

The Wilderness, Part 2

Well, you got some idea of how angry and hurt I was when Betsy took off with the kids. I wrote about it in this section, but then realized I was simply still too hot to publicly publish the narrative, so excised it into a different piece. Do you really want to read it? I can send it to you, but I would rather not.

It was the worst time of my life, and has been very hard for me to write about it, and, I imagine, for some people to read about it. But I survived ...

I wanted to get back to Milton, to make my life with the kids the most normal. Another member of the church, who lived in Milton, told me that a neighbor, and friend, needed someone to live in his house, actually, a mansion. The friend was moving with his family to Italy. I would have the caretakers apartment, for which I would pay rent, but I would also mow the lawn, and do other such work, for which I would be paid as a discount in the rent. I must say, he was getting a good deal, the hourly cost him probably half of what a landscaping company would have cost him, but then, I had a place to live, in Milton.

I remember John, playing with Rachael, looking at her, crinkling his fingers towards her, and saying, "I'm going to tickle you!", and Rachael would burst out giggling. I also remember Betsy coming to pick up the children, when Susan Jones was with me, and, later that week, getting another call from guardian ad litem, telling me the transfer must be done with me out of Betsy's sight. [This is a hint about what I was going through at the time. I would get calls like this on a regular basis. The rules kept expanding.]

I don't remember what I was doing for work then. Probably odd jobs, and office temp work. I had put a lot of the inheritance into the two houses, as down payments, and into the house in Milton, with the addition. That pot of money was rapidly becoming empty. I kept looking for "real" jobs, answering ads from the Boston Globe.

I got a response from the Community Action Agency in Framingham, which was looking for a new director of its sober homeless shelter. They asked me to come in for an interview. I arrived, and was told that I was an hour late. I looked in my appointment book, and saw that it was true. I was sabotaging myself.

They hired me. It was the kind of job I thought I would be good at. In fact, I was. The job started after Labor Day.

By that time, dating through the Boston Phoenix, I had met someone who told me about Dance Friday, then meeting in Watertown. It was just like the dance I had gone to in Santa Monica, except no crates of fresh oranges, and dance music from tapes, not from LP's. I had found a new home.

A summer camp was announced. I thought it would be a good thing to try. The camp was located on a lake near Poland Springs Maine. One of the options was to camp in a tent, which I did, gladly. There were three classes a day, meals provided, volunteer hours required, a DJ'd dance every night and a water front that was CLOTHING OPTIONAL! In fact, all camp was clothing optional, for those so interested, but I was very interested in the clothing optional waterfront. I love swimming in the nude. It feels great. Camp felt like I was back in California.

Not only that, one of the classes meeting an hour and half for five mornings was introduction to Contact Improvisation. Ever since the mid seventies when I had seen Mangrove, the contact improvisation company housed in Project Artaud, I had wanted to learn more, to experience it. Our teacher name was Rolf, he was German, and there were about forty or fifty people in the class. We started by simply lying on the floor, encountering the way we met the earth, experiencing as we lay there, on the floor, the floor pushed back, against us. For ever action there is an equal and opposite reaction. And then we rolled over, slowly, feeling our bodies flow over the floor, and then we learned to rotate smoothly into a sitting position, and then we learned to stand as if a young green shoot of a flower, rising toward the sun, and then we learned how to walk the room, gently, avoiding the other people, and then we learned how to brush against them, and then to give our weight gently to each other, randomly, and then to dance with them, authentically. We learned how to roll on the floor with each other, roll around each other, and through each other, and raise ourselves to standing with each other, and we learned how to support each other, standing, and how to use that support to fall up on each other, up so that one of us would be floating on the shoulders of his/her partner, relaxing in the alignment of our mutual center of gravities. We were doing lifts. We were doing contact improvisation, in only five days!

Camp was over, and I was getting a ride with three other people. We stopped on the way to Boston, in Newburyport, for a bite to eat. It had gotten toward evening, and the weather was turning cooler, so I got out of the car, and started to change out of my

shorts into my ... Oops, I was no longer at camp, and could not just change my pants in public.

