

Foreword

Why would anyone want to read a story about someone else's *ordinary* life? Most biographies and autobiographies are written about people who are, or were famous, or at least infamous. One reason we often want to be rich and famous is because we believe these accomplishments will make us more important, or more *significant* than just being *ordinary*. Even if we do not believe we will truly be more important, we are convinced other people will see us as more valuable, and that is *good enough* reason to pursue fame and fortune.

Of course, while many people want fame and fortune, only a few are committed to pursuing it, and fewer still succeed in acquiring both. Whether or not we pursue fame and fortune, most of us are interested in the stories of those who succeed in acquiring one, or both, or even if they fail in some spectacular way. Since most of us lead lives far from fame and fortune—do you think it would be helpful to have real models for how to lead ordinary lives that are in fact noble, heroic, internally fulfilled, well-lived and worth loving?

Ironically, if we study the lives of the rich and famous, we soon learn that everyone is *ordinary*—why?—because we are all subject to aging, illness, and death. Anyone, who does not suffer from these painful human limitations, i.e. is truly immortal, would indeed be *special*—but since Mother Nature allows no exceptions, everyone is *ordinary*. So sad!

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If we study famous people: for instance, political heroes and villains, great artists, writers, entertainers, businessmen, scientists, religious leaders or gurus, what do we learn? We soon learn that neither fame nor fortune leads to internal fulfillment, a noble or heroic life, or to mastering the ability to live well, love whole-heartedly, and become genuinely wise.

We also learn that only a few people who attain fame and fortune—just like only a few people who do **not** obtain fame and fortune—ever become internally developed enough to create internal fulfillment and lasting happiness. The key to a well-lived and loved life is not *fame or fortune*, it is the *internal development* necessary to *complete* all our developmental tasks, and *master* all our needs and potentials.

A few famous people are self-educated, just like a few anonymous people educate themselves in how to master the *internal* dimensions of human life. Normally we think of *anonymous* people as ordinary, and *famous* people as special, but now we know that everyone is ordinary, we see the real difference between people is the *degree of internal development* they manage to create in one short human lifetime.

From mental and emotional development comes everything people need to make their lives genuinely significant, *defined* by love and wisdom, *fulfilled* by mastering every need and potential, *comforted* by intimacy, and *energized* by beauty. I have spent my *anonymous* life with one purpose, to *learn the lessons* Mother Nature so earnestly wants to teach us. These lessons are critical, not only to each person's lasting happiness, but also to the long-term survival of our species.

Timeless Lessons From a Well-lived & Loved Ordinary Life

That is the long answer to my short opening question, and the reason I am writing this book: that is, it is my intention to share the "agony and the ecstasy", as well as all the critical and timeless lessons I learned in my lifetime pursuit of another question, "What, *if anything*, will make human life *internally* satisfying and meaningful?"

I have answered this question through sixty-five years of observing, reasoning, making hypotheses, experimenting, learning, and then starting over on another level, or another angle of this question and its many answers until now, I understand what is needed. The process I followed is the same as everyone who has ever learned something new about human life and contributed useful insights and information.

My thought is that in sharing the *process* that shaped me, and the timeless *lessons* I learned from my own experience, Mother Nature, and other people, any truly interested reader will soon acquire insight into how to *learn about* and *love* the mystery of this uniquely human experience of being alive.

Even more important than acquiring insight into how to learn about and love life, is to develop a *burning desire* to live well, love whole-heartedly, and become wise. Notice, I did not mention *enjoying life*. Normally, we are taught that the highest goal of life is to *have fun* and *enjoy ourselves*.

Here in the good old US of A, we pursue this purpose with frantic abandon. The problem is that whatever we do for the sole purpose of *enjoyment* ultimately becomes empty, unfulfilling, and painful. Paradoxically, the most fun life offers is a result of *working* for internal development.

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My saying that *life-affirming work* will trump *mindless fun* will never convince anyone. However, if someone reads my story and subsequently sees the real joys, trials, pains, and lasting fulfillment of mastering internal needs and potentials in a context that is personal, connected to every stage of life, and compelling in the degree of *consciousness, caring, and internal competence* that becomes possible, then maybe this person will want to make his/her life well-lived and loved.

It was difficult for me to create a structure to tell my story so it would accomplish the aforementioned goals. Since my story is that of an anonymous man leading an ordinary life, what could I offer that would benefit other people? While my life is *ordinary* and I am *anonymous*, my life's *purpose* is *special* in that few people ever pursue it.

Some people who become famous do so largely because they pursue a purpose to *learn about* and *love life*, and they *want to contribute* to human awareness. Abraham Lincoln, Anne Frank, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Ghandi, Lao Tsu, and legions of scientists, artists and writers have pursued this purpose and contributed to our collective consciousness.

The problem is we may respect and admire these people, but since their *purposes and process* are usually invisible to us, we do not *imitate* them and then *build* on their contributions, so each individual, as well as the entire species can evolve into fulfilling our human potentials.

Since my life's purpose has been to find needs and feed them, I am using my story to *experientially* define the *purposes and process* required to fulfill our uniquely human *potentials*.

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The *structure* for my story is based on connecting significant *external* events with my *internal responses* and the *lessons* I learned at each stage of life: childhood, adolescence, young adult, middle-aged adult, and presently as a senior citizen. The *purpose* for telling my story is to offer a *conscious response* to being alive that is different from what we typically learn through our parents, peers, teachers and culture.

In the process of telling the story of an ordinary man with a special purpose and an unusual process, I am introducing a new way to think about anyone's biography, or life story. Rather than measure our lives in terms of *external* accomplishments, successes, failures and impact on others; I am offering a *process* where we measure our lives in terms of the *internal development* of our minds and emotions.

Now, we can value our lives in terms of what we come to *understand*, the *love* we experience and express, the *wisdom* we develop, and the *simple innocent joy* we derive from the *experience of beauty*. Whether it is beauty in Nature, music, art, literature, a truth succinctly stated, or a child's delight in just being alive, we look for and discover *love, truth, beauty and wisdom* in every nook and cranny of everyday life.

This *conscious* response to being alive is different from today's world of frantic lifestyles and intense competitions driven by fear of being left-out, or just not *getting enough*—not enough success, approval, security or entertainment. A *conscious* response to being alive is *similar* to Anne Frank and Abraham Lincoln, et.al., but is *different* in that what they did naturally, we must learn step by clearly defined step.

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Clearly defining each step in mental and emotional development is what my life's work has been devoted to—I just didn't know when I began this is where answering my life-defining question would lead. Nor did I know that I would lay the foundation for a new branch of psychology—the *science of mental and emotional development*.

Nor, did I expect to learn that human history is defined by the *internal development* of all the leaders and followers that together create and maintain the political, economic, educational and religious institutions that define everyone's values, purposes, thoughts, feelings and behaviors, which in turn, serve to determine the course of human history, as well as the fate of every individual, couple, family, and culture.

One obvious lesson I have learned is that *the character of a culture is created and mirrored by the character of the majority of individuals that populate that culture*. What this lesson means is that to change the course of history from self-destructive to life-affirming, we must start by rebuilding our own characters. For the moment, as far as I know my work is the only path available for learning precisely how to build a *conscious character* based on *expressing love, pursuing truth, experiencing beauty and developing wisdom*.

In reading this book, you will see how an *ordinary person* struggled to develop a *conscious character* based on what he learned from the *famous and anonymous* people he respected, admired and studied, and then tried to expand their legacy. Perhaps, you will be both challenged and inspired to learn from my experience, and will want to do something similar.

Awareness of Death Is the Birth of Life

My first five years were in most ways ordinary, but also filled with *intense experiences*, which along with my unique *reactions* created the *internal patterns* that defined my *response to being alive*. In fact, most people are internally formed in their first five years, however in my case, largely because of training and experiences in later life, and partly because of my genetic inclinations, I am more aware of that process and its effect on forming my character than most people.

To begin with, I spent the first ten days of life without any contact with my mother. As it turns out, she was sick with pneumonia and kept under quarantine, and I was left alone in a crib in the baby room. While I have no memory of this experience it was a signal from Mother Nature, which she has repeated like a drum-beat throughout my life, that even though I was just a new-born, I was all alone and on my own in an impersonal and emotionally cold world.

