

ALICE AT PLUM ISLAND

and other



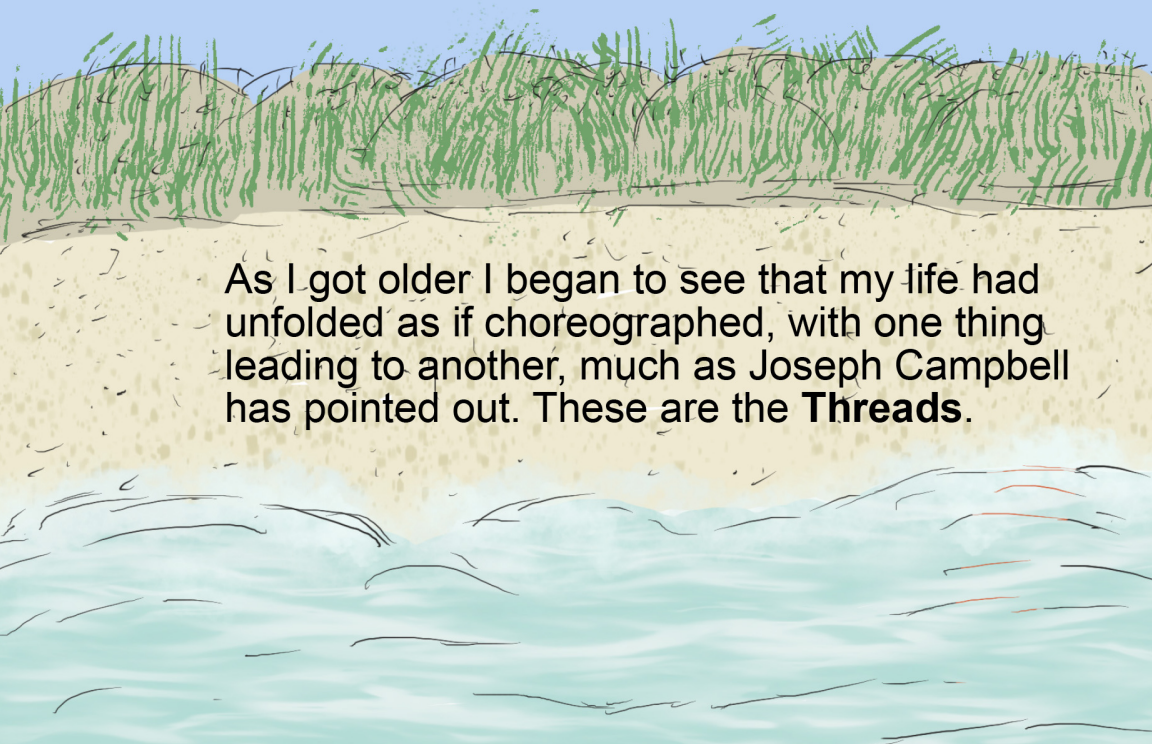
**STORIES,
THREADS
&
MAGIC**



from the life of

DENNIS C MERRITT

I've always told stories that stuck with me, either because they're funny, or ironic, or illustrated something. Like when a small plane almost crashed when we were skinny dipping. They're the **Stories**.



As I got older I began to see that my life had unfolded as if choreographed, with one thing leading to another, much as Joseph Campbell has pointed out. These are the **Threads**.

Then there are events that are, in the words of Yogi Berra, just too coincidental to be coincidences. These are the **Magic**.

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Alice at Plum Island
and other
Stories, Threads & Magic
from the life of
Dennis C Merritt

Many of the stories were originally
published at the author's Substack
publication or Web site.

First printing, August, 2025
on Amazon.

Second printing, August 2026
on Amazon.

Free PDF Edition

Illustrations by author.
Cover art by author.

Publisher – River Rocks Press
Shelburne Falls, MA

www.dennismerritt.com
dennismerritt.substack.com

for
Michael & Ana & Diana
&
Juan & Diego & Miguel & Gale

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INTRODUCTION

I've always told stories, anecdotes about happenings, that stuck with me, either because they're funny, or ironic, or illustrate something or other. They're the **Stories** in this book.

As I got older I began to see that my life had unfolded as if choreographed, with one thing leading naturally to another, much as Joseph Campbell has pointed out in his work. These longer tales are the **Threads**.

Then there are events that are, in the words of Yogi Berra, just too coincidental to be coincidences. They make up the **Magic**.

While the book is arranged in a loose chronological order*, there is no need to read it that way. It might be more fun to just skip around, reading whichever chapters catch your fancy.

Dennis C Merritt
2025, Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts

* Except the first two stories are not in that order, but were put there because when Amazon shows a preview it always shows the beginning pages of a book, and I thought those two short chapters gave a slightly more accurate sense of the flavor of the book than the story of my pet parakeet when I was a kid. (This is the same reason books today have acknowledgements and other such book material at the back instead of the front.)

ALICE AT PLUM ISLAND

1968, Plum Island

Alice of the amazingly large breasts and I were skinny dipping on a secluded Plum Island beach when along comes this small plane. It started descending, coming lower and lower over the dunes. I was up on the beach, and Alice was coming out of the water walking toward me.

I was watching the plane which was now so low I could see the pilot's face. The pilot was staring at Alice. He seemed to have no idea he was about to crash into the dunes so I started waving like crazy. Suddenly, maybe 10 - 20 feet above the dunes he broke out of his trance, yanked up on the yoke and flew away. The hazards of skinny dipping.



MARTY AND THE CORK

1990s, Newton

We had some friends over for Thanksgiving. Bruce, a small software publisher who published my first software product APT - the *Active Prolog Tutor*, and his current girl friend, Marty.

Marty was something, she would tell everybody multiple times that she had an IQ of 160 or some such number. She was very smart and made that clear. She had a book published with a \$200,000 advance, *Dying Young*, which got made into a movie with Julia Roberts. But that's not the point of this story.

We got every dish in the house dirty, and drank a number of bottles of wine. Eventually, Bruce and Marty went home, and Mary and I were in the midst of the disaster in the kitchen.

Now here were the rules, one of us cooked and the other cleaned. She'd cooked that Thanksgiving meal, so by all rights I had to clean this horrid mess. But I decided to see if I could get out of it with a game of chance.

"I'll flip you for who does the dishes" I says to her.

She says, mind you she'd had her fair share of the wine, "sure."

But there's a twist I says, we have to flip this cork. If it lands upright on its end, you win and I do the dishes, but if it lands on its side, you do the dishes.

Incredibly she says "sure." But she says she wants to drop the cork.

Now we have a hard linoleum floor, there's no way, so I say OK, but its got to be from a reasonable height.

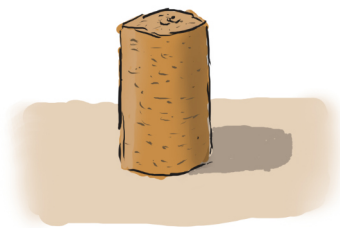
"No problem" says she, and proceeds, from waist high to drop the cork on the floor.

Plop. Right on its end. Never bounced. Never wobbled. Just stood straight up.

The worst part of this story is, she knew she would do it. I thought I was hustling her, but she was hustling me.

(Try it sometime. It can't be done. We've tried it many times since, the cork always bounces and falls over. Can't get it to stand up even with a very low drop to a hard floor.)

Mary could do that sort of thing, she's had a bit of natural magic in her.



MY LIFE

1946 –

Beginning

I was conceived in San Diego and born in Brooklyn.

First and only child. In *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, Alice Miller said firstborns learn to be judged by what they've done. Here's some stuff I've done.

Elementary School Years

I skipped Kindergarten. Played stickball with Kevin. Played chess with neighbor Michael.

High School Years

Sputnik scared us, so America created special electronics programs for scientific minded students. I was in one. I had a girlfriend Penny. In my senior year I was on the track team and my best time was 58 seconds for the 440.

I was in the Boy Scouts, went to the National Jamboree in 1960, met Sid who was my best friend, more like a brother, from then on. My parents took me cross country, we saw the Grand Canyon and things like that. Learned to juggle and played with Polaroid sunglasses. Drove across Death Valley.

Scored perfect 800 in the advanced math SAT and 785 in Physics. But the 800 was only the 97th percentile that year, and my friend Karston got 800 in both. Those scores, and being in the electronics program, and the fact that my parents would pay, got me into Brown.

College Years

Joined the outing club and discovered rock climbing. Climbed buildings until I got caught, put a heart on the top of Sayles Hall. Flunked out in my senior year.

M.I.T. rock climbing friends got me a job programming computers for the Apollo project at the M.I.T. Instrumentation Lab which later became the Draper Lab, after Doc Draper who founded it.

Draper Lab Years

Made only half of what a programmer with a degree made, so I went back and finished school and got a degree in Geophysics. Went back to the Lab and continued the work.

Cherry got pregnant (not planned), had Michael.

Thursday was ski day. Played some golf. Lived for climbing, mostly at the Gunks, but New Hampshire as well. Climbed with Sam. First free ascent of Intimidation on Cathedral.

Went to the Alps, Kevin dissed my card trick on the Matterhorn. Climbed Cenotaph Corner in Wales.

Cherry moved in with Kevin, I moved in with Ann.

Took Silva Mind Control, got involved with various psychic sorts of things. Ramona Garcia. Cosmo's hat. Golf with Harvey.

Sid took me canoeing, I took him rock climbing. We went out West, climbed Mt. Moran in the Tetons, got rained off Mt. Ranier. Got up Mt. Baker after helping rescue girl in crevasse.

Broke a canoe in half.

Played Go, got up to 4 kyu at the Mass. Go Club.

Stopped climbing and started racing bikes. Did that for three years.

Ate macrobiotic food for a while.

Lived sort of communally for awhile, had 6 or 7 people in our house with us. Sharon helped set it up. Met Monjula.

Commercial Software Years

Left aerospace, started work for a real company, CCA. Database. Read James Martin's book. Became a suit-wearing salesman. Made a \$23 million deal on a cold call. Got fired from sales. Joined Cullinet. Selling again. Got fired again for not meeting my quota, but was put in charge of a new AI group because I had discovered Prolog.

Went to Japan twice.

Wrote *Adventure in Prolog* interactive tutorial which later became a book. (Still earning money from it today.)

Got a pilot's license. Flew a few places.

Ann got pregnant (planned), had Diana.

Worked at AICorp, first commercial AI company. Had lunches with Larry Harris, founder.

Amzi Years

Met Mary, divorced Ann, married Mary. Classic mid-life crisis. Fast car, younger wife. Worked for James Martin, ghost writing and special reports. Created a company, Amzi! inc. Moved to Ohio to be uncle and aunt.

Wrote first program to solve Rubik's cube, and a breast cancer decision support program that won an award from the Smithsonian, and the first automated scheduler of Division I college basketball, and a vaccine analysis and forecasting system that took a mom and pop pediatric software company to acquisition by a large private equity firm.

Michael married Ana, wedding in Spain.

Bought a plane, became instrument pilots, flew here and there.

Played lots of golf. Didn't get better. Wrote Reflection.

Started rock climbing again in Ohio. Girl in gym says Asheville is the place to climb.

Moved to Asheville NC, belayed Nathan on lots of first ascents, discovered contra dancing. Wound up running Splash Dance weekend and Monday Night dance, contra in a dive bar.

Grandsons, Juan, Diego, Miguel.

Discovered Second Life. Mary left for the evil empire. Met Fran, moved in. Permaculture. Met Nancy, moved to Florida with her.

Retired Years

Left Florida for Shelburne Falls, MA.

Started Candlepin Bowling at one of the first alleys. Ran first bowling/golfing biathlon.

Wrote *Jazz Chords for Baritone Ukulele*. Made music videos with Nancy. New grandson from Diana, Gale.

Started and settled lawsuit with a large private equity firm over vaccine software. Lawyers did well.

What to do next?

Stories

Realized the marketing value I had. As the oldest Baby Boomer (it started in 1946 and I was born in February of 1946) I would be the bellwether of what the Boomers behind me would want. What do we want? To tell our stories. We've all got our stories to tell.

Helped Sid tell his.

These are mine.

CHIPPER THE PARAKEET

1950s, Levittown

My mom used to like to take in stray dogs, cats and the like. I don't remember too much about them, except they never stayed that long for some reason. Probably because my dad didn't really like pets.

One day there was a green and gold parakeet in the apple tree in our back yard. My mom decided to see if she could catch it. She took a cage we had from failed bird pets of the past and tiptoed very quietly and very calmly out towards the bird. When she was within fifteen feet it suddenly flew up, headed straight for her and landed on her shoulder. It wasn't clear who caught who.

Given its golden color, I cleverly came up with the name Goldie, but she (we think she was a she) soon told us, yes she talked, her name was Chipper. OK.

Clearly this was a bird that didn't need to be locked up, so we didn't, but did keep a cage with the door open that she slept in at night and went to for food. During the day, she would ride around on any available shoulder, or race back and forth on a window ledge arguing with the birds in the yard, or quietly work on building a nest in the back of a bookshelf where we discovered she had hollowed out the top of the complete works of Shakespeare.

Chipper woke me up in the mornings which got to be a pain sometimes. I remember trying to shoo her away on hot summer mornings as she kept digging her clawed feet in my back when clearly there was no school and I didn't have to get up. At breakfast she would walk around on the table and help herself to my French toast, wading through the too-much maple syrup I had poured on it. She was part of our daily life.

One time, when I was sitting in the bathroom, Chipper landed on a full roll of toilet paper on the hanger in front of

me. She then tried to take off, kicking her feet, but her feet, instead of launching her in the air, rolled the paper backwards towards the wall taking her with it.



Chipper was stuck between the roll and the walls, so she flapped her wings, and ran to climb out, almost making it just to roll back and get stuck again. I know I should have helped, but I was convulsed with tears of laughter and couldn't stop as she kept unrolling the paper trying to get unstuck. Eventually she had unrolled so much paper she fell through the space between the wall and the roll and landed on the large soft pile of toilet paper she had created below.

My mom would often greet me as I walked home from school, and Chipper was usually on her shoulder. As soon as Chipper saw me, she would fly outside to greet me and ride back to the house on my shoulder. We did this for years, but then, one day, a large truck came rumbling down the street, scared her and she flew away. She'd had outdoor adventures before, but had always come back. This time she didn't. We cried, then thought of where she'd lived before us, and wondered if she'd moved on bringing joy into another family after ours.



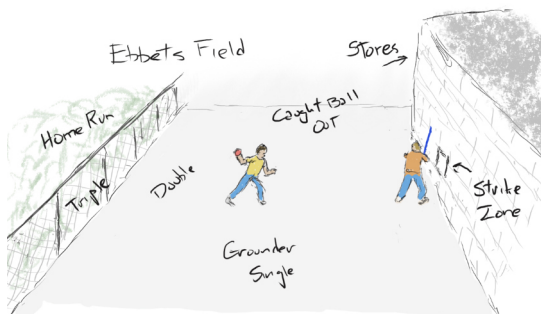
The only picture of Chipper, fighting her reflection when there weren't birds outside to harass

KEVIN, ME, YANKEES, DODGERS

1950s, Levittown

Kevin was my best friend in elementary school. He wasn't actually in my classes, as he was a grade behind, but we were close to the same age as I was a grade ahead for my age. (I skipped kindergarten. That was the peak of my academic career.)

We played a lot of stick ball, with a square painted on a wall for a strike zone, a broom stick for a bat and a rubber ball. We had two fields, Yankee Stadium and Ebbets Field, the home of the then Brooklyn Dodgers. Yankee Stadium was behind the school with plenty of room to hit the ball, like the real Yankee Stadium. Ebbets field was behind a shopping center with a fence in close, like the real Ebbets field.



Ebbets Field and Stick Ball

This was probably around when we were 9 or 10, which were the years, 1955, 1956 when the New York Yankees played the Brooklyn Dodgers in consecutive World Series. Notably, 1956 was when Don Larsen pitched the only perfect game in a World Series, and I remember making some sort of commemorative display around his baseball card.

For us, our games were always the World Series and I was the Yankees and he was the Dodgers. One day we were in the seventh game, playing at Ebbets Field. It was the last inning and he was ahead by two. I had two runners on base (imaginary, because that's how you play stick ball), but had two outs and two strikes. Last pitch. I hit it over the fence for a three run homer!

We both thought it was the coolest finish ever to one of our World Series.

The pros talk about living their dreams in the big leagues, but it's hard to imagine it could get any better than that.



Me with my favorite bat, a broom stick I'd painted blue with black tape for a grip. It had a slight bend at the top and I'd hold the stick so it bent into the ball.

BULLIES

1958 Middle School, 1971 Draper Labs

Eighth Grade

I was a relatively small kid in school with a slight build, a meek disposition, and a year younger than everyone in my grade. This meant I was sometimes the target of bullies in school.

In eighth grade this tough kid, also named Dennis, who had been pushing me around for a while, got right in front of me at my desk before the teacher came in, and dared me to hit him, he said, "come on, hit me, I dare you" over and over.



Hit me, go ahead, I dare you!

So I did.

I suspect he was about to kill me then and there, except the teacher came in the room at just that moment. Dennis said to me "you got lucky, I'm going to get you after school."

I opted to take a different exit from school than I normally did and a different route home.

The next morning he said "you escaped me yesterday, it won't happen today."

Looking for a way out, I said to him "Look Dennis, if we fight after school one of two things will happen. One is you beat me up, in which case everyone will look down on you for beating up a kid smaller than you. The other is, unlikely, I might beat you up, which will be really embarrassing for you. Either way, you lose."

He said "I'm gonna get you after school."

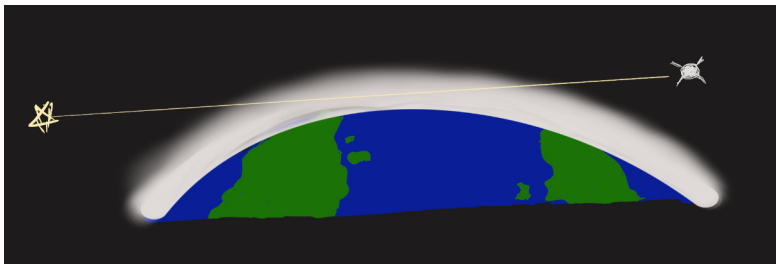
Around mid afternoon, still in school, he came up to me and said “I’ve been thinking it over. The way I see it is, if we fight after school one of two things will happen...” and said back everything I’d said in the morning.

I agreed he was thinking clearly, and we became, well if not friends, friendly after that.

Draper Labs

My first job was as a scientific programmer at the M.I.T. Instrumentation Lab, now called the Draper Labs. I hadn’t gone to M.I.T. or gotten a college degree higher than a bachelor’s, but had friends who got me the job there. We were working in a small group that serviced small contracts.

We’d just gotten one called the Star Occultation project. It called for the analysis of satellite data looking at images of stars as they faded behind the atmosphere before disappearing behind the earth. That analysis would let us figure out the amount of various pollutants in the air.



Star Occultation experiment, not drawn to scale

I was to be the programmer for the project. We had a PhD student from M.I.T. work with us as chief scientist.

He came up with a bunch of equations that determined pollutant percentages based on input star occultation image data. He gave them to me to turn into code, which I did.

