

34. LOOKING BACK: CHANCE MEETINGS THAT ESTABLISHED FIRM FRIENDSHIPS

One

My first opportunity for foreign travel came in the early 1950s. Roy Allen, the English economist, had read some of my published articles, and out of thin air offered me an honorarium of \$200 plus \$200 for passage to Southampton and return. I was to give a short course of lectures at the London School of Economics. At that time a third class passage on one of the great liners of the day cost \$100, so by spending it all Beatrice and I could both go and return. Don't make a mistake about third class--it was not the old steerage on which my parents had come to Canada, but with wonderful service, luxury we certainly did not enjoy on land, The culture of those great transatlantic liners--the daily newspaper, the swimming pool, the sports instruction, the superb cuisine--was at its peak in the early post-war years.

It was on the boat, the Cunard liner Queen Elizabeth2, that Beatrice met a couple, Flore and Pierre Pastier, fairly early in the voyage. She heard someone at the next table saying in French that the waiter had brought sugar but not a spoon, and wondered how to say "cuillere" in English. Beatrice called out "teaspoon" and they continued chatting. We spent much of the subsequent time on the boat with them, talking our hobbled French. The boat stopped at Calais on the way to Southampton, and we disembarked with the Pastiers on a lighter that took us into the harbor. I was thrilled at the thought that I was now actually on French soil.

Before we separated the Pastier's invited us to dinner for the following evening. What impressed us most was the order and good feeling in a crowded walk-up apartment that was all that was to be had in the early postwar years.

We have kept in touch with the Pastier's ever since, and visited them whenever we were in the area. A self-taught engineer, who starting at the bottom had risen to be head of a major electronics factory. They now live in retirement in Nice. Pierre is in a wheel chair but Flore gets around easily We talk to them by phone from time to time.

Two

On one of my early trips to Europe I visited Frankfurt in Germany, I had been in a meeting in Belgrade and after the dreariness of Belgrade the charm of Frankfurt was indescribable. There in Naacher's bookstore, I met Hertha Georg. I was thrilled to find that she knew no English. Here was a God given chance to improve my German. She turned out to be a wonderfully up-beat personality, great sense of humor, intense interest in books.

I took her out for coffee and she told me her story that I pass on as showing one type of human character that combines ambition unchecked by conscience. (If she doesn't want the following story set down I will remove it.)

At the time I met her poor Hertha was still suffering from being abandoned by her husband Wolfgang, who was an art curator. Her work in Naacher's book store was supporting Wolfgang's art studies. One day he received an offer of a job as Assistant Curator of a large art museum in Berlin. Hertha helped him load their household goods into a truck, and when that job was complete, he started off shouting "You're not coming." Aside from the job he had the project of marriage with the Curator's daughter.

Hertha went to court, and explained that she was working and Wolfgang was a student, and she had paid for the furniture and wanted it back. The court awarded her half of it, and Wolfgang sent back a few unusable sticks. Hertha was too discouraged to appeal further.

Beatrice and I are still in touch with Hertha, and most of what German I know was learned in correspondence and telephone conversations with her. A very sociable person, she has a large circle of friends, and on visits to Frankfurt I got to know some of them as well. She left the bookstore and became secretary and confidante to Theodore Adorno, postwar Germany's most distinguished social scientist, who assembled some other notable scholars in the Institute for Social Research that over the years has had a considerable influence on social science thinking.

Among numerous other activities, Hertha gives poetry readings in various towns, and assists her pastor, Ulrich Schaffert. .

Three

In Paris visiting the Institut National des Etudes Demographiques on the rue du Commandeur, I dropped into a cafe after the Institut closed for the day. Sitting there having a glass of wine I noticed across from me a well groomed young lady and I got talking with her. Before we separated she gave me "her coordinates" in her words, that is, address and phone number. She was Ray de Dise, who again had the inestimable attraction of speaking no English. I had to leave the next day, but we corresponded and a few months later Beatrice and I met her in a restaurant and she had her daughter Justine (then about 14 years of age) with her. Justine was a very beautiful and very positive young lady. She saw snails on the menu, and insisted--I mean insisted Je-veux-les--on having them.

