Pop bickering in the front seat all the way to Colonial Williamsburg, or Charlotte, or Boston.

The Hershey trip highlight was not the chocolate factory; it was where Pop had finally had enough, pulled the car off to the side of the highway, got out,

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and walked away. Same for Expo'67 in Montreal. We were told he had been hospitalized with appendicitis. Really?

Before that came the short trip from north Jersey to Queens for the 1964 New York World's Fair. Pop hunted seemingly for hours for a free streetside parking spot in a neighborhood far from Flushing Meadows, and we walked. And we didn't get to see nearly enough of the legendary event. But we didn't pay for parking, dammit!

Another outing took us to the north Bronx and a kid-favorite theme park called *Freedomland*. This happened to be on a day on which a kid-favorite TV host was MCing a stage event. I told Pop that Sonny Fox would be there that day. Pop told me that he wasn't. As we passed the stage, I pointed to Sonny Fox. Pop insisted that he wasn't there.

His mother came over from 'the old country' and lived with us for a few years. She was without a doubt the saddest woman on the entire planet.

One might think I was destructive; I think I was curious. I would take things apart to see how they worked, or what they contained. Of course, I was unable to put these things back together. And when they were discovered and I was queried about it, I did the only thing I could to protect myself... I blamed my sister. For *many* things. Amazingly, I was convincing. And when Pop came home and Mom told him about the bad thing my sister had done that day, it was she who took the beating, not me. To this day, I am unforgivingly ashamed of this. Things were already bad enough; she didn't deserve punishment for *my* offenses.

(I'm still curious today. The difference is that when I take things apart now, it's usually to fix them – and I usually have a fair idea of how that will happen, and how I'm going to put it back together again. As for my baby sister, it's amazing that she talks to me at all. But she does.)

Between the two parents, I was told almost daily that I was lazy and that I'd never amount to anything. While I never consciously believed either of those things, I made little effort to prove otherwise. Why not live up to their expectations?

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Pop cited himself as an example of why college wasn't necessary. He was making it (we didn't know how to quantify that), and we would too – without college. I was at least smart enough to observe that my high school peers were headed for degrees. But then, I was never going to amount to anything anyway...

I ran away from home many, many times – though I was usually back by dinnertime. I was determined, once; I got on the railroad tracks behind the lumber yard and walked and walked all the way to Wortendyke. *Wortendyke!* I had never heard of it. I must've traveled so far, I thought. A little scared that I might be near to falling off the edge of the earth, I retraced my steps back home. In time for dinner.

Maybe it's another manifestation of the same escapist energy; maybe it's a manifestation of my interest in having control of powerful things (like the lawnmower). Whether both or neither, when I was sixteen, I took off in the family car – several times. The driving age was seventeen at the time. It was a gold '64 Rambler American with a 3-on-the-column shift. The folks must've been out playing canasta or who-knows-what else. But there was the car, and there was I, and I didn't think of it as temptation; it was opportunity. And I took it (without the benefit of driver's training), and I got caught – twice! Maybe I wasn't so smart.

So, “lazy,” and “never amount to anything.” Another thing I was told every day was that, on my 17th birthday, I could leave the house and do things my own way. Rebel that I was, and to no one's great surprise, that's exactly what I did.

Somewhere in this book, I must make note of my childhood bad behavior. I'll do it here because it fits a storytelling flow. It is not told here because I necessarily think that my behavior was entirely caused by my home life. It may have been, but it also might be that I was just a bad kid.

We now return you to your regularly scheduled book.

Remember the old people who insisted we move out of The Bronx? They'd had something to do with sponsoring Mom into the U.S. in the first place. And

since we didn't have relatives, they inserted themselves into that role. They were "grandparents" to us kids.

Grandpa was a chemical scientist who was part of a small team that prepared the insecticide DDT for farm use. The story goes that he proved its safety by consuming a spoonful of the stuff in front of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Grandpa lived a long, frisky life, and climbed the Matterhorn each year. As for DDT, well, it rightfully came to an inglorious demise in 1972.

But with his success came wealth. Grandpa and Grandma lived in a stone mansion at the very highest point in Ridgewood, and from which you had an unobstructed view of the skyline of New York. That was pretty impressive. But the attraction for us kids was that the house had a dumbwaiter – an elevator for food from the kitchen to the upper-levels. We spent a great deal of time going up and down in that dumb waiter. Never saw a lick of food in it, either.

Grandma spent all of her time and considerable energies advocating for her two passions: the Roman Catholic Church, and the Reverend Billy Graham who, we learned later, was decidedly *not* Catholic. Grandma had a full-time secretary who would type letter after letter to people of influence. Grandma traveled for business and for pleasure. She often went to Switzerland to visit her children and their families.

And she made time for us, too. She'd pick us up and take us for ice cream or whatever, all the while encouraging us, and drilling us on Bible verses. This was a dichotomy. Catholics studied catechisms, not Bibles. In this, Grandma was an outlier.

Our family spent Christmases with Grandma and Grandpa. We'd watch a slide show of their latest travels projected from a 35mm Kodak Carousel. We kids were made to stand and recite the biblical Christmas Story. And then came the full meal deal of which the highlight was always "Grandpa Salad:" wilted lettuce seasoned with oregano, fresh lemon juice and Maggi (a liquid sodium seasoning). We couldn't get enough. And we couldn't duplicate it years later.

Our grandparents had vacation homes at the edge of a lake in central-Jersey, overlooking a lake in north-Jersey, on a boardwalk on Fire Island NY, and atop a mountain near Bern Switzerland (they actually owned the whole mountain).

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As young kids, we were fortunate to spend time at all of our grandparents' domestic vacation homes. This was usually with Mom and not Pop (just as it was with outings to Lake Sebago, Graydon Park and Palisades Amusement Park). Neighborhood friends often came with us to Grandma and Grandpa's houses to, for example, jump from high atop a sand dune and float not-so-slowly down to the beach using a garbage can lid held above our heads to theoretically keep us aloft. Rowboats were available to us at the lakes, too. And bicycles. These places and things were immensely enjoyable. And they were diversions from home. But I don't think I ever really valued the privilege.

Grandma knew well of our challenges at home. I didn't recognize her efforts to redirect our little lives. To me, she was just an old lady with cool houses who sometimes got us treats, and who made us suffer through endless slide shows.

Years later, after Grandma had passed, I flew into Geneva, Eurail'd to Bern and was picked up at the station by Grandpa. The ride up the mountain was reminiscent of Arlo Guthrie's *The Motorcycle Song* wherein "on one side of the mountain road, there was a mountain. And on the *other* side of the mountain road, there was 'nuthin!" Being a vigorous New Yorker, it was hard to scare me. But Grandpa had to be driving 150mph and, well, fresh underwear might have been necessary when we got to the top. Grandma's headstone was positioned so that she had the perfect vantage of the lush valley below. The view alone made the trip worthwhile.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of Radio in my early life. No matter what I did or did not do, I had been created by God himself to be in that industry. I studied the craft as a listener. I read every book and article as would a student reading text. I wanted to be fluent when I finally set foot in a station. I listened to the DJs and talk show hosts as if they were teachers. And, yes, I even placed one of them on a pedestal.

I heard, on the radio, that my favorite DJ would attend the grand opening of a clothing store just a few blocks from my home. Using paper route money, I bought a camera and a roll of film at F.W. Woolworth, and then strutted my 10-year-old self to the festooned store. I was first in line, and when the door opened, I marched from the bright sunlight into a darkened interior, \$5

camera pointed and ready to shoot. The man near the back of the store grew taller and taller. And when I reached him, he looked down at me and said, "You can't shoot a picture in here with a camera like *that!*"

Total deflation.

At this writing, the DJ is well into his 80s and still does twice-weekly shows on SiriusXM. He has done a great deal of good in the world over the past six decades, thus my choice to not name him. And it should be said that he was absolutely correct in his assessment of my photographic gear. But still.....

Today, I reserve 'Hero' status for people I know who adopt cocaine babies. Or grandmothers who gave a damn.

A few years later, I volunteered for the American Red Cross *Newspapers For The Blind* program. I was assigned a nice tape recorder with a mic, and I read articles from the Ridgewood Sunday News. The product of my weekly effort was then duplicated onto cassettes and distributed to their clients.

Chapter 4

THE YMCA – EAST ORANGE

On the much-longed-for occasion of my 17th birthday, I moved into a tiny room at the 'Y' which was then just a flop house. My window faced the Rheingold Beer plant a block away, and I got the full benefit of the stench of hops and malt. I had a cigarette-stained chair and a squeaky spring bed. The bathroom was down the hall and I quickly learned not to spend time in it. I could afford these accommodations with earnings from driving a dry-cleaning delivery van to the rich folks in West Orange. I didn't do it very long, though.

I got sick and was in the hospital for three weeks. Hepatitis, I was told; the inference being that I was a druggie and was using dirty needles. Well, I never had used drugs or needles. Still, I carried that damning diagnosis with me for decades having been told I'd be committing a federal crime if I donated blood. I faithfully brought it up over the years when asked by medical professionals.

Fred Marx

But only a few years ago did one finally bother to seriously examine the evidence. The result: jaundice. Not hep. I can donate blood now.

Chapter 5

70 SOUTH MUNN AVENUE, EAST ORANGE

This was a multi-story brown brick building. I had an efficiency apartment on the 2nd floor which I shared with the cockroaches. I'd take the #70 bus down Central Avenue into Newark where I sold English dictionaries to non-English-speaking Cuban immigrants there and in Hoboken. This wasn't a thriving enterprise, so I hopped into multilevel marketing with a company called Golden Products. This was consumer home cleaning products. I don't know how I lasted a year, 'cuz I sure didn't sell much soap or distributorships. I do know that our meetings were held in a large room in the Howard Johnson's Hotel & Restaurant near Newark Airport, and that I ate a lifetime's worth of all-you-can-eat Fried Tendersweet Clams with tartare sauce, fries and slaw – \$1.10. If there were a HoJo's still open today, I'd go out of my way to chow down on those ~~rubber bands~~ clams again.

And while we're talking about Yum!, let's take note of a few culinary delights in NYC at the time. Tad's Steak House probably used the lowest quality meat and laded it with salt and MSG, but man, it was tasty. Horn & Hardarts was an automat where you stuck nickels, dimes or quarters into slots to open the little doors and fetch the cardboard-tasting food from inside. But the big prize was Zum Zum, a German-inspired chain of sandwich shops. They stacked the pastrami so high, you needed three vertical mouths to eat it. Yum Yum!

Back to the apartment. East Orange was relatively close to Caldwell where my then-girlfriend was going to college. My off time was spent in buses to and from the campus where we held hands and made out. I begged her to overnight at my apartment. Finally, she did. And on that cold and rainy night, who knocked at the door but my baby sister who didn't have anywhere else to go. Well, she couldn't come here, I said unkindly. I didn't say that my girlfriend was inside and I was about to get lucky. As it turns out, I didn't get lucky, I didn't get any sleep, and my sister overnighted in the hallway – I hope.

I Should Know Better

My girlfriend and a few of her friends found a stray cat in the park. They couldn't return to their college dorm with it. Not knowing where else to take it, they brought it to me. The cat was so dumb, they said, that it deserved only to be called "Cat."

My apartment window overlooked the driveway and entrance to the underground garage. The unscreened window was often open for air. One day, Cat jumped up from the waterbed, past the window sill, and right out the window... 2 stories down. Nine lives and landing-on-its-feet notwithstanding, Cat was hurt. I put it in a shoebox and took it to a vet who wanted \$70 to fix things. I didn't have that kind of loot. Selective memory: I don't recall how this story ended for Cat.

—

The Vietnam War was not going well. Our troops were being killed and maimed, and we couldn't replace them fast enough. Young men were getting exemptions from service by, among other things, going to college. Since I wasn't one of those, I was eligible for The Draft Lottery. And when my birthdate was pulled from the hat, it was paired with the number 47 which was pulled from another hat. This means that of the 365 birthdates of the year, mine was high on the list. The net effect was that I would be involuntarily conscripted into the Army and, most likely, would be going to Vietnam.

I remember not caring that much, and being oddly curious as to *why* I didn't care that much. But I did have to go through the induction physical at a big military center in Newark. If you've seen the 2007 movie, *Across The Universe*, you'll remember the induction scene set to The Beatles' *I Want You (She's So Heavy)*. It would be funny if it weren't so real. Throw in the draft board physical lyrics from *Alice's Restaurant* and you've got a pretty good idea what this experience was like.

Within that process, I was identified as someone with flat feet and a sinus problem. The flat feet flaw, by itself, wasn't enough to disqualify me from service. But the sinus issue had to be examined further. So they gave me a bus ticket and an appointment to see a civilian ENT in West Orange. This doctor had a huge bulbous nose, himself. He poked and prodded into each of my nostrils and then announced [use a thick Jewish accent here], "You

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and go dVietnam wid a nose like dat!” He scribbled something on my paperwork and sent me back to Newark.

They said, “Huh, you’ve got a deviated septum. No military service for you.” They stamped ‘4F’ on my paperwork and I was outta there just like that. Little did I know that we ALL have deviated septums (crooked interior air passages) to one degree or another. I was just lucky, I guess.

By the way, this ENT doctor didn’t seem even remotely related to my DJ friend in the story above despite their nearly identical verbiage (as I remember it).

A post script. A few years later, I had surgery to correct the sinus problems. This removed my ineligibility for military service. By then, the draft was long gone, and the War had finally ended. Just lucky, I guess.

A short story with a major impact. I met someone who, upon hearing of my ambition to be in radio, said: “I don’t listen to radio. I don’t want it to control what I listen to.” It was a shock to my (then-)belief in the crystalline intentions of the industry and its practitioners. It was the beginning of my understanding of the idea that *I* have control over what’s important. *I* have control over my influences. With all the noise aimed at me from every direction, I owe it to myself to filter out the needless.

Chapter 6

BACK TO RIDGEWOOD

My initial solo foray into the world was neither good nor bad, I thought. But I was now strong enough to go to my parents’ house, and able enough to avoid the crap that lived there. I drove a cab in NYC for a while. I worked the sales desk for a welding supply company in Clifton for a while.

I proudly identified as a New Yorker, but found the excessive time in traffic to be tiresome. And I was at a place where the thought of getting started with my preordained life was emerging. Then Pop’s company transferred him to a new headquarters in North Carolina. I was getting nowhere in the city of my birth. So, I decided to try a new environment. I went along.

Chapter 7

4802 TARA DRIVE, GREENSBORO NORTH CAROLINA

This was a brand new brick ranch in a brand new development in a nice area of town. Greensboro was a fresh place to explore, and to weigh and contrast the idea of New York being the center of the universe. The difference was too great. So, deep into the first winter there, I flew into Newark, rented a car (first song on WABC: *Love's Theme* by The Love Unlimited Orchestra), and drove to Hunter Mountain for a few days on its ice-encrusted slopes.

Back in Carolina, I sold floor coverings for ColorTile for a while. The boss's name was Cecil. I became a billing clerk for a national trucking company, Roadway Express. The boss's name was Floyd. His boss was Marvin. Center-of-the-universe people didn't have names like this. Anyway, billing for a trucker is applying federally published rates to specific commodities times the volume being shipped. It is fast-paced work, required a large capacity for detail, and I loved it.

And I hooked up with my long-awaited vocation in Greensboro, though not in a way I expected.

Chapter 8

1220 HIGHLAND AVENUE, GREENSBORO

Almost as soon as I got to Greensboro, I met a guy who'd just been fired by the Southern Baptist Convention for being, well, not Baptist enough. His black-sheep status appealed to me. His method of getting back to relevance was to start a radio program. My interest in radio made me a match and I assisted him in recording five daily 15-minute programs per week. This enterprise was initially accomplished on his living room floor using a Teac reel-to-reel deck. Operations were soon moved to his barn loft which we rebuilt for office and studio space. The program masters were dubbed for two stations, WPET in Greensboro and WAIR in Winston-Salem, and I delivered them to the stations every Friday.

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My working relationship with Reverend Black Sheep went well despite our cultural city boy/southern boy dissimilarity. I was given more and diverse opportunities including travel, and a part in the establishment of a local non-denominational church replete with a sound system operated by me.

In time, I married. I would be more descriptive, but she's still among us and I want to respect her privacy. We got pregnant and I had insufficient medical coverage. This was a turning point. Long story short, I joined the U.S. Air Force.

I had long known that the military had worldwide broadcast operations, so I sold myself to the recruiter as an old radio hand using the Red Cross *Talking Newspaper* and living room floor/barn loft activity as experience. To make my background even more credible, I drove to Norfolk to test for an FCC 3rd Class RadioTelephone License which I still have to this day. With this, I was eligible to enter the service with a *guaranteed* job in radio. I had it on paper.

Now, it must be obvious that I am not a conformist. This made me a probable bad fit for the military which only succeeds when all parties perform as ordered. I knew this. But I made a conscious decision to do things the Air Force way. There was more at stake than just medical benefits. There was excellent training in my chosen field, opportunity to see and work in places I had only dreamed of and, after four years, apply my well-honed skills in the real world. That was the plan.

Chapter 9

LACKLAND AIR FORCE BASE, SAN ANTONIO TEXAS

But first, I had to get through Basic Training. And I had to do it in the heat of summer 1976. I was 25 then, and the oldest in my unit. So, naturally, the Drill Instructors anointed me Dorm Chief. I was responsible for some 50 young whippersnappers making their beds properly and wearing their uniforms properly and for wiping snot off their noses. There was no benefit for me, just more work.

The only negative consequence was when one of the airmen made some kind of horrible mistake (I'm being facetious) and, because the buck stopped with

me, I had to share in the punishment which was to forfeit a rare day of liberty in San Antonio. Sadly, this was a day on which my baby sister traveled from Houston to spend a lovely day with me on the famed Riverwalk. Instead, we strolled around the base parade field.

I was good on the rope walls. I crawled through mud with ease. I didn't die when exposed to mustard gas. But I've never been a runner, and a 3-mile track was calling my name. It took the exhortations of my dorm mates to push me across the finish line on the third attempt at required completion.

Apart from conscientious objectors, everyone in basic was required to field-strip an M-16, clean it, and reassemble it. I became proficient. We trained in dry fire (blanks). I did great. Then came wet fire (real bullets). We were each issued 80 rounds and were assigned a distant bullseye target to shoot. We were scored. I was proudly able to boast the highest score in my unit: 78 of 80.

But my boast immediately became a curse. The great Air Force personnel department in the sky noted my expertise with firearms and assigned me to the Security Police – completely oblivious of my guaranteed assignment in radio. It took three weeks in casual status at Lackland, daily visits to the assignment office, much frustration, and fear of a wasted 4-year military enlistment before things were finally resolved in my favor.

And with that resolution began the first intentional adventure of adulthood.

Chapter 10

FORT BENJAMIN HARRISON, INDIANAPOLIS INDIANA

For being so smart, I sure can be dumb. As I approached the gate, I realized that I didn't know what to do or say when I got there. So I turned the car around and checked myself into a nearby Motel 6. I looked and looked at the piece of paper they'd given me at the end of basic training not fully understanding the meaning of the word at the top: "Orders." I came to reckon that any self-respecting gate attendant should know what to do with it. The

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next day, I did it all over again and, waddya know, the guard *did* know what to do with it... and with me.

“Fort Ben,” as it was fondly called, was an Army base with an absolutely massive three-story tan brick and glass building. From this edifice, all of the Army’s payables, and all of the payroll checks for soldiers around the globe, were produced. It was, at the time, the second largest U.S. government building – the Pentagon being larger.

Somewhere amidst the myriad other structures and trees and open spaces was a three-story white brick building bearing the name *Defense Information School (DINFOS)*. It was kinda plain-looking inside the front archway, and the new bunch of students including my most-excited self were ushered into a lecture hall. An Army Sergeant-Major with a nearly square torso stood before us. He was wearing his Class A’s adorned with service awards and ribbons... almost more than there was material to accommodate them.

In a voice-of-God baritone, Sgt-Maj SpongeBob boasted that ‘the Army had more ships than the navy; the Army had more airplanes than the Air Force; the Army had more troops than all of the other services combined.’ Where was he going with this? So we were relieved when he took a breath and officially welcomed all of us who were from the other branches of the military. There was to be complete equality here, he said, and it would be hard work and fun at the same time.

We were sectioned into smaller bunches for a tour of the facilities. And where did my group go first but to “Radio Row” with studios and record libraries where we’d be learning to use the military’s broadcast tools, and learning the military’s information protocols; where we’d learn from deeply experienced hands, and be mentored, and be evaluated. I was like “Oh boy, this is the big dream. Can we start right now, today?” But wait, the tour’s just getting started.

The upper floor was set up for print journalism and public affairs. This was less interesting to me; I was all about electronic broadcast communications. Which brings us to the basement.

And *in* the basement, there were television studios, cameras galore, lights, mics, *everything* needed to produce TV programs. In the mezzanine were

control rooms into which the products of the tools below were fed and where decisions were made that got a show closer to its finished form. And I looked around and said to myself, “Oh My God, this is a *huge* bonus.” Up to that moment, I had never considered that my preordination for radio might come with a television corollary. I had no idea what TV production would become in my professional life just as I had no idea how much and how often I would need the writing and PR skills also required to be learned upstairs.

And from that day, for the next 6+ years, my feet hit the floor each morning and I couldn’t wait to get to work and see what adventure was waiting for me there. I was a superhero: a “DINFOS-trained killer!” Today, we congregate on several Facebook groups, the primary being “DINFOS-trained Killers.”

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Jeremy was born while I was at tech school. Fort Ben’s hospital didn’t have a birthing unit, so we were farmed out to the big Community Hospital in Indianapolis. I was in the room and, as with seemingly everything else, I had no idea how important this little guy would be to me.

Chapter 11

TATALINA AIR FORCE STATION, MCGRATH ALASKA

If you have a regular job in the military, like, say, aircraft mechanic, you could be arbitrarily assigned to any base, large or small, that had aircraft that mechanics fix. That could be virtually anywhere. If you have a more esoteric job, like say Radio/Television Broadcast Production/Journalism and Photography Specialist, you were likely to be assigned to a place that needed those skills – particularly the electronic parts of those skills – in those relatively rare, remote places where military broadcast facilities exist. So we were told, early and often, that we were going to get a “remote” assignment right out of the chute. For a year. *Without* the family!

I was flown into Anchorage and to Elmendorf Air Force Base where I was on-boarded, issued extreme season gear (e.g. bunny boots, parkas, and mosquito net hats), and told not to play with bears. With that, Permanent-

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Change-of-Station orders, and a ticket on a C-130, I was off to McGrath Alaska. Where?

The C-130 Hercules has been a workhorse for all branches of the military since the late '50s and is still being produced by Lockheed Martin – and still being regularly flown – today. A “seat” on a 130 might be a hammock-like bench along the interior wall and you are as likely to be facing a jeep as you are to be facing a pallet of supplies, or a helicopter – *inside* the cargo hold. To help with the noise, you were issued ear plugs which you chew (and which taste) like bubble gum. Then you shape them and stick ‘em in your ears.

So the 130 hauls stuff. As important is *where* it hauls stuff. On my very first ride, I was going to a place that barely exists on the map. A short airstrip is etched onto a rare mesa in the Kuskokwim Mountains at McGrath and is covered with gravel and snow. The main point of emphasis though is that this strip is SHORT – think aircraft carrier short. You come in at 17 thousand miles per hour and drop your tailhook and latch onto the cable which pulls you to a stop in 3.5 milliseconds.

But with a C-130, there is no tailhook and no cable. The plane has twin turbo-props on each wing and is designed to touch ground and reverse engines so fast and so emphatically that you think your spleen is French-kissing your tonsils. Welcome to Alaska!

It was dark when we landed, so I was directed to check into a room at The Roadhouse – a rustic hotel/bar. A nice, restful night before heading up the mountain? Not a chance. It was March, and that means the annual Iditarod Sled Dog Race (the last great race on earth!) was being run. And that night, it was running right through McGrath. There was a lot of activity there, but not a lot of sound. No barking dogs; they were sleeping. No rousing mushers at the bar; they were preparing for the next leg of the race. It was all new, so I missed a night of sleep taking it all in. It was important to them, and it was fascinating to me.

Tatalina Air Force Station was my remote assignment right out of tech school. And like other places where I might have gotten an assignment, the 100+

souls there had no other information or entertainment available to them save for the worn-out films routinely ignored on weekends at the NCO Club.

The internet and PCs and laptops were still at least a decade away. So airmen and officers and contractors bought high-end stereo systems at the base exchanges (for way low prices) and set up aural kingdoms in their dorm rooms. It was common to walk the halls to the divergent rhythms being produced by Pioneer tape decks, Thorens turntables, Marantz amps, JVC equalizers, and JBL speakers. Receivers were useless in remote locations and were usually shipped home.