This message was repeated by my parents over the next few years. My mother was an emotionally sentimental, self-absorbed person who prided herself on being inadequate, and my father was an *externally competent* man who *internally* was more than a match for my mother's *total incompetence*. Together, they made a parenting team that cruelly reinforced my experience of the first ten days — *kid, you're on your own!*

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For instance, when I was two my mother got a part-time job at the Detroit library working three or four hours a day to make some extra money. Since the burden of this job was overwhelming to my mother, both parents decided it would be best if I stayed with my grandmother(mother's mother), from Monday morning thru Friday evening. This presented a traumatic situation for me, and since I had not yet *manned-up*, I "*cried like a baby*" when leaving my parents on Monday morning, and again when leaving grandmother on Friday evening. I think both parents felt disgusted by my behavior.

Later, after this situation had gone on for over two years, I began to stutter, so at age 4, my parents took me to a child psychologist who upon hearing about the arrangement said in no uncertain terms it had to cease. Reluctantly, my parents followed her advice.

This was my first experience with Chang Tsu's famous story and question, "Good luck, bad luck? Don't know!" In the story, a Chinese farmer's son falls out of a tree and breaks his leg and forever has a limp, and Chang Tsu asks, "Good luck, bad luck? Don't know!" When war breaks out and the army comes by to force his son's enlistment, they pass him by because of his limp, so Chang Tsu asks again, "Good luck, bad luck. Don't know!"

Being tossed back and forth between my parents and grandmother was painful for me, and that pain was doubled because I knew my parents experienced me as a burden and did not want me around, still was it *good luck or bad luck*? At the time I didn't know, but now it seems it was good luck.

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The *good luck* part was that my grandmother loved me, and I loved her. She liked the fact that I was curious, had a precocious vocabulary, and was interested in learning about life and her. She also liked having the experience of raising a little boy after four girls. She was tough-minded, more than a little masculine, and had endured the depression and a coldly distant Neanderthal for a husband, so we were just what the other needed at a painful point in both our lives.

Without the experience with my grandmother in those first five critical years, I would not have known what it was to love and be loved by someone I respected and admired. *So while traumatic and painful, it was also exceeding good luck!* This taught me several lessons that I intuitively, rather than precisely or consciously recorded into my little brain.

One lesson that has served me well, and is different from the attitudes of most people I have encountered over my lifetime, is that I learned to **not** fear pain. Fear of pain, emotional and physical, tends to make us *manipulative* in our attempts to avoid and control it. On the other hand, if we accept pain as an inevitable part of everyday life, and at the same time develop a *burning desire* to *understand* every part of our experience of being alive, then we are internally free to *innocently* pursue the truth wherever she leads.

Early on I learned that emotional pain, while unpleasant, didn't kill me, and instead taught me about life and love, and provided experiences critical to my development. We all need to learn this lesson in our own way, and until we do, we are imprisoned by our fear of pain that is inescapable.

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Exploring & Discovering

There were two other very unexpected *collateral benefits* of being shunted back and forth between my parents and grandma. Both were incorporated into my larger purpose to *explore* the facts and *discover* what is true in this mysterious world of human life. The first collateral benefit occurred on the bus ride to downtown Detroit where the psychologists' office was located. My parents had only one car that my dad used to drive to work, so mom and I took the bus.

In the little suburb town of Clawson, I had never seen a person of color, so when a black man got on the bus I was surprised and intrigued. I immediately walked over to sit beside him – which surprised him and my mother. Then, I surprised him even more by asking questions about his life. I was not yet 4 and 1/2, but already had experience giving energy and attention by asking people about their lives.

He seemed happy to oblige by answering my questions, and we engaged in a delightful conversation that seemed satisfying to us both. When mom and I disembarked at our stop, my new friend and I said an intensely warm goodbye, with a little sadness knowing we would never speak again. What makes this interaction significant?

For one, this was my first conversation with a person of color. Before meeting this black man, I did not know people came in different colors. Secondly, our conversation was based on my innocent desire to understand some part of this man's life, and he just as innocently answered my questions.

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Third, I really liked him and he liked me, so our interaction was emotionally warm. He seemed kindly, as well as intelligent, authentic and genuine, and as a result, someone I could respect. One consequence is that I developed a *reverse prejudice*. *Normal prejudice* is when we create a *critical attitude* toward a whole class of people or experiences based on one sample, or even no samples and just some ideas or beliefs. *Reverse prejudice* (I made it up!) is when we develop a *warm or positive attitude* toward a whole class of people based on one sample.

As a consequence of this experience I developed a built-in warm feeling toward people of color based solely on one interaction with a friendly black man who enjoyed talking with a lonely white kid from the suburbs. Over the years, I learned that people of color, just like colorless white people, have all types in their midst and not all are warm, friendly, genuine and authentic. Nonetheless, I give everyone (*regardless of color*), the benefit of the doubt upon first meeting, but still harbor an intuitive warmth toward people of color.

One lesson I derived from this experience came from observing later on in life that my parents were intellectually liberal and against racism, and pro-tolerance. I could also see that where they were *intellectually liberal*, I learned from *experience* that skin color—like education, social status, power or wealth—means nothing in measuring anyone's value.

Rather, warmth and kindness, as well as being genuine and authentic and capable of whole-hearted caring are real measures of someone's value, including yours and mine.

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The other lesson from this *good luck – bad luck* experience came from the psychologist observing me with the other kids. I was playing with a red Tonka truck and another boy came up and asked for it, and I immediately gave it to him. The psychologist warned my mother that I needed to be taught to *stick-up* for myself and hang-onto my toys. My mother spoke to me about giving up my toy so easily, and I did not know how to say it at the time, but after thinking about it I saw that I did not experience giving up the toy as a loss – because I did **not** care about toys or playing.

Even then, I was a serious little kid with a strong sense of urgency, and a yet to be determined mission in life. Every now and then I tried to value toys and playing, but never felt these activities had any *purpose or meaning*, so why do them? Perhaps kids like me will eventually be identified as having a "*wet blanket gene*", or the "*party pooper personality syndrome*."

An Auspicious Snowstorm

Four was a watershed year for me in that many life-forming experiences occurred that were made even more significant because I remember them in detail! Prior to age four my memory is sketchy, and I cannot discern precisely how much I remember from what I have been told. One experience that I remember vividly and with intense fondness, is a day in late November when Karen and I walked alone to kindergarten in a snowstorm with enormous flakes so thick, soft, and heavy they blotted out both visibility and sound.

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Karen lived next door, and it was a four block walk from home to school. We had to pass thru a city park with a dirt path lined with majestic chestnut trees and a quaint old two-story house that had been made into a library and was to be a future source for *exploring and discovering*, and my primary sanctuary. Immersed in the silence and snow, Karen and I walked mesmerized by the moment, feeling alive and alone, but sharing this magic together as we walked hand in hand. It was all so shockingly romantic!

On the way, we had to cross a main artery predictably named *Main Street*, not able to see ten feet in front of us. Something I doubt many parents today would be comfortable sending their four and five year old children out to do. For us, though, it was no big deal. While Karen was older, she was five and six months, and I was four and nine months, I felt responsible for her, protective, and competent.

Surprisingly, Karen was quite relaxed in relying on me and seemed to accept my grandiose assessment of my role without question. So when we were close to school, and I stopped to throw snowballs at a telephone pole, Karen stood to one side watching me without a thought about the time.

For my side, I remember looking at her and seeing her red hair flowing out from under her wool cap, her cute freckled face with her chin down and her eyes coyly looking up at me. She was dressed in a knee length winter coat with buttons down the front and fur topped snow boots. Standing there in the snow with her hands behind her back, she was painfully pretty, agonizingly innocent, and I loved her.

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I knew at the time that I had stumbled into a timeless quintessential moment, and I did not want it to end. As a result, we stayed there for two hours before going to school. What I did not anticipate was that we were visible to the kindergarten teacher the whole time. She was an unstable person who after my year in kindergarten was hospitalized with a "*nervous breakdown*". I don't take credit for that event, but on the other hand, it would not bother me terribly to think I might have contributed in some small way!

