

California Thanksgiving 1975 - Leaving and Returning to the Unification Church

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Postcard from Lathrop, CA to my parents the day before Thanksgiving – in German

Excerpt from my diary entry for Thanksgiving Day 28 November 1996:

... Today being Thanksgiving reminds me of my most memorable Thanksgiving Day in America 21 years ago (it was also my first Thanksgiving there since I arrived in the States on 6 March 1975). That year, 1975, Thanksgiving Day fell on 27 November, a day earlier than this year.

The day began, for me, in a boxcar of a freight train about 10 kilometers or so east of a town called Tracy, which is somewhere to the southwest of Stockton, California. It had been my third and last ride on a freight train in California (the first ride had taken me from Roseville outside Sacramento, where I had spent 3 days without a roof over my head, to a railroad yard only a couple of miles away, and the second ride was from that yard to Stockton at night).

With me in the boxcar outside Tracy was a man whom I had met in Sacramento (at the Salvation Army soup kitchen) a few days earlier and who had given his name as "Bob Robinson," from West Virginia (if I remember correctly). We had tramped together. He had been on many freight trains and could tell many horror stories about life as a hobo. He said he also once spent 8 years in jail in Louisiana on charges of armed robbery. And he said he had fought in Korea. I estimated his age at 40-45. And he also said he'd been a boxer.

We had gone from Stockton to a place called French Camp, hitch-hiking and walking, planted onions in a field together with some Mexican workers for a few bucks. Then we went on to the small town of Lathrop and spent the next two cold nights out under the stars on a nearby swath of tumbleweed-strewn wasteland. I bought bottles of cheap red wine here and there along the way, and he drank most of it (he wanted the stuff but said he had no money, so since we were traveling together I bought it for him).

We hoped to be able to catch a freight train going south through Lathrop, but the ones that passed were all going too fast. No way to catch them. "Bob" (he also called me Bob because he could not memorize my first name) had persuaded me to come with him to Indio, southeast of Los Angeles, for the winter, where he had previously worked in lumbering and where he thought we might both find temporary work.

The third night at Lathrop, on the eve of Thanksgiving, we saw some workers preparing a freight train for a trip. There were two nice boxcars, one with both doors wide open -- just right. Bob got in while I went to get my backpack and his bedroll. When I came back there was no sign of Bob. It was pitch dark inside that boxcar. When I called him there was a muffled sound as if someone moaned in pain.

I got in and the moaning intensified. There was something big on the floor under my feet and when I touched it I realized that there were several big and heavy wooden boards lying there. It turned out that they had been standing upright when Bob arrived, leaning against the wall of the boxcar and fastened

there. Bob had apparently loosened them and they fell right on top of him. I pulled them off to the side one after another. They were so heavy that I could only lift one side of one of them at a time.

I couldn't see Bob's face but he must have been miserable. He complained of excruciating pain in one leg and one side of his pelvis/hip. And he stank of excrement. His pants were full of shit. I assumed that the heavy load must have pressed on his abdomen, forcing his feces out. Luckily I had a spare pair of pants in my backpack. So I used handkerchiefs and paper tissue and a small towel to clean up his legs and buttocks in the dark after carefully pulling off his soiled trousers (he couldn't move one of his legs at all and couldn't even turn on his hips).

He cried in pain. Very slowly I inserted his legs into my spare pants and then covered him with his blankets. He asked me to take him to a doctor. I would have had to carry him, of course. The workers outside were long gone (we had waited till they left before approaching the train). There was an engine at the far end of the train but I didn't know whether it was manned at this point. I was a bit hesitant to take him to the town because I was an illegal alien in America, liable to face a brief jail sentence and deportation if caught, and we had already committed an offense by just getting on the freight train in the first place.

Moreover, I was upset with Bob at the time because he had broken into a trailer home that day trying to steal something. That trailer belonged to a nice middle-aged couple from Missouri (which they pronounced something like "Mazarra") who had invited us in that morning for a cup of coffee when they found us creeping out of our hoarfrost-covered beddings amid the tumbleweeds. They had told us they planned to drive to Stockton that day, and they left the trailer sitting there. It was not very big but it contained, among other things, several bird cages with various small birds in them, and 2 or 3 dogs.

