

Santa Monica

Before I arrived in Los Angeles, I had called Dan, my friend from Del Mar, and asked if I could stay with them for a week, until I got situated. He said yes. It was not an innocent request. I needed some advice about my predicament from the real world, his father's world. His father had been a CPA, and Dan told me his father had spent time in jail because of some tax fraud. There was the hint that the fraud was crime related. I thought Dan might know the realities of the situation I believed myself in, and give me good advice, or kick me out, or profess disbelief. I was testing my reality. After spending a few days at their house, I told Dan the story of my life in San Francisco. It was a wise choice.

He lent me \$500, to get an apartment, and later got me work with his brother, construction work. His brother wanted to put a hot tub in the back yard, which required extending his gas line back there, and expanding the capacity of his electric panel. Dan's brother lead me through what I needed to do. I just had to get the materials. Having worked for Nathan in San Francisco, my attitude was always, "Sure, I can do that." I nearly killed myself a couple of times. A plumbing supply store in Santa Monica which sold me the gas pipe, and taught me about the needed reverse thread nipple in order to join the new line to the street feed. I was smart enough to shut off the gas. I was too inexperienced to know that I should bleed the lines, and as I was connecting the two lines, under the house, a static electricity spark jumped between them. No explosion. Another of my nine lives.

To needed to attach the new electric panel to the line coming into the house, which meant disconnecting the old feeds, installing a new weather head, and running new feeds. Sitting up on the slanting roof, disconnecting the old feeds went well, and then attaching the new weather-head was a piece of cake, but as I was attaching the new feeds to the line coming into the house, I brushed one hand against the ground while at the same time brushing the other against a hot line, and felt a jolt run through me. Another of my nine lives.

But, I had made enough money to pay Dan back. I am forever thankful that he provided me the float to begin to get my life back in order.

I had always wanted to live next to the ocean, and, if I was soon to die, I really thought that was true, and not from stupid mistakes working construction, I figured now was

the time. So I looked around Santa Monica's Ocean Park neighborhood for a place near a decent laundromat, for some reason that was important to me, and found a furnished apartment in a 1960's California courtyard building. The building was on Fourth Street, meaning it was four blocks from the beach, and fronted a park, where the body builders from Golds Gym at the bottom of the hill would come to work on their tans.

I lived there several months, and then moved to a much funkier apartment in the back of a wood frame building, a one bedroom, with a kitchen and living room and a ton of morning glories crawling up the back wall, which was even closer to the beach.

Every evening I could I walked down to the beach and watch a spectacular sunset. I went swimming in the ocean, a lot, learning to body surf, and loving it. On the beach were lots of surfers, and lots of surfer girls, and on the boardwalk, which was not made of board, but what we could call a bike path, lots of roller-bladers, in bikinis. Southern California at its best.

After the job with Dan's brother was done, I worked for some larger firms, and then went out on my own as a handyman, printing up cards and distributing fliers. I was surviving, and getting to know some of the other people in the trades. I had approached Tom Hayden, who lived in the same neighborhood, about working with his organization, left over from his Senate campaign, but he and I could not find a mutually beneficial placement.

I boded my time. I did not know when the hammer was going to drop, when I would suddenly disappear, but over time, became less nervous. And I saw, in the beach community of Santa Monica and Venice Beach, as if with new eyes, the barely hidden drug deals going down, all over, and, to my surprise, some of the very people who had been involved in that world in San Francisco. Obviously, I could not escape it.

After I had been in town a couple of months, I heard of a dance to support the just beginning rent control drive in Santa Monica. The dance was being held at a church several blocks from where I was living. I had a great time.

The next morning, as was my custom, I took the LA Times, and my beach sheet to the beach, and sat under an overcast sky, and looked at the paltry waves. Behind me, on a small dune, a young African American guy started to preach, "In the name of Jesus, go to Church". "Why not?," I asked myself, folded up the sheet, gathered the paper, walked a couple of blocks up Hill Street and walked into the Church in Ocean park,

dressed in my sandals, T shirt and bathing trunks. Needless to say, I was the most casually dressed person there, but it did not seem to matter. About 20 people were gathered in a circle, the hymns were freedom songs, and the preacher talked about building community. Finally, a religion that spoke to me.