Strangely, instead of generating meaningful percentages, the program produced all zeroes for output. He was a bit angry, said clearly I’d made a mistake, and to check my code.

I did, and it still came out with zeroes for output.

He was furious and walked into my boss’s office, and within earshot of everyone in the group, loudly asked how he

could have assigned such an incompetent programmer to the project, one that couldn't even code a bunch of equations. He demanded I get thrown off the project and that he be provided with someone who knew what they were doing.

It was Friday.

Well, it was eighth grade all over again, and I knew I could stand up to this bully and I knew I had coded his formulae correctly. So I went home and went over his equations. I was able to, from a pure math point of view, analyze the equations and prove that, no matter what input, they would always produce a zero as the result.

Monday morning I asked for a meeting. It was me, my boss, and a very angry and arrogant M.I.T. graduate student. I was pretty wired up and went to the white board and laid out my proof, showing that his equations were incorrect and would always produce a zero. I also showed what the correct equations should be.

Wow, was he mad! He just stormed out of the room slamming the door behind him.

With just the two of us left in the room, my boss looked at me and said, "Well I guess now you're the chief scientist for the Star Occultation project."

SPUTNIK

1950s - 1970s, High School to Draper

When I was about to post this story, which starts with Sputnik, Heather Cox Richardson wrote about the Department of Education with this paragraph as part of her article.

“A Republican-dominated Congress established the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1953 under Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower as part of a broad attempt to improve the nation’s schools and Americans’ well-being in the flourishing post–World War II economy. When the Soviet Union beat the United States into space by sending up the first Sputnik satellite in 1957, lawmakers concerned that American children were falling behind, put more money and effort into educating the country’s youth, especially in math and science.”

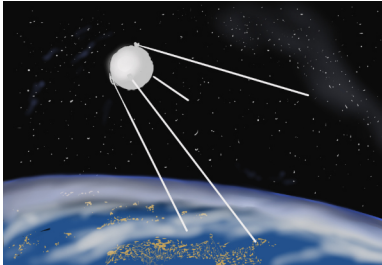
Some of my stories might be considered to be out in la-la-land. This is a problem for me since I don’t really think of myself as a la-la-land sort of person. In fact, just the opposite. I made my living programming computers, not just any programming, but logic programming, a form of programming for those who don’t find normal programming logical enough. I’ve written a number of popular books and articles on the subject and had my own small company as a vendor of logic programming software tools for many years.

Yet my experiences in life often defied logical explanations. For example, the story of how I became a programmer in the first place.

I was attending Brown University, which I got into, not so much due to my high school B average, but more by the perfect 800 I got in the advanced math SAT. That and being enrolled in a special high-school electronics program that was started right after Sputnik worried my country that we didn’t

have enough engineers. Sputnik, in many senses, started my life's professional journey.

When in college, I discovered rock climbing. It totally captivated me, to the point that, in my senior year, I had attended so few classes that I flunked out.



Sputnik

Now, it turns out that many of the rock climbers in the Northeast were from M.I.T., and had become good friends of mine. When they heard I'd flunked out, they asked me if I needed a job. I

was pretty clueless about a number of things, and said, I guess so. They asked me if I knew how to program computers. This was 1967. I said I didn't even know what a computer was. They said, no problem, we'll teach you.

And thus I started my career, programming in support of the backup navigation system of the Apollo project at the M.I.T. Instrumentation Lab, just as those who created that Sputnik inspired high school lab had intended.

If I hadn't spent all that time rock climbing, I would not have made the connections that launched me on my life's work.

There's more to the story. I mentioned it was 1967, the height of the Viet Nam war. Flunking out, I lost my student deferment and became first in line for the military draft. There were many in those days who were aware of all the ways of avoiding the draft, but I was not one of them. As I mentioned, I was a bit clueless.

It turns out, rock climbing was also how I became involved with my girl friend, a climber as well. Somehow she became pregnant. Although an accident, it was a happy thing for us and we got married. It turned out, I didn't know this beforehand, that married fathers were exempt from the draft.

So I put myself up as a role model for youth today — spend your time rock climbing, flunk out of school, have unprotected sex, and everything will work out fine. Well, maybe that's not good advice, but it's what happened to me

and started me out wondering about the strange coincidences that were shaping my journey.

Much of my writing is my logical mind pondering my life's illogical threads.

(For those worried about my advice, I did go back to school to get my degree after I found out those with degrees were making more money than I was. Nobody had quite explained it to me like that before.)

BUTCH AND THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

1963, New York City

My cousin Carole, also raised in the environs of New York City, was a couple of years older than me and going to college in the South. There she met her future husband, Butch. Butch was from Union Springs, Alabama, about as far as one can get, culturally, from New York.

I'm not sure Butch had even been to Northern Alabama, let alone the Northeast, but now he was coming North to visit his prospective in-laws. Of course he wanted to see New York, and I, knowing a little bit about the city, was going to be his tour guide.

I was 17 and Butch was maybe 22? 23? Being 17, I knew, as one does at that age, what was what in the World, or at least, the City. So we're touring the city, and seeing the sights, and Butch is exuding wide-eyed country enthusiasm, and I'm having a blast being the sophisticated, knowledgeable City guide.

Next stop was the Empire State Building. At the time it was, and had been for quite a while, the tallest building in the World. Butch says, "wow, wouldn't it be amazing if someone jumped off!" I explained to him that no-one had jumped off it since the early 1930s and how it was impossible to do now.

He said, yeah, but wouldn't it be cool. He kept talking about it. I explained again how it couldn't happen. I told him about the fence at the top, and the guards that wouldn't let you get to the fence.

He still went on about maybe someone jumping, and wow, wouldn't it be something if someone did it. Getting a little frustrated, I told him that even if someone did jump, the building is tiered and those that jumped in the past rarely reached the street level.

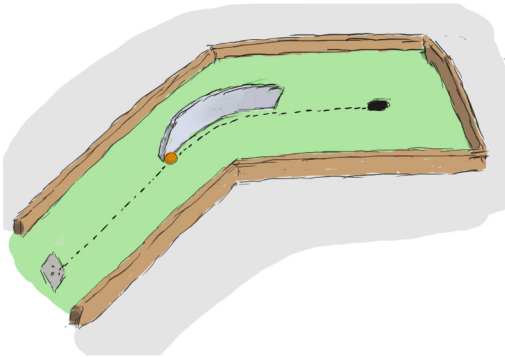
We then turned the corner around the base of the building and saw a gathering crowd. In the middle, under a blanket, was a corpse. The sides of the building and pavement were splattered with blood and bits of flesh.

It was the first guy to jump off the Empire State Building in thirty years, and he made it all the way to the ground.

PUTT PUTT

1961, Levittown

One summer, when I was around 15, they opened a Putt-Putt miniature golf course not far from where I lived. Putt-Putt was a new concept in miniature golf. It wasn't about windmills and dinosaurs and the like, but rather a golf obstacle course that putted true, with each hole a makable hole-in-one if you hit it right. It was "serious" miniature golf.



Typical Putt-Putt hole.
If you hit the curved plate at the right spot, it would take the ball into the hole.

I wound up spending a lot of time at that Putt-Putt and got really good at it. How good? My best score was a 28. That's 8 holes-in-one and the rest 2s.

Putt-Putt was starting professional miniature golf tournaments, and you needed to be able to break 36 to get in. I could have easily made it, but you also had to be 18 years old. Sigh.

The next year, maybe I was 16, I took up real golf and went with my friend Sid to the Salisbury public course. The starter paired us with a guy who didn't look all too happy to be playing with a couple of kids.

On the first hole, Sid and I hacked our balls down the fairway, probably taking 8 or 12 strokes to get to the green. I was about 12 feet from the hole. Sank the putt. The guy was impressed with that shot.

I proceeded to do that for the rest of the round, making the guy wonder how someone who golfed so poorly could putt so well.

MARTY AND THE MASHED POTATOES

1962, High School

Marty, Ed, myself and a few others were at a high school lunch table at the edge of the cafeteria, next to the wall. Marty was sitting next to Ed. Mashed potatoes were part of the lunch. Now we were all science sorts of kids, and Marty was curious if the mashed potatoes would stick on the wall. So he winged the potatoes at the wall, and sure enough they stuck.

The lunch room monitor was a large lady, built like a tank, who didn't take any crap from us kids. She caught the potato fling out of the corner of her eye, and was pretty sure she saw Marty do it. She storms over, points at the potatoes and yells "Who did that!" in Marty's face. Marty calmly replied that he thought they were always there. This made the tank lady even madder, demanded again to know WHO did it!

Marty then looks at the lady. Turns and looks at Ed. He looks back at the lady, grits his teeth, looks at Ed. Looks at the lady, contorts his face in the pain of one facing a serious ethical dilemma and finally stares the lady straight in the eye and says "I refuse to rat on my friend."

With that the lady literally yanks Ed out of his seat and starts dragging him away. Ed's totally flustered, saying no no, Marty did it, and Marty looking grim, says, "I tried to cover for you Ed." Ed's telling the lunch lady Marty did it, but that just makes it worse, now, not only guilty but looking the coward trying to blame his noble friend. Ed didn't get back from the principal's office til after lunch.

SHOWDOWN AT THE PEMBROKE DISH ROOM

1965, Pembroke

Back then, in the mid 1960s, Brown was a men's college and Pembroke was the women's college associated with it. We shared classes, but the dorms and dining rooms were separate.

One year, looking to make some spending money, I took a job as a dishwasher at the Pembroke dining hall. This led to one of the most dramatic athletic competitions of my life. It all had to do with the main dish washing machine.

It was a large machine that had a continuous moving belt of slots for dishes. Scrapers would pre-rinse the dishes and stack them for one person, the feeder, who would load the moving slots with dirty dishes. The belt moved the dishes through the big central processing unit and they came out clean and hot on the other end. There, another person, the catcher, would pull them out and stack them for still others to put away.

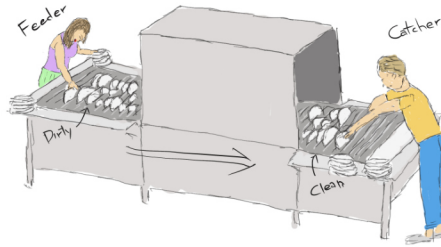
If, for some reason, the catcher wasn't able to pull the dishes out fast enough the belt would bring them to a bar at the end of the machine, which would temporarily stop the conveyor. Can you see where this is going? It became a game, with the feeder trying to pack the belt with more dishes than the catcher could catch, and the catcher pulling the dishes as fast as possible to avoid that stop being hit.

My job was catcher and I was getting pretty good at it. The best feeder was Marty, a Pembroke student. She'd always try to pack the machine to its fullest, hoping to hit the stop. But I could catch anything she could feed.

There was a knack to it. The big dinner plates came through two across, and they were easy to grab. I'd spread my fingers and pick them out four at a time. This let me work my way into the machine. Then when a row of smaller plates

came through, there was more time to get them before the stop.

Marty was good, but with the smaller plates she didn't fill the machine solid, and I always had time to pull them out.



Industrial dish washing machine

Marty was getting frustrated that she couldn't stop the machine on me. She began to tell stories of a legendary feeder named "Pete." He had been the feeder there for a while, and nobody, nobody could catch Pete. He could always get the machine to stop. I listened to these stories, and they were just stories, although I thought to myself, I could catch this Pete.

Then, one day, Pete walked into the dish room. He had heard word of my catching ability and asked Mabel, the supervisor, if he could feed for a bit. Mabel liked working with us kids and enjoyed the competition around the big machine. She said yes.

Pete stepped in front of the machine and started feeding.

I'd never seen anything like it. He never left a gap.

But I could catch him. Dinner plates two across, no problem, then the desert plates, three across. Now the different plates came to him mixed, so there would be a couple of rows of dinner plates, and then desert plates, like that.

The bread plates were smaller, they came in five across, but still, I could catch them, and after a few rows, there was always something easier that let me work my way back in the machine.

Everyone was watching, and especially Mabel was enjoying the show.

There was Pete, with a totally calm demeanor, loading the plates as if he were a machine himself and me grabbing and stacking as they came through, sometimes barely clearing a

row before the stop. But the machine never stopped and it looked like Pete had met his match. Then it happened.

Desert. Tiny little bowls of fruit salad. Pete started feeding those tiny bowls.

Seven across, without missing a space. Seven tiny dishes in each row, and so small you couldn't grab a bunch at a time, had to pull them one at a time. Now Marty would feed those as well, but never so dense, and never so many that I couldn't get them before the stop.

Here they were, a solid wave of these things. I was frantically trying to get them out, they were getting closer to the stop, I almost had them, but they were hard to get out, one was stuck, I yanked to get it free and wound up jerking it across the dish room where it slammed into a wall and shattered into tiny pieces, as the row hit the stop and the conveyor halted.

Mabel cracked up laughing and said, that's it. Enough. Before someone gets hurt with flying dish shards.

I'd lost. Hats off to Pete. He was still the legend. He got his hat and coat, shook my hand and said I was the best catcher he'd worked with, and left. Marty and I finished the dishes for the night.

THE RABBIT

1966, Brown

In my senior year I moved into an off-campus, but still university, house. It was like a frat house except it wasn't. It was just a dorm.

I was rooming with Grant. Now there was a kid in the house who went by the name "Rabbit." He probably picked it himself because, well, he liked to fuck. He would tell us over and over how many girls he'd had and how much he liked to fuck girls. He couldn't emphasize it enough.

There was another thing. He hated fags. He would describe what he would do to any fag who tried to hit on him.

He wasn't a nice person. He had a stray cat in his room and he'd put out food for it and then do behavioral training by shooting it with a pea shooter every time it went to eat.

I can't remember, did I mention how much he loved to fuck girls and how much he hated fags? That's important for the rest of the story.

One day Grant and I were wandering around in downtown Providence and went by a news stand which was selling magazines, one of which was a pornographic gay magazine, "Muscle Boy." I don't know which one of us had the idea, but we hatched this plan to buy a copy of the magazine, dirty it up so it looked well used, and hide it under the Rabbit's bed.

That part of the plan was easy. But what next? We didn't quite know where to go with it.

Well here's where providence comes into play. There were a bunch of us hanging out in the Rabbit's room just acting like college kids, and someone starts throwing a tennis ball around and Grant hits it with a racket or something and it shoots up

to the ceiling and explodes this fluorescent light into a million little glass shards...all over Rabbit's bed.

The Rabbit is pissed and yells, "Grant you asshole, clean that up!" It was hard for us to contain our excitement. Grant says "sure."

He pulls up the covers and starts to unmake the bed and then "discovers" the magazine. Did I mention there were a bunch of us in the room? Grant says, "what's this?"

Well the Rabbit had a temper, and I don't think I've ever seen anyone as furious as he was. He was ranting and yelling, saying it wasn't his, no way it could be his, and that if he found out who put it there he would kill them.

Grant and I, we believed him, and never told anyone, until years later, about our prank.

THE HEART ON SAYLES HALL

1960s, Brown

On February 14, 1966, Orin and I climbed to the top of Sayles Hall, the dominant building on the Brown University campus, and, at about 100', the tallest. We placed a wooden heart in the spire at the top.



The heart on Sayles Hall

A group of us, all rock climbers, simply couldn't stay off the buildings when we weren't out at real cliffs, and, when climbing buildings, well, felt compelled to leave some token of our ascent. Thus the heart that Valentine's Day.

The previous Halloween we planned and executed a military style campaign to place Jack-O-Lanterns on the tops of 13 campus buildings. We had three or four teams each with a climber, a belayer (for safety) and support for the handling and hauling of the pumpkins.

The campus police had no idea what was happening until it was all over and our Jack-O-Lanterns were smiling down from the tops of those 13 buildings. Had they any idea, they might have noticed us wandering about with our ropes, climbing gear and pumpkins.



Jack-O-Lanterns around the main campus, Carrie Tower, University Hall, Manning Chapel, Faunce House, and Sayles Hall

Three of the ascents were noteworthy.

The first was **Manning Chapel**. We thought it impossible to climb but Dick solved that problem by climbing a poplar tree growing on the side of the Chapel. From there he stepped over to the roof and, after hauling up a pumpkin, placed it at the front of the building. I don't know if those trees are still there.

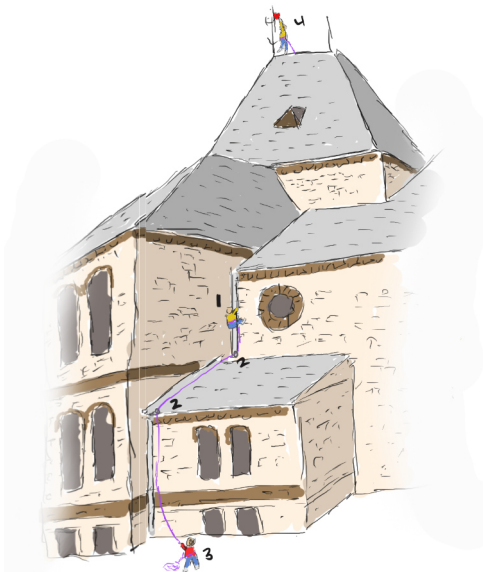
Carrie Tower was the second. Its fluted brick work was climbable, but there was no way to use traditional climbing techniques to make it a safe ascent. That problem was solved by Tom, a graduate student who, having trained in the steam tunnels under M.I.T., had discovered an underground route to the inside of the tower. So it was really a spelunking success, not a climbing one. (Note that a couple of years after us, Peter Blatman did climb Carrie Tower, and also conquered a project we only dreamed of, the Gold Domed State House in Providence. Hats off to him.)

The third was **Sayles Hall**. Orin and I had thought we could mount the pumpkin on the spire on the top of the peaked slate roof. We weren't so smart. From the ground it looked like we could easily get up there, but standing on the ledge at the base of that peaked summit we found out it was

much higher than we thought. So we put the pumpkin on the ledge and vowed to come back, on a different holiday, to complete the climb.

The Route up Sayles Hall

The route for reaching the ledge was relatively easy and fun. The building was broken up, on the side, into five different sections, which gave the route a kind of Alpine feel. It was 75', half a rope length, from the ground to the ledge around the top.



The Route.

- 1) Climbing (layback) the drain pipes.
- 2) Snaplinks (carabiners) with the rope going through, so if I fall, I don't hit the ground.
- 3) Belayer holding the rope.
- 4) Reaching the top standing on tip toe to place the heart in the cradle on the spire.

Orin belayed me as I climbed to the ledge, and then I, from above, belayed him up to the ledge. We then pulled up the rope and Orin went around to the other side of the peak and threw one end of the rope over the top. I then grabbed it, tied into it, and used it to climb up to the very top, carrying the heart with me.

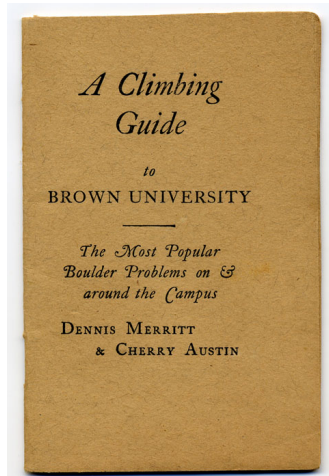
Well son of a gun, we still misjudged the height of that spire. No way could I reach the top, but standing on tip toe I was able to nestle the heart into a cradle like feature that seemed almost designed for it. Orin then lowered me down to the ledge, and we both rappelled off the rest of the way.