In any case, when we came in she unleashed on me with total fury. Her anger was expressed thru yelling and corporal punishment that was allowed in those days. I was happy she only punished me. She and I agreed that Karen was an innocent bystander, and I was the responsible culprit.

The teacher took my behavior as a personal insult, and could not understand that it was not about her, or school, or anything normal. Instead, I was prioritizing according to my assessment of what was important. I knew I was experiencing a *magical moment* that could neither be replaced or repeated, and therefore this moment took precedent over being in school on time – hands down, no question.

This attitude of standing alone and assessing value via my own framework began here in this experience, and I have developed it over a lifetime. One consequence is that I don't always do what people expect, or follow every rule, but the priorities I choose are innocently motivated, don't hurt anyone, but sometimes, piss people off. Sadly – I had a talent for pissing-off my parents, and a few other authorities.

My Brother is Born

If four was a watershed, five was pivotal. Early in my fifth year my brother was born. For me, the first most significant aspect of this event was that I have no memory of my mother looking pregnant. It has been perplexing to me that I blocked this obvious fact from my observations. I think it might have something to do with being told that babies were brought by storks, and I could not both believe the stork story and acknowledge my mother's physical changes.

The other, and more significant aspect of my brother's birth began with my mom going to the hospital to "get Dale." To my mind, I could not understand why if the stork brought the baby, why not *home delivery*? Why would mom have to go to a hospital? It didn't make sense.

Aside from my confusion, I did understand mom was going to the hospital and I felt she would come home tired, and I knew for certain she would have a new baby that would require energy and attention. Seeing these facts, and imagining mom coming home to a house my father allowed to be a shambles, I thought it would energize her to return to a house that was perfectly clean. So I asked for the day she was coming home, and the day before I cleaned the entire house—living room, kitchen, bathroom and bedrooms.

While cleaning the house I remember thinking that I wanted it to look like an adult had done the job, not a little boy. So I paid attention to the details, like straightening the towels, polishing all the furniture, and making sure every-

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thing was put away, or in its proper place. When I was finished the house looked better than it had ever looked, and I was satisfied that I had accomplished my goal.

Indeed, when my mother walked in she was startled and shocked, and upon learning that I had done the cleaning, shocked me with the statement: "It looks like a *woman* did it." I had wanted it to look like an *adult* cleaned the house, and was not prepared for the *woman* thing. This statement triggered my first and really only moment of homosexual panic. Not something a five year old is prepared to handle.

Quickly, however, my brain went into action to handle this affront, and I saw that given my dad had neither noticed or cared about the state of the house and my mom's arrival, and since he never cleaned, in my mom's mind a thoughtful cleaning must be something "only a woman would do." This explanation worked to ease my mind and rescue confidence in my budding masculinity.

It also brought up a new and disturbing awareness. It was becoming apparent that even though I was only five, and a little boy, I could observe, imagine, and care about my mother's perspective, and as far as I could tell from his words and behavior, my father neither saw or cared about my mother's perspective. It was also beginning to dawn on me that neither parent saw my perspective, or cared about it.

The problem was that my parents were supposed to be all-knowing adults, and they had less awareness than I did. In my young mind the many *meanings* in this lesson were just beginning to grow, and would continue for decades.

Grandma's Death & The Birth of Purpose

About six months after Dale's birth in April, my grandmother died. She was only 55, and one day told my grandfather she had a headache and was going to lie down for awhile. She had a massive stroke, and died that afternoon. This was one of the few times mom and I were on the same page with a similar response, we were both devastated. The source of our devastation, however, was different.

Mom was upset because she was emotionally dependent upon her mother for someone to lean on and to listen to her never-ending complaints and woes. I was upset because I lost the only person I could respect and admire, who liked me, and with whom I could share some of the pain and joy of everyday life. At least we both agreed that grandma was irreplaceable, even though we never directly discussed it.

One thing I was noticing about normal life—an unwritten rule said we should never discuss anything personal, real, or meaningful. The only polite topics of conversation were the weather, stories without point or purpose, judgments of people, events or politicians, or mindless nonsense.

So we could not talk about my grandmother's death, what this loss meant to each of us, or heaven forbid the fact that in time every one of us would be facing this same fate. Since we could not talk about death, we could not share loss. We also could not learn or grow, we could only *act* sad and serious, and then pass off these impersonal *images of caring* as bona fide grief. Didn't buy it then—don't buy it now.

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The problem is that if we don't see and care about another person's perspective and the unique facts of her life, we cannot grieve her when she dies. All we can grieve is the loss of advantages, as my mother did, but we cannot grieve the loss of the person. In part, because we never knew or genuinely cared about her. Instead, we are too self-absorbed and internally inadequate to care about anyone or anything other than how we feel, and what we want to get.

When my grandmother died, I spent lots of time thinking about her life. I could see that living through the depression she had known very lean and scary times. She had also raised four children and worked excessively hard in keeping home and family together. The final straw was marrying a man who was cold as stone, hard as nails, and totally lacking in any kind of affection, warmth, or personal conversation. Her life had been, as far as I could see, joyless in the extreme.

My grief for my grandmother was intensified by these insights. I could see my grandmother had been born with a potential for joy that was not fulfilled. Seeing this in my grandmother made me look at the other adults in my life to see what might be possible. While some adults were financially better-off than grandma, they were no better-off mentally and emotionally, and nowhere did I see people leading lives that I considered meaningful and complete.

These observations were very depressing and added to my grief. It seemed to me that human life was inherently without meaning—hence my lifetime purpose and question: *What, if anything, will make human life internally meaningful?*

The Die is Cast

Grandma's death, coming as it did so fast and unexpected—one moment she was alive and vital, seemingly healthy, and in the blink of an eye she was gone, taught me there is no security or certainty. This reality scared me, but the awareness of death also made me intensely conscious and viscerally aware that for the moment, I really was alive, and for as long as I had to live, *come heaven, hell or high water* (*Grandma era cliché*), I was going to make it meaningful.

The first step was to form my question and commit to a lifetime purpose to find the answers, if they exist, no matter what the cost in terms of energy, time, and effort. This first step laid the foundation for developing my mind and emotions, and structuring my entire life's work.

While grandma's death was a pivotal moment, I had already started forming my consciousness as I developed self-life and other-awareness in my early experiences. From the beginning of life, I was curious, wanted to understand, and was hungry for a connection to life and other people, but not willing to sacrifice integrity to avoid pain or gain approval.

By integrity, I mean I wouldn't pretend something was true when in fact I knew it wasn't no matter the cost in pain, disapproval, or loneliness. This level of integrity was easy to adopt once the reality of death imprinted on my brain. Since in the end all things are lost, then pleasure, or avoidance of pain, disapproval or loneliness is temporary, but real integrity is meaningful, so why give up gold for brass?

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In the first five years, I discovered the value of nature, quintessential moments, beauty, the satisfaction of making observations, asking questions, and learning about myself, life, and other people. In this formative period, I learned and loved, experienced death, abandonment and nurturing, and discovered that unlike how they advertise themselves, adults were often unaware and disturbingly unreasonable. This taught me to stand alone, rely on myself, and let the chips fall where they may.

These experiences and insights formed the foundation upon which I built my personality, purposes, and life. Next, we will see how this process unfolded in the second half of my childhood, the lessons I learned and relearned on new levels of depth, breadth and sophistication.

I hope you feel inspired to continue traveling with me in this adventure through what may be an unusual *internal* life wrapped in ordinary *external* events.

Following My Path to Learning, Loving & Living

The primary lesson from my first five years was that learning and loving are pre-requisites for all real living. I had learned from experience with my grandmother, Karen, the black man on the bus, my parents and peers that learning was a pre-requisite to loving, and both were required for the satisfaction and meaning necessary to be internally connected to every significant aspect of meaningful living.

The *primary lesson* from my first five years was also my first level of response to the question: "What, if anything, will make human life internally meaningful?" The next step in my exploration was to ask if there was anything that would be permanently satisfying and meaningful? While I had first-hand experience that learning and loving were satisfying, I did not know if the meaning would last, or be like other things and provide a moment of satisfaction that ultimately turns out to be a mirage, one more example of Shakespeare's "...sound and fury, signifying nothing."