Being in the Alaskan interior means you design your buildings to function in the extreme cold. Tatalina's buildings were interconnected with heated hallways which means, oddly, that we were able to wear summer uniforms in winter. You're good just so long as you stay inside.

Tatalina's mission was long-range radar support. In three months, this function would be taken over by a newer, larger facility somewhere else – and Tatalina would mostly close after service since 1957. This meant that my time there would be well-short of the usual year for a remote assignment. But no matter; I was living my dream.

I had two jobs here: radio and TV, each job separated only by a wall. In the morning, I was live for 4 hours playing records and making announcements. My first record? The brand new #1 hit *Dancing Queen* by ABBA.

Let's talk about the record library. In 1942, the American Forces Radio & Television Service (AFRTS) entered a licensing agreement with record companies and artists. Their materials were allowed to be used by and played exclusively for military and civilian contractors in locations where other English-language programming wasn't available. So, 16inch vinyl "albums" were specially made containing apparently random selected tracks. But these tracks were fastidiously cataloged, and index cards were sent along with each record. And this wealth of music was available even in a hole-in-the-wall place like Tatalina, and to a rookie air talent like me.

The albums occupied shelf space from floor to ceiling on all four walls of the room. This gave the studio a reverential vibe – like church for a guy like me. Wall-to-wall records also provided a unique kind of soundproofing.

Fred Marx

I loved, Loved, *Loved* being in this studio.

Running a music show was 98% art and 2% science. The latter was the greater challenge – getting to, and joining the news network at precisely the top of each hour. Your record has to end at just the right second; your station identification has to be completed at just the right second; and the net join had to take place immediately after a cue only I could hear on my headphones. It's a process called 'back-timing.' The more seamlessly this was accomplished, the prouder you could be of your existence on the planet.

Needless to say, I had a great time. But I also provided much-needed information to my listeners for whom I functioned as town crier. One such time... a couple guys got a tag, ventured out in the cold and shot a moose. The only facility capable of dealing with it was the NCO Club (such as it was). Well, the cooks prepared big buckets of moose meat stew and we could smell it in all of the interconnected buildings. Mouthwatering. I got the call from the kitchen: "Lunch is ready. Come and get it!" I put the word out on the air and then followed everybody to the club. And it was good. Gimme seconds good.

But about an hour later, a new aroma was replacing the stew; yes, we were all getting tummy aches. We were all having gas. If there had been windows to open, they would have been frozen shut. We were prisoners in our own closed environment.

On the television side of the wall, things were a bit more straight forward. We had two projectors and telecast closed-circuit in glorious black-and-white. Programming in the form of 16mm mylar film was "bicycled" from AFRTS in Los Angeles and bounced from place to place until it reached us. Nothing was timely, but we watched it anyway... it was a touch of home. During my time at Tatalina, *Saturday Night Live* became a thing. I remember thinking poorly of it. Sophomoric. Won't last. Chevy who?

Chapter 12

GALENA AFB, GALENA

The assignment at Tatalina ended too soon. Another C-130 flight to Anchorage, then a commercial/contract seat aboard a Wein-y bird (Wein Air Alaska) got me to Galena. This was a small Air Force base on the Yukon River 330 air miles from Anchorage and 268 air miles from Fairbanks. In other words, it was, truly, in the middle of nowhere.

About three hundred Athabascan natives lived in Old Galena which was flooded nearly every April when the river thawed out – an event known as “breakup.” So New Galena was established on a slightly higher plane and *it* was flooded with fair regularity, too.

Rural Alaska had a public education system in which any village with 15 or more students had to build a school. The Galena School was built high off the ground on stilts which were actually freezers planted deeply into the ground to keep the permafrost frozen. I was among a small crew of airmen hired by the village for a very short time to build a fence around the school to keep the bears out.

I visited the town’s tiny general store once. Among many things, it had a small bottle of ketchup for \$5 – in 1978. In today’s dollars, that would be \$23.15. Never forgot it.

The airport terminal was a log cabin with a wood stove in the middle of it for heat. Civilians and military personnel came through that terminal which had benches, but didn’t have concessions or restrooms.

Galena Air Force Base was a “base” because it supported two F-4 Phantom fighters. One of the two runways was long enough for them, and commercial aircraft were also able to operate there.

Two F-4s needed a hangar to live in. And civil engineers to maintain the hangar. And mechanics to fix the jets. And cooks to feed the pilots, engineers and mechanics. You get the idea. If you run the math all the way out, it takes 300 Air Force personnel to support two F-4s. So, between the folks in Old and

Fred Marx

New Galena, and the folks on base, you have a net total of about 600 pair of ears and eyes to listen to and watch me work. I felt like I'd hit the big time!

The radio studio was located in the mezzanine at the Birchwood Hangar, only a ¼ mile stroll from my dorm. Regrettably, this base was too large for interconnected hallways, and the winter wind chills were often -60°F. Conversely, summer heat could reach 90+°F with a 100% chance of mosquitos.

Up early in the morning was I. A quick wave to the sleeping F-4s, and a scamper up the stairs to the studio. This room was similar to the one at Tatalina, but with a small window (not that there was anything to see from it). I had access to the myriad records, callers could make requests, I made announcements for the base and the local community, and for command and other official entities. All this and the network join at the top of every hour. Heaven.

The daily show complete, I was off to the mess – which was already closed – for a late breakfast/early lunch made-to-order just for me. And then back to the hangar where the television studio was located on the perimeter of the ground floor. As if I hadn't had enough fun already that day, now I got to play TV.

The TV station had a large studio with a news set in one corner and space enough for two monochrome cameras on tripods with squeaky wheels to maneuver with. Most of the remainder of the room had metal shelving loaded with 16mm film cans containing programs like *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *Combat*, and *Star Trek*. AFRTS-LA bicycled in the more recent stuff like *The Muppet Show* and *M*A*S*H*.

All of this was broadcast across the base and to the Village of Galena. But not just that... because one of our tower's radials was planted in marsh at the edge of the Yukon River, our signal reached farther out than it should have. This was much to the liking of the natives in villages from Koyukuk to Ruby.

The television broadcast day began with a 30-minute newscast at 6pm and was followed by stuff from our shelves and from LA. On Friday and Saturday nights, I inaugurated an all-night request-a-show concept which quickly became popular. I had an insomniac friend who worked at the fuel depot. He

volunteered to pull the all-nighters. The most-requested show? *Donnie & Marie*. Why? Marie was, shall we say, much-appreciated. Hell, when you're stuck in a place as remote as central Alaska for a year, even Miss Piggy was much-appreciated.

My TV job consisted of three things: planning future programming, preparation of news copy, and delivery of news live on-air. And while one might think that being on-air was the cool part, for me, it was actually the planning part... but maybe not for the reason you might think.

To be sure, there is nothing cool about programming a TV station. You have your shows and you schedule them to fit within certain blocks of time. This schedule then goes to paper, show descriptions are added, and it becomes a TV guide. You go to the NCO Club and make about 500 copies.

Then comes the coolness (literally!). Each Friday afternoon, I took the product of my labor to several distribution points on base. My last stop was the Security Police station. The SPs had three pickup trucks for official business (all were either kept running all winter to keep from freezing, or were parked and serviced in the heated hangar). The SPs also had three snow machines for multiple purposes – one of which was the delivery of TV guides into town and to the native villages along the Yukon River that received our signal. And oh darn if that job wasn't *mine*!

Yes, that was me speeding up and down the middle of the frozen Yukon to the places needing my precious cargo. It was So. Much. Fun. I remember thinking, "Wait'll my grandchildren hear about this!" (No, your honor. To date, none of my grandchildren have asked about or heard of my extreme coolness.)

The second facet of the TV job was news prep. There was a teletype on which was received a hybrid of AP and UPI newsfeeds. It was uplinked from LA and provided a constant, single-rhythm taptaptap – maybe 300 words per minute. Special bulletins were punctuated with bells and asterisks. The machine made a background sound apropos of the newscasts being performed at the opposite corner of the studio. My job was to cull through the seeming miles of paper flowing from this machine and fashion it into an 'order of descending

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importance' newscast. Rewriting and story transitions were always necessary. Here, again, I couldn't get enough.

Early in my tenure at Galena, I was the sole broadcaster – and almost literally ran the radio and TV stations by myself. This included on-camera news delivery wearing a too-large blazer with an official Channel 8 logo on it. I also pre-positioned the cameras, and ran the switcher which was located a dozen steps from the news desk. It was primitive – me walking onto and off set. My only specific recollection of my performances was upon the death of Elvis Presley. I read the copy with an image of The King inset over my left shoulder. Even included a few phrases of *Love Me Tender* played from an unseen player at my fingers. Total schmaltz.

Board operations is where you put recorded shows on the air. I did a lot of it, especially at first. There was a time when I held a particular fascination with Donna Summer's hit song, *I Feel Love*. I liked the dance version's 8-minute length, the driving disco beat and the synthesized riff. I dubbed the song onto a cart upstairs and brought it down to the TV studio to listen to during a board shift. I had it cranked up so loud that it somehow bled through to the TV show that was airing. People on base pulled me aside the next day to ask how *I Feel Love* managed to be a part of the soundtrack of *The Fugitive*.

Soon enough, Leo and José arrived. DINFOS-trained killers, they were. And the only difference between them and me was that they didn't think Galena was the big time. At first.

I had come to understand that my true power was in producing the newscasts as opposed to being in them. So I put the two newbies to work on-camera, added Al from the fire department to do sports, and found Jan for the weather. We *were* big-time. And we had tons of fun.

I had my first brush with celebrity at Galena. Once your face is on TV or your voice is on radio, you are known to all, and all feel privileged to offer their thoughts about your work. All good. But on the day I waited at the log cabin terminal for the Wein-y bird to fly me out to my next adventure, townsfolk were genuinely distressed and said they'd miss me.

Chapter 13

344 VAMPIRE STREET, HILL AFB UTAH

For all the professional experience I'd had, there was no family experience. No sooner had Jeremy been born than I was off to Alaska. He was about 1½ now and had known only his mother. I was all peppy and ready to continue adventuring. He was all 'leave me and Mom alone.' At least that was my perception. And, of course, I honestly couldn't blame him... not then or now.

We were lucky to get base housing for this one-year "accompanied" tour. Our street – and all the streets in the neighborhood – was named for famed fighter aircraft. But Jeremy's room faced the Weber Canyon in the Wasatch Mountains and the winds beat relentlessly against his window at night. During the day, fighter jets were on maneuvers, taking off and landing with ear-splitting intensity. Mom wasn't happy with that. So we moved to an apartment right outside of Hill. Much quieter. I have no record of the address.

A little side story before we get to the other good stuff. Another airman and I got gigs at a Salt Lake City radio station: KSOP-FM, aka *K-SOP Country*. I got the Saturday and Sunday 6pm-midnight shift. One problem: neither the other airman nor I could afford headphones with which to ply our craft. So we went to a Kmart in Ogden, pooled our resources, and bought a \$5 set of headphones to share.

How *had* the Air Force tele-production mission managed to exist without me? I didn't know. But here I was, a full year of black-and-white experience under my belt, ready to take on everything Hill AFB could bestow upon me. Detachment 8 happens to be the unit where the much-vaunted "Air Force – A Great Way of Life" recruiting commercials came from with the sunlight gleaming from jet wings against the pure blue sky. Countless industrial and instructional videos and programs came from Det.8 and were distributed worldwide. Civilians with credentials longer than their arms were at the top of the org chart alongside the officers who were, themselves, TV heavyweights.

Equipment, oh my god. Color cameras on pedestals with silent ball-bearing wheels. Turreted lenses. Cyc strips. Chroma-key screens. Audio equipment.

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Costuming. And the control room with a switcher sporting more lighted buttons than Carter's had liver pills. Color monitors. Time code. Remote electronic editing. ¾", 1" and 2" tape decks. Special effects. Music library just for this kind of production.

Holy cow, did I ever *belong* here.

Somehow, the NCOIC – the non-commissioned-officer-in-charge of me – soon got the idea that maybe I wasn't meeting expectations. Senior Master Sergeant Mark Morris (with 7 stripes on his sleeves) yanked me into his office about a month in and said: "Marx, you've got an attitude problem and I mean to see you get rid of it." I (1 stripe) was indignant. "I don't have an attitude problem and I'll prove it." "You've got 30 days," he barked. And I was dismissed. The nerve of that man, I thought. I'll show *him*.

I applied myself with vigor, running cables, setting lights, building sets, operating cameras, all the while muttering to myself, "He's so wrong about me." 30 days later, I was back in his office. "Marx, you're doing well. Very well. Keep it up." What could I say to that?

Within days, though, I was assigned to crew one of Det.8s two remote production vans. These Ford Econoline Stretch vans cost a million 1978 dollars each to equip, and I was going to travel with professionals to collect footage needed for our productions. Utah, California, Nevada. Military activity and people doing important work and I was in the middle of it, getting my hands dirty, using the best equipment of its time, learning from the best in the business.

Highlights? There are too many. First, an easy one. We crested the hill that revealed the beautiful city of San Francisco at dusk. The dashboard radio DJ intro'd a new record by Journey: *Lights. Magic.*

The introduction of the F-15 Eagle was a really big deal. Government, military and civilian dignitaries came from everywhere for the ceremony. For Det.8, this was an 'all hands' operation. We shot the arrival of the first bird to Hill AFB and followed it into the humongous hangar where crowds were assembled for the speeches and christening. We captured it all. And over time, we crawled all through that bird shooting the little details and producing

training videos to accompany each jet to its forward base. After the grunt work came production during which I recorded some of the narration.

There was a show featuring a highly-mechanized Air Force supply operation. Yours truly was an on-camera narrator for this one. And who'd a thunk it; Second Lieutenants need to be taught table manners. We produced a series of short instructional videos showing how to be seated at a dinner table, how to conduct a conversation with a senior officer, how to drink a glass of wine, and so on. It was a great project in that I learned a lot from it. Oh, and I got to play a Captain.

From your first day in basic training and throughout your career, it is drummed into your head: "The Air Force needs come first." My assignment to Hill had been nothing short of lightning-strike lucky. People in my specialty nearly always got remote assignments, like mine to Tatalina and Galena. Hill was only a one-year assignment, so when time came for my next orders to come down, I got lucky again; I got a choice. Unfortunately, it was of the Hobson's variety.

Choice 1) Take another one-year remote tour somewhere (without family), completing my four-year obligation to the Air Force and then get out as originally planned. Or, Choice 2) Take a three-year assignment at a major base (with family). This meant extending my enlistment by two years for a total of six. This was *not* the plan. SMSgt. Morris sweetened things a bit. No matter which choice I'd make, he was going to "fast-track" my rank advancement; this in recognition of my productivity at Hill AFB. The net net was that I'd arrive at my next assignment as a Sergeant, an E-4, with the pay bump that goes with it.

My wife and I talked about it. I don't remember where either of us came down on it, but I probably got my way; that's how things were with me at the time. In any case, I know we agreed that another family separation was not a good thing for any of us. And we got to go back to Alaska – together, this time.

Chapter 14

6027 PROSPERITY DRIVE, ANCHORAGE ALASKA

We had an apartment in Mountain View for a short time (address unremembered), before buying the condo on Prosperity Drive. In our fenced-in area, I built a sandbox for Jeremy which I don't recall being used much. I also built a deck with a roof which, again, wasn't used much. In both cases, lack of use mostly had to do with the outdoor season being so short. But I was, nonetheless, proud of my handiwork.

Inside, I replaced the entryway floorcovering with wood parquet, stained it golden oak and coated it with polyurethane. We liked it so much that I did the same in the kitchen and bathroom. And I installed a ceiling fan in the dining room. And I put in an electric garage door opener.

Let me jump in here to say that the domesticity demonstrated here took place over a period of about eight years. Further, the dedication-to-family that my activity implies is not deserved. This will become obvious in about one year.

And now, Elmendorf AFB. This is a major Air Force base on the north side of Anchorage adjoining the Army's Fort Richardson. Elmendorf supported I don't know how many aircraft of all kinds, and provided support for the existence and activities of lesser military installations throughout Alaska. Elmendorf was also the refueling stop for military and official (presidential) trips to the Asian Pacific.

The 5049th Broadcast Squadron (5049 BCS) occupied the basement of one of the large administration buildings. Our real estate included a radio studio and sound production operation, and a television broadcast and production operation only a few notches less cool than what I'd just left in Utah. The 5049th had the distinction of being the first-in-the-world satellite-delivered television network. That's first *before* the major American TV networks. We were known as the American Forces Satellite Network, or AFSN. We were the much-studied guinea pig.

The majors were still hopping their signals through a complicated system of ground relays before reaching their stations. No relays for us. Our signal was

beamed straight up to a satellite which then beamed straight down to Puerto Rico, Roosevelt Roads, Guantanamo Bay and, of course, all of Alaska. This rendered TV operations like Galena's obsolete. A lot had happened in the year of my absence.

The technologies we used made it possible for us to air some programming from the lower-48 in real time. There were limits, but we were special nonetheless.

The local Anchorage network affiliates were 2-3 weeks late with their entertainment programming. But the big-3 newscasts had to be shown on a that-day basis. Up till now, someone was recording them in Seattle and flying them up to Anchorage for late broadcast. We worked out a means of receiving and recording all of the newscasts and shuttling them to their respective local stations. And, by special agreement, we broadcast the same newscasts to *our* audiences, too. This began a relationship with the locals which benefited them and us in many ways over the years.

This was the heady and progressive environment I stepped into. Lucky for me, I'd arrived less of an asshole than when I'd arrived at Hill. As I had been informally earmarked for TV, I began my tenure with several months in operations, sending shows to the uplink. The broadcast day was longer. The audiences for our product were larger. The whole shootin' match was in color. And we were at the vanguard of brand new technology.

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In due time, I was tapped for production which began by putting me on-camera for a nightly newscast. As before, I did not consider this my strong suit, but I tried pretty hard in the face of camera crews who did everything they could to distract me. They went so far as to moon me - without succeeding in breaking my focus. But my travails were nevertheless noticed by viewers. I still have letters from people who sympathized at what must have been torture for me while I was just trying to do my job. Translation: they enjoyed it a lot.

As before, the next rung up the production ladder was newscast Producer and Director, the process of calling the shots, rolling the tape, directing the

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Chyrons and graphics. I was in my element. But even that was not the pinnacle of my military TV career.

AFRTS agreements with program producers called for us to strip commercials out of the shows we aired. This means that, during live program feeds, we had to somehow cover or fill 3 or so minutes with something else while the network commercials were playing. And we had to do this for about 16 total minutes each hour. We did this with incessant public service announcements which were mostly irrelevant to our audiences. We sometimes used our own network logo along with elevator music. Booring.

I came up an idea to go out into our military world and shoot stories of our gals and guys doing their jobs and living their lives. It would be a series and we'd call it *Images*. Our Navy graphic artist jumped on the idea and produced an amazing open and closing graphic sequence for each installment. Surely our little stories would easily fill 3 or 3½ minutes, and a bunch of them would be at least as entertaining as the programs being aired. This in addition to being relevant.

The idea, when pitched to the unit Commander, was immediately and enthusiastically received. He equipped me with whatever gear was needed, authorized travel theatre-wide, and opened doors wherever he could. I would also have a direct line to our own tech support. For all of this, all I needed to provide was a written project proposal for his approval.

Are you kidding me? This was way too easy. I was being required to write my own ticket to The World Series. And that's exactly what I did. One at a time at first, then several. It got to the place where, when I showed up in the Commander's office, he'd just rubber stamp whatever was written on the paper and shooed me out knowing that good things would come back.

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Every military installation, no matter how large or small, has an Information Officer or Public Information Officer (PIO). Every single one of these people out-ranked me. So I was surprised at first when I called one and proposed my little idea. I'd ask, "What cool things are going on up there, and who's doing them?" Invariably, these conversations reaped a wealth of ideas. Once refined, proposed and approved, I flew out to these places and did my thing.

I Should Know Better

My “thing” involved shouldering a 40 lb. Hitachi SK-80 camera; a 9 lb. long-range lens; a shotgun mic; an interview mic; headphones and lighting all powered from a 35# battery belt around my waist. I was carrying about as much weight as a modern-day firefighter when they enter burning buildings. I wish I had a picture of myself thusly outfitted. This would be a portrait of me at my zenith.

All this gear was transported in heavy-duty Anvil cases. They had to be off-loaded upon arrival and toted to locations around the subject base each day for a couple of weeks. Invariably, the PIOs would detail themselves to the effort throughout my visit.

It was backwards. It was extraordinary. And for them, it was the most fun they had during their entire year in Podunk. Working with these people was a blast. They couldn't do enough. I was most appreciative and did the best I could to reflect well on them. I also made sure that feathers accrued to their caps.

So, what was *Images* like? Well, it was like TSgt Ikey at King Salmon AFB. He was a lead bomb tech, outfitting fighters with live missiles prior to flight. And after interviewing him for the narrative track, I shot him at work... right up there with the bombs. It was quite involved and I got all of it on tape with jet sound amplified in my headphones.

For relaxation, Ikey liked to fish. So I donned hip waders and stood in the middle of the rushing King Salmon River watching as he chilled while tossing a line. The kicker was when he said: “C'mon fishy. C'mon.” Cut to the closing graphic. Maybe it doesn't look like much on paper, but the artfully edited product was impactful from beginning to end. And our audiences loved it.

There was the young lady assigned to the Morale, Welfare and Recreation unit at Shemya AFB way out at the west end of the Aleutian chain where the Pacific winds are a constant 60mph and beat against buildings constructed of reinforced concrete and expected to last only a few years for the punishment. There, I got to shoot inside the secretive Cobra Dane radar dome (think: the movie *War Games* control center). And recreational activities, and cute silver foxes, and a bonfire on the beach. Cut to closing graphics.

There were a bunch of *Images* like this, some better than others, but all were appreciated. While the subjects and shoots were all in Alaska, the interest in

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the series was worldwide. Decades later, I'd hear from people who saw *Images* aired at bases in Germany or Japan or Turkey.

I also wrote and produced *The AFSN Song* which extolled the virtues of our Elmendorf-based programming and covered 3 commercial minutes. The *Song* was also distributed worldwide and was seen by millions. A melody was written by TSgt. Wayne and was performed by the Air Force Band under his direction. The lyrics were a collaboration of me with two higher-ranking bosses, one of them a Captain. Singing was done by two opposing male/female voices from within the Band.

The *Song* and one of the *Images*, were submitted for, and won, first prize Thomas Jefferson Awards for Excellence in Television Production. And to this day, to the best of my knowledge, I remain the only recipient of this 1st Place award in two consecutive years (1980, 1981). The panel of judges were chiefs of production for broadcast networks in the real world. This made the awards so much more meaningful, and I am still proud of the achievement.

Meanwhile, back at home, Jeremy was in grade school. He was a bit of an introvert, so we were surprised when he joined the scouts and flourished. We worked together crafting a car for the Soap Box Derby. He didn't win it, but had fun anyway. He put lots of energy into selling subscriptions for something and was looking forward to winning the big prize for his effort. Well, he won. And then he was told that the prize was not available and was told to view this as a character-building exercise. Oh no you don't. With Jeremy present, I explained to the powers-that-be that if you say you're going to do something, you DO it. They came up with the prize.

I had been using a modified Commodore 64 to communicate live from master control to a talk studio in my downtown job (much more later). It worked so well for that unintended purpose that I bought one for use at home for its intended purpose: computing. Jeremy found yet another purpose: video games. At age 4, he was proficient at PacMan, Donkey Kong, and the other cartridge games of that day.

By the age of 6, we felt it necessary to channel his time in some way and suggested that he spend half of his computer time developing programs and

the other half playing games. We gave him tools to work with. It was all rudimentary in those days, and for age 6, we were asking a lot. Well, he used the tools and his brains and wrote his own game! He's never looked back, and is currently in his prime as a Senior Data Architect consulting with major corporate clients around the country.

Back to the Air Force. There are so many stories to tell. But there is one I *must* tell. It is my favorite of all stories.

One of the *Images* projects took me back to familiar ground: Galena AFB. The subject was an air traffic controller who also had a private pilot's license and a 2-seater to fly around in. She spotted wildfires in Alaska's interior during summer when she wasn't in the control tower. Hers was an interesting story in and of itself. But it's not the one I want to tell you now.

When I arrived at Galena, I was met by the PIO, a woman who was quite obviously about to pop. She said: "Nice to finally meet ya. That plane you just go off of? I'm gettin' on it. I'm going home to have my baby. See that kid over there?" She was pointing to a skinny black kid. "I've detailed him to you. Good luck." And with that, she walked up the stairs and into the plane.