Not too long after that the heart was featured on the cover of the Alumni Monthly with a short article about anonymous climbers having put it there.

Prequel

Before these assaults on the buildings, we had done a lot of bouldering around campus. Bouldering is rock climbing in the small, where you only climb as high as you're willing to jump off. No ropes or gear required.

My girl friend Cherry (later wife) and I had the idea of making a climbing guide to the boulder problems at Brown. It turns out my roommate Grant, who wanted to work in newspapers when he graduated, worked for the University press and had access to its printing press. So we wrote the guide and he set the type (that's how you did it then) and created the "Climbing Guide to Brown University."



What's fun is I still get contacted by current students interested in the guide.



Cherry Bouldering on Carrie Tower (you can see the fluted brick work Peter later climbed)

Grant Bouldering on the Manning Chapel traverse (harder than it looks)



Epilog

Later that Spring, although we had no building climbing goals, I had gotten a parking ticket. Probably as the result of some bored dorm discussions, I got the notion that it would be better to put the ticket on the top of University Hall rather than to pay it, so we set out. It was just me climbing, with a belay, going up the four stories of that building using the ubiquitous sturdy University drain pipe, then walking across the roof and tying the ticket to a spire. My friends were hanging out at the bottom.

When I got back to the edge, a campus policeman was down with my friends, and, first he demanded that I come down, and then, fearing how that might turn out, demanded I stay on top.

Well I was about to rappel down anyway when he showed up so I decided to be as flamboyant as possible. I made it to the ground in two big sweeping arcs and landed, raising my arms, and saying TA DA!

The campus policeman wasn't there. I asked my friends where he was and was told he was in the next building. I went in there and found him on the phone. I asked him what he was doing. He said he was calling the fire department to come get a kid off the top of a building.

I told him I was the kid. He looked at me and asked, how did you get down? I was kind of irked that he missed my performance and told him if he'd stayed there he would have seen.

Anyway, that got me a trip to the dean's office.

Now to understand what happened with the dean, you need to understand some of the cultural events of the day. In the 1950s Sir Edmund Hillary became the first person to climb Mt. Everest. (I know, and the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, which is important today, but back then wasn't. Sir Edmund Hillary had all the glory and fame.)

I mean, this was huge news back then. Imagine, the first person to reach the highest point on Earth, on a mountain that had killed many others who tried. Hillary was on magazine covers and the subject of articles and interviews and all that. In one famous interview he was asked why he climbed mountains. He answered "because they're there." Everyone knew that quote.

So now, back to me and the dean, with a story illustrating how deans were smarter than students, or at least that dean and me.

I walked into his office, and he almost immediately said "I have one question for you. Why do you climb buildings?" Oh, it was a set up. Of course I answered "because they're there."

I know it was a set up because he didn't even think before replying: "OK, well they'll still be there, and you'll still be here, if you stay off them."

CATCHING A FALLING RADIATOR

1960s, Providence

The lead rock climber climbs above the belayer who is holding the safety rope. The rope is threaded (snap linked in actually) through carabiners as the leader progresses, so if the leader falls, he/she will drop to the last carabiner and the same distance below.

The second, holding the belay rope, must now stop a fall of what could be ten to fifty or more feet. Today's climbers wear special harnesses and belayers use fancy gizmos to automatically clamp the rope to stop a falling climber.



**A climber falls as far as the last carabiner
and that much again**

But this was in the 1960s. Climbers tied the ropes around their waists and belayers held the rope around their backs so, in case of a fall, they could wrap it around their body to get enough friction to stop the fall. It took some practice.

Our plan for teaching climbing at Brown was to find a tall (40-50 feet) tree, and haul a heavy weight up the tree. Then the practicing belayer would have a second rope, with about 20-30 feet of slack in it, going up through a sling in the tree and attached to the weight.

We'd cut the weight loose, and the belayer would have to stop it before it hit the ground.

The belayer has the belay rope wrapped around his/her waist, and is also tethered to a tree so the force of the fall doesn't pull him/her into the air.

The tree we wanted to use was in a public park in Providence. We knew we'd get in trouble doing this, so, before hand, we went to the head of parks in Providence and told him our plan and asked for permission. He thought it was cool and wrote a letter giving us that permission.

So armed with our letter, old climbing ropes, a big old heavy radiator and a Volkswagen, we went to the tree and set it all up. It worked great and we were all doing well catching the falling radiator.

Then, as expected, the police showed up, ready to put a stop to it. So I went over to the patrol car with my letter and started explaining it to them. They were fascinated.

Now Dan was the next to try it. He laid out 25 feet or so of slack in the belay rope and someone drove the Volkswagen tied to the weight to get the weight up in the tree.

The police didn't know anything about rock climbing and I was explaining to them how you stopped the fall by wrapping the belay rope around your body.

Dan was ready, with coils of slack at his feet. Cherry was ready to pull the slip knot on the Volkswagen to free the radiator. I was with the police car, where there was the anxious expectation of a circus crowd.

The weight started down. But Dan, like captain Ahab of Moby Dick fame, had his foot in one of the coils of rope. The belay rope tightened, but around his ankle instead of his waist—whoop!—up he goes feet first towards the tree, held down by the restraining rope, instantly suspended upside down between the two.

I'm gaping in horror, hoping he's OK, as the policeman calmly remarks "oh, I see, you wrap the rope around your leg like that."



Dan feet first in the air

Dan was OK.

THE ULTIMATE CARD TRICK

1968, Matterhorn

When I was around 14 I got interested in magic, and specifically card tricks. I learned a few, but can't say as I was particularly good at them. Also, it was a little disappointing in that one could appear to do magic, but always, there was a trick to it, which kind of took the magic out.

I decided that I wanted to perform the ultimate card trick, one without "a trick to it." That trick, I decided, was to fan a deck of cards, have someone pick a card and then immediately tell them what it is.

No put it back in the deck, no secret shuffle, no hidden shiners to reflect the image, no marked deck, no.... Just, pick a card, and tell them what it is.

How can one do such a perfect, pure trick? Luck.

I figured if I tried this trick every time I had an opportunity to show it to someone new, eventually I'd guess the card right. The odds weren't that bad, it should work about one in every 52 tries.

So at age 14 I embarked on my quest to blow someone away with the perfect card trick.

I did this all through high school and all through college, with no luck. Each time I would claim I could do it, and proceed with the utmost confidence. And then, when it didn't work, I enjoyed explaining what I was doing to whoever had just pulled a card. But I always maintained my self-assured confidence until I knew I had guessed wrong again.



Pick a Card

Life goes on and I wasn't that devoted to my mission, but if I was with some people who hadn't seen it before, and there was a deck of cards near by I'd give it a try.

I'd gotten into climbing, and shortly after college, a group of us went to the Alps for a mountaineering vacation. Three of us decided to try the Matterhorn, myself, my wife Cherry, and our friend, Kevin.

The actual mountain part of the mountain starts from a hut that's reached from a hike up a ridge. Typically that's done the day before, which is what we did. We were hanging out in the hut, kind of bored, and waiting for dark to get some sleep for an early start the next day.



Hut at the base of the Matterhorn

I was sitting with Kevin at a rustic table, and I noticed a deck of cards. I hadn't tried my trick in a long time. I said to Kevin, "I can do the ultimate card trick. You pick a card and I'll tell you what it is." Kevin said "OK."

So I fanned the cards, Kevin picked one, and I immediately said Queen of Spades. Now I picked a different card each time, that's just what I said that time.

And I waited, with all the self assurance I could muster.

And I waited. Kevin hadn't said anything. I was having trouble containing myself. I said, "well???" He nonchalantly showed me the Queen of Spades.

I'd waited nearly ten years for this moment, and he's just sitting there. I said "Aren't you impressed?"

He replied: "Nah, there's some trick to it."

Epilog

There is a grim epilog to this story. A friend told me that the Queen of Spades in our cards corresponds to the “Death” card in Tarot.

Twenty years later Kevin died in a climbing accident on the Matterhorn.



QUALIFYING FOR THE BOSTON MARATHON

1968, Cambridge

I like to brag that I once qualified for the Boston Marathon. Anyone who knows anything about that race is impressed. One needs documented fast times in one or more previous races to simply get to the starting line. That's how it is now, and has been for quite some time.

But back in 1968, to qualify all you had to do was send in \$5. I did that.

Now I had been running some, and thought I would do OK, but I spent the Saturday / Sunday before the, always-on-Monday race, rock climbing. So when my alarm went off at 8:00 AM Monday morning I was faced with two choices.

1. Get up, drive out to Hopkinton and then run 26 miles back into the Boston, or
2. Go back to sleep, wake up later, make a big pancake breakfast, and go out and enjoy watching the race.

I made the logical choice.

MICHAEL'S SAVE

1970s, Winchester

Dom diVincenzo and I coached youth soccer for a number of years. Both our sons were on our teams.

When I first told Michael when the programs were starting, he was real excited. Wow, my dad's coaching my soccer team. But then a cloud came over him and he said with all seriousness, "but dad, you don't know anything about soccer."

I told him not to worry and not to let the other kids know that.

But I learned. We got training. It turns out the International Soccer Federation, or whatever it was called had a meeting and decided to help third World countries develop better soccer programs.

Well, in soccer, in the 1970s, the United States was a third World country.

So they developed a technique for teaching soccer, and trained the top coaches in the World to teach it. That was the 'A' level.

They taught the top American coaches. The 'B' level.

They taught those below them, etc. The program was designed to ripple down to the youth soccer programs.

We had the coach from the local junior college come to Winchester to train us how to coach. We were the 'E' level. It was good stuff.

Dom and I made a good team. I understood the drills and what we were trying to accomplish. He knew how to get the kids to stand in straight lines.

Michael's progress was interesting. He wasn't the most athletic kid on the team, and often played OK but uninspired soccer. But at times he would get this spark in his eye and go

after the ball with intensity and clarity of purpose. When he got that way he dominated the field.

I don't know what made it come and go. I guess its like that for all athletes, sometimes you're in the zone, and sometimes not. But when he was on, he was unbeatable.

A highlight came one year when he was playing goalie. Someone had told him a trick for stopping penalty kicks, how to leave more net open on one side to get the kicker to kick for it and to dive for that open area as he's kicking.

One day the moment happened. It was the closing minutes of a close game. The other team got a penalty kick. The best, coolest, most athletic kid (and popular) on the other team was making the kick. But Michael had his trick up his sleeve, and he was in the zone.

The other kid slammed a powerful kick into the wide open half of the net, and to his and everyone else's surprise, Michael was there with the save.

FROSTED CHOCOLATE

1980s, Upstate New York

My dad grew up in Poughkeepsie N.Y. The drink, which is called a chocolate milk shake in most of the country (and a cabinet in Rhode Island and a frappe in Boston), was called a frosted chocolate back then and there, and that, by God, was what my dad still called it.

When I was in college in Rhode Island, we'd go to a diner and he'd order a frosted chocolate. The person behind the counter never knew what it was, which frustrated my dad and he'd carefully explain how to make one. She'd say, you mean a cabinet. He'd say no, it's a frosted chocolate.



I moved up to Boston and it was the same scene, only with the counter person trying to explain that it's a frappe. No, it's a frosted chocolate. My dad refused to call it anything else.

Years later I was passing through Poughkeepsie by myself and stopped in at a diner for something to eat. The guy behind the counter was about my dad's age.

I had an inspiration—I ordered a frosted chocolate. He just beamed.

PROFESSIONAL DANCER

1970s, Cambridge

Back in the 1970s in Cambridge Mass. a recent Harvard MBA graduate had an idea for a business. Serious dance lessons for non-serious dancers. Instructors that taught jazz and ballet dancing in studios with wood floors and mirrors and bars. But for ordinary people.

He called it "The Joy of Movement Center" with a number of studio locations through out the city. It was a huge success, all sorts of people signed up to learn the sort of dance serious dancers did, including my wife and I.

We thought we were a pretty good dancers, what knowing how to do the Mashed Potatoes and all, and were fairly athletic 20 year olds at the time, so we signed up for Intermediate Jazz because, clearly, we were past beginner.

Huge mistake! There were five-six-seven-eights coming at us faster than we could process, and isolations and moves and complex choreography. We quickly developed a lot of respect for serious dancers.

Our instructor had a professional dance troupe, "Becky Arnold's Dancing Machine," and she'd just lost one of her male dancers. Male dancers were hard to find and she needed a replacement for one number in her show and she thought I showed some promise.

So she asked me to be in her show.

Well what a trip, of course I said yes. She worked with me on the moves and the choreography but I had a hard time remembering the sequences, and even when I did, well I got the moves but probably not with the pizzazz I should have.

Then came the night for our performance, at the Berklee Performance Center in Boston. It was lightly attended, but

still, there was an audience. I made it through all the moves, so no great embarrassment, but that's probably all I can say.

Becky came up to me after the show and gave me \$5, my share of the gate. And told me I wouldn't be needed any more.

But still, that makes me a professional dancer, right?

Epilog — We remained friends with Becky and her husband, and took a number of other courses with other instructors and enjoyed them all. But then, sigh, people, there were arguments between the young business guy who started it and the instructors and battles over money and the whole thing fell apart.

HIPPIES AT WORK

1970s, Draper Labs

Joan Livingston (a fellow Shelburne Falls writer also on Substack) recently wrote about her dishwashing experience in college and how a dean wanted to get her fired because of her hippy look.

I had a similar experience, and it's also a strand that connects two stories in this book, *Bullies* and *Adventure Adventure*, although wasn't a part of either of them.

It's hard to say I was a real hippy back in the day, although I did certainly go for the hippy look. I had long hair, wore jeans to work, lived in a big old house full of people (like Mel in the picture), was against the war (Viet Nam) and smoked some dope.



Me on the left

On the other hand, the big old house was in Winchester Mass., a Boston suburb notorious for old money, and I was working for an aerospace company, most of which's work was military.

The Star Occultation project I worked on was a non-military project, and after I was made chief scientist and

programmer (*Bullies*) I went on to do what might have been my best work at the Lab. However, my boss's boss didn't like a long-haired hippy wandering around his clean-cut group.

The country might have been more divided then than it is now. The anti-war movement, civil rights, the environment, and then feminism were tearing the country apart. And you could tell which side of the divide one was on by the length of one's hair.

My boss's boss made his displeasure clear and made sure I got a zero raise. Do you see about the times? Both Joan in her story, and me in mine, were being penalized at work because of the side of the political/cultural divide we chose. A cautionary tale.

Well it all worked out fine for me, maybe something about Karma balancing things out. The story of me and the first interactive adventure game (*Adventure Adventure*) tells of my getting the maximum raise when, in fact, I'd spent all my time on the Lab computer playing that game.

APOLLO 11

1969, Cambridge

1969 — The country was split between conservatives and liberals, maybe even more so than it is today. The Vietnam war was huge in our lives, and many college kids were actively protesting against it. M.I.T. was no exception. Here are the players and events involved in this story.

Doc Draper — Doc Draper was a legend at M.I.T., he drove a little sports car and always parked it facing out. The story goes that that was a habit he got when he was running bootleg liquor to fund his M.I.T. education. He made a major contribution to WWII with his invention of an inertial gun platform. Because of the rolling of a ship in the sea, it was hard to aim a ship's anti-aircraft guns that were attached to the deck. Draper's inertial platform used gyroscopes to provide a stable base for those guns, letting the ship roll beneath it.

The story goes that when they first tried them he was on the ship, and when some Japanese Zeroes attacked the ships, the gunners fled for safety. Draper ran out to take their place and the horrified admiral had to hold him back. The platforms made a huge difference in our ability to defend against those suicide planes.

M.I.T. Instrumentation Lab — Doc Draper started the Lab based on his inertial guidance technology, which was then used in guidance systems for missiles. (It's basically a gyroscope attached to something that detects motion.) The Lab was funded with government defense contracts and provided work for M.I.T. students and faculty.

Apollo — The Lab got the contract for the guidance system work for Apollo.

The Protests — Students protested the Lab, said there was no way a peaceful university should be funded with military contracts. Lots of bad PR for the Lab and M.I.T.

The Suits — As Draper had gotten older, the running of the Lab wound up in the hands of more serious business types, wearing suits among the engineering techies. They were very much aware of the bad PR of the military contracts and spent money publicizing the Lab's work on Apollo and a few other minor peaceful projects. They worked hard at downplaying the military contracts.

Me — I worked at the Lab, my M.I.T. friends got me a job there, working on the backup Apollo navigation system, an optical sextant.

Which brings me to the day Apollo 11 came back to Earth.

It was probably Draper's idea to have a large truck full of champagne show up. We started drinking and celebrating and drinking and celebrating. The news cameras showed up in a large room with tables.

The suits were there.

We were there.

The news was there, the cameras were rolling.

And Draper was there.

Draper, drunk, climbed up on a table, the cameras were rolling, the suits were afraid...

"When I started this lab we built war machines, and we still build war machines, and I'm damn proud of it!"

Epilog — The M.I.T. Instrumentation Lab divested itself from M.I.T. and changed its name to Draper Lab. The divestment agreement was long and complex and basically said that all of the connections between M.I.T. and the Lab would still be there, except at the very top it would be a separate entity. So it could pursue military contracts without giving the school a bad name.

DIANA AND RUBIK'S CUBE

1984, Winchester

I had a Rubik's cube that was solved, and Diana at the age of four or five said she could solve the puzzle. I told her it was hard. She said she could handle it.

So I just made one rotation, and she put it back.

Then I did two, no problem, and three no problem.

She was full of confidence and wanted to try a harder one.

So we did four and she made a false move and it just started getting more and more scrambled.

She studied the disarrayed cube, realized I wanted it back the way it was, realized she couldn't do it, assessed the situation, and said "dad, we're going to have to peel the colored stickers off and put them back on to get it right again."

Brilliant! I showed her we could do just that by physically taking the cube apart and putting it back correctly.

SMALL TOWN POLITICS

1970s, Winchester

Winchester had a representative town meeting government. That meant the members of the town meeting were all individuals elected by the people in their neighborhoods. The town meeting was the legislative branch for the town and acted just like Congress at the national level or any other legislative body. Members had lots to read and study and there were frequent meetings to debate the issues and then vote on resolutions. The most important ones had to do with the budget.

A board of selectmen acted as the executive branch of the town, enacting the town laws. This meant the town was a perfect microcosm for understanding how branches of government work in our political systems.

They were having trouble filling all the seats in the town meeting, and my neighbor, who had been our neighborhood representative, urged me to run. So I did, and my campaign slogan was "if nobody else wants it, I'll do it." Good enough, I won.

It was an education, and I highly recommend anyone get involved in politics at a local level. Here are a few observations from the 1970s which I believe are relevant today.

Yes/No

All a legislative body can do is answer yes/no questions. That's what a vote is. This was actually quite frustrating as we worked over the town budget. There was no ability to make trade-off decisions.

So we could make individual yes/no votes on individual budget items, but not have any big picture input. That's why

it's important to have committees that make those sorts of decisions. In this case it was the town finance committee that came up with a recommendation for a budget and all the trade-offs that entailed.

