Coming Alive in Dangerous Times (1961-1983): A Divergent Memoir

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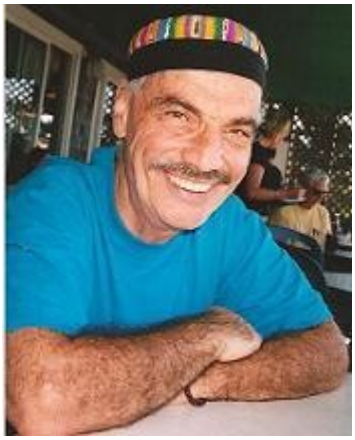
Originally published in
Grassroots Economic Organizing
2015

I can't quite recall if this is version 3 or 4 of my memoir, but in any case, it's most surely a penultimate one, and far from "final". I'm still looking wherever I can for any sort of constructive feedback – from typos to sentence construction to greater clarity, depth, or detail, to whatever bothers or delights you enough about it to send me your comments and suggestions. Email them to [removed -ed] ; I promise to respond.

Unlike most other memoirs, it is also a call to readers to do their own memoirizing, to construct and share their own stories. For if "the world is made of stories, not of atoms.", as poet Murial Rukeyser wisely wrote, everyone's world shrinks whenever anyone's story is silenced or otherwise goes untold. In the next and final section, soon to be released by GEO, you'll find not only encouragement but some guidance and resources to help get your own story told. You'll also hear more about "the memoirista revolution", barely mentioned in what follows, and how to join it.

Memoirs are for all of us, and those of others can aid in creating our own, as ours can assist those of others. Here's one of mine; may it contribute, in some way, to yours.



"*In the twenty-first century, memoirs have exploded from a specialized niche into a central feature of our literary and popular culture. Aspiring memoir authors fill writing classes, and published authors appear on talk shows. We're in the age of the memoir....I decided to call this trend the Memoir Revolution. By exploring our lives and sharing them, we are breaking out of isolation and drawing together into a global community in which we empathize with each other's race, religion, gender, economic and geographic history, infirmities, strengths, and longings.*" (From Jerry Waxler's Memoir Revolution; published in 2013 by Neural Coach Press.)

"*Until the lions have their own stories, history will always glorify the hunter.*" [Cited by novelist and poet Chinua Achebe as a "great [African] proverb" in a 1994 Paris Review interview, where he spoke of "the danger of not having your own stories" and of his, and our, need to be writers of stories which "reflect the agony, the travail — the bravery, even, of the lions".]

INTRODUCTION – AN UNCONVENTIONAL MEMOIR

TAKING A RISKY STEP

When I first decided to write my own memoir back in the spring of 2014, it was an extraordinary, even daring, step for me. My experience with memoirs was minimal: I had read a few well-known ones, e.g., by Maya Angelou, George Orwell, and Emma Goldman. Yes, as a philosophy professor and magazine editor (for geo.coop), I had done a good bit of my own writing, and had spent decades attempting to assist other writers. But writing a personal memoir, much less one that eventually would take a very unconventional shape, had never entered my mind.

In short, my qualifications for writing this memoir are as meager as warm days at the North Pole in January. Despite that, or maybe because of it, I quickly became captivated by this memoir project. And as I did, the project itself moved in directions I had neither intended nor imagined.

At the outset, though, I began with a thoroughly conventional notion of a memoir: I would be alone at its center, recounting stories that divulged my own successes, failures, friends, enemies, achievements, adversities, sufferings, passions, delights, etc. My readers would be an off-stage audience listening to the storyteller, perhaps entertained, but otherwise disengaged.

Much as I do like telling stories, especially ones that put me on center stage, this conventional scenario did not hold much appeal for me. Why so? Let's start with four ways the *process* of writing this memoir differs from many if not most other memoirs. Later on, we'll return to its substance, that is, the special sort of story-based experiences on which it focuses.

To begin with, I wanted to *do more than simply recall tales from my earlier years.* However precious or worth celebrating those stories would be in themselves, I felt they should also be mined for their fresh meanings here and now; for whatever messages they might hold for my feelings and actions in the future. Remaining in my past, however interesting, was not enough.

The memoir I sought would help me generate experiences, stories, shifts and transitions, as yet unforeseen. (The final chapter dives into those "fresh meanings and messages" in detail.)