One thing I noted was that no one in the small circle of adults and kids I knew had formed similar questions of life. What I saw was that other kids seemed to think having toys and endless playtime was the source of a "good life", and all real kid happiness. Adults seemed to have a similar view – only their toys and entertainments were different.

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Adults also seemed to value success, security, luxurious lifestyles, and like children, endless conversations without a single significant point or purpose. What I saw was that my alien view of what made life meaningful and worth living, did not even exist to other kids or adults, and no one seemed to agree that learning and loving were critically important. As a result, I was mentally and emotionally isolated and profoundly alone—*externally* ordinary, but *internally* alien.

Grandma's death served to intensify my aloneness, and I grieved her loss for a long time. At my sixth birthday party, even my dad's sister's (Lorene) husband, Uncle Bub, saw the sadness in my face and in response made a shocking offer. He promised to get me a pony. Now that raised my spirits! I instantly envisioned a pinto pony with a thick mane, stocky body, intelligent eyes, and quiet demeanor. I also saw in my mind's eye precisely where he would live and how I would take care of him.

Our house in Clawson was tiny, but the garage was a huge left-over combination garage and barn complete with hay-loft and stalls that I could fix-up and make comfortable for my new pony. Very quickly I was totally hooked, in part because I desperately needed something alive to love and nurture, and a pony would have been perfect to devote my energy to, learn about, and love. A pony would also be a big project, and even as a child, I had a need for big projects.

The problem was that Uncle Bub was a glad-handing, hard-drinking, blow-hard GMC fleet truck salesman who physically abused my Aunt Lorene and promised me a pony

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with zero intention of keeping his promise. I knew at the time that as a human being, Uncle Bub was not trustworthy, but my hunger was so strong I chose to hope anyway. Of course, I had to deal with this severe disappointment, like every other event in my life, alone.

One strange consequence was a couple of months later I had a most vivid dream. In the dream, magically, I was given the task to take care of one pair each of all the different animals in the world, and they were all in my back yard! My back yard was large, but not big enough to hold two of each species of animal.

My dream was so real that I remember thinking with a moment of deep apprehension that feeding and cleaning-up after all these animals was going to take every minute of my time and energy for the rest of my life. While this aspect was daunting, my mind still leaped out of a deep sleep into total wakefulness with a full picture of my *dream as reality*, so I raced into the dining room to look into the back yard and see my menagerie of life.

I was eager to begin the lifelong project of caring for two each of all the world's animals, and I remember to this day my devastating disappointment. I looked into an empty back yard, did not believe my eyes, looked away and then back again, hoping my animals would appear, and they did not. Now it was dawning on me, "it was just a dream." The dream was so intense, and I saw all the animals so clearly in my mind, that I was shocked they did not exist in reality. These events and my responses were rich in life lessons.

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Lessons in Learning, Love & Loneliness

One lesson I learned was how much I longed for purposes and projects to nurture and love. Now I understand that in part, I was trying to compensate for parents who did not love me by searching for animals, people, and purposes to love. This was a life-affirming response to a painful and confusing reality. Normally people do not observe, or learn, that *giving what we want to receive* is the best way to nurture ourselves when there is no hope we will be nurtured.

With grandma gone there was no one to care about me, so I focused on finding purposes, people and animals for me to learn about, love and nurture. Made sense to me then, and since the facts in my life have not changed, it makes sense to me now. Sometimes, we acknowledge the need to love, but then never define the specific *skills, awareness, and purposes* required to offer the *experience* of love. Instead, we just assume that *feeling love* is quite enough.

This is what I see people assuming when taking on the role of parenting. We just assume that *feeling love* for our children is all that is required, so we never learn about a child's *internal needs*, or acquire the *skills and awareness* required to feed their needs—or the needs of a mate or friend. As a result, we often go thru our life spans ignorant of even the first step in *loving*, which as we have seen is *learning*. Too often, we advertise the image we are *good, caring, loving people*, when the truth is we have not developed the *skill or awareness* necessary to offer the experience of real love.

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In addition to compensating for parents who failed to love me, I wanted to create two other specific experiences: one, I wanted to create a *meaningful* life; and two, I wanted to experience a *conscious and visceral* connection to being alive. Learning about myself, life and other people provided both the *visceral connection* and the *internal meaning* I needed. An unexpected and collateral consequence, however, was it also created a lonely path that to date, no one in my personal acquaintance has wanted to share.

This unexpected consequence provided experiences that were critical in shaping my character and life. For instance, in order to follow my chosen path I had to stand alone and travel thru life without confirmation from anyone that I was on the right track, mostly without companions, and with no one who understood what I was doing. In spite of the limits, I proceeded, but it has had its costs, as well as benefits.

One cost is loneliness. For instance, what I experience as joyful, or satisfying and meaningful, other people view as work, painful, or *maybe of some value – but too hard and lonely*. When we value things differently from other people, we are seen as an outsider, strange, alien, and perhaps dangerous. As herd animals, we *instinctually ostracize* a person who is different, and welcome someone we feel is similar. Having a different view of life and purpose has qualified me as threatening to many people in the herd, so I live on the periphery.

Being an outsider has motivated me to find friendship with other *different* people I discover in books, and to fulfill my internal potentials. *Good luck – bad luck? Don't know!*

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Finding Friends – Real & Imaginary

Everyone needs friends, and the first choice is to have real flesh and blood friends who are still alive! As a child, I had a somewhat peripheral friendship with three boys—Billy and Bobbie down the street, and Greg across the street. Occasionally, we would get together for sandlot baseball or to fly kites, but except for Karen, I was mostly alone.

Karen was nine months older, lived next door, and we were best friends from the moment of my birth. Her mother used to bring her over to "*see the new baby.*" (me) She and I rode bikes, walked together thru fields and woods, shared in significant personal conversations, and played games. We relied on each other for the emotional warmth and safety we did not receive from our parents—although her parents were not nearly as cold, critical, and detached as mine.

My pattern in terms of finding friends has been the same all my life. I usually have one or two friends at a time, then sooner or later they move away and I have no friends for a very long time until someone new happens across my path. Most often, my friendships are formed around the energy and attention I provide, and if I ever stop providing these benefits, the relationship usually deteriorates and dies.

One consequence is that my most satisfying "*friendships*" have been imaginary! I began building a *library of imaginary friends* in the third grade when I found a set of about forty biographies of famous Americans in the tiny school library. (*It was actually a closet with a chair and several shelves of books.*)

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I knew the biographies were a set because they were all hardbound with the same blue cover, and were about the same length. They were mostly of men, the only woman was Betsy Ross, whose claim to fame, as everyone knows, was to make the American flag. The men in the biographies ranged from founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin to sports figures like Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, to inventors like Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison to soldiers like Stonewall Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee to presidents like Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt. There was even a biography on one black man, George Washington Carver – to match the one woman!

My *purpose* in reading all these biographies was to learn whether people famous for their accomplishments created lives that were more *meaningful* than ordinary people. I also wanted to learn what *motivated* famous people, how they saw themselves, and how they handled *intimate relationships* with friends, mates, and children.

Finally, I wanted to learn what famous people actually *understood* about themselves and life. For instance, did they understand any more than an ordinary person what makes life *worthwhile versus futile and empty*, and did they understand the source of their *motivations and purposes*, and in the end, were they *satisfied or disappointed* with their lives?

I read all the biographies, some several times, and in the end I learned many *timeless lessons*, and raised many *timely questions*. I also made a few lifetime "imaginary" friends!

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Imaginary Friends are Reliable

Flesh and blood friends are predictable, but unreliable. On the other hand, imaginary friends are always there when you need them! This is one reason that religion has always been so popular. If we are going to have an *imaginary friend*, why not make him all-powerful and all-knowing?

I have gone thru a couple of phases trying out the experience of *believing* in God as my imaginary friend, and before God—Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny. Over time, I have experienced people like Abraham Lincoln, Emily Dickinson, Anne Frank, Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, etc., to be more honest, helpful, and comforting companions.