I floated home, floated up the stairs to my apartment, and found an envelope taped to the door. The house had been sold. I needed to move, then. But where was I too live? There was an apartment for rent on Hawthorn Road, five blocks from where the kids were living, I visited it, saw that I could, with a stretch afford it, and rented it. The apartment even had a room upstairs, which I could rent out, and, soon, I hoped, the kids would be able to spend the night with me, and then I could walk them to the school bus stop a block from my new home.

Betsy took the kids to the Cape for a vacation, so I had a Sunday free. I decided to check out the local Methodist Church because, since Betsy was attending the local Unitarian church, I did not want to go there. Who this Dr. Birchfield C. P. Aymer, PhD? I imagined old white man, with white hair, and stodgy, like the Unitarian minister in Santa Monica. He was not at all. He was about my age, a dynamic preacher, his sermon was learned. His PhD was from Boston University, in New Testament studies and liberation theology.

I was aware that my birthday was that week, but unaware that it was the first year anniversary of when this nightmare began. All I knew was that I was sitting in a pew toward the back of the church, silently crying. Then, as is the custom in Methodist churches, he announced the monthly communion, with words like this:

“No matter where you are in your spiritual journey, join us at the communion table ...”

For the first time in my life, I took communion.

I wrote Birch a letter, telling him my story, and he came to visit me. He wanted to hear it again, claimed not to have read the letter, I told him the story. I started attending Parkway United Methodist Church of Mattapan and Milton.

A job, and apartment in Milton, and a church, all came together at the same time. Were they related? Historical fiction, I know, but all coincidences need not be seen through the lens of paranoia. Some might just be the workings of the Spirit, or god's grace. Oh, and dancing, too. Life was beginning to look up.

My job started on the first Monday after Labor Day. I met with my boss, and then went over to the shelter, to look through the log book, detailing any issues with the residents, and reviewed the rules. The office was very small, barely room for two people and a desk.

There was a knock on the door. It was a woman from the Department of Welfare. She asked to see my resume, but I did not have one with me, and I told her that my boss had the resume, and she could probably get it from her. She then said, "Usually these jobs go to women." I sort of shrugged and said I did not know anything about that, my predecessor was a woman, and she might better talk with my boss. She said she would. Until that morning, I did not even know who funded the shelter.

The shelter itself was mixed, a dorm room for women, and a dorm room for men. It was a sober shelter, and any one drinking or using drugs, anywhere, if they were caught, would be kicked out. The residents had to leave during the day; one of my duties was to help them find work. The rule was that they could only stay 3 months, and then had to transition into more permanent housing. The ones who did this successfully were usually the alcoholics, in recovery, who were maintaining their sobriety, and would transition into halfway houses managed by the same agency. The others would drift from city to city, staying in the homeless shelters, really, very crowded, but free hostels, which included a breakfast and a dinner.

The dinners were put on by various religious or non-profit organizations, and they tended to zealously guard their opportunities to serve. There were always more people wanting to help than we had slots. People also were donating food to us, leaving it on our doorstep, not that we really needed it, or wanted it. I realized that we could become a food pantry, go through all the food stored in our pantry, get rid of the dated food, and mark the date of donation of all the canned goods which were left for us. The residents help with this. As I recall, we opened for a hour a day, anyone could come, as long as they were sober, and would be able to take some of our food. I thought it was neat, that a homeless shelter was providing the staff, the residents, to give out food to the hungry.

Part of my job was to manage a day shelter, in a building about half a mile from the overnight shelter. It was created the year before, and it was created without funding. I was asked to raise the money to fund it, which I tried to do, unsuccessfully. About this time, I, or I guess I should say we, discovered that the CFO of the agency had no idea of what he was doing, and the books were not only a complete mess, but the agency had

far less cash than it though it had. My shelter was but a very small part of the organization, in terms of budget, but it did have considerable public awareness, not only because it was dealing with the public scandal of homelessness, but also because of the religious organizations and non-profits who put on the evening meals.

That meant that even though there was a crisis, when the agency received FEMA money's, the shelter was encouraged to spend the money. I was told to go to a Wholesale club, B.J.'s, as I recall, and spend thousands of dollars. I had requested, when I started, to have a computer and printer, because there was none at the shelter, and I was computer literate, and this was approved, and the rest of the money I spent on whatever I thought the shelter might need. I did not really know, because I had been there less than a month.