Secondly, and equally important, I wanted *to share center stage with my readers*, to offer them something besides my own life stories and the messages or guidance they held for me. Specifically, my memoir would *encourage and coach readers to see that they too had lives worth memoirizing*, lives that could be renewed or enhanced by the unconventional sort of memoir I would be modeling for them. Believing, as a friend wrote me, that "EVERYONE has great stories to tell.", my memoir would be incomplete if it did not provide an opportunity – and lots of guidance and resources – for readers to become the memoirists they were waiting for.

Thirdly, *my memoir is not intended to be finished*, or to reach a pre-set final stage or destination. On the contrary, the version you now are reading is open to and actually encourages critiques, amendments, new interpretations and perspectives. For example, I have

begun to make contact with many of the folks mentioned in my stories, requesting that they correct or refine mine, or add their own from experiences we have shared.

And last, there is the *non-commercial process* by which my memoir was edited and will be published. That is, my editors were a team of peer mentors from many different parts of the U.S., none of whom received any compensation in dollars from me (or anyone else). Instead, they have earned credits for the time and assistance they offered through a network of "time banks" or "labor exchanges". The credits they earn can be used within this network to access whatever services or products they might need from other members of these alternative banking or currency arrangements. I'm hoping that with your help we can expand this non-commercial form of mentoring assistance beyond this one memoir – but more of that in chapter 5.

In addition, this non-commercial process will also shape the memoir's publication: it will be published and made available on an "open source" or "pay it forward" basis. *GEO*, the internet magazine I work with, will first post it serially with a call for reader comments, and eventually run it as an ebook, free of any cost to readers, so long as they agree to offer constructive feedback on it and/or to write their own coming alive memoir along the same non-commercial lines.

A MEMOIR BASED ON TWO EPIGRAMS

We've already seen four of its many atypical features: it aims at enabling readers to directly engage in writing their own memoir, it will be edited in an unusual, non-commercialized way, it would not remain content with stories from my past, but generate messages to guide my future, and it will remain forever incomplete.

But the full measure of its non-conformity came to me from two epigrams, two brief sources of other people's wisdom I was drawn to. The first of these I found only this past year while searching for a type of memoir I could be happy with. It is attributed to *Howard Thurman,* an African American minister (1899-1981), who wrote books with such intriguing titles as *A Strange Freedom, Meditations of the Heart,* and *The Search for Common Ground*, who, in 1960, became the first black person to take on a ministerial dean's duties at a predominantly white University (Boston University), and who was among Martin Luther King's closest advisors throughout the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. (According to Wikipedia, there is no written record of this particular epigram, but it can be found in *"…in Gil Bailie's Violence Unveiled, p. xv, where he attributes the quotation to a conversation he had with Thurman.")*

Here is Thurman's quote, a very wise one I think:

> *"Don't ask what the world needs; ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."*

This epigram resonated immediately with me; I felt it grasped a truth as important as it was overlooked. Beyond that, I began to see that *when we ask, as Thurman recommends, what has made us come alive, we are in effect becoming memoirists* – albeit of an uncommon variety.

Rather than concentrating primarily on what we had achieved and/or the situations we had suffered through, our "coming alive" memoir would focus more – much more, if not exclusively – on what was going on within us, and in particular, on what we can call our *coming alive experiences.*

Thurman did not urge us to seek out our success stories, or those where we faced daunting obstacles, either well or not so well. Rather, his challenging counsel is to go beyond these externally focused stories, and seek out ones where we have felt that idiosyncratic or unique sense of our own individuality, our own potency and fullness of life.

In short, coming alive experiences are not only focused inward, but are *self-initiated* and *self-directed.* They reveal those times when *we become the author of our stories,* and not merely the passive observers of them. We create our own path and pace, and no longer walk in the dreams or footsteps of others.

The second aphorism is from John Dewey, the American philosopher (1859-1952) who has written more deeply about democracy than anyone else, at least in my view. Unlike Thurman's, Dewey's epigram was very familiar to me; I had cited it often in both my writing and teaching about creating genuine forms of democracy. According to Dewey:

"Democracy must be reborn in every generation, and education is its midwife."