I started going regularly, and got to know some people there. I was fitting in to the Southern California beach culture, but I always felt that I could do more than just be a handyman in Venice, busking on the boardwalk. I would apply for jobs that seemed to match my conception of myself, a mid-level, social justice non-profit administrator, but would not get hired, and almost as regularly, not get interviewed. I had not given up, but I was pretty discouraged.

Halloween, someone suggested I go up to Westwood, for the parade there. I think. This memory is like a repeating dream, but it never repeated. A reveler, dressed as a frog, looked like a friend from Belchertown. Jeff is who he looked like, Jeff who had been at Khe-sanh, who had told me he came back from Vietnam with only one real skill, that was to kill people. He looked at me. I said his name. He had a gun, pulled the trigger, but nothing happened, and then he disappeared. Within the next week or so, I heard a voice in a crowd say, "The gun jammed." Dream, reality, who knows, but another of my nine lives is the way I looked at it.

All paranoia, of course, but it was about that time that my brother told me a story. We were talking on the phone. He was teaching in the Syracuse, NY, public schools, and had taken up golf. One of his golfing buddies worked for the Air Force, he told me, and came by the school one day, to meet Steve, telling the school secretary that he was there to "pick Steve up." Steve was active in the union, and anyone who knew him would know how he felt about the war. The secretary took it to mean that he was there to "take him in," incarcerate Steve. But Steve was no wild eyed radical; nor was I, but it was me who had known the people who had become the Weathermen. Was Steve telling me that he was being surveilled?

So I calibrated my response, with a "hmpf," with no further discussion. I knew I should wait for the appropriate time to ask Steve if this is what he was trying to say. That time did not come until over thirty years later. We had repaired a very fractured relationship; I recounted to him this story, and my fear, at the time, of saying anything in response to him, that would lead to some "tell" if his new friend just casually mentioned me, because this new friend really wanted to know if Steve knew anything about whether I knew anything about where my friends from Columbia, still

underground, were at. Complicated I know, the stuff of paranoia, Philip K. Dick stories, but Steve responded with but two words: "Thank you." In his mind, I had read the conversation correctly.

Thanksgiving was looking to be emotionally tough. I felt pretty alone, afraid to tell people what was on my mind, because it was too crazy, because I did not want to call attention to what was going on, and it was like a big elephant sitting in the middle of my mental room. There was a knock on the door. It was Chuck, from the church. He had come to take me to a Thanksgiving dinner that an Evangelical Church put on at the beach, for the many homeless people who were in Venice and that part of Santa Monica. Several years later, this small act of charity on his part, and the large act on the part of that church was to be the inspiration for one of my life's accomplishments.

There was a weekly dance, barefoot, freestyle, similar to what is now known as Ecstatic Dance, a few blocks from my house, and most Friday nights I would go there. There was also a small folk music group that I would play with, once a month. I would ride my bike on the boardwalk, watch the skaters do their acrobatics at the Venice Beach pier, spend time at the beach. I had several girlfriends over the years, but nothing that seemed to go very deep, and I was beginning to have a desire to be a father, to have some children. I was in my mid-thirties, as were most of the women I was meeting, but the women either already had children, and were not interested in having any more, or were not interested in having children at all. Or maybe I was too financially unstable, and perhaps even emotionally unavailable.

There was a community garden space, a few blocks from the beach, across from the Boulangerie, with its excellent coffee and croissants. I was awarded a space, and grew some vegetables. The climate in Santa Monica is mild, very mild, and there was a ten month growing season, but the best thing that grew, in my estimation, was the Brussel sprouts, a cold weather crop. Picked fresh, they were wonderful steamed. And the tomatoes were very good, especially since I let them ripen to almost the point of fermentation, so they were very, very sweet.