I gave Bob his wine that evening. He usually took only a few gulps but I later found out he had emptied the bottle this time while I had gone for a walk. I returned to our camp when I heard the Missourians' dogs barking. Bob came back from the trailer. He was drunk. He confessed that he'd smashed a window with his fist, trying to break in, but gave up when the dogs went crazy. I told him we couldn't stay together after this. I would not go with him to Indio -- and anyway, we had to get out of this area fast because the Missourians would call the police when they returned.

Not long after that ... [continued on 30 November 1996, Saturday:] ... we saw the fateful train with the open boxcar and decided to take one last ride together. The train started moving before I could make up my mind to take Bob to a doctor. We didn't go very far, though. Probably less than half an hour. The train stopped in what appeared to be an uninhabited area, because there were no lights except a small one outside a low building nearby that seemed to be empty. At the far end of the train I could see the engine leaving. We were alone in the dark.

In the morning I saw that we were on one of several railroad tracks, and that a road ran beside them -- although there was a low fence in between. Bob was still in bad shape. I picked him up carefully and carried him to the fence by the road. Somehow I managed to get him over the fence. He moaned a lot and appeared on the verge of passing out at one point. He clearly was in great pain when I moved him. I brought our luggage.

We found out that Bob was able to stand on one leg, and so we stood there, Bob leaning against me, waving wildly at the first car that came up on the road. It sped off. After a while a second car came, and its driver was less afraid than the first one. He rolled down his window and I told him we needed an ambulance as my companion had broken his leg in a bad fall.

The man drove off, and sure enough, not much later he came back with an ambulance. Bob was put on a stretcher and I rode in the front of the ambulance with the driver. He told me that they came from a clinic in Tracy. At the clinic Bob was immediately cleaned and x-rayed. The doctor told me he had suffered a complex fracture of the hipbone and had to be transferred to a bigger hospital in Stockton. I told Bob that our ways had to part because I couldn't accompany him to Stockton, then wished him good luck.

At this point I had only 9 (nine) dollars to my name, and there was nothing more I could do for him ... [continued 1 December 1996:] ... I decided that it was time to fulfill a promise I had made to my friends at the Going-Up Press printshop (I'm not sure I remember that name correctly) in Washington D.C., fellow members of the Unification Church, when I left them 16 days earlier on 11 November 1975: to visit a Unification Church center in the San Francisco area on my intended trip around the world.

My central figure (boss) at the printshop, Mr. George Edwards, and my friends at "Upshur House," a former Libyan Embassy building on Upshur Street in D.C., had asked me to do that. One of them had hidden 10 dollars in a small plastic bottle of "holy salt" that I had in my luggage (to supplement my meager fortune of 30 dollars), and another had given me a space blanket for cold nights out under the stars plus the good advice to take Interstate Highway 40 instead of I-80 as I had planned.

I-80 passes through mountainous Colorado, which is why I favored it (I always loved mountains), but he (he was a giant of a man named Dennis Taylor -- a very good brother) looked at my sleeping bag and said I would freeze to death if I slept outside along I-80. He suggested that I take I-40 instead, which runs through North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, New Mexico, Arizona and southern California.

I'd followed his advice and made it from D.C. to the Los Angeles area in 5 days (San Fernando Valley, Thousand Oaks, Oxnard, Santa Barbara and finally as far as Arroyo Grande on Route 101 [south of San Luis Obispo] where I spent my first night in California 15-16 November 1975 -- I ended up staying in California until 31 January 1976 -- exactly 2½ months or 77 days -- my favorite state).

I hitch-hiked from Tracy in the general direction of the San Francisco Bay area, hoping to visit the Unification Church center in Oakland and then try to head north again towards Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada -- my original destination when I came across the Atlantic on 6 March 1975.

After one very brief ride with a young hippie-type couple I was picked up by a man in his mid-thirties (my guess) who drove a big pickup truck. His name was Tom -- I think -- and he said he was from Ohio. He told me he was planning to buy a horse, or horses (don't remember which) in this area, and then he asked me if I knew Jesus. I told him that I had joined a Christian movement on the East Coast and that I was planning to visit a church of that movement in the Bay Area.

In the course of the conversation I admitted to him that I had sort of lost my way in the search for God and wasn't praying anymore. I might have mentioned to him that the movement I had joined was the Unification Church, which did not ring a bell in his mind, but I certainly did not say anything about Reverend [Sun Myung] Moon, whose name would almost certainly have rung a bell for him.

