

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERVIN SOMOGYI
by Steven Dembroski, from Dream Guitars

I've created a short list of questions, and as we discussed, my aim is to present them to you one at a time for you to answer when convenient. As this project of ours has aspirations to grow into something of significance, encompassing multifarious aspects of who you are, to my reckoning there is no one starting point that predominates another. In time, I trust a well-rounded form will take shape, making all we discuss relevant and worthy of inclusion. With that, here is my first question:

As a human progresses through time, he becomes a culmination of his life experiences, his education, random chance, and all other conditions of his generation and environment. Between the tabula rasa of birth and the cold inevitability of death, lies the variegated field of human existence, full of hopes and disappointments, moments of fear and discovery, occasional victories and personal losses, dark passages and unexpected epiphanies.

Here the matter of a man takes shape, becoming both an individual, and a part of society. The role he plays in that society is itself a confluence of desire, and ambition, ability, personal morality, conscience and chance. Under the best circumstances, the growth of the individual moves steadily, as if ascending a ladder, where from the vantage of each subsequent rung new things can be seen, interpreted, assimilated and hopefully understood.

Tell me about your ascent, how you view yourself internally, and the key moment(s) that defined Ervin Somogyi, human.

Hmmmm. Your question is not exactly a slam-dunk one, nor one that I am likely to be able to answer briefly. It *is* structurally modeled upon the concept of a graph or perhaps a bell curve, though: there's the beginning of something, followed by expectation of some manner of developmental progression or accretion, and finally a resultant culmination, integration, or conclusion of some type. Regardless of how far we get in life, the *tabula rasa* is about how we all start from zero but, at the end, we exit and the *tabula* is as completed as possible. I think that you are asking about my journey in this domain, out of such a mindset. However, you are asking about the inner Ervin Somogyi as well as the visible, trackable one -- and the former one works to a different model. I don't think that the *tabula rasa* model applies to basic personality formation. At least, not in the usual way.

What I mean is that, as far as hard-wired character traits and basic life attitudes are concerned (I assume that we can agree that these are the Inner

Person), the *tabula* is pretty much filled up by the age of five and, barring a life-changing event, who we 'really' are will have been a done deal since early childhood. That ascent will have been completed. As such, one's very early experiences, particularly one's parenting -- and, if recent studies are to be believed, even one's experience *in utero* -- are foundational; the rest of our lives, our choices, and certainly our perceptions, are shaped within that specific crucible. This knowledge informs one of Judaism's most profound and terrible wisdoms, as voiced by Rabbi Hillel: *we don't see things as they are; we see things as we are*. It is the iron law of human life for those of us who are not free of our own past and our own training. This may sound a bit sententious, but it simply means that we live our lives by rules and needs that we own but are usually unaware of.

The model I'm going to suggest for representing our personal *tabulas* is not a graph or a curve but, instead, a swatch of woven or knitted fabric whose boundaries are birth and death. Looking across it from one edge to the other, this cloth may vary in thickness, evenness, lumpiness, color, etc. -- sometimes richly so and sometimes just being kind of ratty and thin, so that the cloth might look clumsily made -- but the *basic pattern of the weave* is the same throughout. Our *weave* is what is set in our first five years. Our subsequent schooling, training and socialization will add colors to the fabric -- but the way we see things, how "far" we can see, and the ways in which we behave will all echo or reflect the basic pattern in some way.

The Drama of the Gifted Child, by Alice Miller, has been influential in my forming a sense of how this coalescence of core personality works; I recommend it highly to you. Alice Miller's specific focus is how personality is formed under regimens of parenting that are fundamentally cruel; that is, acted out without awareness of the child's needs. Ms. Miller's thesis is that lack of awareness of children's needs is endemic, and in fact the norm. In adulthood, consequently, we are all prisoners of our childhoods -- at least until we become aware of how our fundamental attitudes and sense of self have been shaped. This book has also been published under the title Prisoners of Childhood. It's a seriously good read. I can also recommend Sigmund Freud's book The Psychopathology of Everyday Life to your attention: it describes this same and exceedingly common human phenomenon in quite some depth as well, although from a different vantage point. Freud's book is a compendium of lectures he gave; it's brilliant. Alice Miller's book is like a profound and didactic private conversation. It is no less brilliant.

Just to be clear: not all growth stops after the age of five, by any means. Intellectual and cognitive abilities can grow all through one's life; the frontal cortex keeps on developing long after the limbic system (the seat of emotions) and the amygdala (the brain's filter-trap for preverbal trauma, as well as trauma

experienced in adult life and for which the sufferer can find no words) have, so to speak, reached their ultimate flight altitude and are coasting along on auto-pilot. At least, this is so as far as my understanding of current brain research extends.

MY START

My own beginnings were very unpromising; if we're going with the fabric metaphor then the word *threadbare* might be apt. I was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1944. My father had been taken away, to be killed as expeditiously and as conveniently as possible, for the crime of being a Jew. My mother and I survived for more than a year by hiding, among friends and strangers, in basements.

Within the first year-plus-some of my life, in the last phases of World War II, Budapest was substantially leveled. This destruction was accomplished through daily Allied carpet-bombing, by Russian artillery, and finally by vicious block by block fighting between the occupiers and the incoming Russian troops -- many of whom were women, incidentally; the Russians didn't have enough men left by then. The Russian forces took much of Budapest building by building, from the German military that occupied it. The Winter of 1944 was, furthermore, brutally severe. The civilian population of Budapest -- without heat, food, water, electricity, transportation, or anything but the most rudimentary medical services, and furthermore caught between two fighting forces neither of which was going to quit -- died by the scores of thousands, frozen to death, shot, blown up, starved, buried alive, and dead of their wounds and disease. It didn't help that Death Squads actively continued to hunt *undesirables* until the very end, in the middle of all this, too. That I survived, and that my parents survived, is unspeakable. Honestly, it set the bar pretty low, for me, in many ways; pretty much any other start would have been better. It also didn't help that my parents really didn't have much left over, after World War II got done with them, with which to attend to a child's needs.

I mentioned that Budapest was substantially leveled. I have read that Budapest was one of only three major European cities to have been so significantly destroyed. The others were Berlin and Warsaw; I've seen film clips of these taken after the war, and these cities looked almost like Hiroshima and Nagasaki: mile after mile there wasn't a whole building standing. You may have seen more recent pictures of Sarajevo, which suffered almost as badly fifty years later. Of course, Hiroshima and Nagasaki weren't European cities. But no one mentioned Hamburg or Dresden either, however; they are major European cities and they were both burned down in Allied fire-bombing campaigns that were planned and carried out with the express intent of terrorizing and annihilating the civilian population to as great an extent possible. Look up "Bomber" Harris on Google: it was his policy.

The long and the short of the matter is that I osmosed my early sense of the world from an environment that was soaked in the more desperate realities of war. I might add that no part of it was even remotely a *thrilling-scary* or *dramatic* experience of feeling terror, as it often is in the movies. Or in literature. I'm a good writer and there's a chance that the above paragraphs may be seen as some literarily well crafted, evocative, poignant, etc. gems. But that's irrelevant. Real life isn't subject to literary rules. Readers, viewers, and other observers are perfectly safe; they can hit the "pause" button go to their microwaves to heat up a cheese sandwich pretty much any time they want. Life, such as it was for us, was for real: every time you left your hiding place it was tantamount to picking up a gun and playing Russian Roulette; you might not come back -- exactly as life has been, more recently, for noncombatants in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Rwanda, Iran, Sudan, Lebanon, Syria, and lots of other such places. I can add that, along with all this, the rule at every level of existence for us was *deprivation* -- in a way that I don't think most Americans can imagine. Or want to.