At first glance, Dewey may appear to be taking us far beyond Thurman's focus on nurturing the coming alive experiences of singular individuals. And, yes, Dewey is talking here about large groups within whole societies renewing their supposedly democratic institutions.

But how on earth is Dewey's large-scale revival of democracy to be accomplished, or even started, except by enlivened citizens who have become awakened to their own self-directed lives? As Thurman might have put it, "What the world, and its democracies need, is people who have come alive." Coming alive memoirs, by offering a process focused on personal revival and regeneration, may well make indispensable contributions to the wider rebirth of real or authentic democracy, e.g., in Lincoln's words: "*Government of the people*, *by the* people, *for the people…*"

If Thurman offers a way for individuals to get in touch with, recreate, and deepen their own lives, Dewey is advocating a very similar approach to enliven and enhance our institutions. What Dewey wants to see in genuine democracies – continual innovation and reconstruction by each successive generation – is what Thurman is guiding us towards throughout the stages of our own individual lives. Perhaps, then, they would agree that both individuals and institutions, at their best, are continually asking themselves what is no longer needed, what should be curtailed or discarded, and seeking new ways of thinking, feeling, imagining, and acting....

In short, I felt that *together* the epigrams offered by Thurman and Dewey could reorient my own notion of a memoir to an even more specific and innovative focus: *coming alive experiences, both of individuals as individuals, and as members of social groups (especially supposedly democratic ones).*

At this point, the connections between these two epigrams, and the two sorts of coming alive experiences they celebrate, may seem mysterious, or too abstract. But as we move through the very concrete stories in the next three chapters, the mystery and abstraction should recede.

For now, ponder this question: Have you ever belonged to any group – community, organization, neighborhood, family – that honored both individual empowerment and self-development and its own collective self-direction? If so, what was it like, how did people feel about it? If not, can you imagine what how such a group would look and what being part of it would feel like?

SOUNDS GOOD, BUT…

All of this may sound good, or at least somewhat unique, *but just how will it work?* Here's an overview of what to expect.

Chapters 1-3 will provide stories from three separate periods in my life, beginning in the early 1960s and ending two decades later. In the final two chapters, the focus will be on you, the reader, as well as myself. For example, I'll guide, encourage, and even prod you a bit to take up the memoir challenge, in part by responding, in a dialogue, to questions or concerns that might deter you from this opportunity. For the most part, my responses will draw from my own single memoir-writing experience.

I hasten to remind you of my lack of qualifications as a memoir writer and coach. The sorts of guidance I will offer are those of *one peer to another* and not those of an expert who has spent years mentoring would-be memoir writers. (I will however provide lists of both peers and experts that I have found wise and welcoming.)

TO REVIEW

The memoir you are about to read is deliberately unconventional, in several ways:

• It focuses on "coming alive experiences" in which individuals and communities alike become the authors of their own stories, and thus begin to tell the lion's side of our common history;

• drawing heavily on stories from my past, it will mine those stories for messages offering me guidance for future coming alive experiences;

• it seeks to engage readers in the process of writing memoirs of their own, and to provide them with practical, peer-to-peer, guidance for this;

• it has received editing support and critical feedback from a network of peer mentors, who receive no financial compensation, but are rewarded with time credits for their assistance.

• rather than being or aiming to be a finished product, it remains open to revision, expansion, correction.

Given these features, one exciting aspect of the coming alive memoir, so it seems to me, is that it can take us both into and beyond what Jerry Waxler has called the "Memoir Revolution". For though that revolution rightly emphasizes the increased *quantity* of memoirs and memoir authors, it does not yet appear to see the need for *genuinely innovative approaches to memoir writing*, e.g., ones focused on self-directed coming alive stories, linking individuals to their communities, and offering non-commercial, peer-to-peer guidance to their readers. If so, our new model might become a part of, and also enhance, the current Memoir Revolution.

More specifically, in chapter 5, I will call for a "memoirista revolution", one which agrees with poet Muriel Rukeyser's famous statement: *"The world is made of stories, not of*

atoms." Maybe we will find that by honoring our own stories, and those of others around us, we become lions who can actually challenge the hunters and change the world?