"That kid" was a walking attitude problem. Whitey hated him. The Air Force hated him. He had been busted down to slick sleeve (*no stripes*) for his various infractions. And he was mine for two weeks.

For all his anger, though, he was also smart (and, I would learn later, gifted). He sized me up and decided that I was worth his time. Why? Because my fatigue uniform ball cap sported an official-looking but quite illegal unit logo of my own creation. He spotted it immediately. It made me a badass. So he gave me a chance.

Jay and I grew a working relationship that didn't just involve him hauling stuff around. He wanted to learn about every aspect of what I was doing right down to the tiniest detail. He reminded me of, well, me. And all my recent experiences with PIOs had been teaching me about spreading the work (and the wealth) around. So Jay was quickly an equal partner, and we did good things.

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Project done, we shook hands and I was gone. This story will continue in about two years.

There were other duties as assigned, of course. Twice, I crawled around in the snow and dirt for days shooting the annual Brim Frost exercises which demonstrated the ability of Joint Task Force Alaska to conduct winter operations. Some of my work was done in the air. Once, a helicopter I'd just disembarked, took off and crashed over the horizon killing two pilots.

The Pope came to Anchorage and there was to be a parade with him in the "Popemobile." All of the local television stations (supplemented with crews from their respective networks) pooled their resources to cover the whole event. We at AFSN were included in the effort not least for our ability to uplink live.

For me, the real fun was in the combined effort to coordinate all of these people and their equipment. Representing the interests of the 5049th BCS, I attended the planning meetings, watched the politics, power and positioning, and finally saw results befitting the occasion. Teamwork. And I shot live video from atop a 6-story building on 4th Avenue. The network newscasts used some live and live-to-tape segments for their broadcasts.

The Pentagon has a forensic team on standby at all times. When an F-4 crashed during a low-altitude drill not far from Fairbanks, this team scrambled, called the defacto chief of TV production in Alaska - me - and picked me up with my gear at Elmendorf. We flew in a Lear Jet to Eielson AFB in Fairbanks and boarded a helicopter. I was put in what would have been the F-4 pilot's seat and was instructed to shoot video of whatever the pilot would have seen. We did this the day after the crash and at roughly the same time of day and (luckily) in nearly the same ambient conditions.

The chopper couldn't fly at jet speed, of course, but you can't have everything. So all I had to do was sit still with the camera rolling and the lens out wide. We flew the same route as the jet from take-off right down to the crash site. Then a couple slow circles around the still-smoldering debris and we were done. I secured my gear. We flew back to Eielson, back to Elmendorf, and to my studio. They asked me for the tape, said thank you very much, and went

into my editing bay without me. “Why,” I asked? “Because this tape is classified.” “But I shot it in real time. I’ve already seen it and you haven’t. And you don’t know how things work in my editing bay.”

They conferred and grudgingly agreed. I put the tape in a deck and we watched the footage together. I watched pretty pictures. The forensic guys scribbled on their legal pads. When finished, I was curious. “What did you see that was worthy of your notes?” “That’s classified.” I shot them a look that said, “Don’t make me argue again.” They relented again, I rewound the tape and we watched again, and this time, they narrated. They saw this gleam of light, and that flock of birds, and a wonky reading on a gauge. It was fascinating what trained investigators could see that I could not.

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Over time, I acquired a reputation: When the walls are burning down around you, that’s when you want Fred around to manage it. I don’t remember who said it, but it stuck... and I was kinda proud of it. With the variety of factors in play, I was able to compartmentalize and triage. Throw me at the problem and expect a good result. It was an ethos I maintained throughout my working life, and it served me well.

(I learned years later, however, that when the walls are burning *every day*, the problem is systemic, and even my best efforts will not change it. The result is burning walls, and burnout.)

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My emergency management inclinations brought me to be trained in CPR and First Aid, something you hope never to use. But, of course, I’m writing about it because I did use it.

I was waiting for my friend Larry at the Anchorage International Airport. He shouted to me from baggage claim and motioned me to come over... fast. A middle-aged man was on the floor; no breathing, no pulse. A crowd was gathered around. I began CPR and continued until airport medics arrived. My job done, I took Larry and his luggage home. End of story...

Until later, when Larry called to ask about the status of the patient. I told him I hadn’t inquired. Confused, he hung up and then called the hospital himself.

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It was a 55-year-old dentist from Eagle River, he had been revived by paramedics during transport and was expected to recover fully.

Larry's confusion came from my apparent disinterest in the patient's outcome. I explained that my *interest* was manifest by performing CPR on the man. It's not a thing you do with emotion, as is so often seen on TV. To be effective, compressions and rescue breathing must be performed accurately... almost machine-like. That's how you're trained to do it.

Maybe there's an emotion gene missing from my DNA. Or maybe the missing gene makes it possible for me to dispassionately accomplish what others might find difficult – like managing crises. I don't know. But I am not without emotion. I think I just have good control of when and how to let it fly.

Throughout a military career, you're expected to take courses in management and leadership. I did these, and got to do a bit more. Early in 1981, I was awarded a rare spot in an Advanced Electronic Journalism course held back at DINFOS at Fort Ben, Indiana. This was a very different animal than the large-class, excited vibe of the original tech school. The advanced course was small and focused. I don't recall how many weeks I was there, and I don't recall the subject of my final project. But I do recall one very special aspect of it.

Keeping in mind the modest level of military television production technology then available at the school, I decided that my project needed an extra kick at the end. I wanted to freeze the final frame of video and roll closing credits over it. It's common today, but it was not supported by the tools then available at DINFOS. I had to execute it frame-by-frame, 30 frames per second, until it was finished. Later, I got to be a fly on the wall for its showing to the panel of judges. Well, their jaws dropped open in disbelief that anyone would work that painstakingly for a gig that no one would ever see. I aced the course.

From Indianapolis, I flew to Las Vegas for the annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters. This is mecca for TV, news and production types. A candy store for media nerds, if you will. It was my first trip to Vegas and I spent all of my days on the massive Convention Center floor

taking in all of the new technologies and seminars, and rubbing shoulders with people whose faces you only see on TV.

It being the Air Force, I got to fly a lot and in every kind of aircraft except fighters. (Let others throw up in their helmets for footage we've seen many times before). Sometimes I was just going somewhere. Sometimes I was shooting video for one project or another from up high. On one such occasion, I was harnessed to the middle of a plane doing circles around Denali, the mountain that had been wrongly called McKinley. I was basically leaning out of the open hatch of the plane flying at low altitude with a camera on my shoulder shooting the most amazing vista in the world.

Somewhere in the middle of that, a voice in my head started talking. "What are you doing? You've got a wife and a kid and a dog and a mortgage. There are talented people on the ground chomping at the bit to get a gig like this. You've kept the good stuff for yourself. It's time to let others have some fun."

It was an inflection point in my life; a moment delayed while I was busy having fun. But just like that, it became time to mentor the up-and-comers. And I would discover soon – and often – that boosting others to their own successes was every bit as much fun.

AFRTS was developing plans for recognition of the 40th anniversary of the American Forces Radio Network (AFRN) in 1982. The very first AFRN broadcast on the planet had come from a station on the Navy installation at Kodiak Alaska. So I did some research, wrote a proposal, and set out to produce a 30-minute show about this piece of history. We had a full crew for the trip to Kodiak Island. We found the now-decrepit shack that had been the first AFRN studio. We shot interviews with old-timers there and took the footage back to Elmendorf.

At about that time, we got a new NCOIC; a Master Sergeant. He seemed to be a good manager, was real, and I liked him. I was coming up on the end of my extended enlistment and might not have had enough time to complete the 40th Anniversary project. So I gave it to him on a platter with tape and text and project design, and a list of who-should-do-what. He grabbed ahold of it

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and ran. As with any show of that size, it was a huge undertaking. And waddya know, his show got a hard-to-win TJ Award. Right out of the gate!

The 5049th BCS threw a party for me replete with cupcakes and candles, cards made by our graphics people and signed by everybody, and even little speeches. Letters were presented from Commands around the world asking me to consider reenlisting, or coming to them as a civilian. I still have the letters and the cards, and the stopwatch they gave me. It still works. And I've never had to take it apart.

Commercial television in Anchorage was – up to that point – a late-to-the-party affair. Commercial radio in Anchorage was a different thing entirely. It was all local, live DJs and live newscasters; nothing delivered by a network beyond national/world news on the hour – and no consultants. This applied to all of the dozen or so stations.

The DINFOS-trained killers at Elmendorf were prime targets for the stations in town who knew they'd never get anyone off the streets with any experience or quality. I was recruited by 750 KFQD, a 50,000watt clear-channel and the key station for the Emergency Broadcast System. As well, we broadcast hourly UPI network news, hourly marine weather reports (“...heavy chunk ice in Kachemak Bay...”), and 5-minute live local newscasts. This was known as a full-service radio station in the day and was run by a great general manager. This was a station I could be proud to work with and for, and I did for about 8 years.

With all I had going on in my real job, I was able to give KFQD only 6 hours on Saturdays and on Sundays. 6am-noon was my shift, and I played Adult Contemporary and Oldies. That, with all of the features above, plus commercials and PSAs, made this a busy job. But I was good at it and it was fun.

When I first got there, the station was being rebuilt around us as we worked. It was not unusual to hear a power saw in the distance during a mic opening. The result of the year-long rebuild was a beautiful facility we affectionately called “The Chalet.” It had a spacious foyer centered with a big live tree plus plants and flowers, first-and second-story offices for the people who really

make radio work, and a wing for us, our new sister station KWHL-FM, and the largest television studio in the state (which was never used for more than storage). Oh, and our johns were labeled “Elton” and “Olivia Newton.”

The newsroom had a booth with a window to the main studio, and the main studio had a window to the talk-show studio and to the transmitters. There were two identically- and fully-equipped production studios across the hall. There was a huge music library, breakroom and broadcast offices. *This*, ladies and gentlemen, is what a real radio powerhouse looks like.

The rebuild came with new everything, including AM-stereo. KFQD was first in Alaska and among the first couple of dozen in the country. Going stereo meant that our entire library had to be re-recorded onto stereo cartridges (called carts). I got that job. Each cart needed a label, and I developed a format for the information listed on them. And a catalog needed to be developed so that air talent could quickly find specific songs. I did that, too.

After we'd been settled into the new digs for a while, I was shifted to on-air director of the *KFQD Public Opinion Hotline*, a talk show hosted by Herb Shaindlin. Herb was known statewide for his nightly commentaries on KIMO-TV13, and was notorious for his contrarian views about everything. My kinda guy. In truth, Herb was a teddy bear, but it took a very long time before he'd let you see that. I was a lucky one. We clicked right away (he was also born and raised in NYC albeit a generation before me). *Hotline* was 2 hours every weeknight ending at midnight. After that, I ran the board until 6am.

So let's take a look at my schedule. I woke up at 9pm and scrambled to KFQD. I ran *Hotline*, then a 6-hour music shift wearing my military fatigues. Then I drove across town to Elmendorf for my day job, went home, grabbed a few hours of sleep, and did it all over again. Now, ask yourself... What must Fred's home life have been like? And the answer is... Non-existent. I knowingly lied to myself saying that I was doing it to provide financial security for the family. In truth, I was fooling no one. I liked what I was doing so I did it; consequences be damned. That's why I said that I deserve no praise for the domestic achievements at home back at the beginning of this chapter.

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When I separated from the service and went full-time with KFQD in March 1982, I became *Hotline's* Producer and Director. In addition to whatever else I was doing, I was now responsible for lining up the guests for Herb to interview each night. I also provided him with research – he was a very quick study – and this, coupled with his own vast storehouse of knowledge, and his laser-sharp mind and wit, made him all the more effective. It was a win-win and our ratings showed it.

A real estate deal was being promoted in Anchorage and it smelled fishy. The main guy was coming up from Salt Lake City to push it. I invited and scheduled him for *Hotline* and got busy with the research. I clipped articles from SLC papers, and interviewed official and unofficial sources by phone. My notes and clippings were put in a manila folder and placed on Herb's studio desk. Herb tore the guy apart. The guy left town with empty pockets. Mission accomplished.

All the gubernatorial candidates came through our studios to be interviewed by Herb. One by one, they displayed their platforms and personalities. Being magnanimous, we included even minor candidates. One such looked like a hobo and smelled worse. But his main distinction was the shoebox he was carrying and he wouldn't let security look inside.

Ever a brave soul, Herb let him into the studio anyway. His first question was... What's in the box? No answer. Herb knew that state troopers were always listening in. He found a number of ways to ask again... What's in the box? Still no answer. Finally, the troopers arrived and hauled the guy away. End of story. Except that the troopers later told me they'd found a loaded gun in the box.

Every year, we paraded the Miss Alaska finalists into Herb's studio. One year's 2nd runner up was a certain Sarah Louise Heath, later to become Sarah Palin. Just another pretty face.

Richard Simmons was hot in the 80s. He sold 8,000+ tickets for each of three shows at the George M. Sullivan Arena. After several weeks of hard work, I got him booked with Herb on the night before the first day of the rally. Simmons arrived in a stretch limo in his usual striped shorts and tank top, all oiled up, and entered the building at precisely 10:05pm (after the network news) so that we'd be forced to cover his procession live from the main door

to the studio. He enthusiastically greeted fans (all station insiders) who'd found some excuse to be in the secure facility at that hour, even in the off-limits main control room where I worked across the window from Herb.

Simmons' entry into the *Hotline* studio was dramatic, to say the least. Here were two alpha cats, claws out, attacking each other for two straight hours. Richard would wax poetic about the virtues of daily exercise. Herb would pull a bowl of potato chips from a cabinet and offer them. Richard protested. He launched into preachment about the importance of a good diet. Herb pulled a bowl of unwrapped HoHo's from the cabinet and offered them. Richard literally jumped onto the studio counter as if the bowl was full of poisonous snakes. "That's ca-ca!" he screamed.

The station GM called in on a private line and instructed me to "blow off" the 11 o'clock news. He and his wife were home, listening, rolling on the floor laughing. We were all in tears. My face hurt. Neither Richard nor Herb won the night. But it sure was good radio, and it is the subject of a happy memories these many years later.

The construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System was complete, and oil was being pumped through it beginning in 1977 (the year of my first arrival in the state). By the mid-80s, there was a dearth of work for post-pipeline construction workers and others in the state. We created an on-air jobs board, moderated by Herb and produced by me, and called it *Jobline*. It lasted for nearly a year and put a bunch of people back to work.

Dr. Ruth Westheimer was becoming popular in the lower-48 with a show in which she talked with listeners and guests about sex. Herb didn't think much of the show and believed we could do better. So I scoured our city and found two sex therapists, a man and a woman, to be guests-in-residence in Herb's studio each Thursday night for *Sexline*. It was a hit, got lots of pub, and good ratings. Herb took calls and tried for the lascivious for its entertainment value. The good doctors worked hard to keep him on the straight and narrow. And that was, itself, entertaining.

Friday nights were given over to a show we called *Desperate & Dateless*. For two long hours, Herb talked with (tortured, really) callers who couldn't find a date if it was sitting on their laps. Men and women looking for love. We did

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pair some of them up, even got a few of them married. But our true objective was good radio. Herb tired of this after a few years and *DnD* was handed over to me. Herb said he wanted 3-day weekends. Right.

But this was my entrée to talk radio, a big step up from spinning records; the realization of my life's goal. Soon, I was also subbing for Herb on *Hotline* with important guests and topics. It suited my intellect. There was more of this to come, though not at KFQD.

One morning in July of 1986, I woke up and reached for a pack of cigarettes just as I had each morning for seventeen years. "That's stupid," I said to myself. "These things are going to kill me. As of right now, I am an ex-smoker." I didn't quit; I really *liked* smoking and wanted to keep it up. Now, a little mind trick, and suddenly I was free of it. But not completely... for the next couple of years, each time my body reminded me that it was time to light up, I admonished me... "That's silly - I am an ex-smoker." And I turned my attention to other things. It worked. Haven't smoked once since.

I set up a side gig called PictureRadio, a production company. My first client was an energy company that wanted to build Alaska's first nuclear power generation facility, something I and nearly all Alaskans *didn't* want. But I produced informational/advocacy commercials and a ½ hour show, all of which aired on TV stations statewide for weeks before the measure failed in the legislature. Whew!

That series was my calling card for a gubernatorial candidate who wanted to be a different kind of leader. H.A. "Red" Boucher had progressive ideas and little name recognition. My job was to put him on the map. I started by producing some commercials that outlined his platform positions. But the "map"-making started with a follow-on series that became known as the "Jungle Jim" commercials, so-called because Red was seen close-up to his boots walking through the Alaskan tundra. This was a demonstration of his effort to walk the expansive state, touch its many peoples, and advocate their concerns at the capitol.

One of the “Jungle Jim” commercials won a regional ‘Best of the North Award.’ But Red lost the election to a self-funded hotel owner who was ultimately impeached and removed from office.

A prospective client wanted to produce a video profile of each sitting member of elected state government. These profiles would be made available to school civics classes, gratis. But the client and I could not work out a successful business model and the idea was scrapped.

The nuclear and gubernatorial projects changed the way I produced television. Whereas I had previously been hands-on through 100% of the process, I was now doing the post-production at a major studio in Seattle. I flew my raw footage to Telemation Studios, handed it to the pros, and sunk deeply into their comfy chairs in the control room. I was occasionally asked for an opinion, but for the most part, they did their work based on my shot sheets and scripts. The result was high-quality visual presentations that were not yet common in the Anchorage market.

Splitting my time between KFQD and PictureRadio was never a problem except as it regarded home life. So a lot of serious thought went into an offer from MultiVisions Cable. As I’ve mentioned, TV viewing options in Anchorage were limited. Here, at the very beginning of the cable boom in the 80s, MultiVisions aimed to fill the void and began to build out the infrastructure for a 54-channel digital system.

They did some things right; namely their choice of infrastructure and selection of networks to carry. This made potential customers want what they were selling. And they did other things wrong; namely, poor build-out strategy and speed, and horrible public relations. But that’s not the way the powers-that-be saw it. They thought their troubles were the result of poor work being done by their contracted one-man advertising agency.

Whatever other contributions were being made to the erosion of things at home, I knew that my next move would likely have the strongest impact on it – good or bad. I took the offer: Marketing and Programming Manager with a strong emphasis on Public Relations. PictureRadio fell away, but I never let

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my relationship with KFQD cool off. That said, the MultiVisions gig was something to which I would have to devote my entire focus.

Release of the one-man agency was tough. Anchorage media is a relatively tight group where everyone knows everyone. This guy was a friend. Now he was gone. The search for his replacement went rather easily, though. The newly-selected agency was a very creative and well-run team. We worked on strategies that went well beyond commercials.

And because interest in our product was so high, much of my time was devoted to market-facing efforts. This was not to the liking of company heads who still (privately) thought that good commercials were the answer. They came to feel they were stuck with me because I was well-known in the market; that I had a certain 'marquee value' which worked in their favor either way.

I wrote an 88-page marketing plan, the first done for this company. I hired out for market research and for focus groups. Our new agency was doing a super excellent job and required only modest amounts of my time. Each day brought interview requests from various interests, and newspapers and TV and radio stations. I worked to get ahead of them with *my* agenda instead of being reactive as had been the case at the beginning. I found opportunities to demonstrate that MultiVisions was fighting *for* its subscribers by – among many things – licensing special events that were not being offered to our market; live sports events in particular.

On January 28, 1986, I was in the bedroom dressing for the day. Watching CNN on the corner TV, the shuttle Challenger was launching and tons of Alaskan space fans were watching with rapt attention. Only MultiVisions was carrying it; the local stations couldn't. Then came the words: "Go at throttle up." And the explosion. I foresaw the coming interview requests and my first thought was: "Boy, am I going to have a bad day." Five astronauts with families had just died, and I was thinking of me! I was immediately ashamed. Still am.-

We had what I thought was a good Customer Service supervisor, but a poor CS practice. I worked with the Super to upgrade the department's facilities,

equipped each agent with truth-telling databases, and trained the entire 120-person team (including outside sales and operations) in customer relations best practices. This effort alone worked wonders for our reputation in the city. Word was getting around that maybe MultiVisions gave a damn after all.

We also developed a protocol. When an irate subscriber wanted to be kicked up the ladder, s/he was forwarded to the CS supervisor. If that didn't fix the problem, s/he was forwarded to me. I instructed the supervisors to *not* tell me who I was about to talk with, or what the problem was; only that an 'irate' was coming to me. I would take that internal call, pause for a few seconds and ask, "How am I gonna save this subscriber?" Then I would take the subscriber call and make a new friend. It happened almost every time.

After, I would let the supervisor know how things worked out, and thank them and their people for relieving the steam from the situation before it got to me.

Remember Jay?, the kid I worked with a couple of years ago in Galena? Well, here's the rest of his story. He left the Air Force, moved to Anchorage and went to work at McDonalds. Quite by accident, he discovered that he and his workmates liked music and dance. So they formed a group of four robot dancers, produced their own music and costumes, choreographed their moves, and called themselves *Close Encounters of the Funkiest Kind*. And they were good! They opened for almost every act that came to the Sullivan Arena. Fans made sure to be in their seats early so as not to miss *Close Encounters*. My son, Jeremy, still has their t-shirt today. There was a clamor for the group. They were a smash.

Jay came to my office at MultiVisions one day and said he had so much more that he wanted to do; that he needed to go to Sacramento to establish himself there as a music producer. He asked for a sponsorship to get there and get started. Being so highly regarded, getting money from the company was easy. And off he went.

The monitor in my office was always on and was usually tuned to MTV. At the beginning, the channel was mostly about music videos. I was at my desk one day when I heard a peppy rhythm and a familiar melody coming from the TV. I looked up and, what do you know, it was Jay and his new group Club

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Nouveau covering Bill Withers's *Lean On Me*. I shouted "Hey!" out loud which attracted the attention of staff who piled into my office and began shouting, themselves. It was a great moment of happiness that we all got to share. Jay is still in Sacramento (and in Los Angeles) and is still producing music and artists.

I mentioned the 54-channel system we had. Well, at one point, we wanted to add a new channel which meant that, as the Marketing & Programming Manager, I had to choose a channel to cut. There was plenty of time so I did it right. In the end, it was decided that *The Weather Channel* would go away. The rationale was that each of the local TV and radio stations gave full local forecasts to which TWC merely paid lip service. Weather? It was much cared about, and was well covered in Anchorage.

I used our monthly printed program guide (mailed to every subscriber) to announce the decision and the date. I created and telecast commercials on our own channels telling of the upcoming change. I even bought time on local radio stations with the news. For two *months*, I let it be known that it was coming.

Then it came. And you would have thought I'd killed somebody's mother. The outcry was incredible. Telephone calls to Customer Service. Complaints to upper management. Outrage on talk shows. What could I have *possibly* been thinking? Didn't I know that the TWC meteorologists had built personal relationships with their viewers? Didn't I know that the light jazz playing during the local segments were favored life accompaniments? Had I lost my marbles? Well, it took a bit, but the decision was reversed and everyone was happy again. Except for me; I was nursing my wounds for weeks.

Now, one thing I've said consistently about previous work is the degree of fun I had doing it. MultiVisions was *not* fun. It was hard work, which I am happy to do, but it didn't come with fun. It had been a good run. It was time to grow up.

There was pressure from the top; pressure from the marketplace; pressure to state – but not *mis*-state or *over*-state – my case to the media. Pressure

brought by a failed unionizing effort during which I was the company's public face. Was it worth it?

For me, from MultiVisions on forward, work became all about climbing and achieving. I would be happier if I found a higher-purpose to motivate and drive the effort. But fun had left the building. My sleepy relationship with meetings became my opportunity to conduct them. Energy, crisp agendas and clarity of purpose made my meetings quite the popular thing.

I was paid well whether I produced or not. So the only measure of success was in the subscriber numbers. When I arrived, we had 22,000 subscribers (subs). Within just two years, we'd grown to 36,000 subs, a 64% increase. Some of that growth was in the increasing number of homes-passed which made it possible for the new homes to now subscribe. But as bad as our reputation *had* been, the company knew that many of these potential subs might have declined to hook up.

At my 2-year point, our owner, Pacific Gas & Electric, decided to "focus" their portfolio and they put MultiVisions up for sale. Suitor after suitor examined our numbers, apparently liked what they saw, and then paraded through our facilities. We got offers left and right, but rejected them all because there was no Alaska connection and our market, we felt, would revolt. A persistent California company made an offer so lucrative that we finally said, 'To hell with it; it's yours. Let the chips fall where they may.' And at the 2½ year mark in my tenure, MultiVisions was no more. Overnight, all management personnel were out.