Parenthetically, while I don't wish any of this on Americans in general, I've thought it would teach them some compassion if they had any real clue as to what war feels like firsthand. Americans haven't been subject to such conditions since 1865, and even then rather few cities were razed. On the other hand, from everything I've seen the American (Confederate) South still holds major grudges against those Northern Yankees for having won the Civil War . . . and you'd think this might give one an insight into how the Balkan Serbs, Croats, & Muslims have warred against one another based in grudges that have been held since the 1300s. War really ain't good for children and other living things -- despite our foreign policies, fantasies, misunderstandings, delusions, paranoia, arrogance, testosterone, and self-righteous thinking since World War 2.

I should add that while what I just said probably makes me sound like an unpatriotic bleeding-heart liberal *naif*, I also know that many men and women who have experienced military combat are permanently changed by it in ways that aren't at all helped by throwing cliches around. For anyone who has been thrown into the boiling cauldron of war, violent loss, deadly trauma, dislocations, killing, and the weld-strength human bondings that can occur in such circumstances, it is not helpful to suggest that they've participated in crimes against humans. To do so disrespects territories inside of them that need to be seen as being so searingly and deeply private, and probably always raw beneath the surface, that they verge on being sacred.

(The people who sent them into those cauldrons, though, without having any idea of what a cauldron is . . . that's different.)

In any event, being an infant, I absorbed wartime's emotional reality directly, without any of the filtering or defense mechanisms that I might have had if I'd been older. To cap this sad story off, I don't think that, even in the best of circumstances, my parents ever really would have had any idea of what to do with children. I say this as a simple matter of factual commentary on the child-rearing practices that they themselves had been subject to and internalized when they were young, and that were going to be their own style in raising their children. The dominant European pedagogy of the day -- which is still ubiquitous, by the way -- is described in riveting detail by Alice Miller, whom I've already mentioned, in For Your Own Good and Thou Shalt Not Be Aware. The objective of the *poisonous pedagogy* that Miller describes was (and is -- no ifs, ands, or buts) to break the child's will. My sister and I got the full benefit of such an effort. Alice Miller's books are required reading for anyone who is interested in how children experience the world. Of course, as I said, the war didn't help: my parents' wartime experiences traumatized them irredeemably and permanently. And my sister and I didn't get out from under any of that unscathed, either.

Okay, enough of that. My parents weren't all bad. They just seemed that way when I was young and defenseless, and it took me some growing up to see how significant their wounds, damage, and limitations were. One of their accomplishments was that they stayed together despite, or perhaps because of, unimaginable stressors. A second one was that an academic mindset was inculcated in me. My parents believed in getting as much education as possible; I was rewarded for being smart in school, and I therefore learned to become really smart in school. And both in school and out, I read voraciously. Along the way, I learned English by reading it, not by hearing it or speaking it; that accounts for my vocabulary.

For another thing, my father taught me a fearsome work ethic. Here's how he did it. Our travels started with leaving Hungary at the end of World War II. We were penniless refugees, literally without anything we couldn't carry with us. We went to Austria, and lived there for two years. Then, at the end of 1947, we moved to England; we were there without official papers and we lasted six months. The back-story to this is that before the war my parents had entrusted a friend in England with their savings, for safekeeping; everybody who hadn't already gotten out knew hard times were coming. But instead of repaying the debt after we arrived in England, that individual reported us to the authorities as illegals; we were put on a plane to Cuba within 48 hours of being turned in. We stayed in Cuba for two years, and my sister was born there. Cuba was the most refugee-friendly Western nation at that time: it had no immigration quotas and accepted everyone. It thus became a staging area for many displaced refugees who needed a breathing space in which to figure out their next move. Those next moves were generally to Canada, the U.S., the Latin countries, Australia, Africa, and even back to Europe; I

imagine that a few stayed in Cuba. Our emigration was to Mexico, where I grew up from ages six to fifteen. In 1959 we immigrated into the U.S. and had green cards.

All throughout these travels my father carried the heavy burden of taking his family with him and providing for it. Every move presented new problems in establishing himself and us: leaving behind all that we'd achieved in the last place we lived, no waiting relatives, no contacts except for perhaps the local social agency for refugees, no favors owed, no savings to speak of, a new language (we went through Hungarian, German, English, and Spanish), a need to find housing and work and new work skills, and new schools for the kids. The need to re-orient ourselves of course included the need to learn a new culture, finding a new network of friends, new money, new foods, new household goods and possessions, unpredictable medical needs, unfamiliar logistics, and the ever-pressing needs that every immigrant has for dealing with the issues of legality/paperwork/officialdom, etc. . . . you know, pretty much a clean slate each time. And my father did it repeatedly. He carried his losses, which much outnumbered his victories, far from homeland and from own language, own culture, own history, own familiar surroundings, and larger family. When people have asked me what my father did I've had to pause to think, because unlike their fathers who did one or two things all their lives, my father did all kinds of things. The way in which he survived (he learned a lot of this in the camps) was to *be useful*; he was brilliant at it. And he survived. Otherwise, he never complained about the fact that his own nation had done its best to murder him and us. He was a *profoundly* angry man, but never spoke of any such things. He acted them out instead, which is another story. But mostly, I saw him work steadily. *I saw him pay his bills*. He did not abandon his family, and did not descend into gambling, crime, or drug or alcohol use. He didn't strap a bomb onto himself and blow himself up in a German restaurant, even though I'd be surprised if he didn't generally feel like getting back at those genocidal criminals in any way he could. I'd have felt that way. As a matter of fact, I absorbed such murderously corrosive feelings day by day, so I can understand others having them. My father was an educated man but I never saw him read a book; he didn't have the time. My mother cooked, washed, did the shopping, cleaned, took care of the kids, cooked, washed, did the shopping, cleaned, took care of the kids, cooked, washed, did the shopping, cleaned, took care of the kids, cooked, washed dishes, did the shopping . . .

Psychiatrist Carlos Sluzky has written about the Experience of the Immigrant, for anyone who wants to know more. He's the first to have studied and made sense of immigrants' imperative to solve the immense problems of transition - - not the least of which is starting out as someone who has lost their culture, has the most reduced possibilities in the new one, and in general is either looked down on by everyone or simply not seen. According to Sluzky, immigrants typically don't have time nor energy nor the resources to grieve their losses; *their children take*

that task on for them. I have enormous respect for these tough people; they carry terrible burdens. As to my own losses -- being a child of immigrants who *has* processed a lot of my family's losses, just as Sluzky describes -- these are the loss of a birth-culture, a primary language, an extended family (I've not had cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, long-term family friends, in-laws, etc.), a coherent sense of belonging somewhere, and whatever else qualifies as 'roots'. The flip side to this is: I've traveled and seen quite a bit of the world and am multi-lingual. Regardless of whatever one gives up to do this, it does broaden one, especially if it happens before one's teens. I doubt that you and I would be having this dialogue if my consciousness hadn't been cobbled together from all the bits and pieces I've put together from everywhere I've been. These are simply the facts, and I don't know if what I got represents anything like an even exchange with what I lost.