Experience Counts

A regular at town meeting was our representative to the state legislature. He was always there pointing out what he had done for the town lately.

For example, there was an old bridge over abandoned railroad tracks in town that badly needed repairs.

Our state rep knew of an obscure state law that provided funds for situations regarding abandoned rail road tracks. So he was able to get state funding to repair the bridge so the town didn't have to pay for it.

You can see how it goes. He saves the town some money. He could do that because he'd been in state government long enough to know all these bits and pieces. The town politicians appreciate that and then work for his re-election.

The general electorate is really none the wiser to any of this. All they see is lots of lawn signs and ads to elect that guy, but they're all there because the locals are working for him, and they're doing that because he is working for them.

On the state level at that time, Ted Kennedy was the Massachusetts Senator. He was barely able to talk straight sentences through his alcoholism, probably guilty of manslaughter, and yet got re-elected year after year. Why? I suspect it's the same reason. That with his seniority he's better able to bring federal money into the state, and those in the state that directly benefited turned out each election cycle to keep him in office.

Campaign Expenses

The job of town selectman is a thankless one. These people are up late hours, dealing with all sorts of issues, like this restaurant's liquor license, the budget, park space, etc. Lots of boring reading, lots of irritating people.

And no salary. Strictly volunteer.

The year I was involved in town politics, the selectmen vying for re-election were spending around \$10,000 each on their campaigns.

This was in the 1970s. \$10,000 for a chance to do a real pain-in-the-ass job with no pay? Why?

Strangely, all the selectmen were also in the chamber of commerce, local business people. And once they got in do you know what a top priority of town government was?

Revitalizing the downtown Winchester business district. Town funds went into fancy lights, brick sidewalks, commercial court yards, etc. etc.

There were lots of families in town. Most people I know really wished we had a town swimming pool and rec center. But we got bricks downtown instead.

Someone who wants a pool isn't going to spend \$10,000 of their own money to get elected to a position that will let them help make that happen.

So you watch that happen in Winchester and suddenly understand the how and why of millions spent on national campaigns.

Fighting for your local issue

The people working on the town government issues had little use for those with personal complaints.

There are always trade-offs, like where the low-income housing should go, or if a bike path should be built, or a dead-end street connected.

When the residents on the dead-end street come out and start pitching their case to the town meeting, well, we're all working at this stuff, and they don't do anything for the town except protest when its their little bit of turf.

Absolutely no sympathy.

Moral: if you want to get something done in the town, you have to be involved in more issues than just your own pet project. Politics is scratching each other's backs. The more backs you scratch, the better chance you have of getting your own scratched.

CYCLING VOICE

1970s, Concord

"You're just jealous the voices don't speak to you."
— sign in a friend's home.

Once, nearly 50 years ago, I had a debate with a voice in my head that demanded to be heard.

I had gotten into bike racing in the mid 1970s, and would often be out training on the rural roads not far outside of Boston. Sometimes I would be riding with others, and sometimes alone.

I had a bit of an attitude about these training rides, in that I believed I had a right to ride on the smooth pavement of the road and not on the gravelly three feet or so along the edge. There were two reasons for this.

One was the speed and focus. Someone on a racing bike is going reasonably fast and focused on their workout. These weren't pleasure rides looking at the scenery, although, it was always pleasant on the outskirts of Boston.

The other was the tires. I don't know how they're made today, but back then you raced on what were called "sew-up" tires. They were light weight and could take a lot of pressure, which also meant they were prone to going flat. It wasn't a good idea to ride that sort of tire on a gravelly bit of road.

As I was riding I would hear cars coming up behind me, but I always held my line, thinking I had as much right to the road as they did, and they could pass when it was clear. I never looked back at the car, just kept my head down and peddled. Always.

Then one day, riding alone somewhere out in Concord Mass, I heard a car coming up behind and a voice in my head said "move over." I was surprised, never having experienced

anything like that before. It was practically audible. Having no idea what that was, I thought back, “no, I hold my line.” The voice repeated, “move over.” Again, I said “no, I’m not riding in the gravel.” More insistent, a third time it said “move over.”

So I moved over and rode in the gravel. As the car came by I glanced left and saw it giving me a safe wide berth. I was wondering what that was all about and started to pull back into the road.

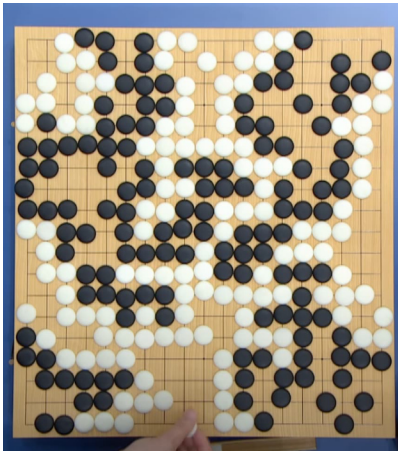
And was almost hit by the extra-wide trailer the car was towing.

CRAIG'S GO LESSON

1970s, San Francisco

This is a story of a rather humbling Go lesson a friend of mine received from a visiting Japanese professional. While it's about a game of Go, that's not really what it's about, but still you need to know a little about Go to understand the story.

Go is a primarily Asian game, with the best players being from China, Korea or Japan. It is played on a 19x19 grid with the players placing white and black stones on the intersections of



A Go board at the end of a game

the lines. The idea is to surround territory on the board with your stones where each intersection of the grid is worth one point. It's also possible to surround and capture the opponent's stones. Whoever has the most territory at the end of the game, wins.

Play involves each player pushing boundaries in different parts of the board, grabbing territory here, threatening each other's

stones there, and in the process forming groups of stones weaving in and around each other.

The game is over when there are no more points to be gained. The players then look at the chaotic pattern of interlocking groups of stones and begin a tedious task of

counting up the score. In a close game, amateurs often don't know who won until that final counting.

On the other hand, sometimes it's easy to tell who won as a stronger player might score a massive victory by surrounding not just territory, but the stones the other player was using for walls as well. The interaction between the groups of stones is so complex, the weaker player might simply not have seen it coming.

How difficult is it to count the score? It's only been recently, with the latest AI advances, that a computer could even tell who was winning a game.

I used to play Go at the Massachusetts Go Club in Boston and had a friend, Craig, who was an intermediate sort of amateur, just like myself. He went on a trip to San Francisco once, where, at the time, there was a visiting Japanese Go professional. Craig signed up for a lesson.

A nice thing about Go is it's easy to handicap so players of different strengths can have balanced games. The weaker player can have from two to nine stones strategically placed on the board at the beginning of the game. The pro gave Craig the maximum 9 stone handicap and they proceeded to play.

The pro was quiet during the game. At the end, it turned out Craig lost by 10 points. He was feeling pretty good about himself, to have only lost by 10 points to a Japanese professional player. In our local club, it wasn't uncommon for Craig, or myself, to lose by 50 or more points to the stronger players who enjoyed demolishing their opponents.

So he started fishing for compliments. The pro didn't say much. Craig, who could be a bit arrogant, kept insisting, wanting to know if that wasn't pretty good for him to stay within 10 points of the pro, even at a 9 stone handicap.

Finally the pro relented. He explained: "For me to have won by more than 10 points would have been rude; for me to have won by less than 10 points would not have indicated my true strength."

Craig suddenly realized that he was destined to lose by exactly 10 points before a single stone was placed on the board. The pro had totally controlled the board, without Craig knowing it, so that his victory would be by, not 9, not 11, but precisely 10 points.

The pro then swept all the stones off the board, reconstructed the game from memory, picked a few key points in the game where he ran down alternate scenarios Craig might have played, and that was the lesson.

CYCLING WITH JOHN ALLIS

1970s, Boston

I started racing bicycles in the mid 1970s, a time when the sport was really small and most of the racers were runners with bad knees. I like to brag that I was a category I rider, which I was, except that back then that was the only category. You simply paid your dues and you were a licensed bike racer.

I was extremely lucky to have lived in the Boston area when John Allis was one of the top riders in the country. He was on our Olympic teams and national champion a few times. And a super nice guy. And an evangelist for the sport.

He trained twice a day on a forty mile loop through the hills West of Boston. Anyone who wanted to ride with him could, so there were usually about 20 of us just tagging on. He'd ride hard up the hills, but then easy on the down sides so people could catch up before the next hill.

One year the state championship was a 110 mile race on a 10 mile loop with a big climb on it. After a couple of laps I just thought it was going too slow. So I went off the front.

[The way bike racing works is there is a lot of drafting. The peloton (main group of riders) stays together because it's easier to ride as a group with riders taking turns breaking the wind. Going off the front, you lose that advantage.]

Nobody respected me, by that I mean, no-one came with me to try to make a break away of a small group of riders.

Except after not too long, John Allis did. He broke away from the peloton, caught up to me and as he passed me said "Let's go."

What a thrill, me and John Allis off the front. Well that scared a lot of people and some other riders caught up to us and it was a fast and strong break. It lost me after about 70

miles. But still, I finished around 10th and what a thrill to have created the winning break with John Allis.

In New England at the time, there were a number of races that drew the best riders from around the country with their prizes. Somerville NJ, Fitchburg MA, and Allentown PA. Riders today are impressed that I rode those races, which are now just for the elite riders, but, as I said, back then, anyone could play.

The current national champion was a Californian named John Howard. He came to race in Fitchburg and I was there. I marked him, I waited for his move, I wanted to be there when he went.

Boom! He exploded from the peloton and I was right on his wheel. It was me and John Howard off the front. He led out and then moved over to see who was with him and let them take the lead. I charged past ready to work with him.

He looked at me, sat up in his saddle, and with a look of complete disdain stopped peddling. He let the pack catch up and waited until he could get someone better to ride with him.

What a blow. He did go off again, and got some other better known riders, and won the race. I finished 10th or so and won a tire. Still, what an asshole.

Then there was the big 170 mile race in Canada with a Volkswagen Micro Bus as first prize. Everyone who was anyone from Boston went up there, along with all the big names from across the country. John Howard was there. John Allis was there.

John Howard had the better sprint of the two. And was more arrogant. John Allis was all about riding hard over the distance, but if anyone stayed with him to the end, he would lose the sprint to the finish.

Anyway, it was, as I said, 170 mile race and 20 miles into the race John Allis went off the front. By himself. Everyone else was pacing themselves. They knew that a lone rider couldn't stay out in front of a peloton made up of the best riders in the country for 150 miles.

So they let him go. And the miles passed. And they didn't see him.

Somewhere around the 120 mile mark, John Howard got worried and decided to go after him. He chased and chased, but never caught him.

John Allis drove home in the Volkswagen Micro Bus.

Me? I had stayed home and it was a strange lesson. Everyone better than me had gone to that race, meaning I was the best rider left in Boston.

At the weekly race, I went off the front, and one guy went with me except he just stayed on my wheel and didn't help break the wind at all.

The race was many laps around a circuit and we lapped the pack. I went off the front again, this time by myself.

I won easily. It was really boring.

Epilog: Well the sport started to grow. I raced for three years getting stronger and faster each year, but the sport was growing faster than I was. Despite getting stronger, each year I finished further and further back. It was kind of discouraging, so I quit as the sport left me behind. But what fun to have been a part of it for those years.

BLACKJACK AND ROULETTE

1985-2018, Various Casinos

In the 1980s my work brought me to conferences held in places with casinos where I enjoyed the opportunity to try my hand at the games of chance. Being of a scientific mind, I knew the odds were in favor of the house and, with that attitude, I lose fast and regularly.

On one trip I decided to try to beat the odds by adjusting my karma. My plan was to mix my gambling fortunes with others. Here was the idea, if I was gambling with other's money, mixed with mine, then it wouldn't be just my fate on the line. It would be theirs as well. Further, while winning or losing wasn't actually that important to me, if I was gambling with other's money I'd be much more invested, being a people-pleaser sort of person, in winning.

I went to my friends at work who weren't going to the conference and told them if they invested in the experiment I would either double their money in Las Vegas—or lose it all.

My right pocket was my gambling pocket. I put one hundred dollars of my money in it and anyone else could add as they saw fit. Whatever percentage of the money was originally theirs, that percentage of the right pocket would be theirs at the end.

Only a few people saw fit to invest, but they were people I felt had good luck, and a good sense of humor.

The conference went for four days. I nursed \$25 a night for every night I was there, and, as I normally expected, the house odds kept eating away at it. I mostly played the \$2 Blackjack tables because you could play there the longest before losing your money.

By Thursday afternoon we were getting ready to leave the conference. Our transportation wasn't there yet and I had

maybe an hour to kill. I still had \$40 in my right pocket and was thinking my experiment had failed.

On the other hand, I had promised to either lose it all, or double it. I went back to the Blackjack table with a mission. I had a different sense, I felt like a winner as I looked for a table with a dealer who looked like a loser.

I started betting \$5, because I didn't have much time. I was winning. I upped the bets to \$25 and immediately got hands that allowed me to split my cards and double my bets, magnifying my winnings.

In a few quick hands I had made up the losses of the week and doubled the original money.

Australia

I repeated the trick in a casino in Australia on another business trip. This time there was only one night available to visit the casino, but, after hearing the story above, a few friends added their money to my gambling pocket.

Just as before, I spent most of the night slowly losing the money at Blackjack. It was getting late and time to go back to the hotel so I headed out. As I was leaving I was aware I had a little bit of gambling money left, and I was walking by a roulette table, and, I had promised to lose it all, or double it.

I put all the remaining money on a single roulette number. It won, paying 35-1, which, you guessed it, exactly doubled my original stake.

I enjoyed paying off the friends who had invested in me.

Aruba

Mary and I got married on August 16, 1991, and went on our honeymoon to Aruba. They have casinos there.

We had a plan. We would go to the casino in the downtown area and play Blackjack until we'd won \$100. If we won that \$100, we would take it to the roulette table and put it on number 16. If it won, that would earn us \$3,500, paying for the entire honeymoon.

So we went downtown and started playing Blackjack. It was going according to plan, and we were gradually

accumulating winnings. Mary got bored though and went to a roulette table and placed a not very big bet on a square of four numbers that included 16.

It came up 16, she was thrilled and she came back with her winnings. I said, “oh no, you used up our 16!” But those winnings helped us get closer to our \$100 goal and after some more time at Blackjack we had made \$100. We left the casino and didn’t even try to play 16 at the roulette table, thinking we’d already gotten our win from that number.

We took a taxi back to our hotel, which wasn’t downtown. It also had a small casino in it, but it was empty. And it was dark, though it was open. There was a roulette table with a croupier standing by it.

It all had a surreal movie feel to it, a darkened empty casino, a roulette table and the two of us with our \$100—and our plan. But \$100 was worth more back then, and we’d had our 16, but still, should we play it, it was the plan, or just hold it... We were thrashing and the croupier waited for us.

We decided to keep our \$100, and he spun the wheel though there were no bettors. We watched the ball bounce around and as the wheel slowed, it popped here, then there and then...

Yes, you know where it landed. On 16.

A Cruise

Around 2018 Nancy and I went on a cruise, and it had a casino. We decided to play Blackjack for a while. I had a book that told the optimum plays, so I memorized them and we headed for a table. Now, understand that these stories describe the majority of my casino gambling experiences and I don’t really know what I’m doing. We were about to get an education.

We sat at a Blackjack table and I was making the recommended bets and we were gradually winning. Then I got a pair of jacks.

I was sure the book said that I should split my jacks (it didn’t), so I did. You don’t have to know what that is, just that splitting a pair is an option for the player. I was taking that option with my jacks.

The dealer, and the others at the table, all said I shouldn't split my jacks. Well that was very helpful, but I said I'd read that was the best play and wanted to make it. They got stronger in their opinion, saying I was wrong and I should never split jacks. I didn't like being pushed, and it was my game and I split my jacks. What should they care?

That changed the whole vibe of the table.

Two of the four other players got up and just stood over it, watching and grumbling about how stupid I was and how I'd ruined the table with my dumb play. They were pissed.

It turns out they, and many players, believe there's a whole flow to a dealer's shoe full of cards and that everyone's destiny at the table is set, but only if everyone plays the optimal rules. By making a wrong play, I had put a bad juju on the whole flow of the cards.

Thinking they were assholes, we carried on, but, wow, did our luck change. We lost every single hand after that, and very quickly ran out of the money we'd allocated for gambling.

Being a bit pissed ourselves, we went to the floor manager of the casino. We complained about the behavior of the other players. She listened sympathetically and then asked us what we'd done.

I said I'd split my jacks.

She winced and shook her head and said "that's pretty bad."

Lesson learned, but on leaving we still had one \$10 chip and were passing a roulette table. I asked Nancy if she wanted to play it on 2, our number. Why not.

It hit and we made \$350.

ADVENTURE ADVENTURE

1970s - 2010s



Bouldering on the Great Wall of China

*Willie and Patty Crowther's cave maps from the 1970s led to the first **Adventure** computer game and to my career building AI applications in the 1990s and 2000s (and a trip to China).*

Cave Exploration, the Reality (late 1960s to early 1970s)

I was an active rock climber in the late 1960s and 1970s, and I spent a lot of time at the Gunks, a popular upstate New York climbing area. Also active at the time were the Crowthers, Willie and Patty. Willie was a more experienced climber than I was and took me up my first 5.8 at the Gunks, a grade that was considered hard at the time. It was a big boost for me and gave me the confidence to continue to grow as a climber, but that's not this story, however it is another debt that I owe to Willie.

This story is about caving. The Crowthers were also cavers and were particularly active in the caves under the Flint Ridge in Kentucky. Mammoth Cave and Flint Cave were both there and were both long, complex caves, with hundreds of miles of networked rooms and passages. They were ranked as the second and third longest caves in the World.

Might there be an unexplored passage that connected them? If so, whoever discovered it would have discovered the World's single longest, most complex, cave. The Crowthers were hooked.

Since they were both talented computer scientists with access to the machines of the day (before personal computers) they used their skills to create detailed computer maps to model the cave systems. With these, they were able to not only document the cave systems, but to see where they were closest and a connection most likely to be found.

It worked!

In 1972 Patty discovered and crawled through a narrow passage and connected the caves. This made her a very famous caver indeed.

Cave Exploration, the Game (~1976)

Meanwhile, back at the Gunks, Patty and Willie ran into marital difficulties and eventually wound up getting a divorce.

This meant that, when Willie had visitation with their two kids, he needed to think of fun things to do. He decided to take the computer models of the caves and turn them into a game where the kids could explore the cave systems going

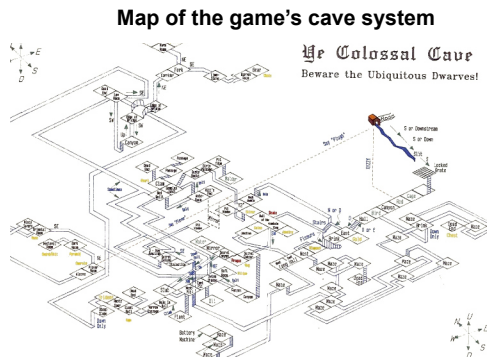
from room to room, with wondrous descriptions of all there was to see.

Now this was the 1970s, and there were no personal computers, or graphics screens. It was all done with the player giving commands in English, and the computer responding with text descriptions of the environments. For example, as you entered one of the rooms you got this message:

You are in a magnificent cavern with a rushing stream, which cascades over a sparkling waterfall into a roaring whirlpool which disappears through a hole in the floor. Passages exit to the south and west.