Looking back, I should have been either more paranoid, or less honest, because it was an opportunity ripe for misuse. I might have bought things for my personal use, thinking no one would be the wiser, and then found out that they were far more wise than I thought, and were looking for that feathering of my own nest. But, I am still simple, and did not even think that it might have been a test of my honesty until several years later.

I had two associate directors. One had been a sergeant in the army, and was a Holiness church minister. The other was a woman who had worked at the shelter for several years. They had both wanted to become the director of the shelter. I think one of the reasons an outside person was hired was because, aside from some basic qualifications, if one got hired, the other would have quit. My guess also is that the woman from the state, who showed up my first morning, was dissapointed that the female assistant director had not been hired.

Almost immediately, a problem came up. The weekend supervisor for the day shelter had not shown up, and the administrator of the addiction programs was bullshit. She counted on the shelter being a safe, and supervised, place to be open for her clients in recovery. It was not. Since I was the person's supervisor, it was my duty to sort things out. I talked to the miscreant and he gave me weak story about missing the boat back from Martha's Vineyard. Something was wrong. My suspicion was he had been drunk, an absolute no-no, as far as I was concerned. Too many of the clients were struggling too hard on their recovery to have staff members abusing alcohol. Addicts can spot other addicts a mile away.

What to do? He had been hired by my predecessor, and I got the sense he was a close friend of hers. She had put her heart and soul into the shelter, and had left for “deeply personal reasons.” Most likely, she also was burned out. I decided that he should not be fired, which I could have done, but put on probation, and his direct supervisor would not be me, but the Holiness minister/drill sergeant. He was a hard ass, but he was also trusted and respected by the other staff at the agency. Rather than accept this plan, the reprobate quit. Both my supervisor, and the director of the rehab program thought I did this very well.

The Department of Mental Health provided us with a once a week social worker, who monitored the mental health of the residents. It was her first year out of social work school; she was an out of the closet lesbian. At least I thought so. In November, at our meeting to discuss the clients, as we were crowded in our office, three or four of us, really crowded, she told us she had a terrible cold. I said, “Well, I won't kiss you.”

Later that week, my boss called me, told me I had to apologize to the social worker, not just to her, and not just to the social worker's supervisor, but in front of the supervisor of the supervisor of the social worker. The appointment date and time was sent, we drove what must have been an hour to the meeting, I apologized, and my boss told me quite clearly to never let such a thing happen again.

The female assistant director and I had a rough relationship. She resented that I had the job, and I found her really grating. In December, she quit, and then I learned that she had gone to my boss, complaining that sometimes I gave her dirty looks, I was angry with her. My boss then told me, good work, she was a thorn in the side of your predecessor also.

I guess I was tone deaf to the thin ice on which I was skating. I knew that some of the residents were using drugs, not in the shelter, but in their life. One young woman had a pacifier necklace, an accouterment for people who use Ecstasy, because one of its die effects is to make you grind your teeth, but the pacifier will block this. Anyway, I could not accuse her directly, but, when the three month term of her stay at the shelter was up, I told her it was time to move on. She was shocked. In the old days, people stayed at the shelter as long as they wanted. The rule was not enforced, but, from my perspective, the rule should have been enforced, because there was no shortage of people needing the beds, and the beds were intended to be temporary. Remember, I had been homeless, and had spent a month at the Catholic Worker farm. I knew from my personal experience what the issues were.

She went to the woman's advocacy center of the agency, they complained to my boss, and once again, I was out of a job. As I recall, I was put on unemployment, and used the time I had to look complete a study of voting participation in Boston, using the recently released population data, by precinct, and entering in the votes for school committee and mayoral candidates, by precinct. The first was automated. I got it directly from the census bureau. The second, I did by hand, for about five or six elections, and, as I remember, 536 precincts.

I discovered something already well known. Voting participation in city elections is extremely low, 5% or 10% of eligible voters, and that this is amplified in minority precincts, whose participation is even lower. Unless, of course, the candidate is black. When Mel King ran for Mayor, participation in minority precincts shot up. I wrote this up, tried to get it published, which did not happen, and networked to the activist groups I knew. No-one was interested. I had intended to start a business, Demographic Data I called it, complete with business cards and a report, but it got nowhere. I was becoming an entrepreneur.