Another thing that I learned from my parents, even though I didn't understand it at the time, was a form of generosity based in sense of obligation and family. You might call it duty. When we first moved to Mexico we landed in Mexicali, a depressingly hot and dusty border town in the middle of the desert. We lived in a slum and, man, *we were poor*. I didn't appreciate this at the time; I was six and had a child's awareness of my little world. Still, once a month, I saw my parents fill cardboard boxes up with clothing (I don't know where they got it from) to send back to Hungary -- for family that had even less. That has stayed with me. It's also been emphasized by the fact that my father's sister, who had married well and moved to the U.S. in the 1930s, and was comfortably in a position to have helped our family in the tough years, didn't lift a finger to do so. Well, other than her middle one.

(To help explain this, that hatred began a long time ago -- as these things do. My father's father was an entrepreneur and ran a small furniture factory in Budapest -- which fact gave the family a certain position on the social spectrum. My grandfather was killed in a street accident when my dad was 20. That no doubt further traumatized an already troubled family; but, my father, as eldest son, was expected to take over the reins of the furniture making enterprise and keep it going. He didn't. He frittered his time and energies away, and ran the business into the ground. The resulting financial void forced his sister -- my aunt -- to have to go out and get a job. She wound up working as a corset maker. This fact, however, radically devalued her social standing and reduced her chances for a good marriage. She eventually entered an arranged marriage, but it was a markedly unhappy one. I don't think she ever forgave my father for having ruined her life.)

Fast-forwarding some decades, I seem to be a teacher at heart. I'm sure that you will sense this in the present conversation, which will be as much about things that I think and know as it will be about facts that are personal and

autobiographical. As I'd mentioned before regarding my father, I seem to have learned to be useful, or at least interesting -- through being informative. But I also believe that this has, in part, a defensive function for me. I seem to have learned early on that people who are out of touch with themselves -- and especially those that lack awareness of anyone or anything outside of themselves and their own concerns -- are like trucks in the streets that have peepholes instead of windshields. They can be dangerous. I want to give them bigger peepholes. I tend to stay away from people whose emotional imagination only takes in fellow members of their own group, clan, demographic, religion, geography, or outlook, and who believe that everybody else is for sure going to Hell. These seem to me to be 'human' pretty much on the level of a horse or a cat that has really good RAM and computational ability, but without empathic capacity. Empathy simply means having an Awareness Of The Other (be it people, other life forms, or even objects) in a way that *means something* to one. From a non-intellectual everyday point of view 'being human' means nothing more than being indiscriminately open, friendly, and compassionately accepting of people and things.

SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS THINGS

In terms of religious culture, I'm . . . er . . . sort of Jewish. Not so much by anything like having a circumcision and a bar-mitzvah as from a sense of feeling like an outsider. Catholics and Protestants might feel guilt and fear of the fires of Hell and such, but they don't feel like outsiders: they feel like they're part of the scheme of things. Unsurprisingly, my family history in World War II, and our rootlessness for many years afterwards, has everything to do with my sense of the world. Otherwise, my father was born Jewish, and my mother Catholic. In Judaism the children are considered to be whatever the mother is; in Catholicism the children are considered to be whatever the father is. Thus for all the Catholics, I'm a Jew, and for all the Jews I'm a Catholic. Neat. But not so helpful. While I consider the history and political development of both these religions interesting, and that they contain much wisdom, I've not particularly followed either of their dogmas. I'm as much Buddhist these days as anything else; I've been studying Buddhism. Otherwise, I more easily identify with victims than with victimizers, simply as a matter of life experience. I can, for instance, better sympathize with the boys who are molested by their priests than I can with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Pope Benedict XIV has recently announced that the Church will deal with these priests appropriately; and what can one say of an institution that takes such an enlightened stance after only several thousand reports of abuse over many decades? To compound the shame, Pope Pius XII didn't utter a single word to help the Jews during World War II. I fail to understand such behavior. From the standpoint of Wisdom and Enlightenment, it is undoubtedly a failing of mine that I find myself hoping that people who have been knowingly in a position to

have helped others in need, but *didn't*, spend a whole lot of time in a place where they need 3000-strength sunblock.

As I said above, my principal questions about things has generally been *Why?* and *How Come?* I think about such things. I am inclined to believe that I do this because my parents were unable to comprehend their own lives. For that matter, no one could have done that: their lives were fully incomprehensible. And I've felt that way about my own life for most of it. As Dr. Sluzky has pointed out, the children take over a lot of the parents' unresolved challenges, and I think I've done so in this instance. "Who is God to have allowed this?" . . . and so on. Interestingly, I have paid attention to my work in that same way: *why* does the guitar sound this way when I do this? *Why* does it sound that way if I do something different? And so on. I might point out, within the context of the present discussion, that while it is true that my work (and my writings) are what I'm known for, these are simply the things that I've learned to do well. I'm glad to have those skills; but they are not *foundational*. *Foundational* is what I spent many years in therapy untangling, and I'll have more to say about that further on.

When it comes to ultimate or foundational questions, in our Western culture, these are usually directed at some version of God. But He (She? It? They?) is really bad about responding to personal inquiries. Polytheism makes sense to me. Buddhism appeals to me because it's about living life here and now; it is remarkably free of dogma, saints, or judgments; it is uniquely inclusive; their "clergy" isn't known to sodomize young boys, and it in general concerns itself with *immediate, complete, and authentic* knowledge of truth -- like the *grokking* that Robert Heinlein describes in Stranger in a Strange Land. Buddhism does have an afterlife/reincarnation component which makes no sense to me at all. Being close to 70 years old at this point I spend more and more time thinking about end-game aspects of life. Lacking the foundational Western cultural assumptions about life and death, I think that once you're dead your molecules return to Nature and that's that. Other pieces of loam get animated and the cycle repeats. Nothing in my history, experience, or awareness suggests anything else. ("Well", my friends would say, "what do you expect? He's a *Taurus*, for Heaven's sake!").

In terms of contemporary religion, afterlife or no, I live in a society that is hugely dedicated to a belief in the King James Bible. It is our chief guide in matters of Living Life. In spite of how waterlogged with the consciousness of this text many parts of this country are, I don't quite know what the Bible is really about: it covers way too many bases. It is much like the encyclopedia. You can find everything in it: genesis, genealogy, history, jealous God, merciful God, false Gods, parables, punishments, military victories and defeats, moral quandaries, songs, abominations and evils, saints, parricide, infanticide, suffering, salvation,

righteousness, obedience, philosophy, primogeniture, repentance, predictions, homilies, polygamy, aphorisms, kings, fratricide, the sins of vice, murder, incest, betrayal, covetousness, idolatry, curses, a great many plagues, the assurance that all will be redeemed if and when one makes a full commitment to following God's instructions and then join him in Heaven, and homilies of many kinds. Being such an omnibus, its usefulness toward grasping any one single thing must be somewhat diluted, don't you think? That is, unless one adopts a Buddhist perspective of All-Inclusiveness; Buddhism is big on The Big Picture in a way that makes judgments, opinions, positions, rules, objectifications, preferences for 'right', or rejection of 'wrong', etc., irrelevant. ("Well", some of my friends would say, "did we mention that he's a Taurus?") I have the impression, on the other hand, that things like Buddhist texts are the result of, and serve the pursuit of, focused efforts at attaining the elusive but singular thing called enlightenment or One-ness.