Sound crazy? Check out the summer 2014 issue of YES! Magazine, on "Story Power", and Cecile Andrews' wonderful book, *Living Room Revolution*, in which she writes:

> *Ultimately, we each need to see ourselves as artists, and our art form is our words. We must feel the same urgent need to express our unique vision as artists do. Usually, it will be in little, seemingly unimportant ways. What did you really think of the movie – even if you disagree with the anointed critics?....Can you risk telling a friend that you've begun to writing haiku? Again, these don't seem like big things, but unless we can be true to ourselves in the little, everyday ways, we won't be able to stand up for the important issues of the day.* (pp. 70-71)

This memoir, as we'll see, is at its heart a story about how one person (me) developed a passion for assisting others (you?) communicate their own stories, and share that very passion as memoiristas.

CHAPTER 1: A NEW YORK YANKEE IN LOUISIANA

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

In the summer of 1961, I made two trips to New Orleans, with very different purposes and outcomes.

The first took place in late May, just after the Freedom Rides to end segregation in the South had begun. Four friends, all graduate students at the same northeastern university, and all white, decided to answer the call for a little known Freedom Ride from Louisiana to Jackson, Mississippi. We were from different academic disciplines – two mathematicians, a chemist, and a philosopher. But all four of us wanted to see an end to the brutal system of segregation in the South and in our nation, and we shared the sense that these Freedom Rides could spark a path to segregation's demise.

I was among them, and we drove my car, despite it having recognizably "Yankee" license plates. We stopped, other than for snacks or gas, only twice all the way from Ithaca, New York to New Orleans. The first was in Alabama, where one of us – Charlie Haynie – had relatives he wanted to visit. He went inside, leaving us to wait in the car, but quickly re-emerged, obviously disappointed.

The visit had not gone well, especially after he explained to his relatives that we were headed even further south to support the cause of racial justice. Charlie tried hard, with no success, to reach through their bigoted opposition. He had even tried appealing to the animal kingdom – where, he had pointed out, horses of many different colors had no qualms about mating and in general got along harmoniously. Needless to say, our mood became somewhat less optimistic after this incident.

Our second stop was not a voluntary one. It occurred on the interstate in the middle of Mississippi, where state police pulled us over. But the smell of danger was a false alarm: it was very late at night on Memorial Day weekend, and the troopers just wanted us to know that there were coffee and snacks several miles ahead, should we be tired. We had assumed that the troopers, given my license plates, were aware of our northern origins, and also that they knew all about our impending Freedom Ride into Mississippi, and would quickly put 2+2 together, and at the very least, arrest us. But fortunately these assumptions were way off-base, giving us a great deal of personal relief along with some additional hope about our mission.

We made it without further incident to New Orleans, where a training session in non-violent resistance had been prepared for us and about a dozen or so other potential freedom riders. Our own Freedom Ride was to go in the opposite direction from the first and most widely publicized one, which left from Washington, DC, and was to travel through several Deep South states, concluding in the Big Easy. Our destination, by contrast, was Jackson, Mississippi, and we were to leave the following day.

Our hosts made sure that the dangers we would face were very well described in advance. As on the earlier Freedom Rides, we could expect lots of nasty name-calling, life-threatening violence, and everything in between. Charlie and Paul(Green), the mathematicians, along with Joe Griffith, our chemist, signed on, but I declined, citing the need to keep working on my dissertation. That was true enough, but it wasn't the real reason for my defection. Even if my dissertation had been written and fully accepted, my fear of getting attacked, badly injured – maybe outright killed – would have stopped me from joining the Ride.

After writing this story, especially for a memoir, I felt impelled to find out at least a little about the later lives of my three more courageous allies. It had been over fifty years since we traveled to New Orleans, and I had long since lost touch with them. I googled for "Freedom Riders", and up popped a book with that title by Raymond Arsenault, that promised a listing of all those who had risked life and limb in that battle zone against racial injustice in this country. In his "Roster of Freedom Riders," Arsenault provides several hundred short listings with some information about each Rider; much too short, but better than nothing. Here's what I found about Paul, Joe, and Charlie:

GREEN, PAUL S. W M 22 Ithaca, NY Student, Cornell Univ. (Ithaca, NY)
Currently a professor of mathematics at the Univ. of Maryland, College Park.