I next was hired as a Host Community Developer with SHARE New England. SHARE was, it no longer exists, a non-profit, self funding food distribution program. A quick check on Google showed only one still alive, in [Philadelphia](#), and the distinguishing characteristic of the program has become the tail of a much larger food distribution enterprise.

The way SHARE worked, back then, was on the first weekend of the month, people would pay \$15, cash or food stamps, and in return, on the third weekend of the month, would receive a package of food worth about \$30, enough, really, for two people for a week. To qualify, they had to have spent two hours a month in a voluntary activity, all the way from reading books to children, or checking in on elderly people, or volunteering at the drop in center, or in helping share bag and distribute the packages of food. This is how SHARE made the finances work. We would buy food wholesale, potatoes in 50 pound bags, and divide them into five pound bags. The labor, except for us minimal staff, was free, as were the distribution points, typically churches and senior centers.

My job was to smooth things over at the fifty or so sites in Middlesex and Essex counties, the two counties north of Boston, and establish new sites. The territory had been pretty well worked over by my predecessor, who was opening sites in Maine and

New Hampshire. I tried by going to unemployment offices, and welfare offices. The Senior Centers and Food Pantries had already been enlisted. I don't think I developed more than one or two sites, and, as I remember, they came on line because they were interested, not because of my efforts. I also distributed PSA's to all the local newspapers and radio stations, for the entire area which we served, all of New England except for, as I remember, Connecticut.

Most of the participants in the program were the elderly and the working poor who, even if they received food stamps, wanted to pay cash for the food package. If they did receive food stamps, I think there was a sense of shame about food stamps, and since they had to sign up for the package at the distribution point, where there friends and co-volunteers were, they were proud enough to want to pay cash.

It was a brilliant, food providing, community building, wholesome system, combining the best elements of non-profit service with the best elements of business. Did I mention that it was self-funding? Brilliant!

There were of course frustrations. One of my biggest was the church food pantries. They, typically, with the best of intentions, would front a family, or person, a package. As I understood it, the idea was that if they liked the food, they would then pay for the next one. But the clients of the pantry who received the package would be given the next month's, and the next month's, so it became like a dole, and not a smart shopping decision. To me, the churches were enabling a dependent relationship, rather than encouraging self reliance. After all, if they liked the food, it was a good deal, and the volunteer commitment served to strengthen communal bonds, exactly what a religious organization is all about.

I contacted a friend from my Oberlin days, who lived in Boston had become a syndicated columnist on issues of economics, and he published a very positive opinion piece in the Boston Globe, which was syndicated throughout the country. Thank you, again, Bob Kutner. I was very happy working for an organization I believed in.

The expansion that lead me, and another person, to be hired turned out to be ill considered. The organization was not bringing in enough new participants to pay for us, especially after the construction of a gigantic freezer, and the extra transportation costs accrued because of the extension of the catchment area. Last hired/first fired hit the two of us, and so I was again unemployed, scraping around for any kind of income.

Regarding my personal life, after a year and a half, I could see my kids without a supervisor, and was allowed to keep them for weekends. I celebrated the start of a normal relationship, when they stayed overnight in their room, with a trip to New York City. They played "Lost in New York" on the beds of the room where we were staying, and, when we went to the Guggenheim Museum, which I thought they would like because of the huge ramp, Jacob showed his taste in art by looking at one of the Picassos in the permanent collection, exclaiming "Ahhhh" as he approached it with his finger outstretched to touch it. Needless to say, the docent standing nearby jumped into action.

Betsy and I worked out a schedule, in which I had them Tuesday and Thursday nights, overnight. I would pick them up and drop them off at the school bus stop a block from where I was living. They would spend Saturday night through Sunday afternoon with me, so they could continue their association with First and Second Church.

Jacob had gross and fine motor deficits, was placed in a special kindergarten, and received Occupational Therapy up until 5th grade, as I remember. Rachael had no such deficits, but, because she was a sibling, also attended the kindergarten, as part of their well conceived normalization program. He also was socially isolated, so I was really glad when he made a friend on the street where we lived. Should I even be writing this? He is full grown now, in his thirties, married, the adult he wants to be, working as a teacher in Portland, OR, doing fine, but, back then, it was a struggle.