One-ness is more interesting than it might at first seem. There's only one thing that I can think of that is so absolutely singular that it is never expressed (in this language or any other I know of) as a plural. That is, there's only one of this while everything else -- even 'God' -- easily subdivides into two or more; we speak of Gods, Universes (even though the prefix 'uni' means 'one'), eternities, infinities, and we can happily add "s" to everything else under the sun and Betelgeuse. That single thing is: Peace. Or Calm, which is nearly the same thing. One can, technically, speak of 'Peaces', and 'Calms' but these formulations sound somehow wrong and you've never heard these words spoken nor read them in print. Peace is indivisible. If there is one God only, perhaps He is Peace -- a quantity barely known on this planet. Outside of that, the idea of One Omnipotent God who needs to be glorified and obeyed, and who loves those who obey him but *relegates to eternal flames* those who don't (including us), is nothing short of psychopathic, and on a par with religions that practice human sacrifice. Actually, below par. In those religions the Gods could be appeased. In fundamentalism one must surrender one's self completely; there is no appeasing.

Personally, I am inclined to believe that humans' capacity to understand *any* God or Force of Creation is on a par with a hamster's ability to comprehend, say, principles of urban planning. I don't think that most people understand the difference between life or death, or sanity and insanity, or health and sickness, or giving and taking, or seeing or not seeing Truth. Not really; not in a way that affects any Authentic Conduct of their Lives.

Finally, the Bible, as we know it, is the direct product of the Council of Nicaea -- pronounced *nye-see-a*. Do you know that history? The emperor Constantine, in 325 A.D., decided that Christianity would be the official religion of the world he ruled. The Bible didn't exist as one book yet: it was an amorphous body of work from

disparate sources, sects, and traditions that had been accumulated over centuries. Of these, nothing of the New Testament had been written down until a hundred years after Christ died; it had all existed as oral tradition until then. Constantine convened a council of the reigning experts and church-affiliated appointees of the time, in the city of Nicaea. Its job was to edit the Bible -- that is, *to formally decide on what the official Bible would be and what it would not be*. The Council of Nicaea edited the Old and New Testament materials, weeding out writings from the pre-Biblical oeuvre (such as the Gnostic gospels) that weren't consistent with Emperor Constantine's and the Church's agenda, and thereby established the *Nicaean* (sometimes spelled *Nicean*) *Creed* -- the official policy statement of the Christian Church. Since then, a long history of scholarly misunderstandings, ignorance, and mis-translations of the materials that *were* included has only helped to further confuse the various texts' original meanings. Elaine Pagels describes this foundational history of Christianity and its principal guiding text very ably and intelligently in her book *The Gnostic Gospels*.

GOOD, BAD, AND FORGIVENESS

I struggle with being judgmental (who doesn't? We're all taught to be judgmental). A very active tension in my life has to do with my inability to forgive those who have injured me, colliding with my belief in the absolute necessity for doing so. (By the way, *injury* comes from the Latin *in juris*, which means *injustice*. It's interesting to me that the original meaning of that word is *to wrong someone*, rather than to merely do them physical damage, which is the modern significance of the word.) The state of general fracturing of trust that my early life experiences inculcated in me has not prepared me for the fact that my adult life has been pretty privileged and lucky, and that most people have treated me well over the years. I got a good education. I live decently. Yes, I've been fucked over somewhat here and there, and rejected, disadvantaged, and overlooked . . . and was in an unsuccessful marriage . . . but nothing as major as my first five years on Earth). I've stayed out of prison. I have a useful and admirable skill. I'm without serious birth defects. I'm white (that really helps), although I experience most ordinary people of any color as being pretty decent. I've found this to be the case in every country I've lived in.

The flip side to all that, of course, is that if one goes below that surface then one enters a territory in which people worship at the altars of very different Gods, some of which are unforgiving, some of which are downright savage and dangerous, some of which are whores, some of which are predators, some of which are unworthy frauds and tricksters, and some of which are the real thing. A few of these Gods -- if I may use metaphoric shorthand -- are (in no particular order): Sigmund Freud, The Media with their various prominent personalities, the proverbial Pot of Gold at the

end of the rainbow, Service to Humanity, salvation, My Country Right Or Wrong, Jesus Christ (either the original one that proposed 'loving thy neighbor as thyself' or the newer one of The Rapture, smiting unbelievers, and assorted kinds of approved intolerance), The Fed, Cleanliness/Order/Reliability, Survival of the Fittest, the free market, Newtonian physics, creativity, sex, Ego, money, authority, Education, Capitalism, the relentless pursuit of Being Right and/or Winning, Less Government, More Government, Pacifism, Socialism, the Rules, Democracy, eating organically, being heterosexual, Progress, Market Share and Bottom Line, D.N.A., Krishna, Karl Marx, excelling at something tangible, Private Property, the Bible/Talmud/Koran, self-denial, profit, the G.O.P., the Earth, a Good Credit Rating, Good Return On Investment, Science and Technology, the Pursuit of Power, and the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. I may have overlooked a God or two.

And yet . . . if there's one thing that any little awareness of history tells us it is that, as long as different peoples share existence on this planet, not a single instance of being oppositional, holding grudges, being pro-us-and-anti-them, or dwelling on old insults, etc. resolves any issues. It just doesn't. The most enlightened statement about this matter that I've seen is the following wisdom, which I will share with you. It comes courtesy of Anonymous, who sometimes signs her (why is Anonymous always male?) name as Unknown:

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you.

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight.

Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous.

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough.

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God.

It never was between you and them anyway.

(NOTE: these things are undoubtedly easier said than done. But the goal is the best I have ever found. And for those readers who find this too saccharine and inspirational, I don't deny having a darker side too. You don't grow up in a war and have highly troubled parents without getting one. But all that's between me and my therapist; and I'm coming to that in a moment.)

THE LIFE OF THE MIND

I should tell you something about my intellectual foundations.

My most important insights, perspectives, and mental growth as an adult have come in two waves of life experience. First, at around High School and College age, was a conceptual one of how the world works, in a way that made sense. This was formed out of the heady soup of the intellectual, scholastic, and scientific thinking that occupied the brightest and most influential minds from the 1880s to the 1960s: Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Henry George, Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, as well as behind-the-scenes people like J. Robert Oppenheimer, Mao-Tse Tung, John Maynard Keynes, etc. These were the people whose thought and influence most Westerners are still touched by every day, both directly and indirectly. They have been, essentially, the spiritual speechwriters for all of our contemporary political speechwriters, columnists, and pundits. Outside of that, news and propaganda about Communism, democracy, freedom, socialism, the superego and sex, the Cold War, the Bomb, China, the economy, trade imbalances, inflation, and better living through chemistry have been, and continue to be, my and our daily fare.

The second episode of significant life experience came in my forties: it was my exploration and discovery of myself through psychotherapy.

That experience turned out to be transformative. My therapist showed and taught me a model for being able to interact with people which had been foreign to me until then, and in which I was acceptable as I was. My previous model had been one in which I expected much of what I said or thought to be ignored, or considered invalid or unimportant, or some form of betrayal. I think most people operate under a model like that. My therapist was quite literally my gateway to being able to have this conversation with you, and others like it with other people. These are based in a sense that I'm pretty much O.K., which after many years of not feeling that way was like seeing sunlight after a long blackout. My therapy basically gave me *permission to inhabit myself*. That doesn't give you immortality or a great job or anything like that, and a cup of coffee still costs the same, but it means that you can actually live a life rather than just going through the motions. The Messiah will come again when everyone has that freedom.