I suspected that there was more than one argument between mother and daughter, and that the daughter won every time. It was not very long before Justine was saying she wants to live her own life, and a few years later, still a student and entirely dependent on her mother for support,

she moved out and took her own apartment. Her mother offered some *résistance* but it was no use. Such determination will carry Justine far in her later work--it is not clear what it will do in family life. She is now 24 and taking her first job.

Ray was involved in Parisian artistic and cultural life. She invited me to a poetry reading in the basement of a cafe on the Left Bank. The poet was Guy Chaty, a mathematician of wide interests with a very energetic presentation of a number of his own poems. His skill and great sense of humor fascinated the audience of about 50 people who had paid admission to that performance. I was thrilled to think I was at a subterranean gathering on the Left Bank.

We had the pleasure of a visit from Ray and Guy and his wife Jeanne at our Cambridge apartment some years later. I will never forget the great dinner table talk that went on for the week or ten days of their visit.

Four

Again in France, also in a cafe, but this one down-town on the Champs Elysses, I saw a young lady drinking a beer. We talked, and her name was Mary Alleyne, and she was indeed English, as I had surmised from the beer. I was on my way to a meeting in Geneva, and I must have impressed her because she came down to Geneva during my time there and we talked a good deal, in English but one can't have everything. She was born and brought up in Leeds, in the north of England--as any native could tell from her speech. When on a later trip Beatrice met her she was impressed: "She's all wool" she said after they had spent an afternoon together.

Mary was engaged to a man who was working in Trinidad and they were waiting for a chance to marry. In due course they did marry, and settled in a suburb of London. Her husband, known as "Bug" now retired, saw that the lab equipment in the local school was not properly used or maintained. Once an engineer, he volunteered to set up laboratory equipment and perform similar tasks.

Mary, an early worker with computers wanted to get a job done, visited a small firm consisting of two young men, and had it done. But while in their office she saw papers scattered in fearful disorder. She offered to tidy the place, and was hired as office manager.

The last we heard they had gone down to the Isle of Wight. We fear that Mary, now well into her nineties, may have passed away, and it is extremely unlikely that Bug, her senior by a number of years, has survived. .

Looking back: why do people do the things they do?

My experience on the internet has shown me the limitations of money for motivating human effort. As one of millions of users whose chief recourse in the search for information is the World Wide Web, I note that most of the things I look up have been placed on the web with absolutely no pecuniary objective. Someone has taken the trouble to enter a number of Latin quotes with translation, or else a poem by Emerson, or a biography of Beethoven, to give the three last things I have looked up. In all three cases and hundreds of others someone got satisfaction simply by keying or scanning them from available sources or perhaps by composing them himself (as I am doing now). It is not exactly exhibitionism -- most often the author does not even show his or her name. And the Web uses a technology discovered as recently as 1990; it now has some 2 billion sites, the equivalent of a good part of a trillion pages. So fact No. 1 about people: most of the interesting things do have no pecuniary motive.

Fact No 2 about people -- their proneness to misinterpretation. Much legislated policy on crime fails because it interprets acts in the framework of one culture, while the actors interpret it in terms of another. Legislators, judges, and such people are middle class citizens for whom going to jail is a terrible punishment, so they confidently enact laws that will ensure that more criminals are apprehended, and that those who are guilty will spend longer periods in jail. But suppose the drug peddlers interpret jail as a kind of initiation into a profession, which if not honorable in the larger society is at least immensely profitable without being particularly dishonorable in their smaller society. With this interpretation jail is still not desirable, but it is by no means punishment severe enough to cause peddlers to give up their well-paid profession.

Variation of interpretation exists everywhere we turn and not only in reward and punishment. After an exceptionally heavy day of bombing attacks on our troops in Iraq on the last day of October, Mr. Bush said the equivalent of "That is good news. It shows that the enemy is desperate."