In reading biographies of real people with the purpose of answering my clearly defined questions, I learned many timeless lessons and opened the door to more questions. For instance, I learned to value the *integrity, self-awareness*, and ability to *care about other people* that I saw in Abraham Lincoln and Lou Gehrig, in contrast to *the self-absorption* and big egos I observed in Babe Ruth and Thomas Jefferson.

Since all four men were highly accomplished, this observation taught me that without the *internal* development to make *external* accomplishments *meaningful*, the external adds a little flash, but is still nothing more than, "...*sound and fury signifying nothing*." For instance, if Jefferson had the integrity of Lincoln, he could have been a conspicuous role model for our country by abolishing slavery on his plantation. This would have made him *congruent* – rather than *contradictory*.

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Instead, Jefferson's talent in writing about freedom and "inalienable rights" while clinging to his slaves diminished his integrity and helped create a cancer of contradiction and hypocrisy in the core of American character and culture that we suffer from to this day. As a seven year old third grader, I could not articulate the details of these differences, but just reading the biographies and seeing the contrasts between famous people like Jefferson and Lincoln helped me form a mental picture of the character I wanted to develop.

Another important contrast was between Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth. Lou Gehrig was a man who loved: he loved baseball, his wife and his team, and he loved life. He also valued integrity, and was humble and grateful for all that life granted him, and he responded to tragedy with nobility and courage. By contrast, Babe Ruth lusted after approval, fame, and pleasure. The Babe was flamboyant and slick, and only happy as the center of attention. To my young mind, the Babe was just a physically talented replica of Uncle Bub!

Without judging anyone, but learning from everyone, I was *exploring* life, other people and myself, and thru this process I formed mental pictures of what life offers and what I *preferred*—not what was *right or wrong*. I was learning that life offers choices, so I could model after Jefferson or Lincoln, Lou or the Babe, and I could see there was no *good or bad, right or wrong* about it, but there were *consequences*. In studying these famous lives, I just *preferred* the lives and legacies of people like Lincoln and Gehrig to Jefferson and Ruth. These people became my best friends and life-long mentors.

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Disturbing Lessons & Timely Questions

One disturbing lesson I learned from the biographies was how little even famous people thought about life and its meaning. What I learned was that everyone was caught up in the events of his times, his own personal struggles, fears and desires, but no one seemed to think about life's *meaning*. This was a disturbing *absence*, since I had assumed famous people would be *special* in their awareness of themselves and life, and would be concerned about meaning, so I hoped to learn from them how to fashion my own life.

Now I was beginning to learn that genetics, parents, external events, luck, and other *unconscious* factors created the social, mental, and emotional environment that made fame and accomplishment possible. As a result, I saw that famous people were often as surprised by their accomplishments and notoriety as anyone else. I also saw that famous people were often as unaware of their motivations and purposes as ordinary people, which was disturbing to me.

Finally, *I could see that very few famous people understood how to create and maintain intimate relationships, or understood the process necessary for internal fulfillment.* Even Abraham Lincoln was helplessly inadequate in relating to women and understanding the process of intimacy, ditto for Jefferson, and to a lesser degree Benjamin Franklin. While Franklin was a master flirt, he knew little about being intimate with his wife and children. From these disturbing lessons, I was forming new questions about human life.

Defending Santa Claus

Two events critical to learning about life and creating my character happened one *before*, and one *after* reading the biographies. The event before was in second grade, when I was six. I was in class and somehow the subject came up about whether or not Santa Claus was real. Partly because I was the youngest member of the class, and partly because I was naive, I was shocked to learn that everyone in class agreed that Santa Claus was fiction, and not real.

This was very distressing news since Santa Claus was a source of comfort to me for many reasons. I liked the idea of someone living for the *purpose of giving presents*. Spending the whole year making gifts with the help of magical elves and his wife, a kindly happy person whom he loved, seemed to be an innocent and meaningful way to spend time.

I also loved his manner of delivery—a sleigh pulled by reindeer he had the privilege to nurture and love. The only flaws were the logical inconsistencies. For instance, how could Santa in one night go to every home on the planet delivering presents? Also, how could someone so rotund get up and down the chimneys? Finally, what about everyone who did not have a chimney? This last question was less critical since we had a fireplace. Even then, I could see the *integrity of my inquiry* was affected by material self-interest!

These and many other contradictions made me doubtful, but nonetheless, I *loved* Santa and it was burned into my character to protect what I loved, so I confronted the class.

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It must be remembered that it was already my pattern to be mostly silent in class. One, because I was almost always reading something that had nothing to do with what was going on, and two, because it was my habit to listen and learn, not speak out. So when I raised my hand to engage the Santa subject, the teacher quickly called on me.

I remember still my sense of danger as I took a position contrary to the whole class. I knew that I was risking humiliation in the extreme, and at the same time, I felt it was my duty to defend Santa from being demeaned and obliterated. So I spoke up saying that I believed in Santa Claus. The whole class laughed at me and I felt embarrassed and humiliated to my core. The teacher tried vainly to protect me, but the damage was done.

After school, I raced home to confront my mother. She was in the kitchen doing dishes when I marched in looking fiercely self-righteous and went right to the point: "In class today I said I believed in Santa Claus and everyone laughed. You told me he does exist, so now I want to know: Does Santa Claus really exist or not?" and she said, "No, he doesn't."

Then I replied in a stern voice: "And the Easter Bunny?" to which she said, "No." Next, going down my list and making this as painful as possible, "And the Tooth Fairy?" and again a sheepish, "No." Then I simply said, "I trusted you and you lied to me, and I was laughed at by the entire class." Then I stormed out and we never talked about it again.

I learned from this event that I had a *burning desire* for warmth and safety provided by benign supernatural forces.

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I also re-enforced what I already knew, that I could not trust my parents to be honest. Finally, and worst of all, it was clear I could not trust myself if a *burning desire* influenced my observations and reason.

These insights and life lessons did not immediately change me, but started a process where observing similar experiences being repeated over and over, I eventually submitted to Mother Nature's reality: one, that life is scary and lonely; and two, there are no supernatural forces that will protect me from cold and impersonal realities.

Confronting a Bully

Another character forming experience happened *after the biographies* when I was nine. I was walking home from school and on the path that meandered thru the park when I saw an overweight kid taunting and threatening a smaller kid who was crying. There were six or seven of his gang nearby enjoying the show. Since I had a significant amount of personal experience with my parents being mean for no reason, I harbored a smoldering anger toward anyone wanting to indulge his mean or sadistic impulses.

I also knew something about taunting — *the gentle art of using the truth to hurt someone's feelings* — that I had little or no desire to express, but this seemed like a golden opportunity to both test my ability and deliver a bit of karma. So I confronted the bully by suggesting he was a "fat-assed bully and coward who could only pick-on smaller kids."

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Needless to say I got his attention, and he and six or seven buddies rushed for me. I had anticipated this reaction and made sure I had a decent lead and none of them were between me and home. I was younger than these other kids, but quick, and it was only a block to home, so the race was on! When I got home my mom's car was gone, so I knew the house would be locked. This was an unanticipated event that required improvisation.

When I raced into the driveway the gang was only about fifteen feet behind me and my heart was pounding, but my mind was calm and calculating. I had built a room in the hay loft of the garage. The sole entrance to my room was up a vertical ladder that would accommodate only one person at a time. I knew that if I could reach my room before I was caught by the gang, I could stand off an army – all alone!

As luck would have it, I made it to and up the ladder a few seconds before the gang. I had a 2 foot piece of 2 inch oak dowel in my room that I grabbed and returned to the ladder to meet the first kid coming up. After that, repelling the intruders was "child's play". I used the dowel to rap the knuckles of each intruder as he climbed the ladder.

Soon, no one was willing to confront *the crazy kid with the stick*, so they went outside to throw rocks at a little window two-story's up. I was prepared for this too. In my room was a sling-shot and hundreds of marbles for ammunition. I had made the sling-shot myself with slices of car tire inner-tubes for bands, and a patch of leather for a pouch. It was highly accurate, and deadly if I wanted it to be.