The player might then type “go south” or “go west” and then be given another message describing where that led.

The game included accurate descriptions of actual rooms and passages of the Flint Ridge Cave System. It was quite large and complex, as was the real cave system. Playing was not a simple afternoon’s exploration.



Adventure, the Game (~1976)

Willie shared the game with Don Woods, who was big into the *Lord of the Rings* books at the time. Willie’s version had some puzzles and whimsy, like the classic bird and snake puzzle, but Don thought it could use more.

And so he added all sorts of stuff to the game. The cave became full of, well, adventure, such as a fire breathing dragon, maddening mazes of twisty passages, and ax

throwing dwarves. These were central to clever puzzles, and the key was often the things lying about. You could “take” them and they would be with you as you moved through the game.

For example, in one room you would see:

There is a small wicker cage discarded nearby.

You could then type “take cage” and it would be with you, and useful for catching the bird you needed when you got to the room where:

A huge green fierce snake bars the way!

(Spoiler alert, the bird can drive the snake away.)

And there were prizes about, gold and other gems, and they were worth points, and the game had a goal, to collect all the points scattered about and protected by puzzles.

This was the very first interactive exploration computer game. They called it Adventure.

You might notice that this is the same basic architecture of a host of computer games that followed. This particular genre, of text-based adventure games, was called “interactive fiction,” but it’s the same basic idea used in the Mario Bros. games and Zelda, and still today in Fortnite and the like.

That basic architecture of a player exploring a computer simulated environment, collecting the things that are there, using them to solve puzzles, and reach some goal is no different today than it was when Willie and Don released that first Adventure into the wilds of academic computer centers.

Adventure Infects Draper Labs (~1977)

Willie worked at Lincoln Labs, which is one of the M.I.T. associated research labs around Boston, and I worked at the M.I.T. Instrumentation Lab (later called Draper Labs) also one of those research labs.

It’s no surprise that one day, one of those large tapes you see spinning in old movies about computers, showed up in our computer group, and was quickly installed on the main frame computer for all to play.



**Mainframe computer tape drives,
and in front, a disk drive.**

At the time, most jobs were still run using decks of punch card input and printed green bar fan-folded output. But there were also terminals scattered about that allowed interactive use of that one main computer. It was on these that one could play Adventure.

Many of us did.

My Addiction

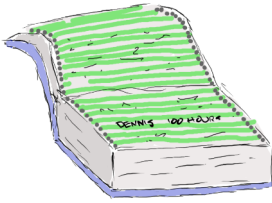
Adventure was the first, totally addictive, computer game, and I was one of the earliest addicts. I had to keep exploring just a little further, trying one more way to slay the dragon, escape the maze, or find the plovers egg.

I was fascinated with it, both as a player and as a programmer. Willie had modeled a whole world in software and opened it to exploration. There had never been anything like it before.

Playing at work wasn't enough. The Lab also had portable terminals that you could bring home and connect to the main frame using a modem and a phone. So I did, and just as Willie had played the game with his kids, I would spend evenings and weekends playing the game with my son.

We spent hours playing, puzzling, thinking and drawing and expanding our map of the cave. We must have had a dozen sheets of paper taped together by the time we were done.

Then something scary happened at work. It was time for my performance review, and all I'd been doing at work was playing Adventure. I went into my boss's office. He opened up a large folder of green bar computer output, scanned through it, and found my name.



He said "You've been spending a lot of time on the computer, and even working evenings and weekends.

That's what I like to see in my programmers." He gave me the maximum raise.

My First Personal Computer, (~1984)

We'd found all the points, explored the entire cave and moved on to other things. My career was changing as well, and, with an idea that I might one day have my own software company, I had moved from aerospace to commercial software.

I was working for Cullinet, the first software company listed on the New York Stock Exchange (and the first to advertise in a Super Bowl), around 1984 when they decided to expand their traditional, main frame computer software, into the emerging IBM desktop personal computer (PC) market. As part of that effort they made PCs available to the employees for their home use.

I jumped at the opportunity.

My first thought was Adventure, the software which had so fascinated me seven years earlier. Now, having my own machine, I was ready to start writing code and creating my own software worlds.

There were challenges. Given what we have today, it might be hard to imagine how unimaginative software was back then. It was called "data processing," and that's exactly what it was. Programs were procedures that processed data. A program's execution was carefully choreographed using "procedural" programming languages.

This was fine for calculating payroll, or plotting a trajectory to the moon, but not for creating an artificial world like Adventure's. The problem was the programmer didn't

control the game, the player did. Who knew where the player might go? What the player might do?

This meant the software had to store the knowledge of the game separate from the control part that monitored the player. That control component would query the knowledge at each move, taking just what was needed at the time.

This was the challenge, to implement that encyclopedia of the game's world using a procedural programming language ill-suited to the task. It required the development of higher level tools that could be used to specify the rooms, connections and puzzles, as well as the changing state of the game, all in some non-procedural way.

I immediately set to work using the C programming language and was designing ways to represent this and that when...

The Magic of Prolog

This next bit should really be in the Magic part of the book. I never went to lectures on anything really, let alone computers. I wasn't a member of the Boston Computer Society (BCS). And yet, someone asked me if I wanted to go to the BCS meeting that night and hear a lecture on this new programming language, Prolog. I said OK.

Prolog was not like any of the normal step-by-step programming languages. It was an entirely different way to write software, based on logic. Its name came from PROgramming in LOGic.

The programmer didn't specify sequences of instructions, but rather made logical assertions, in no particular order, which could then be queried. Based on the situation, Prolog would determine which logical assertions applied. It was a very, very different way of programming and required a different way of thinking about software.

But do you see? It had everything in it that I was in the process of trying to create. Logical assertions could be used to represent everything, and Prolog would (almost) automatically pick the right ones for any given situation.

I was blown away.

I immediately got hold of an implementation of Prolog and started using it to develop my own game.

Nani Search

I quickly had everything I needed to create an adventure game. One problem. I really didn't have the imagination to create a fantasy environment. I had all the software tools, and had laid out the framework for a game, but no game idea.

So rather than try to create one from my imagination, I decided to write a simple one based on a real life quest. That was my young daughter's hunt for her lost security blanket, her Nani. I called it Nani Search.

Want to see how perfect Prolog is for an exploration game? Here's some of the actual Prolog code I typed to create Nani Search. These statements model some of the rooms, connections and food lying about.

```
room(office).
room(kitchen).
room(cellar).

door(kitchen, cellar).
door(kitchen, office).

location(apple, kitchen).
location(broccoli, kitchen).
location(cookie, office).
```

Here are some facts I wrote about food in the game world, and rules about what happens when you try to eat various things.

```
tastes_good(apple).
tastes_good(cookie).

tastes_yuchy(broccoli).

eat(X):-
    tastes_good(X),
    write("That "), write(X), write(" was good.").
eat(X):-
    tastes_yuchy(X),
    write("Three year olds don't eat "), write(X).
```


And how do you ask Prolog about eating something? Just like this:

```
?- eat(broccoli).  
Three year olds don't eat broccoli.
```

```
?- eat(cookie).  
That cookie was good.
```

How easy can it get? Want to add fanciful descriptions? more things? more actions? more complexity? whimsy? It's easy, just type in the logic using correct Prolog syntax, and it's ready to play.

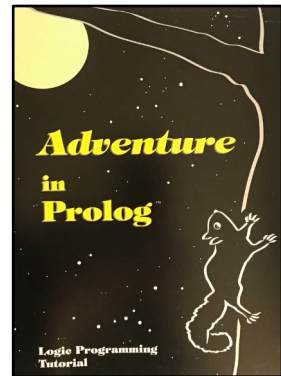
Prolog, right out of the box, had the expressiveness to model a game environment, and a search engine that understood how to use it. It's how you programmed in Prolog.

Yet, many programmers just didn't get it. And there was really only one, rather academic text on Prolog. So I decided to write a book.

Adventure in Prolog

Nani Search was perfect for teaching Prolog so I wrote a tutorial using it to showcase everything you could do with Prolog. I called it *Adventure in Prolog*. It went through many iterations and was, and still is, used all over the World for learning Prolog.

The book brought me a bit of fame in the relatively small world of logic programming.



Artificial Intelligence

While I was playing games, more serious academic types were working in the emerging field of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Yes, the promise of AI was big in the 1980s. Unlike today's machine learning AI, the AI of the day required programmers to hand code the knowledge in the system, usually in the form of rules. It was called "knowledge engineering."

One class of AI application was called Expert Systems because they attempted to replicate the knowledge, the rules, of experts for problems such as diagnosis, configuration or identification.

Why were these systems called AI? Because, as mentioned above, computer programs of the day ran in a linear fashion. But that's not how the human mind works. Instead, we have all this knowledge in our heads and, depending on what's going on at the time, call up just what's needed.

That's what was so new and exciting about both Adventure and AI. They work more like the human mind. The knowledge just sits there, waiting for the search engine of the game or expert system to ask for some tidbit of wisdom.

Prolog was perfect for this which led me to write another book, also still used today, called *Expert Systems in Prolog*.

Amzi! inc 1990-2010

The books led to consulting work and an opportunity to acquire a version of Prolog and start our own Prolog company, Amzi! inc. Thanks to my two books we got a fair amount of business building expert systems and other knowledge based systems.

Ross Perot's company, EDS, contacted me because they were using Prolog to write the flight planning software for Orbitz. They had used *Adventure in Prolog* to learn and wanted me to teach and consult. Imagine, if you use Orbitz, that that software was written by someone who learned by exploring my daughter's world, searching for her Nani.

They sold the software to a company in China, which got me teaching there and led to an adventure exploring the wild, non-tourist, parts of the Great Wall. (photo at front of story)

The U.S. Government contacted us to develop an online (in 1995) breast cancer decision support system to help women navigate through the options of that disease. We got a Smithsonian award for that and the Washington Post said it was the only application worth anything on the Internet at the time.

Among other fun Prolog projects, we were the first to:

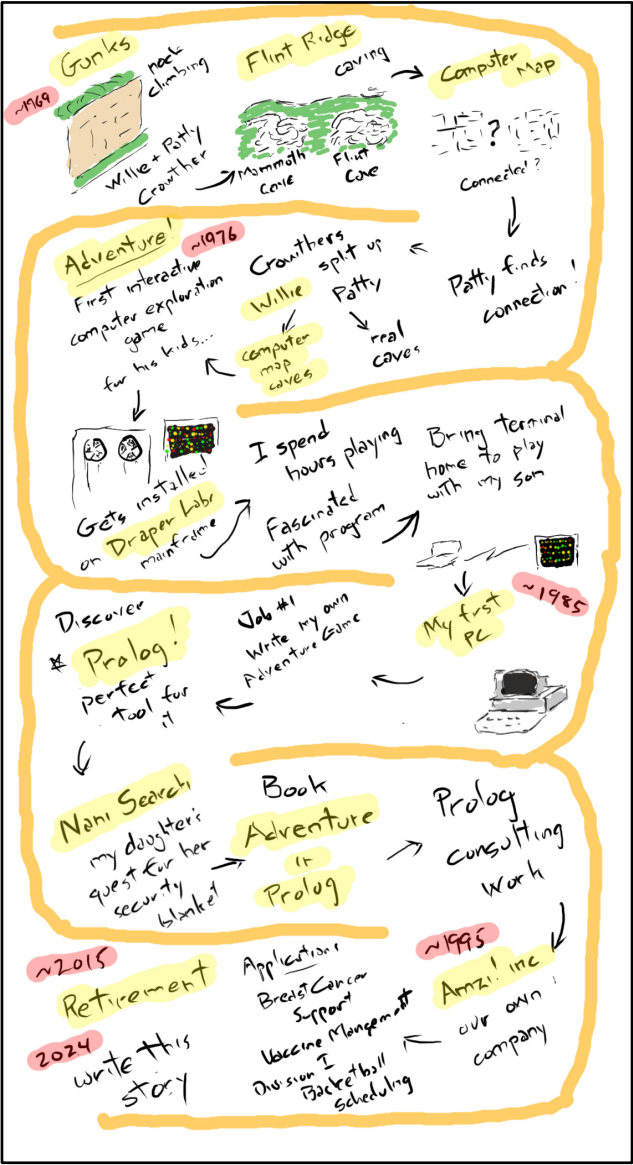
- schedule Division I college basketball (a tricky problem);
- provide complete pediatric vaccination analysis; and
- unscramble a Rubik's cube.

All of these were based on the same basic Prolog programming techniques I developed playing with that first Adventure game.

Retirement 2015

The work didn't make us rich, but it was fun and did well enough that we didn't have to get real jobs.

Had it not been for Willie's creative invention of Adventure, my professional life might have been very different, and probably no where near as much fun. Thank you Willie.



WRITING WELL

1970s - Now

A personal journey from reading about database to writing about jazz on a baritone ukulele.

If you were involved with computers in the 1970s you would be impressed with the name James Martin. He was big then, but fame is so fleeting, even programmers today don't know of him. However, then, he used to get \$20,000/day consulting for large companies on software strategies, and was a prolific writer on all things computer. He supposedly made more money selling text books than any other text book author.

I was the kid good at math and hated English. This led to a programming career in my 20s, working in aerospace. When I was around 30 I decided to leave aerospace and work in the commercial sector, for a company selling mainframe database software. (Late 1970s.)

I didn't know anything about database technology, so I bought James Martin's book on database. A large book. I was ready for a slog, but instead, it was like reading a best selling novel. Database knowledge just seemed to osmose into my brain. I was amazed, how did he do that?

That book got me interested in the challenge of writing about technical things. I saw a similarity between trying to logically structure software code to solve a problem, and trying to logically structure sentences and paragraphs to explain a topic. I started to dabble in articles for trade magazines and the like, all about a software niche, Prolog, I was doing as hobby.

Age 40 – time for a midlife crisis, I had abandoned the commercial software companies and had decided to make it on my own. It wasn't going well. I was almost out of money

and ready to crawl back to the commercial world when my son got rear-ended in my car (nobody hurt). It was surgically precise damage that caused the insurance company to write the car off as totaled and send me a check, but that left the car still usable after banging out the back. I had money to live on for one more month.

Then, just as that money was running out, came the too coincidental to be a coincidence part. A fellow I'd known back in my aerospace days who I hadn't been in touch with for at least ten years noticed I was doing some writing. He called me up and asked if I wanted to work for James Martin. It turns out James Martin had spun off a bunch of other writing products and needed writers for them.

There I was then, doing contract work for the writer who inspired me to start writing in the first place. I was writing in-depth product reviews for the *James Martin Report* and ghost writing his magazine column in *Computer World*.

It was all about the illustrations

He told me that there was a direct correlation between the number of diagrams in a text book and the sales of that book. It wasn't just that he had illustrations, it was that they were how the book was written.

(I've always been fascinated by how writer's creative styles affect their work, like Wodehouse used to make three story lines on pieces of paper tacked around the walls of his cabin and then look for ways to have them intersect, and if you read his books, well yes that's exactly what happens.

(Elmore Leonard came up with characters first and then put them in situations to see what they'd do. This instead of having a plot, and in his books the characters are memorable but you never remember the plots.)

James Martin had a bunch of folding tables in a big room in his large house in Vermont. (He had bought it from Larry Bird's Celtic teammate, Kevin McHale, who had designed it for a tall person, as James Martin was.) He drew diagrams, charts, pictures on pieces of paper and laid them out and organized them on these tables. If anything wasn't clear, he'd add more pictures.

(Hmmm, I bet the large spread out physical work space let him work with the big picture a lot more easily than someone sitting in front of a computer screen, double hmmm, I bet that explains Wodehouse's ability as well...)

(Triple hmmm, total digression, these are thoughts just popping into my head, not part of what I was trying to say, but Wodehouse has been called the best writer of English language fiction, and James Martin has been called the best writer (he's English as well) of English language textbooks, and both used large scale spaces to lay out their works before setting pen to paper.)

Then Lillian, his red-haired girl friend who used to be married to someone who worked for the Shah of Iran and was kicked out in the revolution, would computerize his drawings, and then he would write the words that glued it all together.

I went back and looked at some of his books. There was rarely a page without some chart or diagram on it.

When he told us how he wanted the articles in the report written, he had a series of basic diagrams that he wanted us to fill in for the particular technology we were covering. These diagrams had differing relationships of visual elements that would illustrate the layers and connections between elements of a technology.

and the structure

He also had an overview architecture that we followed that solved the problem of how to talk about interconnected bits of technology and drill down on one bit without fully explaining the other. It added two steps to the classic, tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them structure.

The technology document sections were:

1. abstract, a paragraph,
2. executive overview, a one page discussion of the technology,
3. overview, three-five pages describing all the components of the system and how they related, and only then,

4. a 30-50 page detailed dive into the technology, including examples of use worked out, and
5. a summary.

That detailed overview made it possible to write the deeper details referencing bits of the technology that had not yet been covered in depth. Did that make sense?. So if A is related to B, then because the relationship is laid out in the beginning, the in-depth analysis of A can refer to B before B has been described in detail. And of course there were diagrams that had A and B visually related.

My Ukulele Book

At around 70, retired mostly from software, and trying to learn about music, I discovered the Baritone Ukulele and started playing with jazz chords.

There really wasn't much on jazz for that instrument, and nobody clearly illustrated the connection between the theory of jazz chords and the geometric puzzle of mapping them to the fret board. Just the sort of thing my computer science brain enjoyed, so I decided to write a book.

Jazz Chords for Baritone Ukulele.

The book has lots of diagrams that tell the story and mostly they came first, just as for James Martin. This page illustrates the beautiful cascading chords and harmony of *Fly Me to the Moon*.

I did care about the words as well and went over them many times. At a parent-teacher function my son's English teacher once noted that there's no such thing as good writing, only good re-writing.

Jazz Chords for Baritone Ukulele

Our cascading chord progression lines up perfectly with the melody, as its notes also cascade down in perfect harmony with the chords.



Map of melody notes in Circle of Fourths

We generated the chord progression by moving the root back and forth between the third and fourth strings. That means the chords alternate between a 1 5 7 3 inversion and a 5 1 3 7 inversion.

Stacking them we see the roots and melody move in perfect harmony.

Root	Melody
A 1 5 7 3	Fly
D 5 1 3 7	moon
G 1 5 7 3	play
C 5 1 3 7	stars
F 1 5 7 3	Let
B 5 1 3 7	spring
E 1 5 7 3	Jupiter
A 5 1 3 7	Mars

Parallel cascading chords and melody

Having said all that, when it comes to actually playing the progression, I find the first Am7 on the seventh fret a bit awkward and really enjoy starting with the Am (or Am7) at the nut instead. It can be dramatically slid up to the Dm7 on the sixth fret (it's the same basic shape), and from there the shapes cascade back to that same chord.

55

JUAN'S SOLDIERS

2006, Asheville

My grandson, Juan, was visiting and maybe about 7 or 8 at the time. We had bags of those small plastic soldiers and he had been playing with them for a while and had laid out some large military formation. He came to me and said, "Grandpa, I need more guys."

My first instinct was to say: "Juan, you've got a zillion guys, you don't need any more." Instead, I decided to ask him why he thought he needed more.