As to the first conceptual awakening, those best answers about how the world works came blindingly and excitingly from reading (and discussing) Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Henry George. You've heard of Marx and Freud, but I bet you never heard of Henry George; most people haven't. He was an American contemporary of Marx who was a massively important figure in American social and intellectual thought around 1900; he ran for mayor of New York, and his ideas informed and excited the aspirations of an entire generation of Americans. Those ideas are described in his book Progress and Poverty, which I highly recommend. Tragically, the vanguard of the young men who believed in Henry George's ideals died in World War I, in large part because they *had* ideals and went. George's prominence and influence died there as well. I think THAT was a real loss to the world, in the what-may-have-been sense of the word.

Henry George wrote about what was in those days known as *social economics*. Compared with the abstract and mathematical ways in which just-plain-economics are taught today, social economics taught not only about the productive capacities of a society, and how they are organized -- but also included *who got to make the decisions* about distribution of the produced goods and wealth, and whose interests those decisions served. If you listen to any contemporary late-night talk program about politics, economics, and the investment climate, the speakers will invariably cite the needs of Capital and Return On Investment. There's nary a word about how people who are not part of the investment activity might benefit; there are no broader, longer-term, or even less shallow social concerns here at all. Henry George's ideas were based in large part on the teachings of Adam Smith (I recommend reading him too: he's fundamental), and they appealed to me because of

the sheer logic of his presentation. He is elegantly persuasive, the more so because he begins his narrative by *defining his terms* so that the reader can understand exactly what he is saying. Modern writers don't do anything like that; I've looked in vain; they are very sure of their own premises and then go on to make their argument using declarative sentences as though it were un-macho to show hesitation or doubt.

Most fascinatingly to me, Henry George very elegantly exposed the illogic of one of the great -- and today still unquestioned -- paradigms of our times: Thomas Malthus' creed on how population growth is the root cause of poverty. Population growth isn't the problem: it's monopoly of productive capacity and distribution. You'd have to read Marx and George (I highly recommend Progress and Poverty) to fully understand what I just said -- although it is nothing more complicated than to point out that we have (*for the first time in history*) plenty of productive capacity, but most of it is not directed to those in need; it is directed at those who can afford. As it is, I am probably coming across as one of those pinko bleeding-heart liberals who uphold Communism over the American way. Uh . . . I actually don't. Reading these thinkers is simply enlightening. Plus, does anyone seriously not believe that any regime that shoots or otherwise detains those who try to leave the country has something badly wrong with it?

The phenomenon of Malthus is quite interesting. Thomas Malthus was a hack writer whose other work is entirely and justifiably forgotten. I was interested to learn that he was hired by the British East India Company *expressly* to write the one thing he *is* remembered for: a tract justifying the poverty of the Far East as being induced by the plenitude of native population, rather than the draining of that region's wealth by the actions of powerful corporate interests. Malthus' tract on population, commissioned and written only a few years after the French Revolution, served the cause of the powerful people of those times who quite rightly feared other uprisings if the populations they were exploiting understood that the greater causes of their misery lay in something other than their own numbers. George is a really good read. Malthus isn't -- but echoes of his thinking are available every day on radio, printed media, and television. More lately, Paul Ehrlich took that material and ran with it in his best-seller The Population Bomb. That guy Malthus, he's had real staying power. Incidentally, George's book cites several disproofs of Malthus's theory that are elegant and intelligent. I wish more modern writers could write as logically and lucidly, even if most of them lack the capacity to question their basic premises.

The Population Bomb is about exactly what it sounds like: a prediction of doom. These very predictions could be culled from the history of Easter Island -- the one with all the monolithic heads, you know? To the best of our knowledge the

Easter Islanders comprised of two groups which, together, systematically felled all the island's trees and used up all its resources, to the point that they came to war over what little was left. They wiped each other out to the last man. You can read up on that if you'd like. Malthus would have nodded his head sagely, if sadly, over this unavoidable end. George would have felt something unspeakable at the sight of so many people being wholly blind to the fact that if they worked in unison to make room for each other, they could have planted trees and crops, etc. so as to make their lives *sustainable* and thereby *not die out*. This is a really interesting and useful paradigm, don't you think? Yet, today, no one is doing anything to make life sustainable.

The Malthusian model is predicated on the paradigm of private property and proprietary interests. It's breath-taking to consider how much of human history is based in the proposition that *This Is Mine And Not Yours*. Author Farley Mowat put his finger on it, in echoes of Henry George's thinking, when he said that the concept of private property is one of the most destructive ideas to ever have existed. He's right. The price that this thoughtful Canadian has paid for voicing such heresy is to have been permanently banned from entering the United States.

But I digress. My mental awakening occurred within the larger context of *the* epic intellectual drama of the twentieth century. This was the vigorous examination of, and debate about, the two modern views on the nature of human reality. These debates have taken place within the last one hundred-plus years of Western cultural and intellectual history, and in the first decades of the 20th century, in this country and Western Europe, in particular. Most importantly, this information -- which I'm going to describe immediately below -- lacked the massive internal inconsistencies between the world as I saw it and the world as I was being told God and our best political leadership intended it to be -- or how it was to soon become through their efforts. I'm still waiting . . .

PARADIGM #1

The first of these paradigms was the view originating with Sigmund Freud that man's life on this planet is largely driven and determined by motives and forces from within himself, of which the individual is not aware. Not to put too fine a point on it, Freud's thought put the kibosh on the dogma of free will -- which had been a fundamental assumption in Western intellectual history up until then -- and substituted for it instead the supremacy of the unconscious and the working of innate, powerful, and conflicting drives. Many people didn't want to think of this as a step forward, but those who studied his writings had to admit that Freud's theory did seem to more satisfactorily explain things like hysterical [non-traumatic] paralysis, the neurotic processes of everyday life, wars, sexual deviance, the

illogical uses of power and influence in adult life, the life of the mind, the hierarchy of ego-defense mechanisms that *everyone* uses every day, parent-child relationships, competitiveness, self-hindering, and a host of human behaviors when other, previous, explanations such as Demonic Influences or just plain Will of God had lost their compelling force. The idea that we are fully formed personalities by an early age comes largely from Freud's writings and thought.

Of course, Freud was just the beginning. I've also read the works of other thinkers in this field -- particularly in the Second Wave of my aforementioned growth spurt in this area when, twenty years later, I went to graduate school in clinical psychology in order to learn more about the life of the mind. But that's really another story. If the life of the mind is of interest to you, though, then I will recommend that you also read Wilhelm Reich, who made an attempt at teasing apart the specific problem of man's inhumanity to man. You can read his wisdom on this in his book The Murder of Christ.

By now you can probably tell by my references to books that I rely on them for fodder for my mind. The books that have been the most important to me have been the most riveting, in part because they tell truth, and also in part because they are written clearly and accessibly, with little or no jargon. It is books like these that that I've modeled my own writing on, insofar as wanting to explain things plainly and in everyday language. I very much hope that my protracted attempts at eschewing prolixity and obfuscation will have been, if not effectively intellectually salubrious, then at least having the virtue of adequate verisimilitude.

PARADIGM #2

The second paradigm was the one put forth by the economist Karl Marx, which incorporated the thinking of the social philosophers Hegel and Engels: that the world is organized around the needs of Capital and Monopoly -- in other words, that how society, especially Capitalist society, is organized in its productive and distributive capacities determines what the rest of life is like. Incidentally, both Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud were Tauruses.