Mangrove scheduled a show at the dance space, and I was really excited, and told a lot of people about it. Maybe fifteen people showed for the performance, none of them people I had recruited, or more aptly, failed to recruit. To me, Mangrove was the physical manifestation of what liberation meant, a demonstration of how men might authentically inter-relate. Here I was, embedded in the Los Angeles crunchy granola remnant of the sixties vibe, and with all the talk of liberation, no-one took the time to

see them. So much for my career as an influencer.

I wrote an essay to that effect, but the local progressive weekly did not print it. Actually, it turns out that they did, but they did not publish something else. I discovered this while rummaging through my files, looking for something else. So I produced a broadsheet, a one page newsletter, a very primitive comic strip, which I drew and captioned myself. I made perhaps a hundred copies, and dropped them off at stores, at the church, at the laundromat, at the dance space. No reaction. I did one more issue, same reaction. So much for my career as an influencer.

I was surprised how angry my tone was, and how much I wanted people to hear what I had to say. Less angry now, but I still want people to hear what I have to say.



This cartoon may offend you. It can be read as racist and vulgar. The editors of the Ocean Park News speculate close but the paper, it be- cause it might be taken the wrong way.

Did you chuckle? then you recognised the truth in it. The square and the starfish are liberals, straddling the fence, magnanimously giving work as they might have, day, and supporting the right causes. But their class position places the sombrero in material bondage. His labor adds value to the land of the starfish. He must keep his thoughts to himself or else he might lose the little work he has.

Was it funny? When I wrote the cartoon, I knew it would not be published. My sixth sense told me that was to be so for reasons outside of form or content. And I think it's too bad that it was left out - funny, isn't it?

This sheet is the first in a series

of pamphlets or broad sides in which I shall attempt to express my personal political opinion. I had hoped the perspective could have been the forum. I like the idea of ed- lective ventures.

But democracy got in the way. The liberals, afraid of offending any one, cater to the mob's taste, and thus for sake the clarity of any radical critique. So often have I found this the case, in anti-nuclear power groups, in vent con- trol campaigns, in liberal religion and even in journalism. That's said, "Basta Ya!" and chose this form of offensive.

The cartoon is racist. It depicts white land owners, potentially as humane as Latino field hands, in a derogatory fashion. And it is vulgar. The field hand's thought implies a sexual act, either an act of love or an act of domination, which way did you take it?

The rent control initiative won. I had done a little work on the campaign, and I saw that my talents, training and skills were exactly appropriate to be one of the staff to administer it. That perspective was not shared by the hiring committee, and I remained a handyman. I was getting the picture.

My landlord taught economics at USC. He had been the Finance Minister in Afghanistan, before the Russians came in, and he told me, with some truth to it, that had he not gotten out, he would be killed. He knew I was an activist liberal, and one day showed me some pictures, of the effects of napalm on the peasants, and mujaheddin resistance in Afghanistan, and asked me my reaction. It was as if he expected me to speak for the New Left, not that I spoke for them/us, but it was a way of gauging what kind of resistance people like me would have to US involvement there. I was disgusted by the napalm, told him so, and added, but no US troops. And that is what happened. Charlie Wilson's War, both the movie, and even better, the book, detail the complex coalition that was built which forced the Russians out of Afghanistan.

It was not until twenty years later that I realized the last time napalm had been used in a great power military campaign was by the Russians, in Afghanistan. This means something to me, but I am not sure what. Maybe only that even military people have hearts.

I have a tendency to see patterns where none exist. It might be called paranoia, but I don't think it is so strong as that, much more that I have a Philip K. Dick mind. I got an idea for a movie, bought a used portable electric typewriter, and wrote what the industry calls a treatment, basically a short story, science fiction, in which the Doggie Diner chain, which sold hot dogs, served as a portal for time travel. I was told that I had done the easy part; the hard part is getting an agent who can sell your work. And they were right. But persistence pays off.