It turned out he wasn't just messing about. He had a full military campaign in mind and proceeded to explain to me, in great detail, the forces he had aligned, how they interacted, the battles that were to ensue, the different divisions of the scene, and, most important, the lack of forces needed for a key part of the campaign.

We went out and got more guys.



Another battle

WHAT WOULD DIEGO DO?

2004, Norfolk

Just spent a week in Norfolk helping Michael with the boys while Ana was visiting her sister in Bolivia. Michael had an interesting book on birth order which I read bits and pieces of, which basically indicated that later borns tend to rebel.

I was reading the boys a nighttime story, the old Uncle Remus stories that you can't get anymore because they're racist except I'm not sure about that, and Michael had found a copy at a used book store Web site.

Being first born I had a goal of finishing the story. Diego kept interrupting, wanting to do this or that. I wanted to push on with the story. And Juan did too. The first borns pursuing a goal, the latter born advocating anarchy, chaos, and fun.

The boys were both in Juan's bed. Post-story, rather than going to sleep they were fooling around, but we'd already had to deal with tired kids who had been up too late the night before, so I went up to quiet them.

I told them they had a choice, either be quiet, or I would separate them into different rooms. Diego wasn't buying it. Juan, the first born, understood and explained the rules to Diego. I made it clear those were the choices for Diego.

Diego simply responded, "But I just want to play." He rejected the options I gave him, he rejected the authority, he rejected the rules of behavior.

He simply had a different way of looking at things and wanted to follow his heart.

GOLD BRAHMIN

2005, Texas

My professional career was built around a niche programming language called Prolog that was very good for certain sorts of applications. Ross Perot's company, EDS, hired me a number of times to teach classes on Prolog, which they were using to write the flight searching software for Orbitz.

One time I wound up teaching the class in a small Holiday Inn Express, almost an hour's drive outside of Houston, Texas. Why there? Well that's a story as well. EDS wanted the course to be taught near Miami, where the work was being done, but a hurricane was threatening and at the last minute they decided to move the course to their Houston offices.

But there was a problem. Hurricane season is also World Series season, and Houston, for the first time, had made it to the World Series. There wasn't an available hotel anywhere in or near the city.

While it was a perfectly fine, low cost hotel, the other guests had a different back story. They were families actually living there. They were people from New Orleans who had been displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

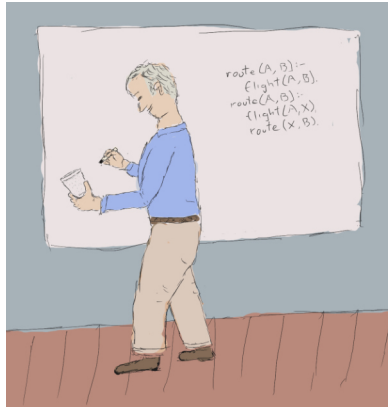
So there we were, discussing logic programming in a cheap hotel meeting room way out on the Texas plains amongst bored and curious children at some strange nexus of global forces—a current hurricane, a past hurricane, and the World Series.

For the class, EDS wanted me to teach 15 or so international contractors they had hired to do the work. Most of the students were from Brazil and were a raucous bunch. They took great pleasure in English words that somehow

sounded like off-color things in Portuguese. “Sea food” was, for some reason, very funny to them.

Also in the class was one quiet young man from India. He told me he was a Gold Brahmin, the top of the Indian caste system. This is the caste of spiritual leaders among other things. How interesting culture is, how what’s important in one is meaningless in another. Hmmmm.

Anyway I had given a programming challenge to the class and promised a prize to whoever solved it first. Well that young man from India got it first.



I took a styrofoam coffee cup and used a white board marker to write “Prolog Trophy” on it. To me, while there was humor in it, I actually meant it as a token honoring his accomplishment. As I gave it to him I told him it was special.

He looked up at me and said “I know.”

I cherish the small connections, like that one, a moment of understanding. I always wondered how long he kept the cup. I like to imagine it sat on his desk for a number of years into his promising programming career.



FLYING INTO NATIONAL

1980, Washington DC

I got a pilot's license a while back and decided to use it to fly myself and a co-worker from Boston to a conference in Washington DC. That meant landing at Washington's National Airport, which, then, as now, had a reputation for being a very busy and complex airport.

Let me tell you about my skill as a pilot. I was pretty good at take offs and landings, and could handle cross winds and put the plane down where I wanted. But I didn't have much experience navigating in controlled airspace, with changing radio frequencies, towers, controls, headings to fly, etc. etc.

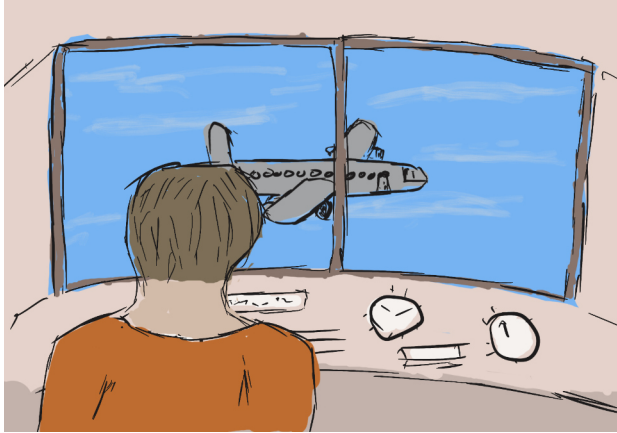
So there we were, in a small plane, flying into National, the busiest airport I'd ever flown into, and requiring strict compliance with Air Traffic Control (ATC) whose job is to ensure the safe passage of all planes in and about our capital and the airport. As we entered the airspace I radioed ATC, as required.

They asked what my heading direction was. I told them. I got it wrong. They had me on their radar and immediately saw my error and deduced I was a total novice they'd have to walk all the way in.

They were incredibly professional, giving me headings to fly and altitudes to fly at, directing me in through the complexities of that airspace, avoiding flying over places like the White House and the Pentagon, as well as staying clear of other planes, and taking me in closer and closer to the airport itself.

We were within sight of the runway and about to get in line for our final approach to landing. ATC was with us all the way. They said "do you see that 737 in front of you?"

Now let me tell you about ATC letting you know about traffic. Usually they say there's a plane at, say 11:00, and you look and strain and way off in the distance is a tiny dot which is the plane they're telling you about.



"Do you see that 737 in front of you?"

Not this time. That 737 took up at least a third of my wind screen as it crossed in front of us on its final approach to the runway. I said "yes." And they said, "Follow it in." Then they added, "and don't slow down, there's another one right behind you."

So I'm screaming into that runway, way faster than normal for my small plane, and it's a long runway and the taxi way I'm supposed to turn onto is quite a ways further down, so I didn't land the plane and taxi like I was taught. I was thinking of that 737 behind me, and I kept flying 10 feet off the runway to just before my turn, put the plane down and got the hell out of the way.

Whew. Those ATC folks were amazing. They took us right in, through all that traffic, through all those restricted air spaces, and landed us right in between the heavies while keeping everything going safe and smooth. Hats off to ATC, with a little kudo to me for getting off the runway so fast.

THE INTERVIEW

1981, Cambridge

Back in the 1980s I started working for the Computer Corporation of America (CCA). It was a grandiose name for a relatively small company of around thirty people in Cambridge Mass. These were some of the biggest brains I've ever worked with and did some amazing work under contract to the Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA).

They were involved in the creation of ARPANET which was the precursor to the Internet. They developed one of the first electronic mail systems. And, the project I was hired to work on, Model 204, was a database created in the 1970s that provided query capabilities to the massive amounts of surveillance data being collected by the National Security Agency (NSA). At the time, few people even knew NSA existed.

There was a popular spy novel written in the 1970s which was one of the first to even mention the existence of the NSA. In it, with a science fiction sort of flare, the book had NSA operatives using the then unheard of ability to ask English like questions of the massive NSA computers, learning about various evil-doer's whereabouts and the like. It wasn't science fiction. It was Model 204.

By the 1980s software was just becoming something that could be sold, and CCA wanted to get in on it. They took two of their projects and turned them into commercial products. This was software running on the large corporate mainframe computers of the day and costing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

It was a long sales cycle and took dedicated salespeople to get paying customers.

One product was COMET, the first electronic mail system that could be used for inter-office communication. CCA, itself, of course, was one of the first users of electronic mail and that could be a whole other story.

Flame wars erupted about company issues like whether there should be soda machines in the break room, or parking should be paid for. (Why should drivers be subsidized when those taking the subway weren't?) Normally mild individuals, sitting quietly at their desks, were typing vitriol and hurling insults they would never say in person. These were people who had worked together for years, just up and down the hall from each other. Amazing.

The other product was Model 204 as the market for commercial mainframe databases was beginning to grow. I was doing tech support for this new venture. I had originally been hired to do development, but, wow, I was in over my head with these people. That's another story, although here's a clue. I was an average sort of player of the Asian strategic game, Go, at the Massachusetts Go club. The key developer of Model 204, on the other hand, was one of the strongest Go players in America.

So I wound up doing tech support which meant getting some idea of how the initial customers were using the system.

Now, the Model 204 group wanted to expand its sales to the West Coast and was looking to hire someone to open an office in California. We were flying people in to interview for that job.

Normally the head of the Model 204 group, or its one sales person, would take an interviewee around, but both were out of town when this one fellow from San Francisco showed up. I was given the job of shepherding him around to the various people who would interview him for the job.

You might guess that CCA was heavy on technical talent, but pretty naive when it came to things like sales and marketing. That would be correct.

We thought we needed some help with the interview, and there was a newly hired VP of sales, Bob Roda, in the COMET group who agreed to be one of the people interviewing this guy.

After all the interviews, it was then my job to go around and see what people thought. I knew as much about what it

would take to open a sales office as the other technical people. We just kind of had vague sorts of impressions and kind of sort of liked this or didn't like that, but, really, we didn't know what we were doing.

Then I went in to see what Bob Roda thought. Now he was a relatively new hire, and hired because he did know about sales and business.

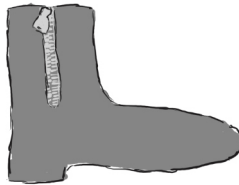
Bob began to give me his impression of the guy. He was able to detail the various strengths a sales person should have, and how on each of those points this guy would rank, whether he'd be good at growing a territory, or closing sales, or prospecting, or... After that he then said, it depends on whether you want this guy to sell, or to create an office and grow it. For that you need different skills and here's how he would stack up for that.

Bob had this guy totally dissected and laid out on his mental spreadsheet. His opinion, after analyzing all that, was this guy wouldn't be a good fit and probably wouldn't be able to do what we needed in California.

I was blown away. I had never heard anyone so meticulously break down and analyze a person and a job. I didn't know Bob, I realized I was way over my head, and, as I tend to do, I tried to use humor to cover my discomfort.

I told him I agreed with him but my reason was I didn't like those trendy zip-up-the-side, dress boots he was wearing.

Bob Roda just stared at me, then cracked up laughing and when he stopped said, oh yes, that was it for me too.



**Stylish, at the time,
zippered boot/shoe**

Epilog — Bob was promoted to head Model 204 sales as well as COMET and sent me out to California to open that office.

WHAT IF HE COULD SHOOT THE MOON

2010, Norfolk, Virginia

When I was growing up my parents and I would often play the card game Hearts. Those were fun times for our small family. It's no surprise then that, as a grandparent, I'd get our larger family around the table to play Hearts. Any combination of my son, daughter, spouses and three grand children might be playing.

Do you know how to play Hearts? It's a trick taking game where, unlike most such games, you don't want to take tricks. For each trick you take with a heart in it you get one bad point. If you take a trick with the queen of spades, you get 13 bad points. So you want to avoid taking those tricks.

This means that you try to play your cards so you dump hearts and/or the dreaded queen on the other players whenever you can. It's kind of a nasty game that way, with each player trying to figure out how to give bad points to the opponents.

But what if you could capture all thirteen hearts and the queen of spades? Then, instead of getting 26 bad points, you would get 26 good points. That's called Shooting the Moon. Do you see the emotional roller coaster this can create? Everyone gleefully dumping hearts and/or the queen on one hapless player and then, gradually realizing that that player is Shooting the Moon and all those bad points will become good points.

Well, it takes a good hand and skill at cards to be able to Shoot the Moon. It turns out my dad had that skill at cards. When he was in the Navy in the Pacific during WW II he made a lot of money in the ship's card games. (But then, he said, he lost it all in the dice games.)

So when he'd play Hearts with my mom and me, he would often Shoot the Moon. He did it so often my mother and I would each deliberately take heart tricks early on to try to stop him.

Fast forward to a family game, with me the grandpa, various adults and the three grand boys. The youngest was Miguel, at the time barely old enough to hold and play the cards. He had no real idea of the rules or purpose of the game, but enjoyed putting cards on the table as the whole family played.

I was sitting between Miguel and his father, my son, Michael. I asked Michael if he thought I should help Miguel. He said he thought it best to just let Miguel play whatever cards he felt like and consider him a sort of random factor wild card in the game.

I agreed that was a good and fun plan, except, while helping him organize his hand I'd seen his cards. I slipped a note to Michael (so the others wouldn't see) saying: "But what if he could Shoot the Moon?"

Ignoring Michael's advice, I started showing Miguel which cards to play and when. Sure enough he won the queen of spades and was well on his way to collecting all the hearts. There was nothing any of the other players could do to stop him. It got down to the last two tricks and he, with my guidance, was only one heart away from Shooting the Moon.

It was then that I realized I'm not my father. I'd miscalculated. There was no way for Miguel to get that last heart. Why? Because I had left myself in a position where I had no choice other than to be the one to take that last heart trick.

So instead of 26 good points, Miguel got 25 bad points (and I got one). Well Miguel didn't really care, he just enjoyed playing, but Michael laughed and noted that I was the worst grandpa ever.

BREAST CANCER

1995, Ohio

AI

First, a little background on Artificial Intelligence (AI), then and now. Today there are amazing things happening every day with AI. So what is AI software?

AI software has two parts. One is an encoding of the knowledge the software is supposed to be “intelligent” about. The other is a means to query that knowledge with specific questions.

Why was AI hard? While computers are very good at representing data and procedures, knowledge is fuzzier and encoding it has been a difficult research problem since Alan Turing, one of the founders of computer science, pondered it in the 1940s.

Today’s AIs are amazing because the problem of representing knowledge has been solved with massive software simulations of the neural networks of a human brain. What’s more, these neural networks can “learn” without the need of humans to encode the knowledge. Wow. Scary.

But AI was real back in the day as well. In the mid 1980s it came out of academic research laboratories with a variety of techniques and tools developers could use to hand craft knowledge into software applications.

We created our small company, Amzi!, based on those developments, providing tools and services for building knowledge-based, that is AI, applications. Not to brag too much, but I used our tools to create what was maybe the first program that could solve Rubik’s Cube, crafting into code the knowledge of speed cubers. (Sigh, the new AI made my skills obsolete, but I have since retired, so all is good.)

In the mid-1990s the Internet was emerging, and to capitalize on that, we developed a tool for programmers to use creating online knowledge-based applications. We called it WebLS (Web Logic Server) and offered it for sale for \$99 and thought we would get rich. We advertised in all the magazines programmers read.

We waited for the inquiries and sales to start pouring in. But we only got one. Just one. From a colonel in the Army, Dr. Fred Hegge, who was in charge of breast cancer research during the Clinton years. (That, in itself is an interesting story about politics and research, why the Army? but I won't stray too far from the main point.)

Breast Cancer

In those days breast cancer was fatal about 50% of the time. And the nature of the disease was such that someone recently diagnosed had to make life or death decisions about treatment with little understanding of the options and how they applied to her particular case. For example, just remove the lump? lumpectomy, or the whole breast? mastectomy.

Fred's idea was to hire us to use our new tool to create a Web site that women who were diagnosed with breast cancer could use to better understand their options. It would filter through the maze of knowledge available and just focus on what was pertinent for their particular diagnosis, such as the size of the tumor.

How was the knowledge encoded? Sort of like this, in rules. Here's a simplified example:

```
If lump size > 4 cm then mastectomy.  
If lump size < 2 cm then lumpectomy.
```

The patient entered what she knew of her diagnosis, such as lump size, into the system, and it would find the pertinent bits of knowledge and produce a customized report explaining what she needed to know.

The system was a huge success, and thousands of women used it to guide them through the complexities of cancer treatment. It got us an award from the Smithsonian and an

article in the Washington Post that said it was the only application worth anything on the Internet. (That was 1995.)

But that's not what this story is about.

Psychology

In our research for the system we got to talk to the cancer practitioners at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Breast cancer treatment involved seven types of doctor, including oncologists, radiologists, and surgeons. The last of the seven was a psychologist.

There we were, awash in all this medical technology, and here's what the psychologist said. He said that, in his experience, women with breast cancer typically fit one particular psychological profile. They were women who had given up their own lives in the nurturing support of others. Maybe their husbands, maybe their children, but they had sacrificed themselves for others.

He said that those women who were able to change, survived. Those that didn't, died.

We asked him if he told the women this? He said no, no-one wants to hear that, but instead he would try to steer women in a healthy direction. (Regrettably it wasn't in our system either.)

Rock Climbing

Fast forward a decade or so and I'm at a rock climbing area hanging out with some climbers, one of whom I had just met. I was sitting with him at the base of a climb waiting our turn and we got to talking.

I'd asked what he did and it turns out he was a cancer research doctor, working at Duke University. He proceeded to tell me, in flat and boring tones, about the technical aspects of the research he did.

I was curious what someone immersed in that medical technology would think of the story of the psychologist above. So I told it to him and asked his opinion.

His whole demeanor changed. He sat up straight, got very excited and said "Yes, yes, that's it exactly!" He went on to say

his wife was working in just that area and told of the relationships between mind and disease she was witnessing.

Epilog to Walter Reed Interviews

Based on our research, and working with Sabrina who was our medical expert, we did write that award winning AI software that guided people through the mechanistic world of medical cancer cure technology.

But we also wrote a book, *Reflection*, that explored the whole mystical, magical nature of the connections between mind, body and it all.

FIRST MAN EXTRA

2018, Kennedy Space Center

I'd always said I wanted to be an extra in a movie, to be able to say that at so many minutes into such and such a movie it was me walking across the street. When we were living near the Florida Space Coast, I got my chance.

First Man, a movie about Neil Armstrong's trip to the moon, was shooting a scene at the Kennedy Space Center. They were looking for men to be boring old geeky white guy NASA executives. I could do that!

I was amazed by the amount of energy and attention to detail that went into what would only be a few seconds of the final movie. They were shooting the scene where the astronauts were leaving the space center for a shuttle van to take them to the rocket. Here's a photo from the actual 1969 event that they were using in setting the scene.



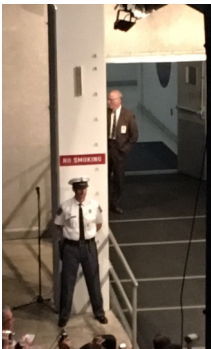
Actual Apollo 11 crew in 1969

I was to be that NASA executive at the top of the stairs as they walked by. By a stroke of good luck, my friend Theresa worked at the Space Center and got some pictures from the offices across the way. Here's one take of the scene.