Even though these descriptions are simplistic abbreviations of seriously complicated systems of thought, please take my word for it that these matters, and their implications, dominated intellectual debate in Western society, and beyond, from about the 1890s to about the 1960s -- and then some. Careers were expended in the pursuit of the understanding, development, comparison, integration, and implementation of these paradigms. Intellectual and actual wars have been fought over them. It was hoped that these -- one, the modern view of inner life, and the other that of external and socioeconomic reality -- would prove

to be complementary. Both these systems of ideas were so powerful that it was believed that if they could be integrated they would provide a comprehensive, rational, and enlightened method for understanding the human condition in the most comprehensive way, and also for regulating (or freeing up) the quality of life in the complicated socioeconomic and urban world we live in -- a sort of analogue to Einstein's quest for an ultimate Unified Field Theory. These ideas found their way into what we know as Social Darwinism, existentialism, all known systems of psychology, capitalism, communism, socialism, economics, sociology, history, art, literature, academic research, social philosophy, politics, and much more. The working of some form or degree of these basic ideas into the modern mind cannot be overstated. As I said, they effected the formation of my own intellect -- and yours too.

Being a Taurus (so I'm told) it is natural that I'd be concerned with concrete, here-and-now matters rather than abstract ones. Maybe so. As regards real-life and hard-reality things in the realm of money and power, though, I've never read more truthful-sounding and outrage-inducing -- but brilliantly researched -- book about who really runs things and how things really work than Ferdinand Lundberg's The Rich and the Super-Rich.

Lundberg, incidentally, was also a Taurus.

Anyway, this ferment of discovery is largely over. Contemporary intellectual society no longer concerns itself very passionately over either one of these paradigms. Both Freud and Marx have been discredited. Henry George has simply been forgotten and we have new heroes such as Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, Oprah, and various authors and titans of industry on our horizons. One reason is that, after decades of trying, the best minds which had examined these matters concluded that these are two separate, complete, and incompatible systems of thought, with no point of commonalty. They are very much like a world view accepting the existence of God, versus another which denies it: both are complete and self contained and you can live in one or the other. But never both. Hence each is useless in understanding the other.

Yet, as far as these paradigms that dominated 20th century intellectual, economic, political, and psychological life are concerned, some thinkers noticed that even though these two world views are mutually exclusive they have one fundamental feature in common. This is that the average individual living by either paradigm has not the least idea of how things got to be the way that they are, and accepts his world unquestioningly as being a normal, natural and necessary fact.

From the standpoint of the workings of the mind the average individual hasn't any knowledge as to why he is the way he is or how he got to be that way. His life is not meaningfully examined or questioned: rather, it is experienced as a natural, necessary, organically familiar and accepted -- if problem-riddled -- whole. Likewise, the average individual living in the "real world" feels no reason to question how things got to be the way they are (I refer you to my previous remarks about the different Gods that people worship -- i.e., what is *real* for them). Even if he did, he would not have been given the conceptual tools nor vocabulary to do this with. Richard Lichtman writes about these things lucidly and brilliantly in his book The Creation of Desire.

THE AFTERMATH

Not only has the intellectual ferment around these Ideas waned, but a third paradigmatic idea has been making a strong resurgence in the last fifty years: it's a reaction against any concern with either of these 'failed' paradigms, the mindsets of modernity, intellectuality, and progress. It holds to an insistence on chucking it all and putting our money in *the way things used to be done (tradition), faith, family, and obedience to fundamental values and authority*. And there is a strong evangelical/authoritarian motive in operation. That is, rather than convincing by argument and by logic, one strives to prevail by simply dominating the opposition by repeating one's mantra (and acting on it) until the other side gives up. Given my own intellectual formation, I struggle to find such a mindset comprehensible. Visions of the Borg from Star Trek come to my mind: resistance is futile, we will conquer you, and all that. I have only logic to offer, and the fundamentalist approach does not recognize the power of thinking or questioning.

I think that at least some of all this might come from people having been distorted, having been pulled too hard in different directions, and for too long. David Hare, in his book Via Dolorosa, makes the point that the State of Israel has never reconciled itself as to whether it wants to be a secular state or a religious one and that its modern history comes foursquare from this split. This struck me as both a profound and obvious insight, which is already codified in our culture in the observation that a house divided against itself cannot stand. As a matter of fact, the U.S. is in exactly the same position as Israel in this regard: we don't know which set of values to set our course by. It doesn't help that both the secularist and traditionalist camps are themselves divided . . . And I don't blame us for not knowing which set of values to adhere to: all the options look pretty ragged and full of falsity if looked at closely. More ominous than that is the fact that these mindsets are *irreconcilable*. The only faction that I can think of that isn't in the fray on some level are the Buddhists -- although I have recently heard of a rock group called Buddhists With Chain Saws. Am I missing something?

I think about such matters. If one of my principal areas of mental conflict is about how decent most people are, vs. how badly people behave in war, religion, and politics, then I wonder whether the social/economic/military world I live in today might not be a function of the fact that the U.S. has been operating in a pre-war mode, with a pre-war mindset, since 1945. Looked at more broadly, one could even say since 1916. That's a century! Talk about being pulled too hard in different directions! Being forever caught between permanent war and peace cannot do other than to create the epidemic sense of dislocation and lack of safety that underlie much of daily life. It also helps me to understand why people cling to their positions as though their lives depended on it, and as though "being right" were a solution to anything. It isn't. But the unpleasant truth for us is that, in consequence of all these factors, you and I live in a world that is awash in desperation and vitriol. And all that notwithstanding, the fundamental reality of *every* matter touched on in these concerns -- whether one takes this metaphorically or literally -- is, and always has been, this: If you give a flower sunlight and water, it'll thrive; if you starve it and stomp on it, it won't. Is this a mysterious concept? I think Jesus of Nazareth said something like this too, before he got nailed to some of the same material that I make my guitars out of.

I want to mention another book that has been very helpful to my thinking: E.F.Schumacher's *A Guide For The Perplexed*. Some people will remember him because he wrote a cult best seller about forty years ago titled *Small Is Beautiful*. *A Guide For The Perplexed* is about values and about how we are all indoctrinated into seeing certain things as firm realities, but to not see others at all *that are right in front of our own noses*. Schumacher begins his narrative by saying that he'd had a lot of questions about What was What when he was young. He quickly learned to not ask them of the adults around him, though, because they didn't know anything and gave him bullshit answers. By his own admission, he shut up and hacked his way through the educational system, hoping for the best but never feeling quite satisfied. Then, one day, as an adult, he traveled to Moscow, Russia, for a conference. He had a free day before the event began and decided to look around the city. He was assigned an Intourist Guide to accompany him (he wasn't allowed to walk around unchaperoned), and they set off with map in hand. Sometime later that day Schumacher found himself in front of a magnificent church building, but he couldn't locate it on the map -- which otherwise featured a lot of the important buildings, historic sites, monuments, and points of interest that a tourist might want to take a look at. He turned to the guide and asked him why he couldn't find this extraordinary building on the map. The guide blandly replied that in Russia *they didn't recognize the existence* of the church, and therefore it wasn't included. Schumacher had an epiphany then: during all his life it

was not his perceptions that had been faulty; *he'd simply been given bad maps*. I think you'd get something out of reading this book.

MY CAREER

You had said: "Tell me about your ascent, how you view yourself internally, and the key moment(s) that defined Ervin Somogyi, human." I think that you really want to know more about the Personal me than about the fulcrum events that have enabled me to be the guitar maker that I am. But I should tell you a bit about these, as the various facts *are* involved who I have come to be, fully as much as in my choice of career. There have been a few significant turning points without which I'd be very differently placed today.