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In this case, I didn't want to hurt anyone, just make them a little afraid and uncomfortable. So I only pulled the bands back about half-way, just enough to be accurate and to sting, but not enough to do any damage. After two or three were hit, and they could do me no damage because the window was small and I had the advantage of height and weaponry, they gave up and went away.

While all this was going on my mind was racing. When the kids went outside to throw rocks and I defended the window I was thinking that I only had two vulnerabilities. One was that I could not defend two places at once, so if the bully had any brains he would divide his forces and keep me occupied at the window and send two kids up the ladder. I kept close count to make sure that did not happen.

The only other thing he could do would be to set fire to the garage, in which case I would stuff my pockets full of marbles and come out firing with every intent of doing real damage. I was also thinking about further taunting the bully by suggesting to him that "*the only thing worse than a cowardly fat-ass was a cowardly **dumb**-ass, and he was all three.*" I resisted that temptation, in part because I had school the next day.

My third vulnerability was I had to go to school where I had no protections, so I was concerned about and surprised by what happened the next day. I was fully expecting to be put upon by the whole gang and getting my ass thoroughly kicked. Instead, they avoided me! I could never have anticipated that outcome. The lesson was they were bigger and stronger, and yet afraid of *little old me*. Who could guess?

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There were other lessons. One, I could see the value of being able to think even when frightened or excited. This was an important lesson that has actually saved my life on three different occasions. Two, I discovered an unexpected value in reading the biographies. For instance, in reading about Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson I was introduced to thinking strategically and dealing with situations where I was the underdog, rather than relying on having as General Colin Powell preferred, "...an overwhelming force of weapons and men."

The third major lesson for life and my character was seeing the value of mastering many things. I already admired Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin for the sheer depth and breadth of their knowledge and mastery. In reading all the biographies I saw the value of being a scholar, artist, writer, scientist and craftsman, and now I saw the value of taking on the role of warrior when the situation warrants.

These were all external accomplishments that contained truly satisfying components, and yet, I could see that I could master everything there was to master *externally*, similar to Jefferson and to a lesser degree, Franklin, and I would still need to master the *internal* dimensions of human life to make my life *permanently meaningful*.

Of course, at the time I did not have the words or mental organization to express what I was learning with this degree of specificity and clarity. Instead, I was forming mental pictures of life, people, needs, potentials and reality that I compared and contrasted and used to create my preferences.

Confronting My Parents

For a serious, shy, and introspective little kid, I did my share of confronting. When I was eight, I chose to confront my parents with the fact that I did not believe they loved me. I had observed their attitudes and behaviors all my life, beginning with dumping me in grandmother's lap from Monday thru Friday, and continuing by giving me used, broken or useless birthday and Christmas gifts, to often denying me permission to engage in innocent and harmless activities.

One example I felt helped prove my point was when the Lone Ranger TV program aired a one hour episode on how the Lone Ranger met Tonto, donned a mask, and made silver bullets his calling card. I was a rabid fan of the Ranger and his sidekick, Tonto, and I really wanted to see this program airing at 1:00PM on a Saturday afternoon.

My dad was my barber and he decided that right at 1:00 he was going to cut my hair, in spite of the fact that I had pre-notified him of the date and time, and had beseeched him to allow me to watch this program. He literally had no other chores or obligations for the day, he was very aware of the intensity of my desire to see this program, and he deliberately took up the first half hour of the program so I would miss all the events I was so committed to seeing.

This kind of experience was the source of the smoldering anger I unleashed on the bully a year later. At the time, I knew my dad was spitefully mean without provocation, but I did not understand the source of his desire to punish me.

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Decades later, after much training and life experience, I did uncover some possible motivators for him to dislike me. In fact, in my thirties I once asked my dad how he saw me as a little kid and he reflexively said, "You could never do anything right!" My mother was sitting at the table and just as spontaneously said, "How can you say that, he never did anything wrong!"

This combination of statements was revealing. Looking from my dad's perspective I saw he felt competitive, in part because I could talk with mom, and he could not. Also, in response to life I was intense, and pursued *conscious purposes* without fear, where dad was careful to do only what was expected. From my mom's perspective, however, I gave her energy and attention and listened to her infinite woes, so even as a child, she leaned on me as if I were a mate.

When I became an adolescent and withdrew my support to define myself, my parents opinion of me coalesced into my mother's statement that as a teen-ager, "*...they always wanted to approve of me, but I never did anything they could approve of.*" This she said in spite of the fact that from age 13 on I always worked a minimum of two jobs and paid for all my books, clothes, surfboard, car, contact lenses, and every expense other than basic room and board.

Not only that but I kept my room, the yard, garage and patio immaculate and never had to be asked to do anything. I also got all A's & B's in advanced college prep courses, participated in two organized sports, and never got into any trouble, and yet, *never did anything they could approve!*

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By the time I was a teenager I was no longer building a case, but trying to accept that no matter what I did my parents would never even treat me fairly, much less lovingly. When I was eight and confronting them, I still hoped their minds and emotions might retain some portion of innocence and fairness that I could touch, so they would genuinely want to understand and love me.

With this purpose in mind, I waited until dinner and confronted them with the simple statement: "I don't think you love me." I spoke quietly, but emphatically, and waited for their answer. I was hoping they would be concerned I felt unloved, and would ask what motivated my statement.

Their reaction was immediate and powerful. They both thought I was being disrespectful, and demanded I retract my statement. I was in shock and devastated. In my worst case scenario, I had not anticipated this reaction. So, I just quietly said I could not retract my statement. Feeling angry and frustrated, my dad hit me with a belt many times, and sent me to bed without dinner.

As per usual, we never talked about this incident, so the next day life went on as if nothing had happened. I took my dog Rover into the woods alone, put my arms around his neck, and sobbed. I could see my parents lived in a different universe from me. They lived through *assumptions and beliefs*, had no *curiosity* and asked no *questions*. As a result, they had no empathy or understanding, and were immune to truth, beauty, nature, innocence, love and wisdom. *They were dead inside and could not be reached by love, life, or me.*

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Animal Stories & Nature

After the biographies, my attention shifted to reading books of animal stories set in nature. The animals were innocent, nature was beautiful, and both were satisfying to love. I needed to fill my mind and emotions with pictures of *innocent sensual experiences, meaningful purposes, conscious caring, and competent actions built on courage and tenacity* that would bring me closer to a world I could identify with, respect, admire, and learn from.

My home and school environments were not helpful, so I created my own world, a nurturing internal world built on developing my consciousness and caring. The animal stories, like all the biographies, provided raw material I needed to build my internal world, and I was *intensely focused* and *consciously purposeful* in my commitment to this project.

My early favorites were the Jack London stories of life in Alaska, and *Call of the Wild* was especially influential. Alpert Payson Terhunes' stories of collies were also poignant because I would have loved to have a smart beautiful collie with the courage and character of Lad to be my best friend.

One story that I read over and over, and more or less memorized, was *The Black Stallion* by Walter Farley. I could identify with being a little boy all alone in the world, stranded on a desert island with only a wild black horse for companionship. It seemed like a magical opportunity to be left to my own devices to master survival, tame the horse, feed, love and protect him, and be loved in return!

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My fantasy of this dramatic story was realized on the big screen when the movie came out. The scene where the little boy first entices the Black out into the ocean so he can climb on his back and ride was so intensely real, stunningly beautiful, intelligent, innocent, caring and courageous, I could only cry, even though by this time I was an adult. The boy falls off into the water on his first few tries, but then gets the hang of it and gallops with abandon without bridle or saddle—horse, boy, and Nature physically and emotionally bonded into one innocently sensual timeless moment of pure joy.

This scene was one example of the *visceral and conscious connection* to the mysterious, wonderful and terrible experience of just being alive that I was intent on creating in my internal world and factual everyday life. These animal and Nature stories helped me understand what was needed.

One downside of my *intense focus* on *consciously connecting* to life thru books was I was always reading. In the third grade, my teacher, Mrs. Carpenter, understood I marched to the sound of a different drummer and left me alone to do my own thing. In the fourth grade, however, I had a teacher new to the profession, Mr. Leary, who was obsessed with making me pay attention in class, which I rarely did.