He asked how much money I had on me, and when I said 9 dollars he took a 20-dollar bill from the top of the sunshade above the windshield and handed it to me. He dropped me off on a bridge that crossed the freeway leading north to Concord, saying he had to look at some horses in nearby Livermore and would be back in about an hour. He said he would take me to Concord if I didn't get a ride until he came back.

Some time after he was gone a car passed me and went down the ramp but stopped just short of the junction with the freeway. A young guy got out, waved to me and shouted, "Do you want a ride?" I picked up my pack and ran down towards him, but on the way I suddenly had a funny feeling that something was wrong with this guy and the way the car stopped where it did.

The guy was on the passenger side, and another young man was in the driver's seat. The car had no rear doors, so the first guy had had to get out to let me in. I dismissed my ill feeling and handed him my backpack when he reached for it. That was my mistake.

Instead of letting me into the car he simply threw my pack into the back and got right back in himself. Almost immediately the driver stepped on the gas and put the engine in gear. I jumped, trying to get on top of the guy who had taken my backpack, but found myself actually hanging between the car and its open door, with one hand on the roof and one on the door (when I told this story to others later they said I had made that up based on Hollywood movies). But as the car began to pick up speed I quickly realized that I was risking my life.

Luckily I let go before it was too late. I fell flat on my belly on the freeway, and my glasses fell off my nose. By the time I had put them back in place the car was gone too far for me to be able to read the license plate.

I was unhurt, except for a couple of scratches, so I walked back up to the top of the bridge. The backpack contained nothing valuable to anyone but myself. It was almost all I possessed at that point. It was also a symbol of my past.

There was a notebook in which I had written down my ideas and feelings, my philosophy, letters, and my first Divine Principle book, given to me by my spiritual mother, Noriko S. (of Japan).

I still carried a few things in my pockets: my passport, some Polaroid photos I'd taken in New York and my wallet with 29 dollars. That was all. I had symbolically lost my past. And I should have begun a new life at this point. But this type of situation had occurred before and would recur many more times without me ever really succeeding in making a new start -- changing my life. I was never able to really cut off from my past, though I tried many times.

Anyway, Tom ... came back in his pickup truck, and I told him the story. He said perhaps that was a sign from God that I should go back to the Christian movement I had left and stay with them. Just before he dropped me off in Concord he took two 20-dollar bills from his sunshade, handed them to me, and then took my hand and said a short prayer to Jesus, asking that the Lord guide me.

From Concord I took the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) train to Berkeley, went to a telephone booth and looked up the Unification Church in the directory. It was listed. The address was on a street or avenue (don't remember the name) just off Hearst Street, which lines the nice University of California campus. When I went to the house I was told it was a day-care center or some such thing and the Unification Church had moved out some time (6 months?) ago: new address unknown.

I walked around the campus for awhile, checking out the trees and shrubs to see if there was a good place to sleep without being seen. Then I bought a 20-dollar sleeping bag in a shop downtown and returned to the street where the Unification Church had once been located.

I thought I would now try to realize my original plan to go back to Stone Age in the woods of British Columbia. But one of the things I had lost when my backpack was stolen was a book I absolutely needed for that purpose: a wilderness survival guide. So I went to a bookstore near the campus and looked at the books there. They had several interesting ones.

As I was looking through one of those books two well-dressed young men walked up to me and greeted me. I was a bit suspicious because I thought they might be from the Immigration department (INS) looking for illegal aliens like me, or perhaps from the FBI or the CIA or who knows what.

They said they were students and told me about an outfit called the Creative Community Project that brought young people from all kinds of backgrounds together to share ideas and experiences with the aim of promoting inter-cultural communication and understanding, and working together to build a better future for all.

They mentioned that there was a beautiful farm where young people could study and work together. The idea of such a farm did not alarm me because I had worked on a sort of farm at Barrytown, on the Hudson River near Kingston and the Catskills in New York State, where the Unification Church held its workshops in a building that later became (as of September 1975) the Unification Theological Seminary. We had gardens on that 250-acre property and I had helped to grow corn there, etc.

The two in the bookstore invited me to a free Thanksgiving dinner with turkey and cake at their community place on Hearst Street, and I happily accepted. Being a bit short of money as I was, a free dinner was certainly welcome.