My parents had planned an academic/professional career for me, preferably a medical one. But . . . making guitars!?! *Hmph!* No one ever even *dreamed* of guitar making. Well, I allllllmosst made it to medical school. I dropped out of that track at the last moment, however, and became an English major -- a move done more out of instinct and desperation than out of planning or thought. I had a nervous breakdown in my fourth year of college and didn't know anything else than to seek refuge among books and reading. These were friends that I'd long felt safe with. Also, I had nowhere else to go; school was safe, and moving back in with my parents wasn't.

I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English. I joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Peru. The experiences I had there were fantastic and I wouldn't have missed them for anything. I came back to the U.S. and enrolled in graduate school (in Latin American Studies) in Madison, Wisconsin. I found graduate school just as oppressive as undergraduate school had been, and I dropped out. I bummed around and did various things for a while, including playing guitar in various Midwestern restaurants and clubs, and doing alcoholism rehabilitation therapy in Rockford, Illinois.

I found both Rockford and the work -- and even the whole Midwest -- alienating. I eventually returned to California, but without a clear plan of action other than to 'find a job' and 'have a normal life'. I failed. I couldn't find steady employment and, by default, did various sorts of temporary and part time jobs. These supported me, meagerly, but did give me lots of free time. This was a blessing in disguise, as I'd never in my life really had completely free, unstructured time. It had always been expended in the service of other people's needs and priorities, and -- to use sixties jargon -- I really had no idea of who I was. But, within this matrix of unstructured time, I built my first guitar.

That didn't come out of a vacuum, though. The background to this is that because a lot of my childhood was, for various reasons that I had no say in, rather isolated and isolating, I spent a great deal of time being my own entertainment and stimulation. I read, built models and kits, worked in modeling clay, whittled and carved wood, assembled things with my erector set, made plaster casts, collected stamps and coins and things, used woodburning tools, etc. I used the manual skills that I'd learned as a boy, to build that first guitar. And in doing so I found a way whereby I could apply those skills to an occupation that offered some things I couldn't find in one package anywhere else. First, guitar making is genuinely challenging and gives the satisfaction of creating something tangible. Second, it offers some really interesting mental and conceptual challenges that pull from woodworking, history, physics, acoustics, music, engineering, art, one's sense of spatial relationships, and even spirituality. Third, lutherie offers a remarkably free rein to one's imagination; the work has no creative ceiling and you can improve your work forever if you want to. Fourth, if one likes to teach and write, lutherie offers lots of things to write about and otherwise share. Best of all, it does these things pretty much without academia's and bureaucracies' infighting and resistance to lateral thinking -- which I'd already seen a bit of. Fifth, lutherie has held my interest even through some very difficult times when there was no money and I felt completely bewildered by repeated failures. Those difficult times also include having depressions, which I've touched on in other writings. The reasons for these are deep inside me, therapy or no, and I continue to suffer from them. Finally, making guitars has also been a haven from the world that I could withdraw into, when it has become too much for me.

Fast-forward a few years.

A significant turning point for me in my work was my relationship to the Windham Hill music label in the late 1970s and through the '80s. Windham Hill's impact on solo guitar playing, and contemporary guitar music in general, was phenomenal. It also became my point of entry into the world of serious lutherie. The Windham Hill guitar players were points of musical inspiration and reference for many young guitarists, both compositionally and acoustically -- in part because, for the first time, the guitar was being recorded and listened to at the level of fidelity of sound previously occupied by classical music alone. I was lucky to have met the Windham Hill guitarists when the Windham Hill phenomenon was just getting off the ground, and at just that point in time when serious guitarists were needing genuinely better instruments. I was also lucky to be living an hour from Palo Alto, which was the epicenter of that musical ferment. It helped that I'd figured some things out about guitars by then; my instruments performed well not only acoustically but also did exceptionally well in the recording studio. The players

very much appreciated being able to make better recordings, and my word-of-mouth reputation grew.

Another milestone was the Carmel Classic Guitar Festival of 1977. This was a prestigious and important event that drew important people from all over this country and even a few from overseas. I'd been building guitars full-time for five or six years by then and felt happy to be invited to show my work; I was going to be one of seven exhibitors. I should tell you that my friends had been unfailingly supportive and encouraging to me in my guitar making efforts all this while, even as my parents could not fathom what the hell I was doing making guitars when I could have had such a promising career doing something reasonable. In any event, I went to Carmel feeling a little cocky and smug, thinking to wow the people there. Instead, I ran headlong into a brick wall: my work was the worst of anyone's there. It was amateurish and careless, and *everybody* could see it. It was a disastrous, humiliating, and sobering experience. I returned from that event severely shaken, and depressed. My friends had, in fact, been no help to me at all with their uncritical kindness: I hadn't learned anything. And I was faced with the inescapable fact that I'd been wasting my time in living out a hippie fantasy -- without actually having the discipline, education, or motivation required to do good, serious work.

It became clear to me that I had two choices: quit making guitars and do something else, or buckle down and do better work. It took me several weeks of re-evaluating to realize that I actually liked making guitars and that the path was open to me if I wanted to apply myself and do professional level work. That was my *real* starting point as a guitar maker. And it was within a year of that decision to do the best work I could, and not let things slide, that I met up with the first of my Windham Hill contacts. The second would not have happened without the first, and the rest is (my) history.

Fortunate though my timing was, I will suggest that my work has also been helped by the seemingly unrelated fact that I'm a generally empathic person. Being empathic is both an advantage and a problem, depending on circumstances. I might have had this capacity genetically but I also know that I learned to survive early on by being very sensitive to my parents' needs and emotional states -- out of all the circumstances that I've already described. This has been helpful in making guitars in that I have simply been able to notice many qualities of the materials that I work with, some subtle and some obvious, but that are not at all hidden; it's just that we're not used to *really* looking at things. Unsurprisingly, this turns out to be just as useful skill toward making better guitars as it is toward getting along with people. I'll give you an example: if you pick up a set of guitar top wood, for instance, and do nothing other than to simply pay attention to it as it rests in your hands, it will offer some *two dozen* separate qualities, features, and attributes to

notice -- that are *right there in front of your nose, eyes, and fingers*. The wood is just dying to let you know all about itself, if you pay attention. Yet, to a lot of guitar makers this material is -- beyond knowing its species, thickness, and grain count -- a complete mystery.

A BIT MORE ABOUT VALUES AND THE WIDER VIEW

We're all concerned with how to live a meaningful life. Personally, I obsess a bit about whether people are 'good' or 'bad', and where the planet and humanity are headed. As I said before, I'm inclined to believe that I took this on from my parents -- though I admit that this really hasn't advanced my life much other than to allow me to put labels on people and things and feel a virtuous superiority on that basis. My current best piece of highbrow advice to the world, in this area, is to postulate the eleventh and twelfth (forgotten) Commandments: Love Thy Children, and Don't Use Yourself Or The World In Wasteful Ways. I think these would help.