There had been management-by-putting-out fires. Deceptive unionization tactics. Growing pains. A most acrimonious acquisition. I was fried. I had to get away; decompress. I went home and told my wife I was going to Hawai'i for a week. Alone. (BIG mistake.) My flight would leave the next day.

But the Augustine Volcano popped its cork the next day, throwing glass-like shards high into the air. Planes don't fly through that stuff; it tears up engines. So I didn't get out of town for another four days.

The purpose of my trip, specifically, was to ask the question: "Fred, what do you want to do next?" And maybe then catch some rays and relax as I considered the possibilities. I arrived at the hotel in Kailua/Kona, pulled on a

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bathing suit and sat on the beach. “So, Fred, what do you want to do next?” “I want to do talk radio.” End of discussion. Relaxation unnecessary. I wanted to go home right away and get on with it. But the ticket I’d purchased had a 5-day stay requirement, and I had to wait. I had already made one huge mistake at the front end of this little jaunt. I was about to make another.

When I got back to Anchorage, I visited Herb at his office. “So,” he said, “what did you figure out?” “I figured out that I want your job.” I thought I was being cute. Judging from his expression, Herb thought otherwise. I immediately regretted opening my mouth.

Herb got over it, though. At his request, I threw my skills into the pot with Alaska’s telecast of the *Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon* for which he was on the board of directors. I ran a camera for several of the annual 22½-hour-long statewide live shows and, in 1987, directed the show from the control room. When Herb and Jean flew into Minneapolis years later, we met at the airport and had dinner. He’s gone now, but Jean and I are still in touch.

The latter part of the 1980s was another tough period in Alaska, though. Things were going badly at home. The boom/bust oil economy was trending toward bust and I couldn’t find work beyond that which KFQD would give me. The station was impacted by the economy too, and the work they could give me was less than before.

Clouds were gathering. Something had to give. Long story short, we packed up what we needed, sold everything we could, and we left this precious place via the Alaska Highway. It was a very sad end to a very productive period of life.

Chapter 15

STUART VIRGINIA

To add insult to injury, we landed at my father-in-law’s house (address intentionally not given). I spent my days duplicating airchecks and résumés and typing cover letters for radio stations everywhere. I drove to interviews from Virginia to Florida. On weekends, I drove to WOJY-FM in High Point NC.

“Joy100-FM” was a station using ‘Format 42,’ Adult Contemporary music targeted specifically to women aged 42. Yes, it was the beginning of corporate media consulting... the beginning of the end of radio as we knew it. I did Saturday morning 6 to noon, chilled in the break room for 6 hours, and then did the 6pm to midnight shift. Then I napped in the break room and did the same exact thing again on Sunday. 24 hours of work in two days’ time.

Chapter 16

958 27TH STREET, TWO RIVERS WISCONSIN

So I was good and ready to interview for, and accept an offer from, WCUB-AM980 in Manitowoc WI, serving the Green Bay metro. Sight unseen. There are only two stations in little Manitowoc: WCUB and WOMT. The latter was low-power but had the town’s listeners with their Adult Contemporary format and longtime local announcers. WCUB had once owned that luster but lost it along the way.

What they wanted from me was to not only recapture the town, but also the entire Green Bay market. I would do it in morning drive, interviewing important people, talking about issues important to listeners, and playing the occasional country music song. I saw the latter as being formatically inconsistent, and avoided music entirely. When I was called out for it, I acquiesced with an occasional crossover hit. And when I was finally called out for *that*, I said “No. I won’t do it.”

Before the end, however, there was some good stuff. I was well-regarded for my live remote broadcasts at special events. The station institutionalized that feature/benefit by moving my entire daily show from the studio to a hotel restaurant with a view of Lake Michigan’s waves crashing against the rip-rap below its huge picture windows. Guests were happy to come there, and I shared the microphones with diners there as well. There were billboards with a cartoon image of me, and the station was receiving calls and letters from listeners largely favoring my work. One such was from a lady who said she was uncomfortable with me at first, but I grew on her “like a barnacle;” a

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maritime term in a maritime town. Before the end, I had recaptured the market in morning drive.

Still capitalizing on my 'personal appearances' value, I was asked to do a fundraiser for a local women's shelter. The local Coca-Cola distributor built a "Coke Castle" in the middle of the produce section of a Copps Food Center. From there, I presided for four days and nights, interviewing guests and raising money. Shoppers got a super good deal on Coke and dropped loot in the bucket. I don't mind telling you that four days in a supermarket without sleep was really hard. But in the end, over \$10,000 was raised and everyone was happy.

Before the end, there was also some bad stuff. I was being given repeat guest bookings for the talk show which perplexed me because they mostly lacked that level of airtime worthiness. I didn't catch on at first, but came to realize that the station was taking payment for these bookings, and they weren't revealing the true nature of the on-air product to me or to listeners. This was a serious breach of ethics and law and I objected strongly. Combine that, now, with the circumstances of my not playing country records to their liking, and you have a fuller picture of how I met my demise there.

So I drove for Clipper City Cab, and sent tapes and résumés and cover letters to radio stations all over the place. At about that time, an industry newspaper was being born. *Talkers* would be about the industry and its people. I visited and dined with its publisher in Connecticut. I sent them a check for \$1,000 and copy and a layout for a double-truck – that's the middle two pages of the entire tabloid-format paper. And in that very first issue was my 2-page headline: "I Should Be In Talk Radio". The text and supporting materials explained why. I was sure this radical tactic would net a flurry of calls. Instead, it got only a few. The market for air talent was already devolving toward the corporate consolidation of today.

My eye-catching strategy easily managed to piss off my wife. And yes, it was a thousand dollars we could ill afford. But no risk, no reward, right? One day, I came home and listened to the messages on my answering machine (remember those?). It was unmistakably Rush Limbaugh who said, "Well, if you won't take my call, I can't help you out." And he hung up.

Tom had been a legitimate guest on my radio show. He ran the American Red Cross education programs. He knew of my military CPR training. I was now available and he had people to teach, so I became a CPR/1st Aid Instructor. In time, he had me teaching other instructors. Later still, Tom left the ARC, opened a retail store selling personal safety products, and I became an equity partner. As hard as we worked it, however, our bigger competitors were able to underprice us. We folded after several years.

For his 17th birthday, I gave Jeremy an hour-long flight in a single-prop four-seater. The instructor was in the right seat and I was behind the pilot. Keeping in mind that I have flown all manner of commercial and military aircraft, I was expecting a scenic ride – and Captain Jeremy did a great job. But about 15 minutes in, my tummy began to churn. Deep breathing did not help. Then the instructor suggested to Jeremy that we do some touch-n-go's. *Oh No!* This is where you land the aircraft but, as soon as your wheels touch the runway, you accelerate and take off again. It's tons 'o fun if you're the pilot. No fun at all if you're the back seater.

I have frequently been told that I have a distinct, recognizable voice. So, here's another brush-with-fame story. I had been off the air for a year. Early one Saturday morning, I walked into an auto parts store. There was a guy behind the counter and two customers, one on either side of the store. I stepped up to the counter and said, "Hi." One syllable. Three heads whipped around, faced me and said in unison, "FRED!" Spooky. And funny.

The tail was wagging the dog again. I was way off kilter; out of my realm. Needing to do something financially substantial, I took a job as a Generator Jumper. An explanation: nuclear power generation plants, the kind with huge conical towers, were required to shut down every couple of years to be thoroughly cleaned and inspected. Slender people with past Top Security clearances were favored for hire to work with the robots which cleaned the inside of steam generators and then performed inspection functions which were viewed from an off-site control room.

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A steam generator can be 70ft tall and weigh 800 tons. Radioactive water is pumped through between 3,000 and 16,000 ¾" copper tubes at high pressure. When shut down, a Generator Jumper – who is clad in 2 sets of protective clothing, full headgear and air hoses – squeezes through an impossibly small portal of the generator, builds a robot in the bowl at the bottom, and then outfits the robot with tools to perform its procedures. A Jumper remains with the robot in shifts due to the heat inside, and to the dose of radiation being absorbed into the human body.

It was fascinating. It was also hot and hard work. I traveled with a team from site to site throughout the eastern third of the county. As you might imagine, it paid extremely well. I sent all the money home and lived on per diem. After about 6 months, I had absorbed all the allowable radiation for my age.

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I went home expecting to find a bank account absolutely stuffed with cash. Not so much. Where was it all? It had been donated to a church. I was done. We were divorced thereafter.

Chapter 17

208 NORTH 8TH STREET, MANITOWOC

Paul and Barbara had also been legitimate guests on my talk show. They owned a popular regional bakery called Natural Ovens which produced natural and organic breads, rolls, muffins and bagels. These were distributed in their own trucks to stores from Indiana to Minnesota.

I did some marketing work for them which progressed into going to fairs and parades and events with a gussied-up trailer, old-timey (functioning!) baking ovens, and lots of samples to give out. And this evolved into my taking a route in Appleton and Fond du Lac, putting the product on supermarket shelves myself.

The job involved leaving the bakery very early in the morning and driving to the first account almost an hour away. You go into the store, pull out the items that will soon expire, put in fresh items, and go to the next store. When you

finish your day, you place an order for the next day's inventory on your route. Rinse and repeat. Hey, I was happy to have a job!

I did have a problem, however, dealing with the nastiness of other brands' reps. Their perpetually negative attitudes were bringing me down. So when the bakery adjusted my route, I used that as an occasion to change things up for *me*. I went to my stores (still with many of the same other reps) and exuded a positive energy. Instead of them impacting me, I was going to impact them. A year later, I looked around and saw that it had worked. They were a very different bunch now.

I was asked to become the company trainer for new route sales reps. I worked with the bakery's owners on development of a training program, and executed with good results.

Minneapolis and Saint Paul had a problem, though, and Paul and Barbara were considering pulling out of that market. Instead, they threw me at the problem without instruction or a budget. "Just fix it!"

Chapter 18

6901 WEST 84TH STREET, BLOOMINGTON MINNESOTA

The problem, as I found it, was reliability. There was weak leadership, twelve route salespeople with box delivery trucks, and the job wasn't getting done. I replaced all but two sales people, and trained and equipped the newbies. I went to each of our accounts one by one and let the store managers yell at me for our empty shelves. I had to promise the moon and then deliver it.

Little by little, we got our shelf space back. Our sales went up commensurately – enough to demonstrate to the suits that I was able to do something good here. I hired someone to do store sample demonstrations, and someone to pull backstock during peak and off hours. I produced and aired some radio ads which helped when I set about adding new accounts. I rebuilt routes to help with the increasing loads.

A challenge for route sales drivers was in determining the next day's truckload order. It was based on items sold, items not sold, and items that have gone

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stale. The goal was to put stuff on the store's shelves sufficient to cover demand without being excessive and needing to be taken back out later. It was a daily struggle. I developed an algorithmic solution adding day-of-week, time-of-month, weather, and other factors to the calculus, and taught my people how to use it. It was hard to learn, but if you did, it worked! My formula was then adapted for use in the company's other regions, also with success.

We grew the region's annual sales from \$700K to \$1.76M in just over two years while improving operational cost efficiencies by 17%. But success came with a cost: burnout. I had been working 80-hour weeks for a couple of years and my effectiveness was waning. It was time for two of my protégés to take over, and it was time for me to rest.

To bide my time, and maybe do a little good, I volunteered with the Minnesota State Services for the Blind. As with the Red Cross gig back when I was a teenager, this was about recording text from newspapers twice a week. It was done in state-run facilities with editing and publication tools, and was then telecast to special receivers. Now it's distributed through a secure app.

For some reason, I felt that July 4th, 2000 should be commemorated by doing something special. So I asked Jeremy to drive up from Sheboygan, and we tandem-jumped out of a perfectly good airplane. We have it on tape. This activity theme is reminiscent of his single-engine piloting years back. It also brought to mind our watching Star Trek:TNG and DS9 together on TV every week. Space nerds, we were; father and son. When we visited the Johnson Space Center back in 1987, Jeremy knew so many of the answers on the tour that we were invited into a deeper level of the facility. Way impressive. And loads of fun.

Chapter 19

2910 BENJAMIN STREET NORTHEAST, MINNEAPOLIS

Funny how one thing leads to another. Such was the case with my next gig.

Blooming Prairie Natural Foods (BPNF) was based in Iowa City and had a second, equal and major operation in the Twin Cities. In each of their warehouses were 35,000 SKUs (distinct products with multiples of each) which had been successfully distributed to natural foods and specialty stores for decades throughout the Midwest. But they had saturated the region and were stuck at \$135M/yr revenue and couldn't grow.

The board had decided to expand into supermarkets, but their efforts had eeked out only \$2.5M after two years. They needed someone who understood food distribution dynamics and, in particular, supermarket dynamics. They needed someone who did not currently exist in their 'barefoot hippie' culture.

A BPNF board member had known me since the Alaska years, and was up to speed on my recent work with Natural Ovens. She suggested that I be interviewed for a newly-created position isolating on the grocery channel. She also knew of my experience as the company 'face' during MultiVisions' unionizing campaign, and that this, too, would be needed at BPNF in coming days. Bigger market. Higher stakes. This one would fail, too. Twice.

The marketing and operations story here was very much the same as when I began at MultiVisions except that I started not with a marketing plan, but with a white paper projecting my industry channel out 5 years. Amazingly, I turned out to be right on every count, but we couldn't know that yet. Here, again, I hired, trained and equipped sales reps covering 9 states in the upper Midwest. I bought a new 1997 Dodge Grand Caravan and ultimately clocked nearly 300,000 miles on it.

Comfort and durability were the van's features. But it came in handy for other reasons as well. During a bad stretch of winter weather, one of our semi's got stuck and couldn't deliver to a new account in Ashland WI. The store was panicking because it had set up lots of grand opening activities, and our inventory was part of that. I removed the rear benches from the van and had our Minneapolis warehouse stuff a duplicated order inside, including frozen

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and refrigerated goods wrapped in thermal blankets. It was a five-hour ride in horrible conditions, but I got there, helped unload, and checked into a hotel. The grand opening was a success despite the weather and store management was appreciative.

On one Thursday afternoon, I had occasion to visit the Copps Food Center in Ashwaubenon WI. It should have been a quick visit but became something longer. This is remarkable only because my van had Minnesota plates. And the Green Bay Packers were playing the Minnesota Vikings in a Thursday night football game at Lambeau Field which, as NFL fans likely know, is located in... Ashwaubenon. The Copps store was virtually in the shadow of the stadium. The Vikings *won!* And I was deeply in the traffic after the game let out and kept my eyes forward to avoid the glaring stares of the Packers' faithful. No big deal, really; I just enjoyed the moment.

I walked through the Fond du Lac hotel lobby on the morning of September 11, 2001. A group of housekeepers were huddled around a lobby TV which was showing smoke coming from one of the towers in NYC. Someone said a small plane had hit it. New Yorkers are hardy folks, I said to myself; they'll make it through okay. My sales rep, Bob, picked me up and we headed for an account in Valparaiso Indiana.

Somewhere before reaching the northern Illinois border, my warehouse manager called and told me about the second plane and that the south tower had collapsed. Incredulous, we listened to audio of ABC News' Peter Jennings on WGN radio. Uncertain, we decided to proceed toward Indiana anyway, and found Chicago's usually jam-packed highways empty. It was the same on our trip back.

In the course of email exchanges from the hotel that night, I remember consoling a friend by finding a silver lining. "If there's anything good to come from this, it's that Americans will unite in harmony with one another." I was wrong. Rush was excoriating the "A-rabs" within two days and took half of Americans with him.

I Should Know Better

Back to business. All of our hard work resulted in a boost in supermarket channel sales from \$2.5M when I arrived to \$18M at the start of year 3. And, just like MultiVisions, BPNF became an acquisition target. United Natural Foods Inc (UNFI) had spread from Rhode Island to Washington state at about the same time that BPNF had conquered the Midwest. UNFI had long abandoned its hippie roots, however, and was now the model of starchy corporate cardboard-ness. Unlike MultiVisions, UNFI came in promising to keep management intact because it had been we, after all, who'd built this wonderful thing. We weren't fooled, though. Our CEO was lopped off at 90 days and, one-by-one, the rest of us became toast, too. I lasted a whole year.

In the 'broken' period following my departure from Natural Ovens a few years back, I began to seek help where I could find it. Some sessions with a weird psychologist. A 'spiritual' practice on the University of Minnesota campus in which you chanted things with increasing intensity and frequency. Bogus. Now, post-UNFI, I dipped my toes back into the realm of relationships. And I went to every jobs event in the metro area. And I walked into a church I'd heard of, and nearly pirouetted out when I spotted television cameras. I didn't want to be recruited for that work. I just wanted to defrag my hard drive.

That worked. And after a year, I did somehow become part of the TV effort there... first running a digital audio board, then running cameras, then training new people on those positions before calling the shots as director of a worldwide telecast. I also narrated on-screen 'commercials' and an audiobook.

And I met Lisa there. On our very first date, people asked how long we had been married; that's how well-matched we were. We jumped out of airplanes together, and went to concerts. We were in sync with future plans and goals. Her son, Nick, was 15, and I found myself becoming part of his life.

On the night before the wedding, there was a party with lots of our friends. Sitting around a table with some of them, Staci said the nicest thing: "When I found out that Lisa was getting married, I thought I was going to lose her as a friend. Instead, I also got Fred as a friend. Win win!"

Chapter 20

3640 INDEPENDENCE AVE SOUTH, ST LOUIS PARK

I was still with UNFI when Lisa and I married, and we couldn't have been happier. It was a big wedding with lots of guests on a snowy late-January Saturday evening. Picture perfect. And things stayed perfect for a whole month when her Fibromyalgia, which had been in remission, returned with a vengeance. Fibro is a nasty beast which causes muscular and nerve pain so severe that you can barely function. It comes with migraines, anxiety, depression, and an overall quality of life in the pits. At first, I had to learn about the enormity of this thing, and take Lisa to frequent medical appointments. I don't think I ever regretted its effects on our relationship, thinking only about how best to care for her.

We have, over the years, seen countless traditional and non-traditional practitioners, each having their own solutions or *no* solutions. We have begged for pain relief, finding, as luck would have it, doctors who were afraid to prescribe it. We have spent so so so much money in our search for an improved quality of life. We have relocated to states where medical marijuana was legal. We have tried therapies of every kind: acupuncture, massage, etc. And we have tried everything under the sun that isn't explicitly illegal. All without lasting result. I am, quite honestly, amazed every day that Lisa is able to get out of bed, much less have a full and active day. And yet, she tries...

Chapter 21

4810 HIGHWAY 7, MINNEAPOLIS

Only eight months after our wedding, my time at UNFI expired. I kept medical benefits for another six months. But I did a foolish thing: I turned 50. Don't let anyone tell you there's no age discrimination; there is. And at a time when the market was flush with young, college-educated, willing-to-take-lower-pay earners, there was no place for me or the many like me. I had been in this cycle before. Rinse, dry, repeat. Would I have had this/these problems if I had

had a degree? I don't know. And it's pointless for me to ruminate about it (though I did).

I found a job at a major FedEx sorting facility at MSP airport for \$11-something/hour, three hours in the middle of the night. At my age, the red-eye shift was murder. And I drove an old gentleman to and from the office in his old Mercedes. It was his attempt to remain relevant, though the days were mostly spent napping at his desk.

I started an LLC called *Plousios* ('to whom much is given, there is much to give back'), a structure from which I could do contract work. I wrote business plans and marketing plans, and coached emerging companies on best practices. One client brokered contracts within the medical devices industry. I wrote their business plan, and made recommendations on integrated data communications software.

Another client was a search firm specializing in Chief-executive types in major industries and non-profits. I fit well in their company culture and they asked me aboard full-time as VP of Operations. My first task was to completely overhaul and repopulate their contact and communications software inputs, increasing them from 5,000 units to 20,000 units. After that, I spent most of my time polishing our recruited prospect's CVs, and rehearsing the candidates on interview techniques. I was a bit surprised at first how inadequate their presentations were. I came to understand that C-level folks move much more slowly and intentionally through their careers. No wonder these skills were rusty.

The office was in one of the high-rises downtown and my window overlooked St. Anthony Falls and the Stone Arch Bridge over the Mississippi River. The building's atrium had a 5-story tall waterfall, trees, and beautiful flowers all around. I had an assigned underground parking space.

Four blocks downriver, the I-35W bridge collapsed on August 1, 2007 killing 13 and injuring many more. It happened during evening rush and I was just then driving out of the garage so I didn't know it happened as I drove away from it. Lisa had it on TV when I got home. Apart from the horror of what had just happened within spitting distance of me, I came to be angry with the politicians who didn't have the stones to fund the maintenance of

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infrastructure. Today, some fifteen years later, we are only beginning to rectify that need.

Being a city boy, I decided to try public transportation for a while. It was a one-block walk from the house to the bus, and a one-block walk from the bus to the office. Couldn't be easier. But I had long forgotten how depressing a bus ride could be – that feeling being derived from your proximity to 50 other depressed people. So I put on some earbuds and listened to NPR.

And what I was listening to was the beginnings of the drumbeat toward recession. After a few months of that, I brought it up in a meeting and suggested we seriously consider possible impacts on our business. The gathered execs didn't respond with what I thought should be the appropriate urgency. At first. But there soon came a time of reckoning, and the result – which I proposed – was to cut a high-budget position... *mine*. Doing this, and spreading my work amongst the remaining staffers, kept those people employed and the company capable of full functioning.

Jeremy's college and career found him in Tulsa where he eventually got married. He and Kim have two kids now, Christopher and Sydney, and his career later took the family to Denver. And Nick studied French through high school and college where he was a media major. All signs pointed to media and France. So you can imagine our surprise when he elected to go to Japan to teach English to 2nd graders. He has since moved up to marketing and tourism, has firmly established his life there, married Maki, and they now have a son, Yukito.

And then there's my parents. They fit into the story here because it was here that I became involved in their care. As a matter of record-keeping and effective communication with my siblings, I blogged about the experience: *ElderBlog* – fredmarx52.wordpress.com. It became a clockwork kind of thing – three weeks of relative peace with daily calls to caregiving professionals followed by a trip to NC to do necessary hands-on stuff for a week. All this attention did not slow the effects of their aging and health, of course. And there came a point where Lisa and I decided we needed to be there full-time.

Chapter 22

3029 RENAISSANCE PARKWAY, JAMESTOWN NORTH CAROLINA

ElderBlog was a nearly-every-day posting about my parent's lives and medical events. It was (maybe still is) viewed by people around the globe who are facing the same kinds of care and behavioral issues I faced with my folks during those years. When done, I printed it out. It totaled 182 manuscript pages, and I never had it published. Why? Because the laws, rules, practices, and other circumstances around eldercare change so much – almost daily. My book would have been inaccurate the first day it hit the shelves. It serves now, simply, as an online record of our parents' lives during their last years.

The recession was in full force in NC, as well. Not knowing how long we'd need to be there, I did my darndest to find work. I got seasonal work as a TV camera operator shooting high school dance competitions from Tulsa to Boston. I got a job in a supermarket bakery, did some freelance marketing/writing work for *Habitat For Humanity*, went to job seminars and fairs, sent résumés everywhere, answered calls from people wanting to buy stuff seen on TV, and took care of my parents' personal and financial affairs. It was not a fun time.

After three years here, Lisa had had enough of the place – enough of the increased Fibromyalgia pain that came with southern weather, and enough of me being focused on my parents and out of sorts as a result. She returned to MN and stayed with her older sister up north.

When it was later possible for *me* to leave, I did. I went back to MN, saw that Lisa was not yet ready to re-couple, and continued west to the only place I could think of where they needed warm bodies without regard to age.

Chapter 23

313 8TH STREET SOUTHEAST, SIDNEY MONTANA

The Bakken. Williston North Dakota. This is a place where oil companies squeeze oil from shale. When I got there, the place was smokin' hot with activity, it being the peak of another oil boom. State projections were for

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2,000 new wells to be drilled each year for the next 20 years. That takes a gargantuan amount of heavy equipment and the logistical challenges of moving it around the region.

And it requires gargantuan numbers of people. These people had to be housed *somewhere*, so gargantuan mancamps (manufactured home cities on steroids) were embossed into the earth in every possible location. Locals rented out their garages. RVs with license plates from every state (even Hawaii) were parked in homeowners' driveways for absurdly high rates. Every nook and cranny was occupied by human beings whose pockets were likely to be stuffed with oilfield cash. There was virtually nowhere left to live. So I considered myself lucky to find a basement room an hour to the southwest.

The Bakken was a place so other-worldly to me that I had to write about it just to sort out what I was experiencing. That was a blog too: *Sunlight Shining Through Cloud* – fredmarx.com.