I continued going to First and Second Church, but also was checking out Parkway. I was, and am still, very impressed with Birch Aymer as a minister, and as an intellectual. He broad his deep learning of the Bible into his sermons. Once, at a Martin Luther King event, the local Orthodox rabbi read from the Hebrew Bible, in Hebrew, and then, in translation. But he was wrong! As I recall, the word in question had to do with the establishment of community, so it was important, and Birch, in his time to talk, rose to the occasion, extemporaneously re-translated the word, and delivered a 20 minute lecture on the history of the Christian Church, and how this word both informed the best of Christianity, and, when ignored, gave rise to the worst. When I complimented him on, he said he wished he it written out.

When I first started attending Parkway, it was a mostly white church with a few African Americans. Birch, and his wife, were black, from St. Maartens. Within two years, many of the white people had left, and many black people, a lot of them from the islands, Methodists and Anglicans, attended. I found myself attending a black church! For the

second time in my life, I was immersed in black culture.

Several vignettes: Celebrate Milton! Was forming, as an attempt to bring Milton's majority white population together with its minority population. (Each year, the high school class is about 1/3 of color.) The conveners asked the churches to send a representative, and Birch asked me to attend. I am sure that they had wanted a brown skin, but they got my white skin. They asked if I could arrange for our choir to sing at the celebration, and I said, yes, but they had to understand that the choir, and the hymns sung at the church, were scarcely different from those sung at the almost entirely white Congregational and Unitarian churches in town. Eventually, I resigned from the committee. For me, the white liberal racism disjunction was simply too frustrating, and I had enough problems in my life. Celebrate Milton continues, successfully, to this day.

I told Loretta about the church, and thought she might be interested in attending. Loretta was one of the people who helped me as a child supervisor, and had been my boss at the UUA. She had been pushed out of her job there, and was acting as a consultant to various international religious organizations. She came with me, and I got a lot of dirty looks from my black co-coreligionists there. I was breaking an unwritten rule, inter racial dating. A couple of years later, her son and his family, living in Milton, began attending, and, when the kids saw her, they said hello, using her first name, rather than her title, Dr. Williams. It had echoes of the Mammy, who took care of the children. Her son avoided me, and I asked her why. Her response was that he had to deal with white people all week, and did not want to have to also on Sunday.

I encouraged the kids to check out the Sunday school, but they were spoiled by the superior quality of UU religious education, especially as practiced by Yvonne Egdahl, at First and Second Church. Basically, she taught RE as an art class. I gave them their choice, so they went to First and Second.

Another time, there was a social event at Parkway, a barbecue, as I remember, and I brought a friend from Divinity School who, like me, had not been successful in the parish ministry, and, like me, white. As we walked towards the church, with people gathered outside of the entrance to the Parish Hall, she said to me, "These people know you." I said yes, of course. It was most natural to me, because we had sat in the pews together, but it was strange to her, because she had rarely, if ever, been in a social situation where we white people were spots of salt in an ocean of pepper. They also liked that she was white, because it was caste appropriate.

Not that I am a perfect anti-racist. Once, I was going into the local drug store, in Mattapan, with a largely black clientele, and, out of the blue, some one came up and fake slapped me in the gut. It was Birch. I had simply not seen him, but he had seen me, and was waking me up. All black people do not look alike.

Another time, I met him at church, and he called me "Bossman." I told him not to call me that. I did not like the reference to slavery. He asked me why, and I started to tell him, but then stopped. He asked again, and I started again, stopped and then looked into his eyes, until his eyes showed he understood I was not going to cheapen our relationship by letting my moral grandstanding get in the way. And then he said something that confused me: "I don't like the Unitarians." I was a Unitarian. It was only later, much later, that I figured out he was saying that he liked me, and thought the Unitarians had thrown me under the bus.

Methodist ministers move around. He was called to a church in New York, a very large church in Harlem. I attended Parkway several times after that, but the new minister was nothing like Birch, just a run of the mill preacher. I did visit the church in New York, once, but did not see Birch, and then learned he had a stroke, went back to the West Indies, and died in 2018. I was sorry to miss the memorial service here in Milton.