From my perspective, I read faster than he talked, did all my work well, never spoke out or caused any problem, and I had clearly defined conscious purposes to follow. From his perspective, I was disrespectful, which he took personally, and he was determined "*to get me in line.*" Not the last to try!

His "final solution", after many punishments, was to put

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me in front of the room with my desk facing the class, only a few feet from him, believing that proximity to him and fear of punishment would prevent me from reading my books rather than listen to him. It did work for a couple of days, and then I couldn't stand it anymore and tucked my book inside the class text and got lost in the story.

My concentration was so intense that I could be in front of the room with him standing next to me talking to the class and I could filter it all out and be immersed in what I was reading. On this day, I was lost in my own world and felt a noise beating down on me from the outer edge of my concentration. At first I ignored it, but it became so loud that I had to look up. I saw my teacher red-faced and screaming at me, he was enraged that he had called my name three times and I never showed any sign of acknowledgment.

His rage reminded me of the kindergarten teacher who also took my behavior personally, and did not understand I had my own life purposes that occasionally took priority over what other people thought I should do. No one seemed to notice that I never hurt anyone or anything, always fulfilled every obligation and responsibility, but simply and quietly and without *asking anyone's permission*, followed my own star determined to fulfill my destiny.

The little boy in *The Black Stallion* was very similar. He was willing and eager to stand alone, take care of himself, love life and the Black, and follow his destiny no matter what anyone thought was safe or appropriate. Some people think this degree of clarity and purpose is disrespectful!

Exploring Religion

My parents first sent me to a Methodist church when I was seven. The church was a large stone building, dark gray and intimidating in the daytime but downright ominous and sinister looking at night. My first experience was at night, and somehow my parents had gotten me into an evangelical meeting where I was alone and felt intimidated enough by the message to "take Jesus as my savior" when called upon at the end of the meeting.

The sermon made this step seem like a momentous thing, so I was immediately struck by the simplicity of the ceremony. I was taken aside by a minister's helper (similar to Santa Claus's elves?), and he read John 3:16, said a little prayer, and "I was saved!" Halleluiah Brother. For me, this was my first puzzling contradiction in exploring religion.

The Santa Claus debacle had made me a little gun shy about believing in *supernatural stuff*, and such a big consequence—I was saved from eternity in Hell—by such a small investment, reading one verse and saying a few words—seemed like too much for too little. Almost like believing Uncle Bub was really going to give me a pony!

I was sent to Sunday School at this church for awhile, but my parents did not take to the congregation, so I was saved from being a Methodist. Next, when I was eight they sent me to a Christian Missionary Alliance church. These people were similar to Baptists, very conservative and fundamental. As the name implies they were missionary based,

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and the minister was a missionary recently returned from China. My primary interest was in the minister's daughter, Beth Ann Ferrinell.

My favorite part of Sunday services was standing next to Beth Ann singing hymns. I liked the sound of a roomful of voices singing, and the hymns we sang tended to be hopeful. I had a terrible voice, so I didn't sing, just stood close to Beth Ann, and listened. We never had a relationship outside church, but if I would ever have made a real person an imaginary friend, it would have been her. Karen had moved away and Beth Ann was sweet and smart, had some intriguing experiences in China, and I was in need of a friend.

While attending Sunday School in this church they gave gold stars for reading the Bible, and since I was interested in seeing the source for all the *believing*, I read the whole Bible, cover to cover. I learned that for every pearl of wisdom, there were pages and pages of boring history and genealogy, along with some interesting stories.

All in all, since people in the church told me the Bible was the *Word of God*, I wasn't impressed with the quality of the writing or depth of the wisdom, which confused me. I assumed that if something was the literal Word of God, it would be of the highest quality. This contradiction did not make me a total skeptic, but it did form a layer of doubt.

More doubts were formed by layer upon layer of contradictions. For instance, God *changed* from the Old Testament to the New. In the Old Testament God interacted with people, in the New Testament that phase was over. My

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mind said that change is not possible for God who is all-knowing and all-powerful, because *change* would mean he learned something new – possible for people, but not God.

Also, in the old Testament God was *jealous and vindictive*, qualities common in human beings, but contradictory in a deity. Not only was God portrayed as having questionable character traits, he seemed addicted to getting approval. So much so that he became enraged when his people made golden images and worshiped them rather than Him. This seemed like the immature attitude of many human adults and children I knew, but not what I would expect from God.

In reading the whole Bible, even at age eight, I was beginning to think that *God was made in the image of man*, rather than "man being made in the image of God." There were contradictions galore, but nonetheless, I continued to stand next to Beth Ann on Sunday morning until she and her parents went on another mission and I took a hiatus from church until two years after our move to California when my parents found a new church to assign me to.

I brought the same attitude and process to religion that I have brought to every part of the experience of being alive. That is, I wanted to *understand religion*, see it for precisely what it is without judging or concluding, and follow this process for years while I learn about the costs and benefits, contradictions and congruence, wisdom and nonsense.

Over time I have come to understand religion, and many other aspects of human life because it was my *conscious purpose to understand*, rather than *blindly accept, judge, or criticize*.

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California & Childhood's End

In September of 1956, when I was eleven, my parents moved to San Diego and rented an apartment in Pacific Beach three blocks from the Pacific Ocean. This was a true game changer! I had finished with sixth grade and matriculated into seventh grade two weeks after we arrived. It was the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence—a little early, but everyone else around me was a teen or almost so, and I felt that I didn't just leave behind my birthplace and home, but also the whole *child* phase of my life. Death and rebirth became real to me for the first time.

In walking to Junior High from my home, only about six blocks, the air was crystalline clear, the sky a flawless blue, and the mountains were etched in the eastern horizon with razor sharp clarity. There was no traffic, even on the main street only one car would be seen moving every five or ten minutes. I remember absorbing the beauty feeling it was so perfect it was painful, and at times seemed too much to bear.

The weather, landscapes, and culture in California were more open and free, and this was to leave its mark on my mind and character. Internally, the patterns of my character were set, but in this new mental, emotional, geographical and cultural climate, I would be free to explore, expand, and truly fulfill the potentials that I began defining in my first 11 years of life in Michigan. I approached my new adventure feeling curious and totally committed to learn, love, and live my way through every delicious moment.

Exploring & Discovering In a New World

I once defined life as "*constant motion in a context of relentless change*" and never was that more true for me than when we moved from Clawson, MI to Pacific Beach, CA in 1956. It was such a different world, and it changed me as I engaged it with whole-hearted energy and attention. Nothing was predictable, everything was new and out-of-control. It was exactly what I needed to explore and discover life from my new perspective as a *man alone*, rather than as a *boy alone*. (I always did push the edge of the developmental envelope!)

One of the more dramatic changes was the presence of the Pacific Ocean, a mere three blocks away. I was totally taken by the sheer size, color, beauty, and perpetual sound of the waves crashing on the sandy shore. To me, the ocean was a mysterious source of constantly churning motion containing vast quantities of sea life in a context of immense and often invisible power – sometimes quiet, passive and benign, and sometimes ominous and overwhelming.

In those days, if I walked on the beach after seven at night or early in the morning, I had miles of beach and ocean all to myself. Today, it does not matter what time of day or night, 24/7, there are always people on the beach. This is one of many costs of exploding population that few people even notice, in part, because the old generation does not pay

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attention, and the new generation doesn't know anything different. *This is one lesson of lifespan; that is, human beings are often unconscious of the losses created by change, so they do not preserve the best from the past, or consciously select and limit the changes created in the present.*

I was consciously appreciative of the fact that walking or running on the beach gave me an opportunity to immerse myself in the experience of Nature, which filled my mind, emotions, and senses with a *visceral connection* to the fact that I was alive and alone in the midst of a vast and wonderful mystery. It was my job to *explore* this mystery, learn about it, *discover* its secrets, love it, live it, and pass-on some bit of real understanding, and so contribute to helping our species protect the innocence and beauty essential to lasting happiness.