I got a more-than-passing education in geology, in the systems and processes needed to support the minerals extraction industry, and in the mining and distribution of deep-earth resources. As I like learning new things, this was certainly that. But as a way of life, I'd imagine it being something akin to the wild west, gold rush, horse rustlin' ethos of America past. It was mostly rough edges and few pleasant experiences.

I had to decide that a coffee house or a sandwich shop downtown were comfortable places. Restaurants? Expect to wait an hour for a table. Recreation? I would never step into that theater, or any of the bars. You never know what might be stuck to you when you walk out. Even ordinary shopping was challenging. There weren't enough people willing to accept Walmart's starting wage of \$17 (in 2012, which equals \$22.59 in 2023), when you'd be making twice that in the oil fields within a year.

Half of my time was spent in a Williston office preparing contracts and having checks cut for many tens of thousands of dollars. The other half of the time, I drove a lot of miles on dusty dirt- and gravel-covered roads, and met with ranchers/landowners who would receive the checks from the oil companies for the right to drill on a 6½ acre parcel of their land. It was my job to facilitate

that transaction, and to initiate the payment of royalties for whatever was pumped out.

Farmers and ranchers are, above all, independent, and would rather die than go to work for someone else. They are square-dealers, and I found them (for the most part) good to work with. There are some who are resigned to having to live side-by-side with the oil industry, some whose buckets are already filled with oil money and they don't want any more, and others who don't want any part of the industry or its dirty money.

Within this process, I learned the nature of the folks who lived there. Calling them "salt of the earth" is fair. Most of the farmer's families had been on their land for generations if not for a century or more. Their thousands of acres of land must be prepared, planted, tended and harvested. Their equipment must be maintained and myriad records kept. All of this work is done methodically and with equal amounts of grit and technology. Their nearest neighbors might be miles down a dirt road. It is not an easy life, but it is *their* life, and they wouldn't have it any other way.

Contrast this with folks who live in cities. Where I come from, city folks don't have cars; they get around on mass transit which is government-supported. They live vertically and in very close proximity to their neighbors.

None of this is absolute, of course. Many city folks live in a variety of other circumstances. And many landowners receive farm subsidies, though they look at it as just a part of the calculus of their business. Even so, landowners look at city people as being on the government dole; taking money they, the farmers, are inputting to the government. Logic isn't being applied here – there are far too few spread-out landowners contributing to the tax coffers to sufficiently support the number of densely-packed city dwellers.

To put a fine political datapoint to it:

Eight of the 10 states that get the most money back from the federal government per dollar they pay into the system voted for Trump in 2020. Nine of the 10 states that got the least, voted for Biden. The typical red state gets back 19 cents more for each dollar sent to Washington than its blue-state friends.

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The States That Pay The Most In Taxes And Get The Least Benefits
Andrew Van Dam, Linda Chong, The Washington Post 7/7/23

No matter the mathematical wrongness of their thinking, this, and so-called traditional social values, is how conservatives come to be. And people who live in brown-brick high-rises are necessarily dependent on the services only a government can provide. At very least, their values must be inclusive of others because there are so *many* others in close proximity. But generally—and statistically-speaking, this is how there came to be liberals. ND is a ruby red state.

I was consumed with the work, and with the time and miles necessary to get it done. But for all that, and my fascination with what was going on there, I was – at the same time – depressed with how my life had devolved. I was saved by the family from whom I was renting. The kids wouldn't accept that I wanted to be left alone. There were more of them than there was of me, so they won. And I came to love them as if they were my own.

Lisa traveled on Amtrak's *Empire Builder* for visits. And we were talking every day by phone. But we knew that changes had to be made in each of us in order to move forward together successfully. For my part, I went weekly to the Williston VA office where I connected via video with a psychologist in Fargo. Later, Lisa and I connected individually and together via video with a marriage counselor in Minneapolis. We did the hard work to make us work.

Just as Alaska had a boom/bust oil economy, so did ND. Their estimates of 2,000 new wells per year were slowly being reduced because the world market for oil was declining as was the market price for a barrel of oil. In the larger view, this means less reliance on non-renewable resources and less pollution, among other things. That's a good thing. In the shorter view, my \$350 day rate couldn't be paid forever if I didn't have enough work assigned. And so, after 2½ years here, I read the handwriting on the wall, packed the car, and headed home to Lisa. She was ready.

On I-94 east of Glendive, just west of the ND border, the car slowed to a crawl. It was Palm Sunday morning and everything was closed. I turned around and drove at 15mph back to Glendive to an auto parts store I knew would open at noon. I had them stick their OBD-II reader into the port and read the code: it was a sensor that cost only \$31 and they had it in stock.

Being Sunday, there was no one to do the fixing, so it was me and YouTube on the smartphone for the next four hours. Replacing the sensor was easy; it was getting to it that was so time consuming. And then it all had to be put back together in reverse order. Well, it worked! This is so not my skill set, but knowing I could succeed despite that would later give me the confidence to do other such things.

Chapter 24

6227 WEST 34TH STREET, ST. LOUIS PARK MINNESOTA

The employment picture was no better in the Twin Cities than when I'd left years earlier. So I did lawncare and snow removal for the apartment building we lived in. I inspected fire extinguishers in huge manufacturing plants. I performed inventory and operational functions for a nearby auction house. And then...

I retired.

At the age of 62½, there was no point in continually butting up against the increasing *unlikelihood* of finding meaningful work again. Lisa and I did the math and concluded that retirement was possible.

My young brother and his wife were establishing a dog sledding operation in Colorado. This would involve their buying a property appropriate for 14+ Alaskan Huskies. We were invited to join in the experience.

Having lived on the other side of the Rockies (Hill AFB, Utah), I knew the beauty of where we were going. When we drove out of The Cities, I told Lisa that she would not be coming back; she was going to want to stay in Colorado. And that's exactly what happened. She stayed, and I returned to MN to pack

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our stuff into a Penske truck and haul it back with the car in tow. My Facebook posts along the way featured Lisa's nameless teddy bear who narrated our travels from its own perspective.

Chapter 25

32305 CR 38, STEAMBOAT SPRINGS, COLORADO

Long story short, the Huskies arrived, the property *didn't* get bought, and Lisa and I found a place to live in Steamboat Springs. Oh, and it snowed 350" during our first winter there.

Steamboat Springs is in the far northwest part of the Colorado Rockies – “The High Country” – and is a world-renowned ski resort. Ski enthusiasts prefer Steamboat over the other more-famous CO resorts because of its distinctive “Champagne Powder” snow, and for its distance from the overcrowded I-70 corridor.

At this writing, 100+ Winter Olympians have formally trained there (more than any other place in the US), have won 22 medals, and many call it home after retiring from competition.

And Steamboat is *beautiful!* “God has a place just up the street from us,” I used to say. There are hot springs downtown and just to the north of where we lived. There are spectacular mountain views from every vantage. Downtown is quaint, and has 84 places to eat within the mere 13 blocks of it. And Mount Werner, the nexus of the multi-mountain resort, has another 17 dining establishments including 3 at the very top (10,670 ft elevation). The view from the top is the stuff picture postcards are made of. All of this describes a place with only 12,000 year-round residents. During ski season, this little town's population balloons to 40,000.

As with other resorts, Steamboat Springs is high on the cost-of-living index; I think it was 124% of U.S. mean when we got there. It made living on our set incomes a bit dicey. This, coupled with the fact that I wasn't doing retirement very well, brought me to look for work. And whaddya know, there's *tons* of work for retired people there. I had to choose from several good offers.

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The one I took was from the largest resort operator. I was a dispatcher for a 24-shuttle fleet, each vehicle with between 15 and 24 seats. I took calls from our guests, noted their locations and destinations, and parsed them out to radio-dispatched shuttles.

This gig had several dimensions: customer contact – friendly and brief-yet-meaningful chats with people; coordination – the logistics of getting X number of people from here to there, on which shuttle, when, and with which other people; time – they usually wanted to get there right away, and I endeavored to make that happen; and cost – the more efficiently I performed my job, the happier were all parties, especially the suits who watched bottom lines closely.

Everything about dispatching was something I liked. I liked my superiors, my drivers, my customers, and the idea that I was able to juggle all of the balls that made this thing work. It was hard work, and it was satisfying.

But dispatching shuttles during ski season comes to an end at about Easter. So I looked around and found a gig working for the city Police Department. I became a Community Service Officer (CSO) and, initially, the work involved traffic, parking, and crowd management for the 150+ events in town during summer. I absolutely *excelled* at directing traffic. Who knew? The more the better. Our traffic engineers figured that on an average summer day, there were some 35,000 vehicles passing through my hands on the main drag. And city leaders were receiving compliments for my work. Everybody was happy.

This led to an offer from the PD: become a sworn officer and lead a team of River Rangers to enforce laws and ordinances on our 125 miles of mountain trails and along a 7½ mile stretch along the Yampa River from the city's southern border to its western border. I was issued a badge, a 2-way radio connected to police dispatch, uniforms, and a mountain bike. I encountered everything from public relations to emergency management. What a way to get fresh air and exercise, and help to improve others' Steamboat Springs experiences.

After the second season, I was asked to write a training manual for the Rangers. My kinda job. It turned out to be 40 pages with a mile-by-mile

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narrative including pictures and illustrations, and another 40 pages containing Ranger-relevant text from city ordinances.

In my second winter season as shuttle dispatcher, I developed mapping tools to make the job easier. This was followed by a poster-sized total-area shuttle map which I did in PowerPoint during year 3. This was risky because PowerPoint isn't really up to the layering demands of a map. But it was the only tool I had at that time. It took weeks to assemble. Then a quick trip to the printing shop and, voilà!, a laminated 40"x60" poster – everything a dispatcher needs to see in one highly-visible spot. Years later, a full-size copy of this map still adorns the wall of the resort's general manager.

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Lisa was having health challenges and we were frequently in need of medical care. We found Dr. Barb who, along with her family, became good friends. On one office visit, Barb asked me how I was doing. I didn't want to divert attention from the real patient, but answered just the same. Barb listened to the very things I had been telling VA doctors for years. But she heard something the others didn't, and directed me down the hall for an EKG. Looking at the tape run, Barb said, "Hmm... heart disease." I was referred to a cardiologist who ran his own tests and concurred. He referred me to the University of Colorado Heart Center of the Rockies which booked me in three days later. They would put me under, catheterize, determine the extent of the problems, and put in up to 2 stents.

Well, the problem was bigger, so they yanked out the catheter, brought me to, and said I had 80% blockages in three arteries. I needed triple bypass surgery and they scheduled it for two days later. Within a span of six days, I went from being a healthy guy with symptoms, to being a member of "The Zipper Club," so named because of the proud new scar along the length of my breastbone.

Recovery was hell. They couldn't give me enough pain meds. I coughed so often and so violently that I broke two ribs. More pain. I survived, albeit with a continuing challenge with my lungs – not an uncommon thing after open heart surgery.

Somewhere along the way, I had purchased a scooter. It was only 50CCs so it didn't need to be licensed or insured. It was cheap to buy and maintain. It had only one gear. It was perfect for a mountain town with undulating roads. I used the scooter for all of my fair-weather jaunts including a trip to the cardiologist for post-op evaluation. After one appointment, I hit an unseeable patch of loose gravel on the pavement, couldn't avoid it, and spilled.

I remember as I was going down saying, "Thank God I'm wearing a helmet." And then, *bang*, I was down, slid into a ditch, unconscious. There were people around me. I came to, said I was fine, got up with some help, mounted the scooter and headed for Dr. Barb's office to be checked out. She sent me for x-rays where it was found that I had broken my collarbone *and three more ribs*. In that condition, I had picked up and ridden the scooter. Adrenaline.

Now, the heart and scooter stories are important in and of themselves. But there is yet another – and long-lasting – consequence: the scooter incident rebroke the not-healed breastbone which has still not re-fused to this day. This matters when I try to sleep on either side. I wake up with chest pain caused by the unhealed breastbone. If you push your pinky into my chest just the right way, you might kill me.

When I returned for a fourth year at shuttle dispatch, I proposed and won an effort to switch out our failing analog radios for digital 2-way radios. Much better signal strength, and they were compatible with any of the possible new technologies we might adopt. And I figured if school buses had tracking systems, why couldn't we? It would make dispatching so much faster and effective if we knew the status and precise location of every shuttle at all times. I also undertook a project to research and propose an AI-assisted ride reservation system – something just a few steps ahead of Uber or Lyft. The effort became an RFP that went out just after the conclusion of that season.

Chapter 26

9 ASH DRIVE, MANHEIM PENNSYLVANIA

Between health issues and the cold hard realities of financial life, Lisa and I knew we couldn't remain in a ski town, no matter how beautiful. We moved

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to Pennsylvania where my baby sister had chosen to retire. Lisa and I bought a house and settled into growing old. She attached to good medical care and a state-issued medical marijuana certificate for pain management, and I attached to the VA Medical Center in Lebanon. With the lower cost of living here, we were set.

Our house was about $\frac{1}{3}$ too big. We chose it thinking that people would come to visit, so we designated the master bedroom and its accompanying bathroom as the guest suite. We took the second bedroom and a hall bathroom for ourselves. Lisa's oldest sister and her husband came for a week during which we drove to Washington D.C. to see the sights. It was during that week that we began to hear the drumbeat for COVID-19. Then it hit the U.S. It was likely the reason nobody else ever came.

We did as all homeowners do, improving things here and there. I toiled with the lawn in an obstinate front yard and eventually tamed it. We laid sheeting and crushed rock over the back yard, removing the jungle that existed there before. I planned to build a gazebo in that tree-shaded space. I power-washed the house and then did three of my neighbor's houses, too. When our next-door neighbor was no longer ambulatory, I walked Bella, her dog, every day. When 94-year-old Ellis' wife went into assisted living, he visited her every day; and I visited *him* every day. In our little cul-de-sac, life was as it should be. We set aside money and were planning – and interviewing builders for – home improvements.

But I was still not willing to quit the productive life beyond our property. I got a job in the hardware & tools department of a nearby Lowe's. And I learned about stuff and enjoyed the customers. But the company couldn't figure out how to pay me. It's not that I needed the money; it's just that if this nationwide outfit couldn't do something as basic as payroll, I didn't need to be there working for them for free. 5½ weeks and I was outta there. *Then* they paid me. And asked me to come back. No.

Everywhere you looked, there were billboards, newspaper ads and TV ads seeking people to become school bus drivers. I decided to give it a shot. Didn't know if I'd like it. Kids, you know? I thought about the essential nobility of

ferrying children to their educations so they could reach their potential. I was properly motivated.

I went with an operator that had 60 buses and 80 drivers, the surplus being for sick and vacation coverage. I was security-checked more thoroughly than I had been before becoming a sworn police officer. I had to do some serious book learnin' and testing. Laws, regulations, details, procedures; all of a sort that I was unaccustomed to. It was very very hard. I had to retake one of the licensing tests before finally getting a learners' permit. The physical driving of a 50ft long bus was not difficult. But the identification of all of its parts was. I really thought I'd wash out, but I tested – and passed! Congratulations, me! I'm a school bus driver.

Early every morning, and in the middle of every afternoon, I set out on a to-the-minute schedule – rain or snow, cold or heat. I got to know my kids by name and some of their parents as well. I grew to love my kids. They weren't all angels, mind you. I did have to write a few infraction reports. But tomorrow was another day and I welcomed them back as if nothing had happened. I think they liked that about me. They learned that they couldn't mess with me, and I was as lenient as I was allowed to be. It was about getting them safely from here to there with no stress added to their already edgy lives.

—

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was a different kettle of fish (or bucket of worms). Political consultant James Carville had famously said of the state: "You've got Pittsburgh on the left, and Philadelphia on the right, and Alabama in the middle." In other words, primarily Democrats on either side, and Republicans in between. It was in that deep red center that we had planted our lives.

There were symbols of extremist ideology everywhere you looked. There was no option: I had to drive buses full of children past front yard flags saying, "Fuck Biden" and other such nastiness. And when COVID-19 was politicized, wearing masks became a touchpoint for harassment. Every stressor of that period was on full display and demanded that you deal with it, like it or not. More of the January 6th rioters came from central PA than from any other full state in the country. The FBI bought billboards with messages asking you to

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turn in perpetrators of the Insurrection. It was hostility all around. Whatever happened to that image of a pastoral region?

The Amish lived in their own world, mixed with “The English” (WASPs) as little as possible, had more than a few skeletons in their closets, and projected a public-facing image of humble living, virtue and craftsmanship. I worked for Mennonites who were terrific. Others were not. But it was the “Christians” you really had to look out for. For them, it wasn’t life with Christ; it was white supremacy and nationalism. It isn’t that they caused fear; I’m from the big city... it’s hard to scare me. Rather, they made me always aware that there were hot-heads around and they mostly looked just like me. And this wasn’t even The Bronx. It was tiresome.

School board meetings became 5-hour-long shouting matches where the only agenda items resolved were regressive. Board members were threatened as they later walked to their cars. Teachers were harassed at parent/teacher meetings and while they shopped with their families. I looked at this, and I looked at my kids, and the nobility of my intentions vaporized.

Maybe I was a spot of light in an otherwise dreary day; I don’t know. But I came to believe that nothing I could do would improve my kids’ lot if I continued; they were doomed, I felt, to lives that were less than they should be. All of this due to the very small, fear-filled minds of a minority of people. And the problem, of course, exists in many places across the country.

--

When Lisa and I arrived in Steamboat Springs years back, we gave serious thought to building a ‘tiny house.’ Our thinking was that, in our advancing years, we required less “stuff,” and wanted less space to maintain. We did a lot of research, and even made some preliminary drawings. But ordinances made it impossible for us to locate a tiny anywhere in Routt County, so we abandoned the idea.

Just before Christmas of 2021, now in PA, we streamed a movie called *Nomadland* starring Francis McDormand and David Strathairn. It was about people who lived in their vans and drove from place to place, meeting up with old friends and making new ones, sometimes working, sometimes not. It was a story about people who had made a lifestyle choice. When the movie ended,

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Lisa turned to me and said: “I have met my tribe. This is what we’ve wanted to do for years. Let’s *not* improve the house any more. Let’s sell it and buy a RV and travel until we turn to dust.”

These words, coming from that person, took three days for me to digest. Then I got busy learning all I could about RVing.

It took about six months to make preliminary choices we thought were right for us, and to start walking through RV lots. Historically, RVs are poorly made, expensive to purchase and even more expensive to maintain. All of the online study, books, and personal interviews confirmed that. Our selection would be tricky; despite the research, we didn’t know what we didn’t know.

So we gave away all of our new furniture and nearly all of our other possessions. We listed the house, and three days later, it sold – at a very high price. We can thank a red-hot seller’s market for that.

By then, we’d decided to look at motorhomes – a 300 sq/ft aluminum lunchbox with big decals and a steering wheel. We weren’t going to get the ‘perfect’ rig right out of the chute; we didn’t know what that was yet. So we got what we thought was a ‘good’ motorhome and called it our “training wheels.”

It is a used 2019 Thor Freedom Traveler A30. It’s 32ft long and has a 24ft long slide-out which greatly expands our living space. It has a bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, living room and cab with captain’s chairs that swivel around. It has two big roof-mounted air conditioners, a generator, and 3 TVs (including one outside!). All of this is built on a Ford V-10 front engine chassis and is fueled by regular gas.

The dealership put the car on a tow dolly, locked it onto a 2” ball, and we drove the whole thing off the lot in Greenville NC. 50ft total length and I was comfortable driving it. This was the rig we’d cut our teeth on. We’d learn what we liked and didn’t, needed and didn’t. And when the right time came, we’d be that much better informed and able to make choices for the next rig.

About 30 minutes shy of our destination in PA, we had our first catastrophe – and that is not an exaggeration. In highway traffic, the car jumped forward off the dolly, causing it and the motorhome to wobble almost uncontrollably

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across lanes of travel. It turns out the car had not been secured properly at the dealership. Three hours later, we were moving again albeit quite rattled. From that day forward – and for maybe four months – almost every day of travel brought a major event of some kind.

Chapter 27

233 RAINBOW DRIVE, LIVINGSTON TEXAS (mail service only)

Three forces were pushing against us. First, and primarily, our inexperience: among many other things, we quickly learned that we couldn't just pull into an RV repair shop for service. They're all so backed up that I had to break my own "the-pro's-will-do-it" repair resolution and do it myself, which means I had to learn how. Not my skillset. Besides that, it was difficult to identify the rare, truly knowledgeable repair people.

Second, gas prices: when we started moving toward the west, gas prices were up over \$5/gal. That's 80 gallons times \$5 = \$400 to fill up. At 7.83 mpg, that was a LOT 'o loot going into the tank between the eastern seaboard and western SD, our first extended stop.

And third, the heat: by the time we got to northern Idaho and then central Washington, the July and August temps were well over 100°F every day. Historically, it *never* gets that hot in the northwest. Thanks to human-caused climate change, now it does. Our two ACs didn't handle it well and neither did we. At one point, an exasperated Lisa asked out loud the questions on both of our minds: Did we make a huge mistake choosing this lifestyle? And: When does this get fun?

Well, it got fun as soon as we stopped waiting for 'the other shoe' to drop. It took a few months but we got there. We met, chatted and networked with some of our campsite neighbors who are always willing to share their experiences. From them, we learned many things about camping, RVs, maintenance, reservations, and cool things to do.

Probably the most important lesson we learned from our neighbors was that our catastrophic experiences are equaled by every other newbie. That was

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oddly comforting, and made it possible for us to relax and enjoy the lifestyle knowing that our ignorance was not quite as likely to kill us as we had feared.

I studied up on repairs as they became necessary. We took walks around the campgrounds. We left the RV and ventured out in the car to explore our surroundings. Even just going to Costco is an outing. We reasoned that the budget could sustain our visiting places that are free, and we found *that* to be at least as much fun as the high-cost destinations (e.g. enjoying the many sights and sounds of Las Vegas without actually gambling).

And that's our life now – changing the scenery from our living room window (windshield) whenever we want to. Ah, the life of a nomad — *that's* the life for me.

Part Two

PATTERNS, PARALLELS AND ABSTRACTIONS

You've heard the saying: "A doctor who treats himself has a fool for a patient." I bring that up as a means of disqualifying myself as an accurate self-analyst. But what good is a lifetime of accumulated wisdom if I don't apply that wisdom retrospectively to my own life?

Back in the 'Lakeview Drive' section, I talked about how my father wrote banker's boxes full of music, deposited them on a publisher's front counter, and abandoned them. That was puzzling to a young me; why put so much work into something you'd orphan? A benefit of writing things out, as I have here, is that I am able to see patterns in my life. Here's one: *ElderBlog* could have been published; it might have helped many caretakers and caregivers. I had what I thought were valid reasons for *not* publishing. But was that just an excuse? Or was I practicing a pattern instilled in me as a kid?

I have a long history of having or producing things and filing them or giving them away or simply being done with them. Take, for example, the elements of the '40-year Anniversary of AFRN' production given to my new NCOIC. Or furniture given to people needing it more than I do. Or not feeling compelled to learn the post-event condition of a CPR patient.

I have claimed loyalty to New York City (23 years), Anchorage (10), Minneapolis (20) and Steamboat Springs (5). If I loved these places so much, why was I okay to leave them or any of the several addresses within each of them? Did I abandon them, or did I have an itch to discover a new place?

I witnessed the historic events of my time. But if I so believed in the cause(s), why did I not feel a need to join in? An attachment disorder? Or curiosity with limits?

I was asked to re-up with the Air Force. I was asked to join the high school ski team. I qualified for Mensa. I did not do any of these. Not a joiner? Not a team player? Iconoclast? There is hardly a thing you can do in television production that doesn't require the efforts of multiple people. So maybe that's not it.

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I really don't know if any or all of these things belong in a section about patterns. They could be perfectly valid within the contexts in which they took place. Or, there is a trait in me that quacks like a mouse.

CRANIAL NERVE #6

Chapter 14 is this book's longest; it details the prime of my productive life and all the good and bad that came with it.

I talked about my time capturing video footage of the activities on flight lines with all my gear... including headsets. The F-4 Phantom Fighter has twin engines which can take the jet to Mach 2.23 (1,473mph) at 40,000 feet (level flight). But before taking to the air, the sound on the ground exceeds 100dB. That's getting close to an NFL stadium at full throat, close to the pain threshold, and is way beyond a safe level without hearing protection (which wasn't much in evidence back then).

Thing is, I had to *amplify* that sound in the headphones in order to set and record good audio levels. And it did damage my hearing, taking out my perception of high frequencies and giving me a constant ultra-high-pitched tone in both ears, tinnitus, day and night. No biggie. Just the cost of doing business. Part of the job.

A couple of decades later, I was talking with a Veterans Service Officer in Minneapolis about a writing project he was involved with. He suddenly diverted away from the conversation to ask, "How's yer hearing, Fred?"