The movie astronauts walking

We must have shot the scene 20 or 30 times. It took most of a day. That poor guy playing the kneeling photographer on the right kept trying to get a more comfortable position and they kept telling him, no, look at the picture, you need to be kneeling, with your arm up like so. (Compare the film and actual photos.)



Me, between shots

Where am I? Well you can't see me in the action shot above, and I realized, since the main camera was set up on the left (looking at the picture), the best case would be my right elbow got in the movie. It didn't.

The other extra people were NASA techs, security people, and a gaggle of photographers. It was strange that, even though none of us knew each other, we tended to group by the social strata of our roles. I hung out with the other executives.

We had gotten into our suits and haircuts a few days earlier. I didn't find out until afterwards that the person in charge of costumes was Mary Zophres who

had been nominated for an academy award for her work on *La La Land* and had worked on many Coen Brothers movies, including *Fargo*. She clearly enjoyed her work, taking pride in the period authenticity she brought to movies. I was glad to

have had those few moments with her as she picked out my suit and tie and fitted me in them.

She insisted we wear suspenders. Why? Because nobody today is willing to hitch their pants up to the height they were worn then, so we had suspenders, under our jackets, to hold our trousers to the correct period height.



Me, as a NASA executive

I had hoped to be the exec in the primo position by a post on the right of the picture, and I was, for a little bit. But James Hansen, the author of the book on which the film is based,

wanted a cameo in the film and took my spot. Before I wound up on the ramp, they moved me behind him, which was interesting because I got to talk to him for a while.

He made the observation that we didn't have the technology to fake a moon landing back in 1969, but we do now. He said the images in the movie are amazing, and were mostly shot with physical models, rather than computer graphics, in Atlanta.

Well I was out of sight behind the wall in the final movie, which is just as well, because if I had been in it I would have wanted to see it more than once, and it really wasn't a very good movie. No sour grapes here.

In summary, it was a very long boring day, but I'm glad to have had a small part. It was especially fun because in 1969 I was actually working on Apollo.

For those who don't remember, The Onion, a satirical newspaper told the story as it should have been. The headline was: HOLY SHIT! MAN WALKS ON FUCKING MOON!

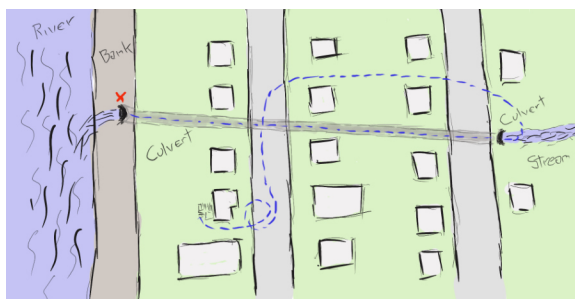
And the lead story starts out: Neil Armstrong's Historic First Words on the Moon: "Holy Living Fuck! We're on the goddam moon!"

NELSON'S ADVENTURE

2022, Shelburne Falls

Nelson, as he does many times a day, went down the back deck steps for a peaceful wander around the yard, sniffing and doing his business. But on this day, as never before, he started howling, running in circles, and, this old dog who has difficulty walking, took off down the street at a full sprint, cut between two houses, and disappeared from sight.

Really disappeared. Searching for him there was no sign, people about had not seen him, and a posting to a local Facebook group had many people looking for him, with no luck.



Nelson Disappears

What had happened, it turned out, was he had gone to a small stream, near those houses, probably to get relief from whatever had gotten to him. That stream goes into a culvert that goes under the streets and yards and empties, after about two blocks, into the river running through our town. Whether by choice, or the current, he'd gone through the culvert and gotten stuck where it empties out above the river.

Nobody on our side of the river could have seen him, which is how he so totally disappeared.

Two people on the other side of the river happened to look across and notice him. They came over to our side, wrestled him out of the culvert and saw that he made it home. Nelson probably would have died there, had they not seen him and come to help.

What had happened to him? There was no smell of a skunk, no porcupine quills, nothing to indicate anything had thrown him into such a state. Maybe some yellow jackets? But it was January. And he had been wandering the yard for years without incident. No idea what happened.

Connections

Whatever the reason, these events were uncannily entwined with emotions that had been building within me. The emotions didn't cause the events nor the events cause the emotions, but they're connected in a synchronicity sort of way.

Nancy, my wife and Nelson's rightful owner, was in Florida for a few months visiting family and avoiding the cold. I was staying in our home in Massachusetts, taking care of Nelson, who really was more our dog, and using the quiet time to work on my writing while sitting by the wood stove.

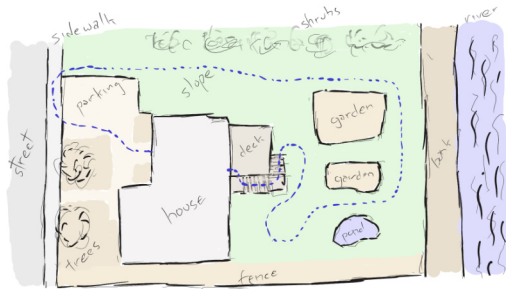
Nelson wasn't much trouble, except he was getting older, having passed my 77 human years in his dog years. The biggest hassle was walks. I used to really enjoy taking him off leash and watching him bound through the woods, and didn't mind, as he got older, simply taking him around the neighborhood. But he'd gotten where he often would refuse to walk, and if we did start out, would stop and wouldn't go either this way or that. It was annoying.

As far as doing his business, that wouldn't have been too much of a problem if I could have done what we'd always done. Our house is on a slope, with the front door at street level and the back opening on a deck with stairs down to the yard. We'd let him out on the deck, he'd go down the steps, wander around the yard, and then come up the steps and back in, without leaving the yard. But his legs were starting to go and he couldn't make it up the steps anymore.

Nelson came up with a solution. He'd go down the back steps, somewhat shakily, wander about as much as he liked, and then take the easier route up the slope on the side of the

house. Then he'd circle around on the sidewalk, come to the front door and patiently wait to come in without even thinking of going in the street. What a good dog.

I'd keep a dog biscuit in my hand so I wouldn't forget to periodically check the front door after letting him out. We did this maybe five or six times a day, whenever he was pacing about the house. It worked great.



A typical Nelson walk about the yard

But now the first major snow storm was coming, and all I could think of was what a pain. I won't be able to let him out back as the steps will be snowy, and even if cleared, icy. And there isn't much front yard between the house and the street. He's obstinate about walks, yet paces about, and I am trying to write... I was working myself into quite an agitated state.

OK, maybe unjustly, maybe I was being a bit of a jerk, but, the key point for this story is, no matter what the reason, that was how I was feeling.

It was in that state of mind that I let him out for what I knew would be his last trip around the yard before the snow started. It was in that state of mind that I heard him start to howl.

And it was in that state of mind that, as I saw him tearing down the street, I knew my issues caring for Nelson were over. He was gone. I sensed, maybe, forever.

I didn't feel good thinking that, but that's what I was thinking. I felt guilty as if it was, and maybe it was, my fault he'd run away. As I drove around looking for him, checking the small streets, and the ones with traffic, there was absolutely no sign. I began to feel that he really might be gone forever.

I began to feel worse about how I'd felt, and began to despair that he might not come back, as I was fond of him and he was a good dog.

It was as that second state of mind was settling in that I got the call that he was found and safely home.

So there's the magic connections. My resentment and his disappearance; my grief and his rescue. No causal connection. But my feelings and the events were perfectly reflected in each other as they unfolded that day.

Epilog

The next morning, I shoveled the snow, and when Nelson woke up, put on my jacket, grabbed the leash and together we went out the front door. No agenda, no walk, just him going where he wants with me following. He found a good spot to pee, then sniffed around a bit, wandered through the snow and a little ways up the sidewalk, found a good spot to poo and then headed back. It was just fine, hanging out with him wherever he wanted to go on a snowy winter day.

My fretting had been for naught, and his sudden disappearance and recovery got me connecting more with the good Nelson vibes, rather than the irksome ones. The whole, very strange, incident led us to a more harmonious place, and I got some writing done. (Nelson has since passed on.)



FORTUITOUS DOG BITE

2022, Shelburne Falls

Some medical turmoil in my life was recently relieved by voices in my head that lead me to a dog that bit me on my rump.



I say voices, but, unlike that incident on my bike 50 years ago where the voice was almost audible, these weren't so clear in diction but were perfectly clear in intent. They were from somewhere other than my rational mind and urged me to take steps other than what I'd planned.

My Medical Turmoil

I try to avoid our health care system as much as I can, preferring if at all possible to keep my self healthy with diet, exercise, good thoughts and the like. It's not like I don't believe in all the amazing medical technology we have, but

rather don't trust the profit-oriented system we have of delivering that technology to people.

Nor do I fully accept the body-as-a-machine model of our medical technology and do think there is a powerful mental aspect to our health. However, I'm not a fanatic and did have a doctor and used him when needed for some small thing or another.

Except a bigger thing started to happen. My heart, with even slight exercise such as my daily walks, would sometimes jump to double time, from a normal 60-70 beats per minute (BPM) to 120-140. If I stopped, took a deep breath, it would soon slow down. But it was worrisome.

Well, I'm not going to go into the details, but my doctor at the time provided some very unsettling care looking into this making me more and more certain I didn't want anything to do with our medical system.

I had earlier made some attempts to find another doctor, but due to various issues with local practices closing, hospital budgets, staffing, whatever, there were no general practitioners (GPs) taking new patients.

So I decided to take myself to a higher spiritual plane and not worry about it. To accept whatever my Karma delivers. To open myself to the Universe and proceed on my normal walks. And I walked with that sense of inner peace and..., wait, is that my heart again? I stopped and took my pulse. OK, relax. Normal again, resuming my peaceful walk and... wait, is it going again?

I was compulsively checking my pulse every few minutes as I walked.

It seems I wasn't on as high a spiritual plane as I thought.

Having convinced Nancy (my wife) not to push me into the medical system, I confided in a nurse friend, who immediately pushed me to drop my current doctor (she knew of him) and find a good GP to help me get to the bottom of this. But she didn't know of any who were taking new patients.

Sigh. So there I was, not wanting to get deeper into the medical system, but knowing I had to, and sensing how difficult it would be to even find someone taking new patients let alone one who was reasonable good and remotely close to where we lived. Tomorrow I'll start looking in earnest.

I woke up the next morning with the need to act weighing heavy on me. I did nothing. I knew I had to start looking. But didn't. I knew I needed a doctor, but that there were none to be found. It got to be late in the afternoon and I'd still done nothing.

The Voices

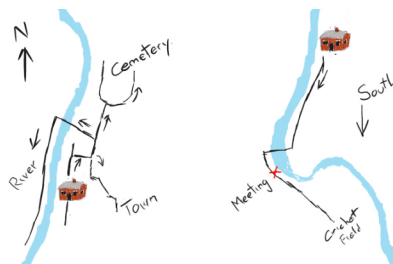
Distracted by it all, I decided to go on my walk and get out before it started to get dark. That's when I first was aware of the voice. My room was a bit cluttered and it told me to make my bed. Huh? I had to get out. It said I didn't have to clean up more, just do that one task, for that amount of time before starting.

I was in a distressed state and didn't argue. Made the bed and then started out on my walk.

Let me tell you about my walk. I always go out the front door and head North walking to the edge of our village. From there, sometimes I would loop around the village clockwise, or loop around our river counter clockwise, or continue straight for a circuit around a local cemetery.

Always starting North and one of those three.

The voice said go South. Huh? I never start to the South. It strongly suggested I go South. Well, OK, I might do that for a change and I could go over the Iron Bridge downtown and loop up by the old Lamson factory and head towards Cricket field. So I did.



**My normal North routes,
and the route South taken that day.**

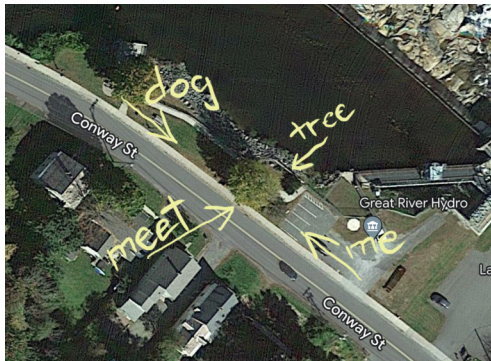
When I got to Cricket field, that voice told me sit on a bench in the gazebo there. Note that I never stop and sit on my walks.

But I did. And sat for a little while, until it was clear it was time to get up and head back home.

The Dog

Now at one point on the walk back I would be walking along a sidewalk between a road and the river, with some plantings at some parts. As I was approaching that area I saw a young (to me) family headed towards me. A man, his wife, a stroller and two rather rambunctious dogs.

For most of that section of the sidewalk, there was room between the sidewalk and river for them to give me a wide berth with the dogs. But we met precisely where a tree forced us to squeeze closer in order to pass.



The tree that brought us together

He was wrestling the dogs between the stroller and the tree, as I approached staying on the sidewalk. After I just passed them I felt the teeth of one of the dogs biting me on the rump!

“God damn, fucking A, your dog just bit me!”

I was really pissed. They apologized. I’m thinking, great, do we need to check for rabies and whatever. He, the man, said his dogs were vaccinated, but it wouldn’t be a problem if the bite didn’t break the skin.

I was still pretty angry, and couldn’t see my own butt, but I do like to settle things quickly and don’t like our legal system any better than our health care system. So I made him an offer. I would go around behind a car with him, show him my butt,

and he'd tell me if it broke the skin. Fair enough, and he told me it wasn't a problem because, wait for it, he was a doctor.

The Doctor

Well, the skin wasn't broken. He offered to give me his contact information. I was still pissed his dog bit me, and it stung some but not too much, and they seemed nice people so I was fine with letting it drop.

It did register that he was a doctor, but I just thought he was one of these specialists and not one of interest to me. I went on my way.

How about that, I was stressed about finding a doctor, heard voices that lead me directly to an interaction with a doctor, and I still didn't get it. More magic was needed.

Now Matt is a neighbor and a professional dog walker. We're friendly, but never actually spend any time talking, but on that walk back on that particular day I wound up on the same street with him going the same way.

I said, "Matt, you won't believe what just happened to me" and told him about the dog bite. He asked about the dog, I described it, and it turns out he knew the dog and the couple and walked their dogs for them sometimes.

He said he's a primary care doctor, and a good one, with a new and growing practice.

Well I'll be... I figured it was destined he should be my doctor so I looked him up, sent him a letter with this story in it and asked if he would accept me as a patient. He said yes.

If the voices hadn't gotten me on a different walk, and induced those delays, it wouldn't have happened. I wouldn't have been at that exact narrow spot where the dog could have a nip at me. And what a surgically precise nip it was. Enough to hurt and piss me off, but not enough to puncture either my skin or my jeans.

What a wonderfully timed, beneficial incident. The dog knew better than both of us that I had a rump that needed to be bitten just that hard at just that moment.

Epilog

This doctor was perfect for me, wanted to be in primary care to help people get the care they need. This is not where the money is in medicine. He understood perfectly my desire to have as little “health care” as possible, and also my desire to have a doctor as an advisor, letting me know my options, not “telling” me what to do, but outlining my choices.

He had a bunch of tests done, we did some thinking, and it turns out I might have triggered the heart issues when I decided to eliminate the thyroid medicine I was taking, so I started taking it again, and the number of incidents of a racing heart have greatly diminished.

Who knows how my health will progress, and our health care system evolve, but I feel I have at least one good doctor to provide a bridge between the two for me.

Sid

1960 - 2025

Sid died.

We've been friends, more like brothers, since 1960. There are lots of stories from those years, and that, a love of stories, was one of the best things he gave me. He always had a story about this or that and whenever we were talking I'd try my hardest to keep up.

What else? Adventures. It was Sid who pushed my ideas of what was possible out in the wild. He was often the driving force behind some trip to some mountains somewhere. Or, as in the picture below, something different like a caving adventure rappelling into Hell Hole cavern in West Virginia. (That story is in his book, *I've Got a Better One.*)



Sid (right) and me (left) on a 1966 caving trip

The stories here are about Sid, who he was, what he was like and maybe who we were. We'd been there for each other since those earliest days. It started with Boy Scouts.

Jamboree

Sid and I met at the 1960 Boy Scout Jamboree in Colorado Springs, Colorado. For a Jamboree they make up troops from a town by taking a few scouts from each of the various local troops. Sid and I were in different home troops but both wound up in the Levittown Jamboree troop. Sid was made a patrol leader and I was in his patrol. Mr. Madden was our Jamboree scout master. Never Sink was the name of our Jamboree troop.

We all got on a train and headed from Long Island out to Colorado Springs.

Now Mr. Madden considered himself something of a military drill sergeant, and asserted his discipline over the troop. He had us practicing marching, which he thought was important, and made it clear he was in charge. He decreed that nobody could explore the Jamboree until we had the Never Sink camp site in order.

This meant putting up the gateway we'd brought for our camp site. It had two thick poles that would hold up the Never Sink sign we'd brought.

Now the ground was really hard and dry, and we needed to dig fairly deep holes for those poles. The shovels we had were not up to the task. We needed a post hole digger and asked if we could go borrow one from another troop.

"Nobody leaves until the gateway is up," he said. We explained we couldn't get the gate up without a post hole digger. Proud of the strict discipline he was teaching us, Mr. Madden reiterated, "nobody leaves until the gateway is up."

The Jamboree went for, I think five days. Our whole troop missed the first two days because we were confined to the camp because we couldn't dig the holes for the posts. Finally a couple of kids snuck out of camp, borrowed a post hole digger, dug the holes and returned the digger without Madden (no longer deserving the respect of Mr.) knowing it.

We were now free to enjoy the Jamboree.

Why is this story important? It was to be a repeating theme in much of Sid's life.

Sid would work hard to earn something, deserve something, and then get denied by some force such as Madden. Here Sid was, selected for the Jamboree, a real honor

for a scout, only to wind up confined to camp for the first two days. He'd often find himself having to fight a second time to claim what was his. Sometimes he'd win. Sometimes he'd lose.

Why else was it important? It set the tone of how he, we, dealt with it. More than anger, we were amused by the absurdity of it all. Sid and I could step out of the scene and just laugh. At that Jamboree I got a reputation for laughing til the tears streamed down my face. This was the seed that led to our appreciation of the existential humor of a play like *Waiting for Godot*. More on that later.



Sid's Patrol, he's in front, I'm wearing sunglasses

We did enjoy the rest of the Jamboree, and it was the beginning of the connection between Sid and myself. For me, I'd never met anyone like Sid before. He knew how to get stuff done. He knew what had to be done and how to do it.

Like our patrol's area. He was getting the tents organized, the cooking area, the tarp over the picnic table, etc. He was just a whirlwind of energy making everything that needed to happen happen. The rest of us were just sitting around watching.

Sid got up on his high horse and started lecturing us, saying how he was doing all this work to get things ready and we were just sitting around not doing anything.

I don't know what inspired me. I think maybe partly a sense of awe at watching him, but I said "But you enjoy doing the work, we don't."

He was just dumbfounded. I was right, he was in his element. He didn't know how to respond, and I think it was

maybe at that moment we developed an understanding and friendship that lasted all those years.