When the Palestinians bomb an Israeli home, the Israelis bomb a half-dozen homes. "That will show them. Anything they do to us will be visited several fold on them, and that will stop them." The Israelis should know by now that it does nothing of the kind. It stimulates them to new attacks. Neither side can win this kind of war. The war will go on as long as there is no empathy. Or until some terrible weapon is used that can entirely destroy the other side.

My correspondence with President Bush, March 12, July 15 July 19, 2003

Following are three letters I wrote to President Bush, along with the replies that came back.

Sunday, March 12, 2003

Mr. George W. Bush,
president@whitehouse.gov

Dear President Bush,

You must know the phrase of Oliver Cromwell, a pious Christian like yourself, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

You should think of the Korean War that ended in a draw. You should think of the Vietnam War, in which we were brought to a standstill, and withdrew--after more than 50,000 American soldiers died.

In connecting Iraq with 9/11, you must realize that the men we captured, some 19, I understand, were from Saudi Arabia; none were from Iraq.

Our military technology is far in advance of that of Iraq or of any other country. We can readily establish a battle front in Iraq, and even win there. We read in the New York Times (March 9) that the world is full of nasty regimes, "that we are about to bomb one that isn't intercepting our planes (like North Korea), that isn't financing Al Qaeda, (like Saudi Arabia), that isn't home to Osama and his lieutenants (like Pakistan), or that isn't a host body for terrorists (like Iran, Lebanon and Syria)". (Maureen Dowd.)

We have just sent home the one Iraqi reporter stationed in the United States, and have the impertinence to ask other countries to curtail Iraqi news and diplomatic representation. We should welcome both news and diplomacy. The more they can learn about us, the more we can learn about them, the better for both. Rather than trying to destroy the Iraqis; we should be trying to educate them.

I am sorry to have to relate these grim facts to you, Mr. President, Please call me if you want further information. My phone number is 617-491-2845.

Yours faithfully,

Nathan Keyfitz,
keyfitz@netscape.net
1580 Massachusetts Avenue, #7C
Cambridge, MA 02138

I received the following answer:

Thank you for e-mailing President Bush. Your ideas and comments are very important to him.

Because of the large volume of e-mail received, the President cannot personally respond to each message. However, the White House staff considers and reports citizen ideas and concerns.

The picture given in the Manchester Guardian (Weekly edition July 3 - 9) astounds by the impudence of our unelected President. "The Pentagon is planning a new generation of huge hypersonic drones and bombs dropped from space, that will allow the US to strike its enemies at lightning speed from its own territory...The technology would free the US from dependence on forward bases and the cooperation of allies. This drive for self-sufficiency is spurred by the difficulty of gaining international cooperation for the attack on Iraq." Based on this I am sending a second e-mail letter to Bush

July 15, 2003

President@Whitehouse.gov

Dear Mr. President,

You paid no attention to the letter I wrote you on March 12, and went ahead with a war on Iraq. I can understand that you are miffed by the French and Germans, and Russians, and Canadians for not joining your escapade in Iraq. You smashed the country physically, and destroyed its system of authority. Saddam Hussein was not the kindest of rulers, but at least he kept the country operating and most people eating.

I repeat that you are going to regret having disregarded my letter and gone ahead with war on Iraq.

The world cannot fail to notice that you go from war to war. From Afghanistan to Iraq to Liberia. Where next? Each one is a failure in its intended purpose, but you hope that the next one will keep people from talking about the past failures. You are indeed pursuing a Warfare of Mass Distraction (WMD).

Margaret Atwood, a distinguished Canadian writer, has written a book, *Oryx and Crake*, that you should read. It is fiction of course, but an excellent picture of a world destroyed by technology, with only one person, called Snowman, left alive. If you find it hard to secure a copy, let me know and I will lend you mine.

I can appreciate your irritation, as head of this great nation, that the world does not like and admire us. You are afraid that they might attack us, and you are going heavy for new weapons. But let me reassure you, Mr. President: No country is contemplating an attack on the United States.