"Funny you should ask," I said.

"What was your AFSC (your job)?"

"79151 – Radio/Television Production and Journalism Specialist."

"Headphones?"

"At all times."

"Fill out this form. Let's get you some help with that."

Thus began my relationship with the Veterans Administration and with VA Medical facilities around the country.

The bad news is that I had hearing damage alright. Now I had documented proof. The good news is that the VA gave me the very best hearing aids (your tax) money can buy. I'm on my third set now. The bad news is that none of these devices have helped to distinguish the sounds I want to hear (your voice) from those I don't (room noise). So I haven't worn the hearing aids a lot.

Tinnitus is another story. No medicine, therapy or device will mute or reduce the nails-on-chalkboard screech I hear continuously in both ears 24/7. Sometimes, it's loud enough to wake me up from a deep sleep. For this, the VA sends me a check every month to compensate for the pain. It's just enough to suggest that they're really really sorry this happened.

I'm not sorry, though, because the compensation doesn't end there. My hearing loss and tinnitus gives me an open ticket to medical care wherever I find myself in this country. That's medical care for anything and everything except dental. There's a co-pay for meds; otherwise, I'm good. If you look at it from a cost/benefit point of view, I came out huge on this one.

Because health care ain't cheap, as you know. And the older I get, the more I need it. And with my chosen (nomadic) lifestyle, VA is everywhere I go. I am truly fortunate.

I've already talked about my Coronary Artery Bypass Graft (aka heart surgery) in Chapter 25. That may well be the highlight of my medical life, so far. I have experienced VA care for many other things over the years, but nothing nearly as strange as a recent visit to the facility in Fargo.

I have had a lifelong battle with sinuses and have had several major surgeries to correct it – including the first one which made it possible for me to join the Air Force in the first place (see Chapter 5). There have been all kinds of tests and meds and, still, I have bigtime sinus problems.

The problems have gotten so much worse over the past year as evidenced by a frequent inability to breathe through my nose at all. Such was the case when we arrived in Fargo in July 2023. I was already thinking to visit the VA Medical Center there when, one day, I started seeing double. That was bad enough, but when I had to drive the big motorcoach across town, I found depth perception to be flat out dangerous and knew it must be attended to.

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Fargo VA's Doctor of Ophthalmology ran me through all kinds of tests small and large. She concluded that one of my sinuses was enlarged and was pressing against Cranial Nerve #6 which caused double vision in the left eye.

What!? I have a cranial nerve called #6? Does this imply that I have at least 5 other cranial nerves? I never knew!

The good doctor pulled a paper-thin sheet of clear plastic out of a file drawer. It was smooth on one side, and vertically serrated on the other. She cut a section to fit the left lens of my glasses and applied it to the inside of the lens. The idea, she said, was to correct the double vision using this odd appliqué. It might take three months or so, but when I started seeing double again, I should peel off the appliqué and, *voilà!*, I will be able to see straight again.

I'm still waiting for that happy moment. But in the meantime, I'm thinking, "Holy Shit! Somebody *invented* this thing. Does he or she know, every day, how very meaningful it is to me that they did it?"

And I can't help but wonder (and I can never know) if I have ever had – or *will* ever have – that kind of impact on anyone.

It can be true at any age, I suppose... but when you get *my* age and something medically untoward happens, you tend to think the worst. "It's a stroke. I've never had a stroke, that I know of. Is this the first of many? Is this gonna be what takes me out? Have I done all the things I want to do? Can't this wait till, oh, *next* year? Am I ready now?"

You never know when the time comes. You live your life day-to-day and try to do good. During my "era of great achievement," 'good' was easier to measure. When, at the end of a day, I asked myself if I did anything good today, it was easier to count accomplishments. Now it's different; when I ask myself that question, I'm hoping I did something... *anything*. Just as long as I wasn't a waste of space. My self-expectations have thinned out considerably.

THE MILITARY EXPERIENCE – FROM G.I. TO VETERAN

The War in Vietnam ended in 1975. I didn't have an internet or a Wikipedia to research while making the decision to join the Air Force a year later. All I knew was what I read or saw in popular media.

The story was that G.I.s were spat upon, threatened and derided as they returned from overseas. Many had been draftees and, as such, had no say in the manner of execution of their combat orders. Yet, here we were – us anti-war boomers who never fought – abusing soldiers as they returned home.

The only problem is – it didn't happen! The whole abuse construct was false, but it caught on and lived on despite being debunked.

Here's something that *did* happen: overt racism within the ranks while in theater. Much in the way Blacks have been wronged throughout American history, they were similarly treated while in Vietnam. The draft brought a disproportionate number of Black soldiers vs. White ones. Yet, there came virtually no opportunity for their advancement, and every opportunity to die in battle.

There is little good in that aspect of The War but, as with fighting units in all of history, there was some bonding of our troops despite race. This, and the top-level realization that the American military *needed* Black troops, may have contributed to an enlightened policy of equality toward the end of The War. I don't want this to sound too Kumbaya-ish, though; racism is wrong, it has no place in life or in the military, and shouldn't have needed correction.

But by the time I entered the Air Force in 1976, Equality was the mandate... everywhere you looked, the policy was touted. And, thankfully, it was also supported at every level. Unaware of the Vietnam discrimination, I was breathing progressive air and was glad of it.

But the air wasn't entirely clear. Between the moment I first entered the recruiter's office and the moment I first entered Tech School two months later, I was probably asked a hundred times if I was gay. I wasn't, so no big deal, right? But the sheer number of inquiries made me suspicious of the military's fears of it. Even the advent of don't-ask-don't-tell during the Clinton administration twenty years later did not satisfactorily solve the problem. And

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it's not even a problem. Ask the troops. The issue exists only in the small, fearful, judgmental minds of the political and military powers-that-be.

Nevertheless, I was in the Air Force for 6+ years. I could have spent – and would have been happy to spend – the additional 14 years in the service and then called it a career with all the benefits that would have derived. But my pre-set goal was to parlay my initial enlistment into a career in the real world. And I'm nothing if not true to my goals.

I did give the military 110%. For that, I got hands-on education, practical experience in my chosen field, and a lifetime of healthcare.

Which brings me to the point of this section.

The first time it happening was in 2013, I think. The lady at the supermarket checkout spotted the VA identification card in my wallet. Then she looked up at me and said: "Thank you for your service." I don't remember how I responded, but I do remember being conflicted.

I served, yes. But this felt like I was stealing glory from those who truly deserved it. G.I.s have sacrificed their bodies and their minds... *they* should be thanked. Their parents and spouses and children and friends should be thanked.

Me? I had the best time of my life, did stuff I'd never dreamed of doing, worked with great people up and down the ladder, *and* lived to tell about it.

And you're thanking *me*? I should be thanking YOU.

TALKIN' 'BOUT MY GENERATION

My Generation, The Who, 1965

I was born between the end of WWII and 1964; a "baby boomer." In simple terms, we, the older cohort of boomers, found it good and necessary to detach ourselves from the norms and mores of our parents. They were about war and nationalism and capitalism. We were about love, peace and happiness – for everyone but our parents.

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And if, in the course of love-ing, peace-ing and happy-ing, we came upon an injustice, we protested that. If we saw racial or gender inequities, we demonstrated. If we faced an undeclared war, we burned our draft cards. If we recognized a crook in the White House, we rallied against him.

We were quite angry, really; a contradiction for a group claiming enlightenment in the age of Aquarius. We got shot and billyclubbed and teargassed, and these things served to make us madder.

We followed thinkers who were often older than we were. We did what we did fully believing that we had the right of it; that we were somehow ordained to bring about change for a better world. We pissed off authority at every level. We hated the table being set for us by the elders.

We thought of ourselves as inclusive and superior as we trekked toward adulthood.

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How often have I heard variations of: “The world is going to hell in a handbasket;” or “Things have never been this bad;” or “If things get any worse, the end-times will come to be.” These assertions were made to us by our elders. But the weird thing is, when we became the elders, we didn’t see the irony as we spoke the very same things to our own kids.

Indeed, many boomers didn’t come face-to-face with our duplicity until 1989 when Billy Joel wrote, *We Didn’t Start The Fire*.

We didn't start the fire
It was always burning
Since the world's been turning.
We didn't start the fire
No, we didn't light it
But we tried to fight it.

Joel’s point was that, throughout *all* of history, there have been issues tugging at our worse-angels. He was enumerating only forty years of it in his song.

We, in our youthful ignorance, viewed the powers-that-be as the generational devils, while we were the planet’s saviors.

—

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Meanwhile, already-established social and political leaders had their social and political interests to protect. They hunkered down and made things harder for us. A president and some “men of God” created organizations called “The Silent Majority,” and “The Moral Majority,” and “The Christian Coalition” which gave the elder constituencies platforms from which to judge boomers.

We were perfectly set up for a fight for the soul of the country. And fight we did – often and violently. And while the greater body of analyses concludes that society was changed as a result, I say that boomers made things worse: not for the destruction or the progressive ethos we espoused, but because... we grew up!

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This is a subject about which I have long been perplexed; a subject about which I have researched. My queries found no dataset that answers the right questions. I even lowered myself to opinion and analysis pieces which were all over the map. Garbage.

I contend that as boomers aged and eventually became the people in charge, we made things worse. How did this happen? What are the *right* questions?

Absent data to the contrary, I offer a theory.

Music being integral to the boomer experience, a sinister accidental playlist invaded our hippie ecosystems. The Edwin Hawkins Singers gave us an updated gospel/rocker with the Top-10 *Oh Happy Day*, “... when Jesus walked”. Norman Greenbaum came along with a snappy *Spirit In The Sky*. “... I got a friend in Jesus”. Rolling Stone cited it in their list of ‘500 Greatest Hits of All Time’. And Greenbaum is Jewish!

Ray Stevens opined *Everything Is Beautiful*, whose opening lines included “Jesus loves the little children of the world.” The theme was perfect for the Boomer generation, so we could forgive the intrusive Jesus part.

No less a Rock ‘n Roll icon than George Harrison sang *My Sweet Lord*. “I really wanna see you.” There were so many more in-your-face hits that they were collectively anointed a genre name: “God Rock.” It produced Broadway smashes, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* which, themselves, spawned a bevy of hits.

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This genre featured themes of love, inclusivity, hope, honesty and fairness. These were *our* ideals. And the tunes were great. As the music became ever more prevalent, the Jesus hammer morphed into acceptability.

And despite the upheaval occurring between about 1963 to 1975, God Rock was softening us and, by the mid-70s, we found it increasingly convenient to appropriate Jesus as our own (cause). This gave us continued focus on what was “good” as we aged toward adulthood.

We thought we were bringing our enlightened values with us but, without realizing it, left them behind as we adopted the traditionalist values of so-called Christianity. Many of us – myself included – gave away, or (worse!) burned our godless vinyl collections. (Now, *that* was a sin.)

It had little to do with Christ, really. If it had, we would have kept going in the loving, inclusive direction of Jesus. Instead, we became adults, parents and leaders whose behaviors Jesus hated while he was on earth. And we couldn't see that.

—

So, the question: What good did my generation do?

I'll begin the answer with a return to my friend, Jay. Within the flow of a dinnertime conversation one evening (in 1985), I had a moment of warmth. I said: “I sure am glad my generation solved the problem of racism.” What a stupid thing to say. Jay shot me a look that spoke volumes. But, just to make sure, he took me on a tour of the Fairview section of Anchorage and told me stories of the people who lived there and the adversities they'd had to face. I'll let today's headlines provide proof that “the problem of racism” is far from solved.

By what measure has my generation made this world a more peaceful place than we found it? Did we turn weapons into farm implements?

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War I despise
'Cuz it means destruction of innocent lives
War means tears to thousands of mothers' eyes
When their sons go out to fight and lose their lives
I said
War!
Huh. Good God y'all
What is it good for?
Absolutely nuthin'. Say it again

War, Edwin Starr, 1970

Women's rights? There have been some hard-fought gains in the push against the glass ceiling over the last 50 years. Pay equity, however, remains, well, inequitable. Meanwhile, many states are making it impossible for women to have babies without out-of-state travel. Why? OB-GYNs are fleeing their states because of prohibitions and liabilities imposed on them by anti-abortion legislatures.

Environment? Human-caused pollution has brought climate change to a deadly scale – not someplace else, but right here on our own continent.

Economy? The absence of – and/or insufficient enforcement of – banking regulations caused “The Great Recession” (2008) to cite but one event in recent memory, and, as I write this, another series of bank failures may very well do the same again.

And political idiocy may again bring the U.S. to a debt ceiling which, if not properly exercised, could cause global economic collapse.

(The previous two paragraphs use words like *may* and *could* to couch events that might or might not happen. But the issues are real, severe, and *frequent*. And all of it is squarely within the purview of my generation's business and political leadership.)

When we boomers were young teens, our nation's politicians were still able to negotiate change in good faith. That began to degrade with the upheaval of the 60s and 70s. Then we entered the leadership picture. Today, there is no good faith; only 'we must win – you must lose.'

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No more voting for the best candidate; we are voting straight-party ticket. We are moving to states and regions where others agree with us. Net net, we are setting ourselves up for another civil war. And the issue is the very same: 'You are wrong and I am right.' Both sides have guns.

There's battle lines being drawn
Nobody's right if everybody's wrong

For What It's Worth, Buffalo Springfield, 1966

It seems to me that we've come full circle... returning to the **1860s**.

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done;
and there is nothing new under the sun. Ecclesiastes 1:9

BUT...

It doesn't have to be like this. All we need to do is make sure
we keep talking. Stephen Hawking, British Telecom 1994

I believed then, as now, in the causes and issues about which so much noise was made. But that's me.

My generation? We weren't at all special. We just had really good music.

I COULD BE WRONG, BUT I'M NOT

Victim Of Love, Eagles, 1976

I like to think that music came into me from listening to the radio. My love for *talk* came first (see Chapter 1). I regarded the music within the first 10 years of my life to be more my parents' taste.

It must be true that every generation thinks of its music as the best. As I rode around the world on my bike listening to 77-WABC, I distinctly recall saying to myself, "Boy, I sure am glad to be living now because we have the best music ever." How I could know that at age 12 is beyond me, but there it is. (Earlier on, I'd wondered how the artists and groups existed at the radio station and what they did and what they ate between the times they performed their songs on the air.)

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In 1962, there came a tune by The Tornados called *Telstar*. It started with the distortion of a rocket launch and continued as a high-energy instrumental featuring a predecessor of the Moog synthesizer. From this, I learned two things about my musical taste: I liked the unusual (distortion, synth), and I liked songs without the cluttering of words. All of the words had been used up already, I figured.

Instrumentals made it possible for me to appreciate the nuances of the rhythm and melody. It made easy the looping of the melody in my head such that I could devise my own variations. Many of them.

Another instrumental at around the same time was The Village Stompers' *Washington Square*. It was named for the primary feature of Manhattan's Greenwich Village, but its style was pure Mardi Gras. I envisioned the band softly approaching me along the parade route, playing the main celebratory body of the song while in front of me, and then continuing softly on down the street.

Hence my appreciation for instruments and styles that weren't based on guitars and drums. These are music values I still hold today. Hell, I *liked* disco, and hated rap at first – though it grew on me.

It may seem odd, but I am strongly attracted to the pipe organ. Here is a single instrument that can give voice to a multitude of others. This is a machine requiring a lifetime to master while, at the same time, making music on its many registers and with its myriad stops. It can deliver birdlike highs, melodies in the midrange, and bone-rattling lows – all with clarity, all at the same time. And sometimes, it can put out so much sound that you think the building is gonna collapse from the extreme vibration.

When I was a kid, I was always eager to see the latest kid movies at Radio City Music Hall because the giant Wurlitzer came up out of the stage floor and performed for me with its 4 manuals, 58 ranks and 4,178 pipes. Incredible. Back then, Virgil Fox was the big name organist. Today, I would give that honor to Anna Lapwood.

Motown was smokin' hot in the 60s. But I do remember once hearing a Supremes tune and thinking: "Hmm, there sure are a lot of black people singing songs on WABC." And then I immediately thought: "That's stupid, it's

great music and I *like* it. And that was a racist thought I just had and I won't have another one again." Maybe not those exact words, but something close.

The Beatles – what can I say. They were crazy good. Theirs is a story of guys who paid their dues and learned their craft in the club dungeons of Liverpool and Berlin before hitting it big. It is a story of guys united by their celebrity but whose celebrity ultimately forged changes in them as people and as artists. They did not stay static in terms of their style; they continually advanced. And their expansions took their listeners on trips to new worlds. They grew us as the musical and social beings we became.

During the 60s, many songs evolved away from hits and toward statements. There was a lot to talk about and our music led and supported those discussions. Protest, anthem, anger. As many books have been written about The Beatles, many more are about the music of my generation. The times influenced the tunes; the tunes influenced the times.

For me, and in New York City, WNEW-FM 102.7 was the transmitter of that influence. Before corporate-controlled radio, there was air talent who were genuinely tapped into the music and culture. I would've given anything just to sweep the floors in WNEW's studio.

I speculated earlier that every generation regards its music to be the best. That seems true based solely on my reading of human nature, and I can't prove it. I would posit, however, that by whatever measurement could be devised, the music of my generation had the most immediate *and* lasting social impact, resonating far longer as an art form and a messaging medium than that of any other generation. I include these thoughts as a means of highlighting the importance of music since way back then. And my thinking could be instructive regarding other aspects of me.

—

When I was young, I thought I knew some things. To wit: the original artists' recording was always the best version. Later, I heard a quote from master rock guitarist Jay Stapley (neither he nor I am able to attribute it):

Excessive reverence to the canon leads to tyranny. And the notion that it should always be played only this way leads to music becoming ossified. Frozen.

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I began to challenge the rigidity of my own thinking, and got my answer when José Feliciano covered The Doors' *Light My Fire*. Same song, totally different; in some ways, the cover was better. Much later, the legendary Prince's *Nothing Compares 2 U* was boring when compared with the impassioned version by Sinéad O'Connor. (More about The Purple One in a moment.)

Still later, Simon & Garfunkle's monster hit, *The Sound Of Silence* was dwarfed by Disturbed. I don't know how that's even possible. Paul Simon, who wrote the song, liked the cover so much that he emailed his praise to the group for its stunning accomplishment.

This is fun. Let's keep going. [The editor's gonna chop this part down anyway.] Joe Cocker made The Beatles' *With A Little Help From My Friends* his own; Dylan's *All Along The Watchtower* was way better when observed by Jimi Hendrix; *Hallelujah*, Leonard Cohen's great song, was so good that not just Jeff Buckley – *EVERYONE* who ever sang it, sang it better; CCRs *Proud Mary* was given a new and better life in the hands of Ike & Tina Turner. (*You Make Me Feel Like*) *A Natural Woman* – Aretha or Carole? Okay, that's a tie.

And c'mon... Janis Joplin did a down-to-her-bones version of *Summertime*, better even than George Gershwin's original for *Porgy and Bess*.

Another thing I thought I knew was that the original studio recording was always perfect and, as such, could not be as good when performed live. This is the height of ignorance on my part, and denies the greatness of live performance. The studio provides a controlled environment and (perhaps unlimited) do-overs. The stage is all risk/reward. Everything Pink Floyd recorded in the studio was eclipsed by their concerts. Coldplay's studio smashes are funereal when measured against their live performances.

And there's something special about the shared experience of concertgoers. In the summer of 2016, just after the death of Prince, I attended an open air show headlined by Booker T. & the MG's. This group had some Top-20 hits back in the 60s and their new show was as tight as ever. Somewhere in the setlist came the unmistakable opening guitar riffs of *Purple Rain*, which were immediately recognized by the thousands in attendance. Arms went up, lighters lit up, and we slowly swayed in sync with the song. Catharsis. Release. Wonderful. It is, I suppose, why most of us bear the cost and make the effort

to go to such gatherings; to share the necessary spiritual experience of oneness. We have music to thank for so much of this.

Two Stanley Kubrick films had tremendous musical influence on me: 1968's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (my all-time favorite movie), and 1971's *A Clockwork Orange*. Kubrick loved classical music and he used it extensively in both films. In *2001*, he used symphony orchestras. In *Clockwork*, he used variations of classical themes by artists like Walter/Wendy Carlos. With these, my tastes were stretched further.

I grew to like the coupling of classical with rock. And the longer the piece, the better. Like the *Overture* and *Underture* of The Who's rock opera *Tommy*. Or the *Overture* from *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Almost anything that combined these divergent styles were of great interest to me.

A further sampling: Jeff Lynne had strings in his studio and on stage in lots of Electric Light Orchestra songs, notably *Fire On High*, and (sorta) *Roll Over Beethoven*; Boston's *Augustana* and *Foreplay/Long Time*; Elton John's *Funeral For A Friend/Love Lies Bleeding*; even Barry Manilow's *Could It Be Magic*. Judging from the number of these marriages, it may be that many rock musicians, themselves, also dig the symphonic.

Keith Emerson was one of those. A classically trained pianist with a yen for jazz, he really wanted the fame of a rock star. So he found ways to combine the forms. First with The Nice, then with Emerson Lake & Palmer, he brought rock to Mussorgsky's *Pictures At An Exhibition*. And he wrote and performed his own works – rock *and* classical. He featured Moog Synthesizers and the Mellotron among many other instruments.

I saw ELP in concert three times. Emerson was a big-time showoff. I mean, who plays a concerto on a Steinway grand while spinning end-over-end in a cloud of smoke twenty feet above the audience? Or Bach's Toccata & Fugue in D minor played *from behind* a Hammond B-3 while it's *on top* of you? Please. Keith Emerson was a keyboard monster and an enduring personal favorite.

Mike Oldfield doesn't have a theatrical bone in his body. What he does have is a gift for music composition and a yen for contemporary instrumentations.

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Before his 20th birthday, he composed and recorded what he called, ‘Opus One.’ You might remember it as *Tubular Bells*.

One week in the studio; Mike Oldfield played 21 instruments, and made 274 overdubs – an exceedingly rare technique considering that digital recording didn’t exist at the time. And when the 25-minute-long opus ends, I have to gasp for air and say, “Wow!” I don’t know how many thousands of times I have listened to Oldfield’s works, but the same response rises from within me for so many of them... I say “Wow!” right out loud, even when there’s no one to hear me. This year (2023), we celebrate the 50th anniversary of Oldfield’s first masterpiece.

Mike Oldfield has a couple dozen studio albums and has toured the world extensively producing full-concert videos – one more amazing than the last. He is the epitome of classical construction, endless curiosity, constant innovation, and the discovery of unique instruments and voices used to advance the music and – even sometimes – to sing lyrics.

As a bonus, I’d submit for your consideration, Pomplamoose. Nataly and Jack have happy hearts, bunches of talent, are consummate musicians, and they enjoy sharing the process of music creation with their fans.

—

Maybe this isn’t about the music, per se. But it *is* about the meaning of music as it pertains to life writ large.

There was a time during the 90s when a handful of radio stations tried to combine “light jazz” with “new age.” I liked the esthetic of the latter and merely accepted the former. Milwaukee had a good station for this combo. Minneapolis never did. Beyond this coupling, though, *real* jazz was just not my thing.

It was during this era that I attended a seminar where my friend Maurice used jazz to illustrate his points. Afterward, I told him my perception of jazz was that there were five musicians on stage fighting for the spotlight so they could show off. Maurice looked at me with the slightest hint of pity and said that I couldn’t be more wrong. More in a moment.

I later participated in an executive team-building exercise where bassist Michael Gold, PhD, described his world of jazz musicianship. The phone

would ring: “Hey, a bunch of us are gonna gig at the so-and-so club tonight. Wanna jam?” The group relationships were fluid, so the prospect of great success or certain failure was a risk factor (and an appeal!) on a nightly basis. Gold said that he could tell within five minutes of the gig starting if it would be a good one based solely on the skill of the drummer. It isn’t for me to understand why... I’m not a musician.

I love being a drummer. Everyone thinks you're dumb.
What they don't realize is that if it weren't for you,
their band would suck. Dave Grohl – Foo Fighters, Nirvana

Back to Maurice. “The drummer is key,” he told me, “for more than mere tempo-keeping. The drummer sets the vibe for the song being played. And the other musicians organically blend in and make art as a single unit. Within that, a musician will take the lead and offer impressions for as long as they (and the audience) are happy with the result. As important is how the baton is handed over to the next featured musician, and the next. To an appreciator of the form, each feature is a gift unto itself. To a jazz aficionado, the handoff is where the magic happens. Lots of performative elements... one whole.”

Can’t the same can be said of every productive effort? Sports dynasties like the old Yankees, or the Steelers or Cowboys, or the Bulls. Love ‘em or hate ‘em, when they’re bangin’ on all cylinders, teams like these are hard to beat.