After they left it occurred to me that they seemed vaguely familiar. Not because I had seen them before, but there was something in their faces and in the way they talked that was familiar: they seemed like members of the church that I had known back on the East Coast. One of the two, whose name was Trimble, from Minnesota (he was later kidnapped and reportedly became an enemy of our church -- deprogramming other members), was just like some other brothers from the Midwest that I had known in New York.

Another thing that was funny was my own feeling and attitude. I am by nature a rather pessimistic, melancholy person. And I had just been robbed of my most precious possessions. And I had nowhere near enough money to buy the necessary equipment to survive in the wild in British Columbia or even to make it up there -- except if I was very lucky hitch-hiking (in Sacramento I had been stuck for 3 days without getting a ride). And yet I felt happy. I didn't worry too much about where I would sleep that night or the next.

I went to an ice cream parlor and enjoyed a nice hot fudge sundae (I think -- at least that's what I used to like in New York). Trimble, the "student" (I think his first name was Jeff, but I'm not sure), came in and reminded me of his earlier invitation to the Thanksgiving dinner -- at Hearst Street, number such and such, at 18:00 hours.

Well, come 18:00 I went to the place. From the beginning I felt something as if I was not going to a strange house but actually coming home. Coming home, indeed. I had never seen the place before but the people's faces were familiar -- somehow. There were many young people.

We gathered in a circle in a big room and began to sing songs. I knew the songs. I had sung them all in Barrytown, New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., etc. I turned to a sister next to me and asked: "Is this the Unification Church? -- I'm a member." She put a finger across her lips and indicated that we should talk after the singing and prayer. We had a great dinner, during which I learned, from the same sister and out of earshot of the others, that this was indeed the Unification Church.

She asked me not to use that name, however, because there was too much bad publicity about it. She told me that Rev. Moon had approved the use of the name Creative Community Project. We were all invited to spend a weekend at the farm at Boonville, 120 miles (200 km) north of San Francisco in the coastal hills - - a 750-acre property. Of course I would be happy to go, I said, and signed up.

We were to be taken there by bus the following evening -- Friday, 28 November 1975. After it was all over I went out to try to find a place to sleep. Though I had been a member on the East Coast for some 8 months, nobody here knew me and they couldn't let me stay at the center. That night I walked up a road lining the upper side of Berkeley campus, looking for a place to crash and at the same time enjoying the view across the Bay to the lights of San Francisco ...

(continued 2 December 1996) ... Suddenly I was illuminated by a car's high beam. It was a patrol car. A police officer came up to me and asked to see some ID. His partner stayed in the car. On the spur of the moment I decided to show him my Luxembourg passport. He leafed through it, looked at the American visa and handed it back to me.

Apparently he didn't know that I was supposed to have an I-94 immigration dept. form attached to a page in the passport, which gave my date of entry into the United States and specified how long I was allowed to stay. I had thrown that form away months ago when it expired with no possibility of renewal. He then told me that I was not allowed to sleep outside near the campus, and he and his buddy left in their patrol car.

People at the church center had given me directions to the local YMCA, where they said I could spend the night for little money. I went there and got a cheap bed for the night.

The next day I went up to Boonville, the 750-acre farm, which was called Ideal City Ranch. It's a beautiful place. I went on to spend about 5 weeks there, attending workshops and helping with the farm work. Then I spent another month or so in San Francisco, mostly witnessing to people in the Fisherman's Wharf/Ghirardelli Square area (met many New Yorkers there) and once selling roses on the street.

I lived in the church center on Washington Street near a small park (Lafayette Park?) in Pacific Heights (?). Only once did I manage to bring a guest to a workshop in Boonville: a German girl by the name of Elisabeth H., who studied in Massachusetts and whom I met at the Wharf. She hailed from Berchtesgaden in Bavaria, I think, and was a practicing Catholic. She joined the (Unification) Church in Oakland later.

I met her very briefly 7-8 months later in Washington, D.C., in a McDonald's, I think. She was on her way to visit her folks in Germany. She said the Oakland Church leaders, Mose and Onni Durst, had given her permission to do that. This surprised me, as we were in the midst of Rev. Moon's most important campaign in the States: we were preparing for the big Washington Monument rally on 18 September of this Bicentennial Year 1976.

Anyway, so much for the story of Thanksgiving Day, 27 November 1975, when I returned to the church after a 16-day absence. I never saw or heard from Elisabeth again.