But, back to reality. I was scraping along financially, finding odd jobs, office temps. One evening the door bell rang. I had the kids that night, and Rachael went down to answer the door. It was the landlord's son, with a notice to quit. I was being evicted. The reason given was he wanted the apartment. He did not, it turned out, but I needed to find a place to live.

One of the town officials hooked me up with a family nearby, who could accommodate me, and the kids three nights a week, but after a few months, this turned disastrous. Actually, the first night foretold the disaster, when my host asked if he could drive me to an ATM so that he could borrow some money from me. I found an apartment, still in Milton, and rented that for about six months, but then the middle apartment in Fields Corner became vacant, so I moved there.

It was during this tumult that I met Judy. She is the patron saint of lost causes, and I certainly was a lost cause then. But I had something she desperately wanted, two small children, and she loves children.

Judy and I met each other at the Earth Day celebration at the Hatch Shell. Well, actually, I picked her up. I looked over and saw an incredibly beautiful woman, with a very short female friend, the oddest lesbian couple I had ever seen, and started talking. Her friend left, and we started talking more and more, and we knew the same people, and had the same evaluation of some of the players in affordable housing, and it seemed like a really good match, and, after a couple of months of getting to know each other, I introduced her to the kids. We were having dinner at Bertucci's in Braintree, and she showed them how to blow into the straws to have their wrappings fly through the air.

“Oh my,” I thought to myself. But the deed was done.

By the time I had met Judy, I had been evicted from the apartment on Hawthorn Road, for no special reason, had moved in to a house on Concord Avenue, in Milton, which was a disaster, and then rented an apartment on Blue Hill Terrace. But my tenants on the second floor of Montello Street had moved out, and I needed to either rent it, or live there myself. A recession was on, I had trouble renting the apartment, so I moved in.

It was, in fact, a very nice apartment, with fond memories from when Betsy and I lived when we were together, Jacob was just learning to walk, and Rachael was born.

And Judy was a keeper. No matter what our problems were in the future, and we did have problems, she was and is a good soul, trustworthy and generous. She desperately wanted to have children of her own, but, as she found out later, could not conceive. Not that we did not try, often. A active sexual relationship was important to me.

She found me a job, fixing up a friend's house in Newton, minor repairs. I screwed it up royally. It required tile work, which I figured I could do. I could not, and still cannot.

Then, as I recall, through a temp agency, I found a position as an administrative assistant in the office of the Physics Department at MIT. It was low stress, a direct train ride from Fields Corner to Kendall Square, and I was working with interesting people, both at the support staff level, and at the professional level. My job was to keep class records for several of the professors, and do other, odd, administrative jobs. It was not at all a challenge to me. It was through an office temp agency, only for three or four months, but it got my foot in the door. I thought I might convert it to steady employment, long term, and get on with my life.

The professors liked me, especially after they got to know me, and found out how smart I was, and how interested in science. One of them, who worked half time at CERN in Europe, even took me over to the small cyclotron MIT then had in one of its old, since demolished, wooden buildings. I was fascinated. It was just a big, circular hunk of iron, sitting in the middle of a room about the size of a large living room, and he told me how it worked. I believe it was from the late 30's or early 40's, and had been replaced by the cyclotron that Harvard and MIT jointly constructed, near the Divinity school. Modern cyclotrons, like the one at CERN, are miles in diameter.

Another professor had a friend involved with City Year, and thought I would be a good match. He forwarded my resume. Nothing came back. I was angling for any job that came up as an administrative assistant, but I overheard, one day, in the hallway, "Sent your name to Washington, but they said no." Was I hearing things? Maybe. This is in the early nineties, so it is so long ago, it might have been a dream. But I did approach the Dean of the School of Science at MIT, who had been chair of the Standing Committee at the Concord church when I was there, hoping ... He said, "Sorry, can't help you." At the end of the semester, temp position ended, and I was again unemployed.