The second Halloween I was in town, my neighbor, a Van Halen fan, suggested we dress up and cruise the new, fancy bars on Main Street. When I arrived in Santa Monica, Main Street was just starting its transformation from skid row to chi-chi. His idea for a costume was to take one of his wife's old panty hose, chop off the legs, fill the leg with paper, attach it to our fly zippers, get some old trench coats, walk into the bars, and open our coats. The first bar was one of the old ones, with the usual guys sitting there, smoking. They thought we were just weird. No response.

But then we began to hit the hip bars, and there, the reaction was what we wanted. Every one cheered. We were a huge hit, in more than one sense. Outside one of them, a guy stopped us, and chatted. He liked our act. He was one of the investors, it turned out, and this is how I met Arnold Schwarzenegger. Every one has a star story in Santa Monica. Jane Fonda lived four blocks from me, but I never met her.

It was about that time that I quit smoking. I had had a lot of practice, having smoked cigarettes for almost twenty years, and seriously trying to quit for five. I would quit, and then a couple of days later get in a social situation where people would smoke, and bum a cigarette, and that would end my abstinence. And that first cigarette tasted SO GOOD. I have been told by former heroin addicts that quitting heroin is easier than quitting cigarettes, and I believe it. But, for my 35th birthday, I decided to give myself a birthday present. I would quit smoking, and, if and when I was tempted, and I would remind myself that it was like giving away one of the nicest presents I ever got. I was never really tempted, but for the first month or so it seemed every cell in my body hungered for nicotine, and the next six months to a year I had a generalized craving for

something. This is the serious addiction that nicotine and tobacco do to the body. I have not smoked since then, one of my greatest personal achievements.

The church formed a men's group, where we would talk, you know, like men, but it was very good for me, and for the other people too. I have participated in at least five other men's groups, and that one was one of the best. We were really clear and honest with each other. It bears mentioning if for no other reason that it was part of the culture and the times.

I began to realize that Jim, the minister at the church, was in fact doing in practice why I chose to major in political science. He was a community organizer, but even more importantly, he was not an organizer of them, but of us, middle class people who wanted to create a better world. He was successful, not just with rent control, but eventually became the Mayor of Santa Monica.

So I went to him, and told him this, and asked him how I could become a minister. He told me, "Go to a seminary." I asked to which seminary should I go, and he replied that he did not know, he was a Methodist, and I was a Unitarian, so I should go to a UU seminary. Honestly, it was hard to tell that the Church in Ocean Park was Methodist, except for the placard on the front of the church. God was scarcely ever mentioned, Jesus was a rabble-rouser and communion, as is Methodist tradition, was celebrated on Sunday, but in a small service before the congregation gathered. I was scarcely aware of it, and would not have participated, had it been offered while I was in church.

He suggested I go talk to the UU minister in town. He looked very wise, like a minister, as opposed to a guy, and had a distinctly New England cast to his demeanor. He recommended Starr King School in Berkeley, and then, second, he recommend the four year program at Meadville Lombard in Chicago. "Four years, in Chicago?" I thought to myself, thinking of the winters. Not too likely. Then I asked him where he had gone to school. He muttered something. "Where?" I asked. "Harvard." "Really," I responded, "I did not know they were a seminary." He pointed out that Harvard was established to train ministers. But it was not really a very good school for training ministers, he said, and much more oriented to training scholars.

I attended his church, once or twice, to see what it was like. It reminded me of why I had not gone to church for many years. I was familiar with the liturgy, familiar with the hymns, familiar with the humanist perspective, but nothing inside me moved. Before that, and since then, I have had that experience at middle class white churches, and

that is what UU churches are, middle class white churches.

I did some research, and discovered in addition to the three divinity schools mentioned, there were several that, although ostensibly Christian, UU's had attended, Union, in NYC, Yale, and Andover-Newton, in Newton, MA. I wrote to all of them, requesting catalogs and application forms.