GRIFFITH, JOE HENRY W M 26 Ithaca, NY Graduate student, Cornell Univ.
Born in Oklahoma City, OK, on November 11, 1934. Graduate of SMU (B.S., chemistry and biology, 1956) and Cornell Univ. (Ph.D., phys. chem., 1967). Participated in Route 40 campaign (1962), March on Washington (1963), and voter registration drives in Fayette, MS (1964). Active in anti-war movement (late 1960s). Teacher (1967–1971) and principal (1971–1988) in MA. Worked with Smithsonian's Nat. Acad. of Science (1988–1992) and Nat. Museum of Am. History (1992–1994), and NASA's educational outreach program (1998–2003). Currently lives in Durango, CO.

HAYNIE, CHARLES A. W M 25 Ithaca, NY Graduate student, Cornell Univ.
Began teaching experimental courses at the Univ. of Buffalo in 1969. A leader of the political left on campus, he organized demonstrations against racism and nuclear power plants. A lecturer in the Social Sciences Interdisciplinary Program and affiliated with the Environment and Society Institute, he retired in 2000 and died a year later at the age of 65 following a three-year battle with cancer.
(From page 545 of Arsenault's book, published in 2006 by Oxford University Press.)

As for me back in 1961, I took a plane home, leaving my car behind so I could say that I had contributed something to help bury Jim Crow. But the defection continued to bother me, so when a job offer came through that same summer from a university in New Orleans, I took my second journey down there to scarf it up, like a hungry beast. The university that hired me, at that time called Louisiana State University in New Orleans(LSUNO), was just three years old, and had been intentionally created as an integrated campus. (I was soon to learn that this was just one in an immense series of tactics used by the notorious Long family of Louisiana to win support from black constituents.) Maybe I could support the cause of equal rights for all from a position of (some) influence and in part redeem my cowardice?

A CITY THAT WELCOMED ANARCHISTS

I stayed in New Orleans for seven edgy and animating years, loved the city and its many cultures, and returned there often to visit friends made in the 1960s. The city was, and still is, home to many anarchist thinkers and groups. A big part of my affection for it came from how it led me away from the classical philosophy I had been trained to respect towards the wide, wild, and largely ignored world of anarchist thought and practice. It was exciting to be there, and share in experiments of both one's own mind and the broader culture.

In 1962, I began to work with Lew Perry, a historian friend I'd met during our graduate years. Lew and I, as well as Charlie Haynie and Joe Griffith, had been part of a merry band of graduate students that somehow found time to engage in anti-establishment initiatives, including a theatrical reading performance more like a full-scale lampoon – of the McCarthy hearings and accusations of so-called "communists" in the mid-1950s. (McCarthyism will surface again, a bit later in this chapter.)

Lew and I found we had overlapping leanings towards anarchism, and decided to produce a comprehensive anthology of anarchist thinking; eventually this also included a whole section with nine different *critiques of anarchism* by the likes of Bertrand Russell and George Bernard Shaw. By 1965, the culture was shifting, the time was ripe, and Doubleday

Anchor agreed to publish the book, seizing upon what it saw as a "groundswell" of anarchist activity both inside and outside the USA. (Our anthology is called *Patterns of Anarchy*, a neat title that Lew came up with.)

Meanwhile, I was delighted to find that many of my New Orleans undergraduate students were already quite familiar with and drawn to anarchism, in one form or another. For example, they led me to *Auriana*, an early twentieth-century underground novel set in an anarchist community. And they, in turn, were happy to find a professor who did not ignore or summarily dismiss anarchist thinkers.

In the 1960s, NOLA, as New Orleans is often called by its residents, was a special place. It drew dissidents of all ages, much as the San Francisco Bay area did, but especially from the Deep South. There are many fine stories to be told about those seven years. In one of these, my friend Hammett Murphy and I used symbolic logic notations from my introductory logic course to confuse agitated enemies of our march for peace in southeast Asia. We scribbled these notations, including (x), (Ex), (v), a horizontal horseshoe, and many others, on the sidewalks of the French Quarter, and apparently misled our adversaries into thinking we were leaving coded notes for others who opposed the Vietnam debacle. They actually bolted out of their rifle-toting pickup trucks to take close-up photos of the nonsense we'd scrawled on those sidewalks! Meanwhile, we noticed with some glee that those who had gathered for the actual peace march were left pretty much alone to raise their voices and concerns.