Judy came to the rescue. A friend of hers worked for the City of Boston, in what is now the Department of Neighborhood Development, and he needed someone to replace one of his staff who was on sick leave. I needed to be hired through a temp agency, because it was a temp job, which was accomplished, and I figured I had a foot in the door. After all, I was then a Boston resident, and Boston had a residency requirement for its employees and maybe a job in the city bureaucracy was headed my way.

Richard and I got along well. He had a civil service job, which meant that he was a union employee, and protected from political nonsense. His job was to make sure that the management of city owned properties was done in accordance with the funding laws of the state and federal government. He did his job dutifully, sometimes too dutifully, but since he was civil service, he was protected. I also observed him being ordered to sign off on a document, after having told his boss that it was outside of the guidelines. "Sign it!," he was ordered. He did. He looked at me. I was a witness.

My job was to examine funding proposals for the development of properties and then he would evaluate them, based on the funder's criteria. One I remember quite distinctly. I knew the building. It was located at Peabody Square, that is, the Ashmont

Red Line station. As I looked at the structure of the deal, converting an apartment building into subsidized housing, I realized that the developer was getting a substantial amount of money, up front, no matter what happened, and then would either own the building or have an income stream, I don't remember which, after the work was done. It was clearly a sweetheart deal. I pointed this out to Richard, and he looked at me, blank-faced, and said, "Yes."

Later, I observed that he was working on a spreadsheet, Excel based, typing in narrative next to the figures. I pointed out to him that the Microsoft Office family of programs was designed to link text, using Word, to spreadsheets, using Excel, to databases, using Access. I thought he ignored me.

But a couple of weeks later, he told me that he had a special project for me. Boston, being an older city, has old housing stock, and much of it was poisoned with lead paint, both interior and exterior. The city, the state, and the federal government, had funded a variety of programs over the years, combinations of grants and loans, at various rates, depending on the year of the program. But the city had no real good idea of the status of the loans, and the city was interested in servicing those loans, rather than paying a bank to do it. My task was to set up that system, to look at each of the contracts, ascertain its terms, create an amortization schedule, and then produce a monthly letter, informing each loan recipient the amount due each month, and the remaining principle owed, just like you get from a bank if you have mortgage.

With the help of an IT person, I did just that, creating an Access database which included the recipient of the loan, the address of the property, the date of the loan, the terms of the loan, etc. The calculations were performed in a linked Excel spreadsheet, and the letters would be generated through a Word mail merge function.

It turned out that almost all the loans were improperly constructed. Not only, as suspected, were some recipients "forgetting" to pay their loans back, but the loans and payments schedules were such that some people would never have paid off the loans at the end of the term, and others would have paid off their loans years before the end of the term. I asked my IT associate to check my system. She did, and said to me, "the level of incompetence in the agency was truly astounding."

I soon was no longer needed, the person I replaced had come back to work, and there was no other position for me at the agency. My fantasy of getting a job with the city was just that. I was able to get another temp job at a company finishing up some loose

ends on the big dig, and used that time to peddle my report on the lead paint program, hoping someone would hire me because of my demonstrated skill. No one bit. What did happen was that the lead paint program was suspended for about six months. Richard later told me that my integrated system had been adopted agency wide.

Whenever I was looking for work, I would go to the nearest Home Depot, to see if they needed someone. They never did. I think I went there about five times, but in the Fall I was in the right place at the right time. A kitchen designer had just quit. They needed someone right away. The store manager asked, "Had you ever designed any kitchens?" I said "Yes, one, in California." He said, "Claim it was three." And then he asked, "Was I comfortable with computers?" I said, "Yes, of course." I was hired. He told me common sense was the best attribute if you wanted to be happy at Home Depot. The manager of my department's name was Paul Sullivan.

I write his name because at the same time, an apartment opened up in Milton, on Hawthorn Road, down the street from where I had lived before. It was a very nice apartment, a duplex, with four bedrooms on the top floor, a large living room, sun room, and dining room, and small kitchen. It was perfect for me, and it was affordable, exactly what I could get for renting the apartment where I was living in Fields Corner. The owner of the building was no longer able to climb the stairs to the apartment, and was going into senior housing. By chance, by fate, by luck, by no connection at all, his name was Paul O'Sullivan.

Judy agreed to leave Somerville, where she was living, and move in with me. A new chapter in my life was beginning.