

On The Verge Of Encountering My Spiritual Father

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Time to go, and the two of us set off [from Santa Fe, New Mexico] for Santa Monica. The driver wanted to visit one more friend, so we took a southern route, going west along Interstate 10. (Rather than directly, via Interstate 40, the way I'd come.)

We did stop, I don't recall in what town, and found that sought-after friend. Yes it was the Sixties era, this was a spiritual group and everyone was wearing robes. Somehow I don't think it was the Hare Krishnas, rather something quite similar. Me, the eager intellectual seeker, wasn't too impressed.

By the time we got to Tucson it was getting late. I had an idea, and must've had some kind of notes along. We drove to Tom W's house, in the east part of town along Speedway, a main drag in that city. Tom was not there, and I'm pretty sure it wasn't the brother who'd visited my cabin either.

Anyhow, a friendly family, and when I explained how I knew Tom, and what we were doing that day, the young man readily invited us to stay over. At noted earlier, maybe I could've learned more, but things didn't go that way. So we enjoyed their hospitality, and headed west in the morning.

As I recall we crossed the Coast Range along Interstate 10, very impressive with the deep canyons and extremely high winds. We made it safely to Santa Monica, to an upstairs apartment overlooking the beach, that evening. (December, early sunsets.)

The people there were into amateur rocketry, which I found utterly captivating. They showed 8 mm films, some of launches, some from cameras mounted on rocket payloads.

I stayed the night, then bid farewell, and planted myself at the nearest freeway ramp pointed north. Then things got interesting. Skeptics will mock. Coincidence, selective memory, exaggeration, not really extraordinary, blah blah blah. I invite them to try this, make a leap of faith, and see if they are rewarded. (Probably would be! God is always looking for an opportunity, and small miracles aren't so rare as the big spectacular ones.)

I make a simple cardboard sign, something like: San Francisco. Will Share Gas Money. And I waited. And waited. For hours. Then I figured: okay God, okay Earth and Sky Mothers. You know I am skeptical, and would love to find out for sure that you are real. I also want to do something big for this messed up world. Let's see, okay?

Eventually, I got a ride. Then, after a shorter wait, another longer ride. Then again, even sooner and farther.

Next stop was Santa Barbara. This was before the freeway went in, and 101 passed through the city. There must've been fifty or a hundred other hitchhikers! Usually good folks, but in those days, "Oh man, somebody stole my pack" was a well-known and miserable refrain.

I stepped out of the car. Turned to face traffic, and held up my little sign. Boom! A van, having passed any number of others, pulled over and opened their door, right in front of me. Thank You God.

This was several young men, going all the way to the Bay Area. Their destination was a formal commune, known as The Land, which was somewhere between Los Altos Hills and Woodside. I don't think it's still there, and am not sure of many details.

They put me up for the night, and shared a great supper and breakfast. Then I went over to the nearby 280 freeway, and hitchhiked north.

From the BART station in Daly City, the line's original western end, a traveler can get to just about anywhere in the San Francisco Bay Area. I went back to Sheldon's place, in Berkeley near the Oakland city line. The AC Transit busses were then about fifteen cents, and cover the entire area from Richmond down into Fremont.

Years later, I'd get to know those bus lines very well. Still not having a car, but many places to go. For the moment, Sheldon's place was a welcome refuge.

His father Frank was an engineer, a brilliant and practical man, and his mother Elise also quite skilled. As I recall she managed an art shop, or similar, and she was also a dedicated local activist. Sheldon's older brother Steve also lived there, though I didn't know him as well.

One big cause was opposing the expansion of the nearby Alta Bates hospital. That institution was gradually buying up nearby houses, and tearing them down to put in a multi-story parking lot and new medical buildings. A lot of money was involved, and for once, the activists didn't always succeed. (Ironically, decades later, with medical-industry consolidation the owners considered shutting down that hospital entirely -- and that plan also met with protests.)

Sheldon's house is where I grew to thrive on Scientific American, then a formal inch-thick monthly publication. Also, even without playing much chess, I learned the names of many reigning grandmasters, and standard opening moves, and such.

Sheldon had practiced an unusual skill. He would place an empty glass on their wooden floor, then get a carton of milk. Then he would stand on a chair. Next, he'd fill the glass. Start pouring, and stop even as the milk reached the top edge of that glass. The remaining stream would exactly fill the glass, and settle down without spilling a drop. His parents did not bat an eyelash.

The local radicalism had intensified. A couple of blocks from Sheldon's house, Patty Hearst had been living with her boyfriend, while attending UC Berkeley. Earlier that year she'd been kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army, then in a bizarre twist, debuted as their newest convert. This became a massive news story, and there in Berkeley, many people regarded Hearst as a folk heroine.

Folks talked of spinoff groups, and of more fully casting away the old dead System, with its unimaginative elders. Liberating everyone, kids especially, to go forth and build a far better society. I was idealistic, not brain dead, and understood there needed to be a real foundation -- something actually new and better, for any of those bold dreams to reach fruition.

Tragically, Frank died of a heart attack a few years later. He did not smoke, but in those days of trans fats and desk jobs, a whole lot of not-that-old men encountered a similar fate. Elise kept the household going, and years later we visited her at a shop she managed in Walnut Creek.