I expected that if this hail Mary worked in restarting my professional life, it would be in Berkeley, where life was more casual. I wrote Starr King, asking to come up for an interview. They responded, "Show up anytime." Seemed too casual, even to me. They sent me a packet of Rorschach pictures, and asked to share my responses to the images.

Now, something very weird happened as I was going through them. One of the pictures reminded me of a musical performance. At that moment, in the front apartment on my floor, the child living there started playing the recorder I had given him the previous month. I mentioned that in my response.

All the schools but Harvard sent me catalogs. Harvard sent me just an application form. I completed the application form for Starr King, and Harvard, but the application to Harvard was really just a copy of the Starr King one. Why not? For an extra \$25 application fee it was worth the gamble. Long odds, but, after all, it was Harvard.

I had no clear idea of how I was going to pay for the school, only that, if I were admitted, I knew ways to live very cheaply in places like Berkeley, because I had done it before. Anyway, I should cross that bridge when I came to it. Part of the application was a financial aid application, which consisted, basically, of submitting my last three year's tax returns. Needless to say, my income had been very low. I was living month to month, no health insurance, one step from disaster.

About a month later, as promised, I received a letter from Starr King. "Blah, blah, blah, we have a competitive admissions process, and perhaps apply next year." Oh well, nothing ventured, nothing gained. The next day, there was a letter from Harvard. "More of the same," I thought to myself, as I opened it, but, no I was wrong. I had been admitted! "Great," I thought to myself, "I don't even know what it will cost, and I am sure I am not going to be able to afford it."

Then I noticed a second page. It outlined the expenses for the first year, tuition, books,

food, and lodging, a reasonable budget for how much it would cost for me to go there, and then outlined how they were going to pay for it, with minimal loans. Not only had I been admitted, but they were going to pay for it. My first thought, upon learning this, was that I was getting three years that I did not have to worry about the rent!

I could hardly believe it. The minister at the church was equally surprised, and he had written one of the letters of recommendation. I asked Tom Hunter, the UCC minister/folk singer what he wrote, and he said only, "Oh, something flowery," Wow! It was Springtime. A member of the church had a van which needed some work; I sold the pickup truck for enough money to buy the van, and fix it, and converted into a camper with storage space for my tools.

Looking back, I think the minister of the Unitarian Church had a hand in it. He found me a work project, for a parishioner who was dying of cancer, and through that, probably got to know who I was and what I was about.

Since I expected it would be a long time before I was out West again, I did some camping in the Sierra, and then headed East, driving through Zion National Park, and other spectacular Western scenery, stopping to climb Mt. Harvard, one of the Collegiate Range in Colorado, whose peak was something like 14,400 feet.

I parked my truck at the trail head, at about 10,000 feet, and made it up to the edge of the tree line, probably at 13,800 feet, at a glacial cirque, where I set up my simple plastic tube tent, crawled in, and slept for the whole next day. I think. It seemed that way. The exertion and the altitude got to me.

Leaving my campsite, I climbed on up through a field of scree, loose rock. Every five or ten feet I had to stop, to catch my breath. The altitude really got to me. I finally made it to a saddle, with the summit only a couple of hundred feet up, on my left. I stopped. I looked over the edge. A great valley spread out below me, way below me. I looked at the summit, and knew I could not make it, and hoped that this was not a portent of things to come. I got to Harvard, but would I graduate?

I went back to my tent, slept a long time, and the next day hiked back to my truck, heading East. At that time, my parents were back living just outside Rochester. My mother's birthday was August 27, and I wanted to get there for that. As I was driving North, up through Pennsylvania and then the Genesee River Valley in upstate New York, I realized that this country, which I had grown up in, was the most beautiful country I

had seen that entire summer. True, I had seen more spectacular country, but for simple beauty, there is nothing more beautiful than the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York.

I was broke, living on fumes. I asked my parents to give me a \$500 birthday present, which they did. I then headed East, stopped in Amherst, and then continued on to Cambridge. Driving down Route 2, down the hill through Arlington, I saw before me the city, the city that had recognized my genius, after that decade in the desert.