Acrophobia

I learned about his acrophobia, fear of heights, at that Jamboree. Everything was flat, but we took a trip to the Garden of Gods. There was a not very high rock, with a railing around it, called Steamboat Rock with broad steps leading up to the top. The steps were wide and there was a railing in the middle as well as on both sides.

Sid was afraid. We didn't understand, it wasn't very high, the steps weren't steep, and there were railings, yet, there he was, terrified. We, of course, knew nothing of phobias, were insensitive to his plight, and we pushed and goaded him to go up the stairs.



Steamboat Rock as it was in 1960s. Not open any more.

He made it up to the center of the flat area and was just shaking with fear. He couldn't handle it. He grabbed that railing in the center, a good five feet from the railings on either side, and edged his way back down, pleading with us to understand. I couldn't believe how tight he gripped that rail.

I'd never seen anyone so afraid of something. We knew then maybe we shouldn't have pushed him so hard.

Rock Climbing

Jump forward to our college years, and we had both discovered our college outing clubs, a natural place for former Boy Scouts to wind up. Sid got into white water canoeing. I got into rock climbing, and witnessed Sid do something remarkable.

Sid decided he didn't want his acrophobia controlling his life. He asked me to help him become a rock climber.

He took it slow. The first thing he did was simply go to a climbing area. It was a friendly area, with a wide road along the base of the cliffs, and, where we were, the cliff wasn't very high, maybe 50 or 60 feet. He wouldn't even get close to the cliff.

On his third trip he got up to the cliff. On the next trip he tied a rope around his waist and took one move up and then back down. I belayed him and made sure the rope was tight.

Eventually, with a tight rope belaying him, he made it to the top of the cliff. I was amazed, I'd never seen anyone have such determination to overcome an internal demon like that.

From there we went on to taller cliffs and climbing on the granite mountains of the Tetons. That fear was still there, the reactions were still there, but Sid, goddammit, wasn't going to let that stop him. We were going to climb those mountains, and so we did.

White Water Canoe Races

While I was rock climbing, Sid was engaged in competitive white water slalom canoeing. Just as I led him up rock climbs, he got me in a boat and paddling. I competed in a couple of races in the novice class, and it was a blast.

It wasn't too long ago that I read something on male bonding. It said the most likely way for it to happen is when two men are each good in separate fields, rather than the same one. Hmmm, well how about that. That was us. We used to compete at everything, but not in either of these areas. He was the paddler. I was the climber.

Sid's pattern of earning something and then being denied occurred in canoeing. He and his partner earned a place on the National Team to go to the International Championships as

fourth boat. That year, for the first time, they decided to only send three boats. No real good reason.



**Sid (right) and his sister Fran (left)
paddling in a slalom canoe race.**

He'd call me up and tell me these stories and it was with that mix of disappointment and anger at the injustice, yet tempered by acceptance and humor. He'd say "you can't believe what they did..." It happened so often, it was almost as if he wouldn't be comfortable if it didn't happen.

But, as always, he'd just pick himself up and continue the fight. Justice prevailed and he got his rightful position on the National Team in a following year and went to Italy to paddle in the Internationals.

Levittown

Now back to Levittown, after the Jamboree, we spent a lot of time together even though it required our parents to drive us.

It was maybe another incident of someone in authority messing Sid up that made us even closer. Sid was on his high school soccer team. After running into another kid Sid was on the ground and pretty sure he had broken his leg. The coach told him to get up. Sid said his leg was broken. The coach ridiculed him, said no you haven't, just stand up and get back in the game. So Sid stood up and a simple fracture turned into a compound one as the bone popped through the skin and he fell back down.

That meant Sid was confined to his house for a long time, so I'd just go over to hang out with him. We played a lot of

chess. It was annoying how good he was, because I was the brainiac of the two of us and it made no sense that he could play so well. But he was sooooo competitive. Hmmm, we both were.

Sid's intelligence also showed in his aptitude for analyzing sports. He could break some sports action down and see it differently, and how to do it better.

In the summers he'd come over to our house where we played a lot of croquet. There were two ways to hit a croquet ball. One was like a golf swing, which provided power but was difficult to aim. The other was, standing over the ball and using a pendulum swing, which was accurate, but, what with your body in the way, hard to get much power.

Sid, after just a little time playing, decided on making his own third way. He used the straddle technique for accuracy, but then stood backwards, looked between his legs to aim and took a big swing. I was upset, that's just not how you do it. He said, why not and kept doing it, and kept winning.

This also was a theme in his life. He just had an eye for sports and athletic movement. I believe his articles on how to set up a women's volleyball team based on the skill set of the team is still a classic in volleyball circles. He just had different ways of looking at things.

Coaching

Sid was a gifted coach.

We were wandering about Cambridge Mass one day, I don't remember why, but we came across some people playing a game we hadn't seen before. It turns out it was, I think, Australian Rules football, sort of like Rugby, but different.

We'd been watching only a few minutes and Sid starts commenting on how this player on the other side was out of position and where he needed to be to more effectively do, whatever, I mean, Sid just saw that stuff.

Sometimes he took me and my wife at the time, Ann, canoeing. It was New England in the 1970s and, in the winter, the canoers would practice indoors with slalom competitions set up in swimming pools. Gates were hung over the pool, just like in a white water slalom race, and just like in such a competition, the paddlers had to take a path through the gates,

some forward, some backwards, different turns to get to them, like that.

Well I knew a fair amount about canoeing, but not racing, and Ann didn't really know anything. So I, being the man and all, and the experienced paddler, would be paddling the stern, with Ann in the bow. Sid had a different idea. He told me to get in the bow and let Ann paddle stern.

I was a bit put off, but Sid said, no, listen, the bow is where you get the power in this type of race. You provide the power and let Ann just steer through the gates. No other man/woman team in the race paddled that way.

OK, well I was still pissed, and decided to prove Sid wrong. I got in the front and didn't even try to control the heading of the boat. I just paddled as hard as I could and waited for Ann to bump into gates or something and ruin the run.

She didn't. We won. Sid was like that. He saw a better way to use our assets to win that particular type of race.

Jewishness

Sid, by his own telling, might best be described as an obnoxious Brooklyn Jew. He and his family were from Brooklyn, but for some reason I never understood, had moved to Levittown for a few years. They then moved back and he graduated from high school in Brooklyn, but not until I'd visited a number of times and got to play stick ball in Brooklyn streets as well as stoop ball.

In Levittown, where we were, there was a fairly large Jewish population, and true to stereotype they all cared about public education so at least half of the kids in the advanced classes in school were Jewish. Most of my friends were Jewish. More than one of my friend's mothers made me an honorary Jew.

Sid's mother was one of them. She liked me better than Sid, and Sid knew it. It was OK though, my dad liked Sid better than me.

Central High, Providence RI

I was going to school at Brown, in Providence, and Sid was teaching at Central High in Providence. It was a tough, mostly black, inner-city school. He taught history and social studies.

He'd sent two girls to detention. They both complained to the principal that that was done because Sid was a racist. The school wanted no part of that, so they started proceedings against him. Sid decided in his defense to ask his students to write an essay on whether or not Mr. Feldman was a racist.

One said he was a racist, but it's not the blacks he doesn't like, it's the Jews. He got overwhelming support from his students. This was a theme in his life as well, students and players who really appreciated what he did for them.

It wasn't a well funded school, and he had to share his class room with the biology teacher. She was a black woman and often had to set up demonstrations for her class in the back while Sid was teaching his lessons. Now word of this Jewish racist teacher had reached an activist black minister, and he was on the way to the school.

It turns out, his wife was that biology teacher.

She didn't know what was going on, but went outside to meet her husband coming to the school. She asked him why he was visiting. He explained he was there to investigate reports of a racist teacher. She said, really? Who?

He said Sid Feldman. She said you have to be kidding. He's the only teacher in this school doing anything for us.

There he was doing great work teaching in the inner city, and being thrown over by administrators. And he fought it, and won. A theme.

Other good work in that school? There was a drama competition. Sid and I had both gotten totally into the existential writing of Samuel Becket and in particular his play, *Waiting for Godot*. It's just two characters on stage, talking, waiting. Godot, of course, never shows up. It's an absurd view of meaningless life.

While the other schools in the competition put on the sorts of happy shows they might put on, Sid got a couple of these inner city black kids to do *Waiting for Godot*. He said they totally understood the play and performed it perfectly, capturing all its existential angst. The audience was stunned

for five minutes before bursting into applause. They didn't win.

Golf

In my senior year of college, my girl friend got pregnant so I settled down to be married. Sid, who was a year ahead of me, had joined the Peace Corp after graduating. Well things went wrong for both of us. There were problems in the Peace Corp and Sid came back early and pretty distraught. My young marriage had just failed leaving me distraught as well.

He'd come to visit and we were hanging out in my empty apartment, both really down, both having told each other our long tales of woe.

We were sitting there, with our heads hung low, when, at the same moment, we both sat up, looked at each other, and at the same time said:

Golf.

Understand that this was the 1960s and we were into all sorts of counter culture activities, like climbing, canoeing, and camping. Golf to us, and those of our ilk, was an establishment pastime.

But we had dabbled with it in our teenage years, and were amused at the fact that golf is, as a game, more than a little bit absurd. Just right for the two of us at just that moment. So we went out and played.

This was the start of our decades long competition. Yup decades, and we kept score by decades. I was better during our 10s, 20s and 30s. He was better in our 40s, 50s and 60s. We tied in our 70s.

Keeping score was part of our golf routine. It wasn't just a simple score. We'd play and then the real competition would begin, the debate about who won the essence of the game. Golf is full of opportunities for that. Like does "stroke play," total score, or "match play," total holes won, better capture who played better?

It was worse than just that. Sid had his own demons and wanted to win and wanted to convince himself he deserved to win. So he'd keep score both ways. There's more. For men,

golf is really about driving. So, apart from the score, who was driving the ball better? If Sid won the game but felt I was driving better, he'd feel he lost. And then there's the question of who had the best hole. So many ways to evaluate a game.

So you can see, debating who "really" won was really the essence of the competition. Did we enjoy that more than the game itself? Maybe.

We did finally agree on a scoring system after a particular tough day in a drizzling rain. We were playing match play but on this one long par 5 we were struggling. What with tee shots into the woods, penalty strokes coming out, flubbed shots on the fairway (because the grips were wet, really) neither Sid nor I had a clear idea of where we stood in that all important stroke count on the hole.



Sid Golfing

We were only half way to the green and arguing, no, no, you went into the woods, but after you dropped, flubbed it and it went back in the woods, so that's 7 and then you...

Did I mention our appreciation of the absurdity of life? We often laughed at the image of the two of us, in the drizzling rain, only half-way to the green, arguing about whether we'd had 11 or 12 strokes to that point.

Anyway, this did lead to the creation of our own official scoring method. Match play, each hole is its own small game, but modified for our sometimes abysmal play. You could only win a hole with a legal (we didn't always honor the real rules about lost balls) double bogey (two over par). So if we both sucked on a hole, we didn't need an accurate score, it was zero for both of us.

17th Hole at PGA Sawgrass

Did that fix our scoring debates? Not really, and here is the most famous one. Harriet, what an amazingly good woman she is, said that Sid and I needed to have a golf outing to a famous course. Did she even pay for it for us? I don't remember, but it was her who got us going. She set it up for us

and we went to Florida to play two days at PGA Sawgrass in Florida.

That's where they have the Player's Championship each year. Its 17th hole is famous and the signature hole on the course. It's a par three and the green is on an island in the middle of a lake. (There's a narrow causeway to get out to putt.)

As we got to the course Sid said, "you know it doesn't really matter what the score is, it's whoever gets on 17 will be the winner." I swear he said that. He never explicitly denied it. Just joking? Well you've heard how we keep score.

The first day, I hit my tee shot on to the green and two putted for a par 3. He hit his in the lake. The second day, I hit my tee shot onto the green and two putted for a par 3. He hit his first ball into the water, then put a second shot from the tee onto the green and sank the putt. (two tee shots, one penalty for the water and one putt for a 4)

And so our weekend ends. Sid notes that he outscored me in stroke play both days. He notes that he beat me in match play both days. He notes that he was in general driving the ball better than me both days. And he notes that his birdie (one under par) on the very difficult 18th hole was maybe the best play of the weekend.

All of that was true.

But I had hit the island 17th green both days, and parred both days, so I claimed I won. He says his second day hitting the green and one putting was better. I said that was a great shot and putt, but still, his first ball went in the lake. Mine didn't. I won.

I don't remember how long ago it was that we played there but the debate continued through the decades. Just a week before he died, in a bunch of things he said, was the claim that he had won at that 17th hole.

I didn't contradict him.

Eating and Competition

Now Sid ate faster than anyone I ever met. And I've never met anyone who eats slower than me.

But we were competitive and I like a challenge so I decided to beat him in an eating race. The venue was a small

dinner party with Sid and maybe four or five other friends. My wife, Ann, had made a nice chicken dinner for us all.

Now, the only way for me to beat Sid in an eating race was, one, not to tell him it's a race, and two, to cheat. I was ready.

When it was time to eat I made sure I got to the stove first, got my chicken and other stuff on my plate and sat down before the others. I didn't say anything, I just immediately started shoving food in my face as others were still getting theirs.

Finally Sid had his plate and sat at the table. As soon as he sat I looked up for a second and said, "Sid, how's your canoeing season going?" and immediately lowered my head back to my plate.

The whole time I was focused just on eating I could hear Sid talking non stop. I finally finished and was ready to savor my victory and looked over at him still going on and on about canoeing with his plate in front of him. On it were some chicken bones picked perfectly clean.

I don't know how he did it. I did, in all fairness, tell him of the competition he'd just won after the fact.

University of Georgia (UGA)

A dark chapter in Sid's life was his firing from UGA. It followed the pattern of him following the rules, doing really well, and then getting screwed. There he was, a Brooklyn Jew building the women's volleyball program at the University of Georgia (UGA). What could go wrong?

Nothing at first. He built a team with players that have remembered him forever, and, let's cut to the bottom line of college sports, won two Southeast Conference (SEC) championships. He was rolling. Now he won those championships making good coaching decisions and playing his best players, but there was one girl who thought she should be first string, who was really mad she wasn't, and more importantly, whose influential father also thought she should be first string. She accused Sid of, not anything in particular, but just being sexually inappropriate.

The athletic director didn't want this sort of scandal, and fired Sid. It's not so much the girl accusing him that bothered him, it did, but that athletic director who refused to stand

behind him. It's the same story from the Jamboree scout master, the soccer coach, the national canoeing team coach, the high school principal...

Sid bounced back from those other setbacks. He fought them and won. But they were smaller, this was his career. And he lost his appeals to that Southern athletic director.

I talked to Sid a lot in the years after that. The humor and appreciation of the absurdity were gone. He didn't see anything funny in this one. That girl and athletic director had taken his life away. It was sad for me to see him sink into a shell for a number of years.

He then taught high school for a number of years, and eventually, he got his mojo back and returned to women's volleyball. He became head coach at Piedmont College, close to where he and Harriet had a Georgia mountains cabin getaway, and where he had a number of good years with winning seasons and players who appreciated all he taught them.



Sid coaching Piedmont volleyball

[Do you wonder if maybe he did something wrong at UGA? He taught and coached his entire adult life and this was the only time he'd been accused of anything, other than the racism story told earlier. Not only that, the player had transferred to UGA from another school, where she had done the exact same thing. After not making first string and disappointed her father she accused the coach and got him fired. Sid did not have a sense of humor about that girl. Or the athletic director.]

Harriet

Harriet, what can I say. I'm so glad they found each other.

Sid and I enjoyed our times together, adventures in our younger years, golf in our middle years, and we were always in touch to some degree or other, but Harriet added something. It was just a pleasure to be with them both, to sense their connection, their shared humor and wit. Harriet, also a teacher like Sid, was every bit Sid's equal with comments like "The kids today don't need self esteem. I don't have self esteem and I do OK. What these kids need is to do their homework."



Sid and Harriet around 2009

I only visited him once in his last year, but there he was, lying in his hospital bed pushed next to their bed. Harriet was just lounging on the larger bed, propped up on one elbow, comfortable, relaxed and leaning towards Sid. And Sid was talking about something and I was in the conversation, and Harriet was just there, so much a part of him.

Of course, because we talked about everything, I talked with Sid about it and he said how much he was enjoying it, just him and Harriet, lying on the beds, watching TV, commenting on the shows, making fun of this person, pontificating about that topic. She brought a joy into his life over that last year that spilled over into my long talks with him.

Thanks Harriet.

Hospice

Sid almost died that last Summer. But he didn't, they saved him, and he wound up confined to a hospital bed in his home. His care changed to hospice. Not the sort of hospice where one is waiting to die, but rather a hospice where they stop doing medical procedures and tests.

Sid loved it! No more hours spent on doctor's visits. But when I say confined, I mean confined. He couldn't even get to the bathroom, and rolling over made him out of breath. Yet, when I talked with him on the phone, as we often did in those last months, he was still Sid, still fun, his mind and wit as sharp as always.

We'd talk about the fears and uncertainties of current politics, the corruption of college football, and his own reduction to a Godot-like existence. How did he deal with these?

With a full embracing of the absurdity of it all, with reactions of anger, sarcasm, and laughter—just as we reacted to our absurd confinement to camp at that Boy Scout Jamboree so many years ago.

Ashes

Some of Sid's fondest memories were of times spent in the North Lake campground in the Catskill mountains. Some of his ashes are floating down the stream and others sit at the edge of the escarpment.



Creek by North Lake campsite #11



Escarpment at North Lake campground

Acknowledgements

People

Tom the Optician for the excellent glasses designed specifically for writing books like this. Yana for reminding me not to indent first paragraphs. Nancy for suggesting “wince” in the article on Blackjack. Eve for helping me see a book through an artist’s eyes. Joan for the writer’s group and encouraging me to get these stories on Substack. Mo for her insightful critiques of the layout. Abbot for getting me to avoid using the word “memoir.” And all of my family and friends who encouraged me to write my stories down.

Software

Procreate on an iPad for the drawings. Scrivener on a Mac for organizing and writing the stories. Affinity Publisher 2 for laying out the book.

About the Author

Is this really necessary in a book that's all about the author?



**Me, Sid and Karston at Operation Igloo scout weekend
about to go flying down the hill**

My Links

denniscmermitt.com – Website with lots of stuff including links to my other stuff and a contact form.

www.youtube.com/@denniscmermitt – YouTube channel with videos, on, like the Website, lots of stuff.

denniscmermitt.substack.com – Substack stories, as appear in this book, both written and spoken.

dennismerrittthoughts.substack.com – Substack thoughts on various topics.

My Books

Reflection – About how it's all magic.

Find-a-Frog – Kids photo book, finding hidden frogs.

I've Got a Better One – Sid's stories, from solo climbs in Africa, to travels with Harriet.

Jazz Chords for Baritone Ukulele – Tying together the theory of jazz chords with the geometry of the fret board, on the four strings of a uke.

Understanding Jazz Chords on Guitar – Same as above, but for the full six strings of a guitar.

Building Expert Systems in Prolog – Hand crafting knowledge using the Prolog language. (An obsolete skill?)

Adventure in Prolog – Learning Prolog with the, still fun today, genre of interactive fiction.