Fresh from being a lingering guest at Terry's, I didn't want to impose on Sheldon's parents. So I called grandma Carlson, and went to El Cerrito to stay there. Grandpa was very ill by then, with cancer and more, and not at home. My cousin Wayne had lived there for years, and his old bedroom was available.

So I moved in with my grandmother. I still wasn't doing my share of chores, and she really did indulge me, far more than I deserved.

El Cerrito

I ended up staying with grandma five months.

My sisters were attending South Fork High, while mom and Jan were living on the Eureka waterfront. During those months I didn't see them at all. Dad and Elsie were around, for family gatherings.

Eric F lived with his mom and sister in north Berkeley, a long walk or short bus ride away, so I was over there a lot.



My cousins were around, but I did not see them often. Janet had divorced, and retreated to a house in Benicia. I would only see her a couple of times more. Dale was in poor health, living in an apartment in Richmond. Wayne was (as I recall) living his with father Ray, there in El Cerrito, so I saw him most.

Grandma's ethnic Runeberg Lodge, its local Berkeley chapter, had once enjoyed thousands of members. With the younger generations becoming more Americanized, and programs such as Social Security and Workman's Compensation filling many of the lodge's original functions, these groups shrank dramatically. My mom and sisters would later comment, by the 1970s they could, and did, meet in grandma's kitchen.

Grandma would sit there at the kitchen table and play Klondike solitaire for hours, Then get on the phone, and chat with her younger sister (who lived in Albany, the next town south -- a local call) for hours. She'd brew cowboy coffee on the stove, and drink easily twenty cups each day. All her life she'd worked hard and successfully, also overcome breast cancer, and deserved each minute of relaxation.

She watched the daily soap operas, faithfully each afternoon: As the World Turns, General Hospital, All My Children, The Young and the Restless, Days of Our Lives, and others. I seldom sat in, but enough that I began to recognize the characters and cast, also learning the basic plot lines. Somehow grandma knew the whole scoop, even gossip about the individual actors.

To my surprise, somewhat then and more so now, she was literally unconditional. She never even asked me what I was doing, or planned to do. She made no demands, expressed no expectations. Quite the opposite, we'd go shopping at the nearby Lucky supermarket and she'd ask about my favorite foods, and sometimes I'd do a little cooking. (If she had asked me about specific plans, I'd have been hard pressed to answer.)

I was about done with the 'EST' group (now known as the Landmark Foundation). Had they believed in God, instead of literally claiming the whole cosmos is some kind of joke, or perhaps if they'd offered me a salaried position, I might have stuck with them longer.

One good thing, through 'EST' (as I recall) I met a young lady named Leslie. She had a Volkswagen Beetle, and we used to drive to Golden Gate Park and other interesting spots. Not quite going on dates, by today's standards, and I was polite, though still too boorish. We lost touch, and while writing this memoir, I'm seeing if I can find some of these old friends.

Through Eric, I gained entry to a circle of friends, some my age and some a few years older. We'd attend movies and various events. One guy had an apartment in San Francisco, and he'd host gatherings there. There were fairly mild, with record album music and lots of snacks. I didn't meet anyone famous, however at second hand, heard lots about the local celebrities of the day.

This helped support my ongoing spiritual quest, and living near Berkeley, there was a cornucopia of religions. Swami Muktananda had a center there (it's still going) and I saw him speak.

Another place hosted a trio of Tibetan monks, so I attended. While I have deep respect for them, and advocate for their national freedom, it wasn't a religion for me. Their ceremonies are very long and utterly repetitive, and some of those guys smoked like chimneys.

San Francisco had become the only city ever to see its phone book yellow pages have two listings for Churches: Satanist. Eric got in contact with one such man, and we spoke with him on the phone. Thank God, and boy do I ever mean it, we did not pursue that avenue.



Claremont Hotel, Berkley, CA

Eric had seen Rev. Moon speak, at my favorite urban-getaway spot the Claremont Hotel, but didn't say much about the experience.

I continued to read, though do not recall if I had an El Cerrito library card. One book, popular in New Age circles, was 2150 AD, by Thea Alexander. A future utopia, but actually rather harsh. They had such confidence in guided reincarnation that sometimes the characters would commit suicide, in order to be reborn all the sooner. No way, I thought.

The Irish lady, Shannon, gathered together what she referred to as a coven. She wanted to be specific: this wasn't Christian or Satanic, not Pagan or Wiccan, rather Druid. I did not, and still do not, have enough specialized knowledge to evaluate this. I do know that the various modern versions are heavily reconstructed, and sanitized from the rough (and often, largely unknown) ancient versions.

Shannon had gatherings at her apartment, nothing really strange, yet fascinating for us young folks.

One time, about ten of us gathered outdoors, at a rural location just east of Fremont. (Probably on the bottom slopes of Mission Peak; it's all built up now and I'm not certain.)

I recall a lone hiker, a young man, coming upon us. We'd built a small campfire, stacked up rocks, wore bright costumes, and more. He muttered "whoa" in amazement, and continued walking uphill.

Shannon had given us a design for a ceremonial robe, really quite beautiful. Grandma was an expert seamstress, and she helped me make it. I'm not sure what happened to it, and I wish I had it, or at least a photo. Shannon also gave me a new hairstyle.

My male relatives did not like that style, and Shannon went so far as to write them a formal letter about why it was so important. I went along with her, though it wasn't exactly my favorite either.