I guess I’m using jazz and sports as metaphors for every field of endeavor – to bring my thoughts from the lofty back to the practical. You bring your skill, combine it with others, and make something better than it might’ve been with only your contribution.

Even writing, which is necessarily a solo enterprise, gives life when it is read. So the individual effort ultimately manifests in an exchange involving multiple people.

Whether making machine parts for tractors, vaccines to save populations, or mowing your neighbor’s yard, we are each contributors to each other’s lives. None of us function in a silo. Everything we do impacts others.

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OBSESSING THE NEWS

At the height of my generation's convulsions, the War in Vietnam was front and center in the collective consciousness. It was in every newspaper, on every TV news broadcast, and was likely to be the leading topic of conversation – no matter who was having it.

There was a civics class in high school in which the war was discussed. Some of the other kids seemed to know what they thought about it. I thought very little of it. Later, after the draft physical business (Chapter 5), I realized that my indifference to wartime service was a product of my ignorance on the subject. I read up on it, and quickly understood that the Vietnam War was a hellhole on every level. Being oblivious to an important subject is no excuse.

So began my interest in current events even if they occurred outside my existing zone of familiarity. Slowly, at first. By the time I was in the Air Force media world in the late-70s, newscasts, 60 Minutes, and newspapers had become a regular part of life. But as I got nearer to my career in talk radio, my appetite for news was voracious. I didn't want to be caught not knowing something about any subject that could come up in an open forum. So I read: periodicals, books, white papers. Everything.

Everything, that is, but opinions and editorials. No advice columns. No lifestyle crap. I didn't want to be told what to think. Still don't.

On the first page of his book *Hold On, Mr. President* (1987), ABC White House correspondent Sam Donaldson said his knowledge base was very wide, but not very deep. His width of knowledge made it possible for him to begin any impromptu interview. His overall knowledge of politics (his specialty) made it possible for him to continue it.

I adapted Donaldson's technique for use in my own interviewing practice. I knew that – in a worst-case scenario – if I came up with the right first question, the rest of the dialog would fall into place. There were just a few times when, despite exhaustive research, the first question of an interview was not apparent to me. And I would introduce my guest and then open my mouth to ask that first question and, whaddya know, one always came out. It never failed. *That's a gift.*

I Should Know Better

My consumption of news transcended the professional and migrated to the personal. It remains my norm to read the news for at least a couple hours every day (even these decades after departing the media). My sources are carefully selected for accuracy, balance, and tone. I also read digests of what the unbalanced sources have to say so that I can know, ahead of time, what foolishness I might face. No blind-side punches for me.

This is my drug of choice. It's like a genuine physical need. I have made several attempts to curtail my habit with varying degrees of success. After 50 years of this, I'm down to three major papers (*The Guardian-U.S.*, *Reuters* and *The Washington Post*), and one trusted analyses blog (*Electoral-Vote.com*), all paid online subscriptions. I'm comfortable in the knowledge that I know what I should without being bloated with info I'll never need.

—

My need for news extends to an interest in the news *business*. I see “The Fourth Estate” as crucial to the existence of democracy and to truth-telling. And if, as some say, there's “a special place in hell,” I hope the tellers of lies will find themselves there asap. (Don't get me started by asking the disingenuous question: What is a lie?)

The tellers of truth should be heroes. In my lifetime, these included Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, Mike Wallace, Woodward & Bernstein, and so many others. Books, and movies like *All The President's Men* (1976), *The China Syndrome* ('79), *Spotlight* ('15), *The Post* ('17), *She Said* ('22), and even a TV series *Alaska Daily* ('22) showed the process, responsibility, and tension of getting an important story and getting it *right*. I am drawn to portrayals of journalists digging into minutia for that snippet of data which points in the right direction; of fact-finding, interpretation, and well-crafted writing and editing. Of the dogged pursuit of accuracy.

—

That said, the news industry, over its history, has done plenty to shoot its own foot. I had to force myself to watch the true-story movie *Shattered Glass* (2003). It was painful to see slimeball Stephen Glass operate within a major media system that failed to deploy its own high standards against his journalistic fraud. Even *The New York Times* has had the wool pulled over its eyes in the “reporting” of Jayson Blair. And just last week (November 2023),

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Fox Sports' Charissa Thompson freely admitted fabricating sideline reports on nationally broadcast NFL games. And these are only a few recent examples of professional malfeasance.

So I can't fault anyone who doesn't trust what they read or see in the news. And this is doubly true of publications that are free to access. And this triply true of the cesspool of "news" sites available on social media.

I also don't fault anyone who becomes fatigued by the pessimism of the news. Just look at the headlines:

Dog Bites Man is a fairly ordinary occurrence, so you wouldn't see that headline.

Man Bites Dog is unusual. That makes the headlines.

100,000 Planes Land Today, 6M People Home For Dinner is a given; no headline.

Plane Crashes, Kills 83 is tragic. It makes the headlines.

Much of what we call news is negative. And with the proliferation of unreliable sources comes consumer exhaustion and disconnection.

Layer onto that the current-day news *business* environment where Craigslist came along and took away the lucrative classified ads, and the internet came along and took away the display ad inches. The net effect of these factors was/is to remove revenue to the point that legitimate news outlets atrophied, rendering them decreasingly useful as a means of digging for, collecting, and disseminating information.

Newspapers? Who cares? Most of them are small-town papers, anyway. Well, since the turn of this century, over 2,000 legit local papers have folded. Tens of thousands of reporters are no longer gathering and distributing information. Untold millions of readers no longer know (as they once did) what's going on in their own backyards. Which leaves us with big-city or national outlets who necessarily make their presentations from a larger perspective. This results in framing (for one example) their political stories as Red vs. Blue. When this is all we see, we forget our commonalities, as was once the norm. It accelerates our polarization.

An excellent story on this very subject was delivered by Judy Woodruff on *PBS NewsHour* just two days after I wrote the above couple of paragraphs.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-the-loss-of-local-newspapers-fueled-political-divisions-in-the-u-s>

There are still good sources of online information out there, just fewer of them. And there is now a direct cost to the end user who wouldn't pay were it not worthwhile. Sadly, I would guess that only politicians and news nerds like me actually pony up. The rest have only time enough (or only care enough) to get fleeting impressions of current events by consuming headlines, talking points, mis-information, dis-information, or news candy. And that's not even to mention (dear lord in heaven, save us!) AI-generated "news."

THERE'S NOTHING GOOD ON TV (Yes, there was)

I think the expression, "There's nothing good on TV" refers mostly to the episodic – whether sitcoms, drama series, or even the nightly network news. I mostly agree. But television does excel when something important happens – like an early launch into space, or Mt. St. Helens blows, or the Exxon Valdez spoils my beautiful Alaska (I still can't drive into an Exxon station), or Baghdad gets bombed, or 9/11, or the Insurrection. Most events are worthy of at least a quick read; these and others are worthy of real-time participation, albeit through a flat-panel screen.

I watched television quite a lot as a kid (an understatement). Cartoons, *Lost In Space* (Angela Cartwright!), *Twilight Zone*, *Get Smart* (Barbara Feldon!), *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, *Gilligan's Island* (Mary Ann!), *Mission Impossible*, and on and on.

Later, it seemed important to watch some of the original offerings from the nascent HBO and Showtime. Later still, PBS' *American Experience*, Carl Sagan's *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* and *Frontline*. Even CNN was required viewing at its start.

Otherwise, Newton N. Minnow was probably correct when he said that television was "a vast wasteland." He should know... he was the Chairman of the FCC under JFK.

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All of this is a setup for me to highlight what I believe are a handful of the more worthwhile shows.

Remember WENN (American Movie Classics 1996-98). I rarely like “period pieces” (e.g. *Downton Abbey*). But when fiction meets history, sometimes it’s good. And when the story is set in a radio station, well, that’s required viewing for me. And when it’s written by a guy who *loves* radio... you can’t go wrong. That guy is Rupert Holmes who you may remember as the writer and singer of *Escape* (*The Piña Colada Song*) among other Top-10 hits of the ‘80s.

This show is set in the time before and during WWII and reflects the lives and work of a staff trying to sustain a radio station during that period. Radio was ‘live’ then; no network, no recorded shows. The pull of the War on station personnel is deeply told. A particular highlight for me is the mechanics of scripting and performing radio shows back then. The production of sound effects is true-to-life (and funny as hell in that the SFX guy never speaks!). This 56-episode series is like a really good book – you can’t put it down.

The Newsroom stars Jeff Daniels (HBO 2012-14). Maybe this review belongs in the chapter above (OBSESSING THE NEWS), but it’s set in a TV newsroom, so I’ve included it here. Daniels and the young cast are news obsessives in the very best way. Theirs is a continual effort to fulfill their constitutional mandate to inform the public. *How* they do it is what this show is about. These 25-episodes reveal the internal and external politics of a daily television news production, and approaches each show’s 2 or 3 subjects with an eye to ethics, morals and history.

Three highlights among many – Season 1, Episode 1, Scene 1, where Daniels responds to an audience question about what’s good about America. Find it on YouTube. It’s *SO* worth watching. Then there’s Jane Fonda, the mysterious network owner who, once revealed, has a *lot* to say about how a news show should be done. And an online news producer, Dev Patel, returns from an extended absence to find that his operation has devolved into a ‘features and listicles’ toilet. The speech he delivers to his successors is priceless. It reminds me of a speech given by Joshua Malina to Robert Guillaume in...

Sports Night (ABC 1998-2000). The impassioned speech was delivered by an eager-to-move-up reporter to his grizzled managing editor, and it dealt with

the reporter's feelings after doing a story about hunting for sport. No condemnation; just the airing of both sides of a story. All 45 episodes were like that... not about the glitz of TV sportsdom, but of the humanity (and lack of humanity) in what these people do to prepare a sportscast.

But the granddaddy of all television shows, the one whose loss I still mourn is...

The West Wing starring Martin Sheen (NBC 1999-2006). At first glance, it was a fictionalized show about liberal politics set in the White House. But it was quickly realized as so much more. And it was an immediate #1 show.

During the first couple of seasons, there was an internet chatroom where the show's viewers would comment on the show in real time as they watched. The room's chatters would critique the authenticity of sets, or the propensity of the characters to 'walk-and-talk,' or nit-pick about adherence to White House protocols. These remarks, alone, were fascinating given the inside-the-beltway pedigrees of the chatters.

But after a while, the room thinned out and then folded. Turns out, even the beltway brethren loved *The West Wing* and they wanted to watch it instead of sniping about it. That just doesn't happen. And the chatters came from across the political spectrum. Why? Because the edge of the show was the debate of real issues from all sides. It was a fair fight. And the show didn't always tell which side won in the end, respecting the viewers' ability to reason it out for themselves. How rare!

I recorded the show (on VHS) each Wednesday night, watched it as soon as I got home, and then re-watched it two or three times more; it was that rich. It was like listening to a Mike Oldfield opus (for me)... at the end, you just have to exhale and say "Wow!" right out loud.

The richness came from the portrayals of flawed characters, including the president (Sheen), who surrounded himself with idealists who needed to move things forward in a city that always pushes back. The storylines were pulled from the headlines of the Clinton/Bush2 years. The show was very nearly perfect in every way. And if I ever yearn for an example of how government outta work, I can stream all 154 episodes and feel like things really *could* be okay again if we tried.

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I would be remiss if I didn't mention that *The Newsroom*, *Sports Night*, and *The West Wing* were all created and primarily written by the same person: Aaron Sorkin. All of his work is word-dense. You are forced to pay attention if you are to appreciate his works at all.

And now he's into films. I recently enjoyed a Jessica Chastain, Idris Elba movie, *Molly's Game* (2017), the true story of an Olympic-class skier who then ran high-stakes poker games for celebrities and mobsters. Written and directed by... Aaron Sorkin. Look him up. He's done a *lot* of good work that you would enjoy.

WHAT I BELIEVE – AND WHAT I DON'T

I believe in a supreme being because I choose to. I look at the wonders that surround me and recognize the work of a benevolent creator. The existence of a supreme being makes sense to me.

We see a universe marvelously arranged, obeying certain laws,
but we understand the laws only dimly. Our limited minds
cannot grasp the mysterious force that sways the constellations.

Albert Einstein

As with everything I've written here, it is my intention to clarify *for myself* the many experiences, teachings and principles I have received and reasoned through, and which have guided my life. By now, you know that I come from the Christian belief system, so my thinking begins there. While I am conversantly aware of other faith traditions, I have never studied them.

The first canon of my religion is that you shouldn't try to
convince anybody to believe like you do. Leon Russell

Male pronouns are used in this section only for commonly-understood clarity. The God I know has no gender.

RELIGION (for the love of God)

If four eyewitness accounts (the gospels) are to be believed, Jesus Christ spent a significant part of his three active years of ministry on earth criticizing religion and, specifically, its leaders. How ironic that the very subject of religious practice would condemn it. Indeed, Jesus' only recorded demonstrations of anger were his rants against the religious influencers of his day, identifying them as (among other things) "snakes," "frauds," "hypocrites" and "thieves."

What happened?

God visited with Adam, and Moses, and Abraham, all icons of the time *before* Christ. The reported guidance given during these events became fodder for those who wish to organize, whether God wanted the organization or not. It

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was inevitable, and he knew it would happen before the fact because a supreme being is all-knowing.

There were and are people of goodwill, of course, who tried (then and still) to nurture God's children with his teachings. But God also knows that humans will produce structures within which greedy people would hold subject those who would follow. It is these structures and the accompanying man-authored practices which are offensive to God.

It is often difficult for us to tell the good and the bad apart. But not for God; he sees your heart and honors your sincere effort to grow in a relationship with him. But he hates the rituals of religion.

If there is a God, atheism must seem to him as less of an insult
than religion.

Edmund deGoncourt

God has no religion.

Mahatma Gandhi

God created everything to be relational. Were this not true, everything would quickly become extinct. The first part of human relationality begins with God himself. He put it into us at birth: the desire to seek and find and choose him. The second part is with other humans who share our space, culture and values. We like being with others who are like us.

Jesus was talking with Peter, a name that translates to *rock*. Jesus said to Peter: "You are the rock upon which I build my church." This quote has served as the basis for starting religions from that moment to this. But after three years of trashing religions, Jesus didn't mean to start more of them. Whatever we think we know of the meaning of the word *church* today, taken to the root definition well before Jesus' time, *church* means relationship. Jesus was saying, 'Peter, you're an imperfect man...but you have chosen to love me, and I love you. Our love stands as the basis of our relationship forever.'

The Bible infers several times that it pleases God when his "saints" are gathered together. When one of his children loves him, he is deeply touched and loves his child back, as with Peter. When two, or two hundred or two thousand love him in a single gathering, he is tickled pink, and loves each of

us back as *individuals*. Sure, he could manifest himself to an individual or group in any number of ways. But his deepest touch is reserved for the individual, his unique and precious creation. To God, it's always about a one-to-one relationship. That's what *church* means to God.

Having thusly corrected the definition of 'church,' the structures we refer to as 'church' are merely gathering places – which are fine, and a good opportunity for community. Until people step in to make rules.

THE NATURE OF GOD (the shortest chapter in this book)

Of all of the books I've ever read, none has so immediately changed me as did 2007's *The Shack* by William Peter Young. It was said to be a novel about grieving. What I got from it was a rendering of the true nature and personality of God.

Depicted here as a rotund Black woman (do *you* know what God really looks like?) who loves to cook and sing along to popular music playing on her headphones. I mean, God being "especially fond" of a funk-blues group called 'Diatribes?' "... They're just full of vinegar and fizz. Lots of anger..." But God wants to hear what's on the hearts he gave life to. Maybe he's thinking that they're just processing through life on their way to an encounter with him. No problem here.

Nothing threatens God. Nothing 'keeps him awake at night.' No worries. Everything's going precisely as it was set in motion to go – the good and the not good, alike. He is unfailingly and especially fond of *all* of his creations... from 'Diatribes' to Rosa Parks.

God is always the same: with love for his children no matter what.

Fred Marx

THE NATURE OF MAN (the devil made me do it)

We were created with a dynamic that makes us aware of opportunity and keeps us alert to danger. But what is good about this awareness can often be bad when the focus is not first on God. So God knows that the 'self' tools in us can be used for purposes other than his will. The nature of humans, left to their own devices, is to serve themselves.

In my talk radio career, I favored discussions about politics, philosophy and theology. As with any subject, my goal was to expand the thinking of my listeners such that they were able to make better-informed decisions than were possible before listening to that day's show.

What I learned over time was that people listened only as long as the dialog affirmed their own points of view. If they listened beyond that, it was only because the dialog (or *I*) was entertaining. This is why balanced talk radio, as it was in the age of the FCC's *Fairness Doctrine* and the *Equal Time Rule*, is no more. It has been replaced with tirades with which the listener agrees, or changes the station.

Talk programmers have known this ratings secret for nearly forty years now. It was only recently that actual smart people learned why it is so.

[P]olitical scientists have begun to discover a human tendency deeply discouraging to anyone with faith in the power of information. It's this: Facts don't necessarily have the power to change our minds. In fact, quite the opposite. In a series of studies in 2005 and 2006, researchers at the University of Michigan found that when misinformed people, particularly political partisans, were exposed to corrected facts in news stories, they rarely changed their minds. In fact, they often became even more strongly set in their beliefs. Facts, they found, were not curing misinformation. Like an underpowered antibiotic, facts could actually make misinformation even *stronger*.

How Facts Backfire, by Joe Keohane, 7/11/10 Boston Globe

I Should Know Better

A growing disillusionment and disgust became a knot in the pit of my stomach. What becomes of us if our minds are closed... if we can't listen to inarguable truth or to other points-of-view? The answer: we become divided, and in-so-doing, we (as a society) become weak.

It is human nature to be comfortable with what we're comfortable with, and intolerant of the rest. I believe that this makes God ill. Here he gave us the ability to reason, and we restrict ourselves to what makes us feel good.

Great minds discuss ideas;
average minds discuss events;
small minds discuss people. (attributed to) Eleanor Roosevelt

Let's talk about what's good about us. We love our spouses and children, and work to provide for them as best we can. We are diligent at our jobs, work at a high standard of ethics and pay our taxes. In times of need, we pitch in to help our neighbors as, for example, when injury victims are helped by good Samaritans. To the more ordinary: we selflessly volunteer our time and effort to any number of causes which bring benefit to others. From these examples, can we conclude that man is basically good?

Contrast this with what's bad about us. There are people who victimize others in ways I need not describe. Industries take advantage of under-regulation or the absence of oversight by polluting, or delivering inferior goods or services, or by developing financial instruments so complicated that they hold the potential to bring down the world's economies. From these examples, can we conclude that man is basically bad?

I say that both sets of examples are true ... and are often true of the same individuals. I knew a man who was a captain of his trillion-dollar industry. He recently paid a nearly half-billion-dollar partial settlement to the Securities and Exchange Commission for backdating stock options. In just the last decade, he also donated nearly \$100 million in personal funds to the arts. Good guy or bad guy?

You've heard stories of religious leaders who have brought many souls into the fold and nurtured them to stronger relationships with their Lord. Then you

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hear that the same religious leader is caught [insert your infraction of choice here]. Bad guy, or good-guy-gone-bad, or never-was-a-good-guy in the first place?

As the apostle Paul is given almost equal status with Jesus in terms of New Testament coverage and quotability, Christians give Satan almost equal status with God. Heresy? Look around. You've seen that religious leader's tear-filled assertion that "Satan is strong in this world. That's why I did it." What's a flock to do? With this as our example, we can all commit our sins and then say, "The devil made me do it."

But I believe that Christians give Satan a whole lot of credit for things that are done to us or by us. Satan didn't cause the collision; the collision happened because the other guy blew a traffic light. Satan didn't light that cigarette; you did it because nicotine addiction is just that strong. Satan didn't steal from the company; the CFO did it because she wanted the money and thought she could get away with it.

We are faced with moral and ethical choices. The principles built under us before we even entered school serve as the underpinning of our decision-making. Some of us were taught through religion. Others were taught without God at the center. Both sets of people fulfill or fail life's possibilities. Both sets of people do good and bad. I know "men of God" who are loaded with church-destroying imperfections. I know atheists who are sincere in their non-belief, and whose lives are examples of godliness.

How do we reconcile these contradictions? Is man good or bad by nature? The Bible tells us that man is bad by nature until his conscious pursuit and acceptance of God. Yet, as I've pointed out, folks who've accepted God can do – and have often done – horrible things throughout history.

The reverse is also true, of course, as in the case of Mother Teresa. We thought well-enough to bestow upon her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. The Catholic Church canonized her in 2016. Saint Mother Teresa spent a lifetime of self-sacrifice and hard work in God's name to improve the health of the people of India. Yet, in her final book, she expressed doubt in her own belief and faith in God.

Where is my faith? Even deep down ... there is nothing but emptiness and darkness ... If there be God — please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul ... How painful is this unknown pain — I have no Faith. Repulsed, empty, no faith, no love, no zeal, ... What do I labor for? If there be no God, there can be no soul. If there be no soul then, Jesus, you also are not true.

Teresa, Mother; Kolodiejchuk, Brian
Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light. New York: Doubleday (2007)

The one woman in our lifetimes who so exemplified God's love, doubted God!

What was the nature of *this* human? Could anyone doubt her good-ness? How would *God* evaluate the nature of this woman? If I may presume: God could be 'hurt' that Mother Teresa – or anyone – would doubt him. But he can withstand the little darts we toss his way. He loves Mother Teresa because she sought him even in moments of doubt. Anything she ever did in his name is just gravy.

God knows that his eminence is so vast that human minds cannot take him in. To doubt him, then, would seem quite a natural human response, wouldn't it? Could it be more true of those who get even closer to him?

The contradiction cannot be reconciled. I believe that the nature of man is both good *and* bad. If we see more profit in doing or being good, we will. If we think there's more profit in doing bad, we will. And the same individual will make these decisions on a case-by-case basis.

If we claim God to be the center of our lives, we presumably accept his values as those with which our choices are made. So maybe the question is: Do you *believe* in God? Or, do you believe in *a* god?

French mathematician, philosopher and theologian Blaise Pascal loved tackling this kind of question. Before his death in 1662, he approached it from a mathematician's point-of-view in what would posthumously come to be called "Pascal's Wager." He believed that reason and intellect could not be

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helpful in determining the existence or non-existence of God; that it was purely a matter of faith.

The Wager:

First, if I believe God exists, and God in fact does exist, then I will gain infinite happiness.

However, if I believe God exists, and God in fact does not exist, then I will have no payoff.

Second, if I do not believe God exists, and God in fact does exist, then I will gain infinite pain.

However, if I believe God does not exist, and God in fact does not exist, then I will have no payoff.

Thus, I have everything to gain and nothing to lose by believing in God, and I have everything to lose and nothing to gain by not believing in God.

On these grounds, one would be foolish not to believe.

Implicit in the Wager is that the acknowledgement of God carries with it the acknowledgement of a certain set of godly values. It also suggests that Hell is a consequence of going against those values. But, as I've argued above, we are inclined to shelve godly values if a situation seems to give an advantage for doing so. Conversely, we apply his values if we are committed to him *and* it suits us.

I have previously discussed the love relationship God has with his children, and we with him. If we profess to love him, we'll want to do right by him, won't we? So, now, the question becomes, 'What *is* love?' If it's emotion, then we'll follow our impulses. If love is commitment, then we'll work to do the right thing; sometimes failing, but trying nonetheless.

The nature of man? There is no single answer. Or, to be more accurate, there are currently 8.1 billion answers – one for each human on the planet – and that number must be multiplied by the number of values-based decisions each person makes every day.

HUMAN PRODUCTIVITY (catch it if you can)

I believe that anything we humans can dream up, develop or do has as its originator, the ultimate creator – God. Whether a business concept or a book or a circuit board or hammer-to-nail or lunch, everything that can be made already exists in some intangible form. All a thing needs is the right human receptor to recognize its possibility, capture it, and make it what it will become.

Maybe you've heard stories like this before:

"I was lying in bed and I kept hearing, 'Words are flowing out like endless streams...' I was a bit irritated, and I went downstairs and it turned into a sort of cosmic song[.] The words are purely inspirational and were given to me[.] I don't own it; it came through like that."

The song became *Across The Universe*, and its irritated receiver was John Lennon.

Did God write it and leave it there for a guy with the right haircut to receive it? No. Or maybe yes. There is nothing we can imagine that hasn't been first conceived by God who then gave some person the ability to bring it about. So, no... God didn't write the song literally; he did hang it's elements in the vapor for the right human to find. In this case, the right human had a God-given gift for writing lyrics.