It is all very well for Rummy to talk about enemies -- enemies are what the owner of a war machine wants, so that he can show how well his machine performs. In the mid-eighties we collaborated with Iraq in its war with Iran and a picture of Rummy shaking hands with Saddam Hussein is now on the Internet. To see it for yourself just boot up your computer and run

<http://www.californiapeaceaction.org/campaigns/rumsfeld/metroad.pdf>

You will find it quite inspiring.

But pay no attention. You can sleep in peace without a dime more of expenditure.

So for heaven's sake tell the Pentagon to call off that drone going at 3,000 miles an hour. You just don't need it.

Just give me a call if there is other information I can provide. I will drop everything to set you on the right track.

Nathan Keyfitz
keyfitz@netscape.net
Tel: 617-491-2845

I received the following answer:

Thank you for e-mailing President Bush. Your ideas and comments are very important to him.

Because of the large volume of e-mail received, the President cannot personally respond to each message. However, the White House staff considers and reports citizen ideas and concerns.

And today--Saturday July 26--I am sending my final letter:

President@Whitehouse.gov
Dear Mr. President,

I think that writing you is a waste of time, and this letter is my last.

But I urge you to think of the cleanup job your successor who will be elected in 2004 is going to have. You should try to make it easier for him by back-tracking on some of the things you have done.

To get the national budget back to the surplus condition in which President Clinton left it you would have to cut expenditures on arms drastically. There is no risk in doing that--as I have repeatedly insisted no one is going to attack us.

You would also have to take back those tax cuts, those give-aways, and raise taxes on the rich. Those taxes would have to be higher than when you came into office, because in the meantime you have been running deficits, anything up to a trillion dollars for the present two-year period. (Think how much a trillion is, Mr. President. It would take you thousands of years to earn one.)

Then about Iraq. You will have to apologize to the Iraqis, to France and other European countries for that ill-fated war. You would say that we should have been more patient, and let the UN Inspectors continue and complete their work. And since the Iraqis are naturally mad at us now, and are shooting down our soldiers, it would be better to get other countries, known to have been against the war from the beginning, go into the country to restore order. But no one is going to move one soldier or spend one Euro except through the United Nations. You left the UN in shambles; this will bring it back.

Moreover you know that you have a lot of crooks in your government. Insider trading is one of the least of their crimes. You would get right after them, and see that they are appropriately punished.

You would either release or try those people whom you are now illegally holding in Guantanamo in Cuba.

Moreover you should get the American people to see your policies in a long-term perspective. During the Iran-Iraq war we backed the Iraqis. On the Internet there is a picture of Rummy shaking hands with Saddam Hussein in the mid-1980s. You can see it yourself by running

<http://www.californiapeaceaction.org/campaigns/rumsfeld/metroad.pdf>

on your computer.

Moreover you should cut taxes. I mean that. But cut them on the poor and middle class. They will spend the money, will spend us right out of the present recession--that otherwise will continue indefinitely.

The rich don't spend the money you have given them. That is aside from the kick-back in the form of contributions to your political campaign.

So Mr. President, this is the last time I will write you. I just hope you will go out of office gracefully.

Nathan Keyfitz
keyfitz@netscape.net

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Thank you for e-mailing President Bush. Your ideas and comments are very important to him.

Because of the large volume of e-mail received, the President cannot personally respond to each message. However, the White House staff considers and reports citizen ideas and concerns.

Dear Mr. Bush,

I see in the New York Times that you gave a talk to the American Legion on the day when the number of U.S. deaths since May 30 came equal to the number during the war. "We will never yield to terrorism" By terrorism you apparently mean small scale operations including suicide bombers. You think that suicide bombers are morally despicable, while bombing from the air is OK. What you have to wake up to is that each of us fights with the weapons we have. The Iraqis cannot acquire weapons to match your hi-tech. But one weapon they have that you cannot match--their faith in the cause of Islam that makes so many of them lay down their lives for it. How many Americans would similarly demonstrate such confidence?

On the matter of guilt, we have to take the bigger share, since we started it all.