A Knife to My Throat

The ocean was due west of my home, while sagebrush covered hills peppered with jack rabbits, rattlesnakes, foxes, hawks and coyotes was about eight blocks due north. I loved both environments, and often hiked alone in the hills. During one such hike when I was twelve, I saw two older teen-agers approaching. I rarely saw anyone else in the hills, and I instantly perceived my vulnerability and experienced a moment of apprehension.

There was no way to avoid them without running away, and I had no reason to expect danger, so I overrode my apprehension and kept walking toward them. Upon meeting,

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they greeted me and walked up close – too close. They were much older and bigger, and the largest one pulled a knife out of a scabbard on his belt and demanded I give him money. I always carried a silver dollar on me, so I gave him that. He took the dollar and they walked away.

During the robbery my heart was pounding, but my mind was clear. I didn't think he would kill me if I did not give him provocation, but if provoked, his eyes looked dead enough that I did not know what he might do. So I just remained calm, gave him my dollar, and when they walked away I went home and called the police.

The police came, took my report and scoured the hills, and lo and behold the two kids were dumb enough to still be there. The one who robbed me was 17, and had been in juvenile hall for assault, and the other was just an ordinary kid. One lesson I learned from this was I could *feel safe*, but it did not mean I was in *fact safe*. Another lesson was that I hated being helpless. When the knife was at my throat, I was helpless to defend myself, and I vowed that in the future I would always be prepared for the unexpected.

My parents helped in this regard by giving me a .22 rifle for my 13th birthday. It was a cumbersome bolt action with a five shot clip. As per their usual presents, it was also rusty, missing the rear sight, and the stock was old and marred. So I replaced the sight, cleaned the metal, refinished the stock, and now when I went into the hills I was no longer helpless! Instead, I walked thru town with a loaded rifle and no one noticed or cared. What do you think would happen now?

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A Colorful Character

Upon entering my new school I was given a battery of achievement tests. The school system had recently instituted a program of tracking students by putting them in homogeneous classes of varying levels of difficulty based on their test scores, and I was placed in the "advanced" classes, which surprised me because I did not think of myself as that smart. However, this is the reason that I met Mr. Shepherd.

Mr. Shepherd taught seventh-grade English, and he was a truly colorful character. He was in his sixties with a great tan and an abundant mane of snow white hair. He was short, around 5'7", and liked to wear white suits with a white shirt and white buck shoes. He was a bachelor, and he taught at the Junior High with his sister, also short, unmarried, and sporting an equally abundant mane of white hair. They were close in age and might have been fraternal twins.

Watching them walk down the hall together made me think I was seeing my fantasy of Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus, they were so cute, intelligent and lively, and they obviously loved life, learning, the students and each other. Mr. Shepherd was my first experience with a teacher I *wanted* to listen to because he had things to say that I felt were intelligent, honest, and useful. He also had an original and irreverent attitude toward life and pretentiousness that I loved.

He once asked for an essay and I asked how long it should be, and he said: "*Make it like a girl's skirt – long enough to cover the subject, but short enough to make it interesting!*"

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Even at the time this statement rang out like a cliché, but I had not heard it before and I loved that he would say it. Where I had come from, no adult, much less a teacher, would acknowledge that it was ok to be *interested*, even privately, in what was under a girl's skirt! So to me this was a socially risky and risqué thing to say and it totally delighted me, and made Mr. Shepherd even more endearing.

More importantly, Mr. Shepherd modeled clear thought and precise articulation of meaningful topics that I had not yet seen outside books, and rarely even inside books, so I was hungry to learn from him. Not just about literature, but I wanted to learn about him as a person, how he thought, what he cared-about, and his response to being alive.

I had become too shy and he intimidated me too much to ask direct questions, so I carefully listened and observed the whole year. It was his last year of teaching before he and his sister retired. I knew she was his sister only because her name was *Miss Shepherd*, and I discovered through the kid grapevine they lived together and were retiring.

The basic facts of their lives—being unmarried, siblings, living together, and being so vital, intelligent, playful and lively at retirement age was not ordinary at all, but special. It painted a picture of how to respond to life that was different from what I had observed before, and one that I deeply respected, silently admired, and secretly decided to emulate.

This new picture of life gave me permission to carve out a unique and original niche in life, which I had already begun to do, but now felt comforted in knowing I wasn't alone!

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A Social Summer

My Junior High years were more or less unremarkable. I continued to read, but my focus changed to more serious authors like Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Pearl S. Buck, John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway, etc. I especially liked Twain's, *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Steinbeck's, *East of Eden*. Except for Mr. Shepherd's class, I spent a lot of class time reading, and was warned by a teacher when I was reading in an assembly that I would *ruin my eyes* reading in dim light.

I just smiled to myself, and thought, "Too late, they are already ruined!" The truth is that I could not see the big E on the eye chart, which made me legally blind without glasses. Of course, this did not stop me from reading by flashlight for a third to half of many nights. My parents tried to stop me from reading by first catching me, and then taking the flashlight away and placing it on my dresser across the room.

Their thought was that my single bed with metal springs squeaked so much they would hear me get out of bed to retrieve the flashlight. Little did they know this tactic only challenged me to get out of bed moving *one muscle at a time*, so I silently got out of bed, got the flashlight, and got back in bed without making a sound.

This painstaking process could take anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half, and while it seriously cut into my reading time, overall, this excruciating process provided a very satisfying experience of breaking a dumb rule.

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I went through Junior High with one friend, who was around for a year, but moved away. Then, in the summer between ninth and tenth grade, when I was fourteen, Bailey Smith moved in nearby, and we became surfing buddies.

I had just bought a Gordon & Smith surfboard, one of the first they made and the first of the new lighter weight foam boards. The board cost \$100.00, which was a handsome sum in those days, and I earned the money from a combination of a paper-route and doing yard work. For a moment, I was on the cutting edge of a new technology, and the envy of all the kids burdened with the heavy balsa-wood boards.

Where I was shy and introspective, Bailey was outgoing and made friends easily. This was important since I was just getting interested in girls and recognized I was awkward and shy and did not know how to talk with and relate to girls, but Bailey was handsome and relaxed around girls and a better *chick magnet* than a cute dog! Thru Bailey, I gained access to a group of kids who met at the same place on the beach every day for the whole summer.

I was savvy enough to know better than to talk about my interests—like what 15 year old girl would want to talk about Twain, Dickens, Steinbeck, et.al., or would be fascinated by my question of what, if anything, would make human life internally satisfying and meaningful? None I knew.

One issue was the girls were 15 or 16 and I was 14, but happily my age did not become a problem because I did not seem 14. The problem remained that I knew what to avoid, but was clueless about what topics would be fun for girls.

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My *conscious purpose* that summer was to fully master surfing, become outrageously tan, build rippling muscles, and *learn how to talk with girls!* From what I observed, these accomplishments would lay the foundation for getting the coveted prize, a real girl friend! The only still missing components were to buy cool clothes, replace the glasses with contacts, and in a year and a half buy a car.

I was a determined young man and engaged my problem by realistically appraising myself and young females and identifying the critical steps necessary to build a bridge from my alien world to their normal experience in a manner that would be *satisfying* to both parties, even if not genuinely *meaningful*. I considered this *an integrity-based compromise!* You may think I was just kidding myself, but I was at peace.

All in all the summer was a raging success, and I fulfilled my purposes. Given that I was practicing about eight hours a day—I arrived at the beach about nine in the morning and left around five—just like a normal job, I soon learned the *gentle art of inter-gender conversation*.

What I discovered was that girls preferred to banter, be entertained, laugh, engage in gossip, and talk about themselves. Occasionally, if they had an issue with their parents or a boy friend, they might want to get real for awhile, but mostly they preferred to be superficial and have fun. In other words, girls were just like everyone else in normal life.

Seeing that girls were not mysterious or deep meant that I could soon offer conversations that met their criteria, and also add just a *hint of meaning* that other guys could not.

A Jewish Princess

The hi-light of my social summer was meeting Paulette. She was from Arizona and vacationing with her family and hooked-up with the beach group. It was August, so I had acquired some skill at conversation and Paulette and I felt an immediate attraction backed-up by satisfying conversations that were not all fluff and nonsense.