"Songs are their own things you happen to catch. It has nothing to do with you. In our whole catalog, there are probably fifteen songs where that's happened... where it basically just lands. I and we care more and more about what is coming through. What are we being told to do by the whatever-you-call those powers-that-be?"

Chris Martin, Coldplay 2023

How about a dude with a famous falsetto who was asked to write a hit song and was given only one word to work with: "Grease."

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He was at home, watching the kids. “I watched my father write that song in real time, pick up a guitar while I’m watching Bugs Bunny,” his son, Stephen, recalled. His father wrote it in an afternoon. “It’s like he’s an antenna. He knows that one frequency where all those things hang out.”

The Bee Gees’ Barry Gibb Has Written More Hit Songs Than Almost Anyone Karen Heller Washington Post 11/27/23

And this phenomenon is available to anyone, anywhere. Like this Swedish med school student and singer/songwriter we may have never heard of:

“Sometimes when I write them [lyrics], everything goes so smoothly and it’s like divine inspiration. The first line came to me, then the second, then the third and I finished the lyrics in 15 minutes. It’s like that for me sometimes.”

Anna Bergendahl 2022

I’m using music to make this point because it is a form of creation nearly all of us appreciate. But the same principle applies to *any* field of endeavor: from artistic to scientific, tangible to philosophical, practical to recreational, philanthropic to service. God gives each of his children ability. You can call it gifts or talents, if you wish. These abilities do require recognition by the recipient and diligence to learn and reach proficiency.

I clocked in my 10,000 hours as a kid, practicing. ?uestlove

Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good. It's the thing you do that *makes* you good. Malcolm Gladwell

Someone with a gift for nursing must train for that important work. The same for someone gifted for microbiology or for accounting. If you're working in the area for which you are gifted, the work often flows easily; it's usually the preparation that's hard.

From the smallest necessity
to the highest religious abstraction,
from the wheel to the skyscraper,

everything we are and everything we have
comes from one attribute of man –
the function of his reasoning mind.

Ayn Rand

In my view, Rand – an atheist – is one phrase short of complete correctness. That phrase, added to the end, is:

...and that reasoning mind is a creation of God.

Sadly, there are many who know what they're gifted to do, but are redirected by circumstances or parents or cultures who have other ideas for you. I'd guess that better than 80% of us are not working in the areas we're gifted for. This, by itself, creates a cosmic imbalance God didn't intend, but, of course, knew would be.

If you lose your purpose, it's like you're broken.

Hugo, movie: *Hugo*, 2011

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And then, there are those who are gifted, but use their talents in negative ways. Taking my thoughts again to music, few could argue that Michael Jackson wasn't gifted. Perhaps your opinion of him as a person influences your opinion of his work. Nevertheless, you must acknowledge that he was a prolific musician and a consummate performer.

Couldn't we say the same for James Taylor or Taylor Swift, for AC/DC or TSOP, for The Moody Blues or The Blues Project, for Monteverdi or Mozart? All of these, and nearly every creative in all of time, and nearly every *person* in all of time, has exercised his specialty to do, or to produce work that was opposite to God's intention – as did Michael Jackson. As have we all.

WHAT WOULD JESUS BE? (wave a flag or hug a tree?)

This section is a statement of my beliefs, not a judgment of yours. Nevertheless, I know that some will find opportunities to be offended by assertions made in these pages. Religion is a lightning rod for controversy, after all. Another is politics. Put them together, and you've got real trouble.

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This is a discussion about God and politics.

Religion has, throughout history, been used for purposes good and bad. Certain political systems were and are based on the religious practices of the society over which the political system rules. Indeed, a foundational tenet of the United States is the free practice of religion as opposed to a state religion from which many of our ancestors fled.

My interest here is a pursuit of the question: On which side of the current American political spectrum would we find Jesus if he were physically among us today?

Why does the answer to this question matter? Because religion, Christianity in particular, is used as a platform plank in American political campaigns; as the rhetorical ethos guiding an entire political party (and, hence, almost half of the electorate). Religion is a brand in the sense of political marketing. It is as if one party has the corner on 'the God vote' and the other is pagan.

Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst.

C.S. Lewis 1964

Instead of living ... by the true doctrine that always develops and bears fruit, (certain U.S. Catholic leaders) live by ideologies. If you don't change upward, you go backward. [B]ackwardness is useless ... there's a correct evolution in the understanding of questions of faith and morals that allows for doctrine to progress and consolidate over time. Pope Francis 2023

I mentioned the "Moral Majority," and "Christian Coalition" earlier. Would Jesus have created what Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and so many others did? I say no. Here's why.

The pretext of these organizations was to establish (or reestablish) God in American society through political influence and legislation. This is foolish because any thinking person knows that you cannot codify morality. You can write all the laws you want; people will break them. It is the nature of man –

without God – to serve himself. A man with God wouldn't need refocused laws because he places God at the forefront of his consciousness.

God hates deceit (Psalms says so, not me). I believe that God hates(d) these organizations. Why? Because, knowing the nature of man without God, the specific intent of these organizations could only be the wielding of power over politics and the exercise of that power within our political and social systems. I believe that God saw Falwell, Robertson and many others as wanting that power.

Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully
as when they do it with religious conviction. Blaise Pascal

It's really very little different from Jesus criticizing the religious leaders of his day. These were the people who took positions of power for themselves in the guise of religion, and exercised that power over God's children. How is today's exercise of politics (and/or religion-based politics) different? Is "Christian Nationalism" (perpetuating the church's influence in society and politics) encoded into our Constitution, as is so often claimed?

Christian Nationalism quite clearly has no basis in the Constitution. Many of the Founding Parents were religious skeptics, or flat-out nonbelievers. On top of that, they were laser-focused on the various ways in which King George III managed to impose his authority on colonists. And they believed, with good reason, that the existence of an established religion was one of those ways (after all, the monarch is also the titular head of the Anglican Church). The Founders, even the ones who WERE religious, made clear over and over against that they intended to create a wall of separation between church and state.

There is also no basis for Christian Nationalism in the Bible. Jesus made very clear that his kingdom is the Kingdom of Heaven, and is not to be found on this planet, or in this life. In addition to John 18:36, there is also Philippians 3:20: "But our

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citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."

More broadly, the single most important idea underlying Jesus' ministry is radical inclusivity. This is what brought him into conflict with more traditional/fundamentalist Jews of his era; he welcomed all comers, and was entirely or largely unconcerned about parentage or ritual purity or social status or gender (among other things). To propose to create a nation for one kind of person (basically, straight white social conservatives) runs absolutely counter to Jesus' message.

What we have here, then, is people who have a modern-day political agenda, and who are bending and twisting their religion to justify that agenda. Electoral-Vote.com 10/29/2023

So, having God as a personal influence is one thing. But codifying God into our social and political structures is not what he or our Founding Parents wanted. Indeed, quite the opposite on both counts.

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Campaign politics has become the art of the scurrilous charge; the lie, slander. The more often your venom strikes its target (the softly-engaged electorate), the more likely they will be convinced of the correctness of your charges, and the more likely you are to be elected or re-elected.

After the 2008 general election, I did some research to prove my theory that this type of campaigning was a relatively recent development. I learned that I was very wrong.

In 1800, Thomas Jefferson endured a presidential campaign in which supporters of his opponent, President John Adams, labored mightily to convince the public that the then-vice president was an atheistic coward hell-bent on ripping Bibles from the homes of God-fearing Americans.

A Jeffersonian writer, in turn, called Adams a "hideous hermaphroditical character which has neither the force and the

firmness of a man nor the gentleness or sensibility of a woman."

In later campaigns, Andrew Jackson's wife was referred to as a woman of the night, and Abraham Lincoln was characterized as a baboon in as many creative ways as the opposition could imagine. Excerpt: *Negative Campaigning - What's New?*
Larry J. Sabato, The Los Angeles Times 11/4/2008

Deceit works in the campaign. It continues in office. Edicts are hammered out on the floor of the House or Senate, Legislature, Assembly or School Board. Respectful opposition used to be the order of the day. But today there's nothing respectful going on at all; it's just opposition ... political polarity without intention of doing what's good and right for constituents; only what's right by the party. Paralysis.

God sees this practice of politics as the acquisition and possession of power over *his* people. God does not create polarity or paralysis; he is the creator of order and productivity.

I'll turn my argument now in a different direction. According to our founding parents, America is not about the will of its officeholders; it is about the will of the people. In most cases, this will is expressed through the vote; a franchise, a holy rite, if you will. There are billions of people on this planet who do not have a vote. We do.

The problem is that we don't use our vote well. We live busy lives. In a decreasingly common nuclear household, you'd have two income earners, kids' school and extra-curricular activities, our own professional, community and social activities. There just isn't enough time in the day.

Nevertheless – as with anything important – we must make time to study up on the political process, its practitioners, and the issues. Absent that, the demagogues will hold sway. Sound bites and misleading headlines and disinformation will be the basis for our decision-making. And our choices at the polls can become sources of pleasure or regret both in the near term and for future generations.

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I am perplexed at the stupidity of the ordinary religious being. In the most practical of all matters he will talk and speculate and try to feel, but he will not set himself to *do*. George MacDonald

God gave each of us a brain to think and reason with. I believe that if we all applied our cranial abilities to the careful selection of our representatives, we would soon see governmental bodies whose true interest is the welfare of its people.

But this is not the reality of the world we live in today. So, my answer to the question at the top of this section: I believe that Jesus would not align himself with *any* political party.

HELL (Who goes there? – Who doesn't?)

I remember it clearly. Sister James Marie told her first grade class that if you whisper the name of Jesus with your dying breath, you would spend eternity with him in heaven. And I remember my little brain thinking, 'Well, heck, if it's that easy, I'll just do what I wanna do and take care of the important stuff later. Much later.' It was, for me, a formative behavioral moment.

We talked about it, my friends and I. And while the prospect of eating candy without the consequence of cavities was appealing, we knew, even at that age, that it couldn't be right. There *had* to be consequences.

I didn't bother contemplating what it was that God really wanted from me; how he wanted me to conduct my life; how he wanted me to be the holder of his light; to show how much he loved me and others. None of that was important. *Me* was important, and *me* wanted candy. Now.

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I've said that God is the creator of everything, and that he is capable only of creating good. Believing that, for years, I did not believe that there was a hell. How could there be? God is incapable of creating bad. So my belief system began to drift toward a more social model where we're all good to each other

as much as possible. And while no one was keeping score, the better we were as brother's keepers, the happier he was.

I am writing this on a Good Friday in the Christian world; a day on which we recall the ultimate sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf. He was tortured and executed, descended to hell for three days, and then rose in glory to heaven. Any Christian has heard this so often as to glaze over at its repetition. We fail to parse it out and seriously consider the significant things that occur in this little bit of dogma. For this writing, I will isolate on one:

Jesus went to hell.

Legend has it that hell is a fiery pit. Among other sources, *Dante's Inferno* did a good job of imaging this place-without-hope. I don't know about the fire. I've come to believe that hell is a place that is completely separated from God. That doesn't seem so bad, does it? Or does it?

Humans are, to the best of my knowledge, different from any of God's many other creations. We have souls and spirits and consciences and brains to reason, create and produce with. It's not that any other species is not special to God; it's just that we are, somehow, *more* special to God. So special are we that he gives us a choice not available to other species: the choice to love him or not.

My belief is that God placed in each of us the desire to be with him. He promised that we would find him if we looked. He gave us the capacity to decide for or against. Adding it all up: if you look for him, you will find him. If you find him, you will love him. Why? Because God is the essence of love, and because you have the essence of God in you.

One complicating factor: Jesus said that no one enters the pearly gates except through him. In other words, one must accept Jesus in order to reach the ultimate destination. That these words were spoken while on earth gave us the idea – by association – that acceptance must take place on earth.

I will confess that these words have caused considerable thought. That Jesus is the gatekeeper implies that Christians have the upper hand in the access-

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to-heaven business. But if people are made in God's image, given the ability to seek and find him, and given the right to choose or reject him, what becomes of his creations who have not heard of him? What becomes of the Jew or Hindu or Buddhist or Shinto or Pagan or atheist? God created them, too. He loves them. Their pursuit of him takes different forms than a Christian's. But he still loves them every bit as much as anyone else of any faith practice or culture.

So let's go back to hell with Jesus as I begin to pull this together. What do you suppose happened while he was there? Remember, Jesus *is* God. All of the souls in hell were created by him to love him and live with him. If you were one of these souls, separated from your loving creator, what would you have most wanted while he was in your presence? Right, to be with him; to go with him.

And if you were God, the essence of love who created these souls to desire precisely this, what would you have done? That's right... your heart would have swelled and your face would have beamed a tear-filled smile and you would have welcomed them to be with you forever. If that's what *you* would have done, how much more likely is it that God would have done it?

And what of the people on earth? Who gets to go to heaven, and how do they get there if not exposed to Christ while on earth, and if not accepting of him while on earth? This is where I have to part with popular Christian dogma.

I do believe that we all get one last chance to find and accept Jesus, but it may not be here on earth. As our spirits rise from our dead, cold bodies, we have a potentially final encounter with Jesus. Our spirits, which were created to commune with God, come into the presence of God. It has to be possible, still, to reject him. But I believe the overwhelming likelihood is that your spirit will be consumed with love and reverence. That's what you were created for.

It simply *has* to be that way. If not, how can you explain why God wastes people born into cultures unaccepting of a supreme being? Or into religions that worship other gods? Or into war zones? Or into sickness? If you believe in a *supreme* being, then you must believe that he wastes nothing. If it is true that everyone will bow at Jesus' feet, then we must accept that this act will

not necessarily take place here on earth. There must be that one final opportunity.

I don't believe that heaven waits
for only those who congregate
I like to think of God as love
He's down below, he's up above
He's watching people everywhere
He knows who does and doesn't care

I Believe In You, Don Williams 1980

I believe that hell is a very lonely place not only because the spirits there are separated from their creator, but because Jesus pretty much emptied the place 2,023 years ago, and the vast majority of spirits after that point said "Yes" to their final celestial invitations; be it the first one or the last.

I now believe that Sister James Marie was one breath away from having it exactly right.

It must be possible to reject God, else why did he give us the choice in the first place? And a true rejection has to result in the dislocation of you from him.

Hell: a place completely separated from God and opposite from his intention; a place without peace for its occupants. It might as well *be* a fiery pit.

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD ON EARTH (the power in their words)

Yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater is not okay. Saying that the president is a socialist, yellow-bellied foreigner *is* okay. In the first instance, the safety of the theater's occupants is put in jeopardy. In the second instance, mere bombast – while potentially slanderous – is protected free speech. I would argue strenuously in favor of anyone who speaks ill of the president because curtailing your right to speak – on this or any subject – could limit my right to speak my *own* opinions. It's a two-way street.

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This section is not about the exercise of the right to free speech; it's about what is being spoken.

Every time there's a calamity – anything from the loss of a loved one to a massive geological event – we wrestle with the same questions. After the Japan earthquake/tsunami/nuclear meltdown in March 2011, I wrote:

All manner of reporting has kept us abreast of events. All manner of expert analyses have been rendered. Now it's apparently time for some opinionists to crawl out of their caves.

Glenn Beck inferred that God was punishing the Japanese. Perhaps worse, he didn't say what he said. Confused? Try this: on his radio show on Monday, Beck said, "I'm not saying God is, you know, causing earthquakes. I'm not *not* saying that either. Whatever you call God, there's a message being sent. And that is, 'Hey, you know that stuff we're doing? Not really working out real well. Maybe we should stop doing some of it.' I'm just saying."

Glenn Beck, *Glenn Beck Radio Program*, March 14, 2011
excerpted from *The Judgment Of God: Glenn Beck Version*
FredMarx.com March 16, 2011

From a free speech point of view, I have no problem with Beck expressing an opinion. I do have a right and (perhaps) an obligation to mitigate his bullshit. His method of expression is a cowardly way of saying something without saying it, and it fits a cauldronous stench Beck has stirred to perfection.

At least Beck's political/religious forebears had the brass to say it outright. Commenting just after 9/11, Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell said, "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'" Then Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson responded, "Well, I totally concur."

I Should Know Better

The thesis – put forth by Beck, Falwell, Robertson and many others – says that God is vindictive; hateful. I say the opposite: God is love. To prove this, I will explore the creation of the earth, the creation of things living on earth, God's children, and his parenting practices through the ages.

There is little argument (among *most* Christians) that earth was created about 4.6 billion years ago. You'll recall from scripture that earth was without form and was void. The creation story (Genesis) tells us that some animals were created on the fifth day and the remainder early on the sixth.

If a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as a day to God (2Peter3:8), what was the void and formless earth doing between its creation and the placement of plants and animals upon it? It was *evolving* into a form capable of sustaining the lives of plants and animals.

In earth terms, land masses were slowly moving to where they are today. This movement was manifest with great earthquakes and hurricanes and volcanoes and ice ages. Mountains weren't just plunked down upon the face of the planet; they were formed through the compression of land masses over a very long time. Rivers weren't placed into the landscape; they were etched into it over millennia. Continental shelves and fault lines and the locations of the oceans are among the natural products of the process of earth's growth. And the big news is that earth continues to shift/contract/grow every single day. Including today.

Earth's natural law is the way in which the planet fulfills God's plan for it and for the creations supported by it. God won't violate his own law to keep us from thinking that he hates us. Thus, catastrophic events are not and cannot be *infections* from God. They are, simply, the product of natural law.

So, why would a loving God put his children in an unsafe place? We might question his purported benevolence.

God created humans about 2.2 million years ago. Scripture tells us that God created us to love him. Why would he do otherwise? Of course, true love must be a decision made of our own free will, so God had to give us free will. If we couldn't *choose* to love him, we'd be robots in service to a master. The part

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of us God's most interested in is the spirit which was crafted to seek and find, fall in love with and eventually live alongside our creator. That's his plan. But it's our choice.

We have not only choice, but a self-preservation instinct. This serves to self-motivate continued good health and long life, gives us defensive and offensive capability, and has kept us around as individuals and as a species. But our bodies can't exist forever; they're not supposed to.

The planet was intentionally not created with resources sufficient to sustain an accumulating population forever. And God's great plan isn't satisfied by our continued physical existence. There must be an end to physical life in order for the spirit to wind up where it will go.

Given these traits – choice, self-preservation and the reality of a finite physical life – humans have been, by nature, problematic from the very start.

Simplistically, there are two kinds of parenting: the junior's-going-to-grow-up-to-be-a-fine-young-person-someday kind, and the tough-love kind. The first kind lets the child find its own way without restriction. Some say this is a lazy kind of parenting.

The second way sets boundaries as a means of protection, and sometimes finds it necessary to remind us when we've taken risks beyond the safety of the boundaries.

The latter is the relationship God had with his children at the beginning. He'd hand down laws (boundaries) so we'd have necessary guidance. We'd go another way and he'd have to reel us back in. It is only the scale of God's adjustments that cause us to think of him as mean. Meanness has never been his motivation.

Over time, things got bad enough that God had to do something new and different. He sent part of himself to earth to wipe our slates clean and to be an example of how we should live. Accomplishing that, God didn't have any new laws to hand down; he didn't have to mete out any disciplines. It began a new era in his relationship with us. This is the age we now live in.

Today, we have *and need* only this guidance:

Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence. This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: Love others as well as you love yourself. These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them.

Jesus Matthew 22:37-40 MSG

There is an end to this age: Rapture, Armageddon, Eternity. Only God knows when and how these things will play out, and we are counseled not to speculate (Acts 1:7). But until then – and after then – God gets to be what he is: pure, absolute love.

Putting it all together, then, this is how I know that God isn't bringing judgment or punishment upon anyone who suffers in any kind of abnormality:

- Natural law is working just as it always has, and just as it should.
- Choice and self-preservation, and the reality of a finite life continues as intended.
- Your last opportunity to say “Yes” to Jesus doesn't come until you leave earth.
- If Jesus returns to earth first, *this* will be your last opportunity. And only he knows when this will happen.

Only God is perfect. We humans are inherently imperfect. We have, therefore, no right to condemn *anyone* for *anything* (Matt.7:3-5). If bloviating religious leaders studied their Bibles without the overlay of their political agendas, they would know that only God knows when the end is coming. They would know that God reserves for himself, alone, the right to judge. They would know how very dangerous it is for them to act in his stead.

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I want to clearly delineate the term ‘judgment’ from the exercise of ‘good judgment.’ The first instance is used in the sense of passing judgment or condemnation upon someone else. This is the context for my use of the word in the above paragraphs. In the second instance, the exercise of good

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judgment is more a consideration of the variables we use to make well-informed decisions for ourselves, and has nothing to do with condemnation.

I began this chapter saying: “I believe in a supreme being because I choose to.” I’ve also said that I was born into this belief system. As I grew in intelligence and understanding, I might have come to think that there is no supreme being at all. I didn’t do that. I still believe... because I choose to.

The vastness of even the concept of God is beyond the understanding of the tiny little human mind. So I would be intellectually dishonest if I didn’t freely admit that parts (or all) of my thinking on this subject could be wrong. By extension, there may not *be* a God. What do *I* know? Still, I actively make my choice every day, and I’m sticking with this one.

I have built a case against religion using Jesus’ own words spoken while on earth as, I believe, he meant them, and as chronicled in the Bible. Assuming we give the Bible credence, I think my arguments are solid.

Given my dislike for religion, I have long tried to figure out how to identify my faith practice, if asked. Just a few months ago, my friend David gave me the perfect answer: “I identify myself as a follower of Christ, and definitely *not* as a Christian.”

If he were on earth today, I believe Jesus Christ would not identify as a Christian, either.

I Should Know Better

THOUGHTS ABOUT ME (I am, I said) *I Am... I Said* Neil Diamond 1971

My younger brother, Michael, did the hard work and earned three degrees including a doctorate. He is now considered the preeminent global subject matter expert in his field. My sister, Elizabeth, earned her bachelor's after ten years of night school while holding down an important job. She graduated at the age of 52.

I love learning. Researching online or in a library is heaven to me. For that reason, I've long thought that I was intelligent but not stimulated by formal education. Now I'm wondering if I was just lazy. Is this right? Or are the ghosts of my parents still writhing inside of me?

I had to work much harder than my peers. That's okay; lots of people work harder than I ever did and it isn't fair to compare. But meetings and monologs and lectures still induce me to sleep (literally!), so no degree for me. Has achievement of incremental and accumulated success come as hard-fought compensation for scholastic inferiority? Was I trying to prove myself to myself? Or to someone else? Or, was I working with my gifts as best I could, and exactly as intended from birth?

How would life have been different had I applied myself to rocket science, or package design, or geology? I can't know. But if I had somehow acquired credentials, I may not have floated around the country like a feather in the wind for five decades. And finding moral high ground or some kind of "higher purpose" does not a worthy substitute make. You can't write it on a résumé. It can't be measured like an achievement. It's the softest of soft skills – like saying "I'm a 'people' person." Is that the best I've got?

And how much of a people person was I, really? Did I love my wife and child? No. I treated them as badly as my parents had modeled for me. That's no excuse, though. My verbal abuse was as damaging as my parents' physical abuse. Deep though my parents' training may have been, as a child, I vowed never to be like them. As an adult, I had chances every single day to *not* be like them. I could have changed, but I didn't. And I made my own family's lives miserable.

I will confess to having a certain dissatisfaction with my life resulting from a self-perceived level of under-achievement. My worse angel says I should have

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accomplished more. Is that my ego talking? My better angel says I did exactly as I was designed to do. Is that some kind of excuse? In my heart of hearts, I believe the continuous search for greener pastures to be a core value of my life. Ever the explorer, one who keeps asking the questions, challenging the status quo, changing the scenery, acquiring knowledge.

Was my life-cycle unique? Innocence, sentience, preparation, productivity, leadership, maturity, reflection. Does everyone experience life in the same basic ways?

Since my thinking about the nature of God has changed, I wonder if I've managed to cobble together a life that is pleasing to him. I wonder if there's more still expected of me. I wonder what that might be.

Early on, and despite young behaviors, I understood that I had a purpose, that I was playful, and that people were willing to follow my leadership. So some kind of rudder had to be developed in me. That became a personal mission statement – something to steer with:

**My mission is to have a positive impact
in every situation
and on the lives of everyone I encounter.**

Nothing fancy. Not something I had to commit to memory; I didn't have to. It was always there in my consciousness. A vibe to live by. Did I achieve it?

Today, at the age of 71, I can look back and see that my life can be distilled into one evaluative phrase:

I was never content.

I know this is true. I am not sure that it's inherently bad or good. On one hand, contentedness could be passivity. On the other hand, *incontentedness* could be a necessary ingredient for progress and productivity. Of myself, I think I come out more the latter.

In the end... it doesn't matter that I'm remembered for my presence on earth. It does matter that I mattered. I hope that, as a bringer of light, I mattered to the best of my ability.