The Western idea of God is that He runs everything -- sort of in the manner of the Wizard of Oz, from behind his curtain. Wizard or not, and regardless of what you call him, God is simply one of the most insisted upon, fought over, debated, obsessed over, and written-about entities/topics in the world. If you really need to have a Supreme Deity in your life to make sense of things, though, then wouldn't it make sense to make Him/Her/It/Them as sacred and life-affirming as possible? In this regard, Zen Buddhists simply don't talk about The Deity (or, in their lexicon, the Buddha), because to even speak of that vast entity diminishes it. In earlier Judaism the very mention of God's name was forbidden for the same reason, and the Tetragrammaton (the Hebrew acronym for God's awesome glory) was withheld from anyone who had not yet reached adulthood: God/He/She/It/Them was sacred and far too awesome to fit into any adult's mouth; even mere knowledge of it was a great responsibility. Incessantly yammering on and writing about God (or Mohammed, or Allah, or Jesus, etc.) as we all do seems to me to . . . how should I say it . . . devalue the currency. A real God, if He/She/It/They is to be Truly Sacred, cannot exist as a common-currency sound-byte. Nor can one be on a first-name basis with the Deity without its being shrunken down to our size. God knows we don't get expanded to His/Hers/Its/Their size.

Here's a paradigmatic thought: what I just said may well sound thought-provoking, and there is undoubtedly a genuine logic and basis in reality to it. On a different level, though, I might say that this is all simply upper-cortical-function activity and, therefore, not essentially different from any radio-show evangelist's telling us what *he* thinks "God wants us to be doing" -- or a witticism by Jay Leno, John Stewart, or Steven Colbert. That is, it's a thought, not an insight. An insight is (for example) that every now and then I have *an experience of myself* as living a

meaningful spiritual life -- *sans* external instructions -- by simply being in the moment. This is part of several ancient traditions of wisdom that are not mainstream, but nonetheless profound. As in Zen, I think that the deepest teachings of any religion are communicated in hints, and only to those who are receptive.

FINALLY . . .

As I get older I find I'm less angry than I used to be, losses and limitations notwithstanding. I mentioned some of my (historical) losses before; they are permanent and irrevocable. Another is more subtle, and my awareness of it comes out of some recent health studies from Holland. Dutch epidemiologic researchers have identified significant physiological and metabolic changes in their population as a function of whether a given individual's mother *or grandmother*, suffered deprivation while pregnant. There was a lot of deprivation during World War II, *and they're still finding incarnated traces of its influence two generations later*. Wow; that's awesome. Anyway, I've had certain metabolic problems all my life, and it now seems at least possible that they arose *in utero* from wartime conditions. It's one more reason for me to believe that war is bad for people. This is not exactly an original thought, but I think it's one of the more strongly intelligent ones that I possess.

Overall, though, I think it helps most that I am realizing that I don't have enough time left in which to win any more major battles, or even to decide on anything significant that is left unresolved. I've largely accepted the idea that the answer to *why?* may reside in "a better way to live life", perhaps a more "spiritual" one -- whether or not this is an illusion. Most of the contradictions in my life are irresolvable, and my ability to change anything other than myself seems more modest every month. My current life-ideal is the amoeba. Amoebas are open to everything in their paths; they take everything in without prejudice; they spit out what they can't use; and they don't go out of their way to hunt profit nor their own or any other kind. The amoeba is a pretty good role model and guide. As is the following story that I wish to share with you as an end point to a rather long monologue.

It comes courtesy of Alexander Woolcott, whom you may have heard of. Mr. Woolcott was the Dean of American Letters in the 1930s and 1940s. He knew everyone who was anyone and was the most respected single voice in the world of American arts and literature. His opinion of who was who, and what was good or not good, carried great weight. Woolcott lived in the Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan, one of whose rooms there was set aside as a meeting place for anyone and everyone who was in town and desired stimulating conversation. There was a

large round table in it -- the fabled Algonquin Round Table. Around it sat many of the most significant thinkers in the fields of literature, the arts, science, economics, culture in general and even politics, all in free exchange of their beliefs and knowledge. It ran day and night for years, in open discussion, and without any particular agenda other than to cast light on things. Our phrase 'round table discussion' originated there. That cultural Mecca was the epicenter for the most significant outpouring of intellectual, artistic, and creative thought and stimulation the modern world has known -- and it was Mr. Woolcott's invention and gift. We don't have anything remotely like it any more, even in think tanks.

Woolcott was a writer as well as an opinion maker, and he penned the following Christmas story which has always been dear to my heart. I'll try to tell it as well as he did.

The story begins on a cold, bleak Christmas Eve. It's Winter. And it's getting dark. An icy, cutting wind is blowing through the empty streets. These are completely deserted. The townspeople are at home, in front of their fires with their families, with a festive Christmas dinner soon to be had. All is quiet except for the whistle of the wind, and the incessant blowing of the sleet. There is a movement in the stillness. It's an old beggar, poorly clothed and huddled in a doorway, trying to escape the freezing shafts of the wind. The poor man looks like he's seen much better days. He moves along the street from doorway to doorway, slowly, trying to stay out of the wind, driven by the freezing cold. He seems to have no destination other than any little shelter he can find. After a while he reaches the town's church, whose doorway is deeper and offers some greater degree of protection; he retreats into it as far as he can. Then, pressing his back against the door, he is surprised to find it unlocked; it yields. He opens it and, cautiously, goes into the church.

The building is empty; all is quiet. And in front, at the altar, a Christmas feast has been laid out. The congregation has made lavish gifts to the Christ Child to celebrate his birth: there are packages and presents, fineries, and bolts of expensive, colorful cloth. And in the center of it all is a table laden with delicacies that will be consumed in a short while, when the church members come in for that night's special Christmas service.

The old beggar looks at this display, hungrily. He hasn't eaten in days. Cautiously, he approaches the table, drawn to its odors and promise of plenty, looking to see if anyone is going to raise an alarm. But no: he is alone. He takes a little food, and then some more food. He eats, ravenously and gratefully, until he is satisfied. It's not as cold in the church as it is outdoors but, with his tummy full

now, the old man feels the cold. He wraps some of the cloths around himself to warm himself. The fabrics are of bright, vibrant hues.

Being wrapped in such festive colors, and being surrounded by the churchly shine and glitter, he beggar remembers that many years ago, when he was a young man, he worked in a circus. He was a juggler. The colors, lights, and sparkle have reminded him of that circus life left behind long ago, and that he hasn't thought about in many years. He hasn't done any juggling since he left the circus; and it occurs to him to see if he can still do it. So he goes to a large fruit bowl in the middle of the table and takes some apples from it, and begins to juggle a few of them. He can still do it! Slowly, revived by the food he's just eaten, and being warmed up by his wrappings, and also loosening up his arms and hands with the exercise of juggling, he begins to juggles faster. His coordination and muscle memory start to come back to him. And he takes more apples from the bowl, and juggles them! Pretty soon, he's juggling more things than he's ever juggled before. He's never juggled this well! He's inspired! It is a magical, private moment.

But it is only a moment, and after a while the impulse and inspiration pass. It's time for him to go; people will soon be arriving. The beggar puts the apples back into the bowl. He removes his warming fabrics, re-folds them, and goes out, back into the cold night. The church is silent.

Unbeknownst to the beggar, two priests have been watching him from behind a curtain. After he has left, one of the priests turns to the other and says, "did you see that? Did you see what that filthy old beggar did? He touched our Lord's gifts. He ate his food. He played with it! What a sacrilege! What a desecration!"

His companion slowly turns to him and says, "oh . . . is that how you saw it? I saw it differently. You know, our congregants are prosperous people. Yes, they have bought many fine gifts for our Christ and our church. But they lead comfortable lives and these things are easy for them to give. This old man, he gave a gift too . . . but he gave of his skill. He gave of his ability. He gave of *himself*. Truly, he gave the Finest gift of all".