At another time, Lionel, an African American student of mine, along with some other students and myself, decided that it was high time that Preservation Hall, the very famous French Quarter jazz venue, open its doors to people of color – especially since so many of its musicians were black. This is a story that ended well; to our complete surprise, the Hall let us all in without a murmur. *Why* they did so is still a mystery to me, but almost nothing in New Orleans was without mystery.

For the most part, I lived in or near the largely bohemian and otherwise non-conformist French Quarter. On many weekends, a group of anti-establishment friends gathered there to picnic and play in a small neighborhood park; it was called, I think, the Cabrini Playground. On one occasion, we noticed that within, or, actually *under*, our own softball game, a group of young kids had somehow inserted a stick ball game of their own. Helene, one of us, pointed out that this was a true expression of anarchy in practice, two totally separate groups harmoniously sharing the same terrain, while engaging in wholly divergent pursuits.

And a group of anarchic-leaning friends native to New Orleans made sure that I was able to distinguish the real cultural heart of the city from the tourist-overrun French Quarter by taking me to places where Zydeco and Cajun were dominant presences, and people danced in ways and talked in dialects almost as incomprehensible as those in the Scottish highlands. The group, which included John Clark and Jack Stewart, also taught me much about anarchist history and theory, and the forms it took in New Orleans. And also about anarchist philosophers such as William Godwin, an 18th century British philosopher, who wrote novels, essays, and treatises about the importance of developing one's own private judgment, and the tendency of government and government-shaped education to undermine intellectual independence and moral boldness. I no longer live in NOLA, for reasons we'll soon get to. But it is still one of the very few cities I feel at home in, and visit regularly. I treasure the time that I spent there, and the friends who unknowingly taught me as much as, or more than, I taught them.

NOT ALL WAS EASY IN THE BIG EASY

But all was not fun-filled during my years in the Big Easy, yet another colloquial name for New Orleans. At one point, a maverick history professor at LSUNO, Joseph Lancaster Brent III, gave a talk there based on two films focused on Congressional hearings similar to those held earlier in the 1950s by Senator McCarthy. One was made by the American Civil Liberties Union; it condemned those hearings as witch hunts. The other film was made by the House Un-American Activities Committee, a Congressional committee; it praised the hearings as way to protect the country against "creeping communism". Brent made the critique that both videos were "propaganda"; he claimed that neither was fully accurate or told the whole story. This angered a lot of very conservative folks outside the university, and they called for his resignation or dismissal unless he rescinded his critique.

Brent, however, was not easily intimidated. He also lived in the French Quarter, and we would often meet at the Napoleon House, a restaurant that played great classical music and, allegedly, had offered the French emperor a safe refuge after he had escaped from captivity on the isle of St. Alba. Joe loved a good intellectual battle, and his conservative, and confederate, family credentials were impeccable, dating back to the American Revolution. He offered to meet with his critics, and to more fully explain his position. And those of us who admired him agreed to be right there, wherever that meeting took place.

Hammett Murphy and I arrived at what I now think was most probably a White Citizens Council hall, filled with perhaps two hundred or more people who greeted us with venomous looks and whispers. (White Citizens Councils were aligned with the Ku Klux Klan, as white supremacists, mostly throughout the South, but also in the North.) Moreover, we were quickly told that we could not choose our own seats, as a row of chairs – right at the very front – had been selected for us and any others who looked like they might support Joe. My then wife, Eleanor, remained outside circling the block with our car, in case we had to run for our lives.

It was, to say the least, a scary scene. But Joe cut through the angry and poisonous vibrations like a ray of sunshine can illuminate a dark or musty room. He began by mentioning a bit of his own conservative and confederate lineage, and then told his audience that they did not understand what real conservatism, real American conservatism, meant. It had nothing to do, he continued, with left or right doctrines, communism or capitalism, for those are just idols, someone else's dogmas. Rather, it had to do with a having a critical consciousness, of keeping an open, flexible, and independent mind, and not being the slave of this or that ideology others had come up with.

Joe gave a few specific examples, took some questions, and we then walked out together, he and his small row of allies. The rest of the room was now almost entirely silent, no longer simmering with anger, its remaining inhabitants struck and more than a bit baffled by a genuinely new way of thinking.

But in 1967 I was denied tenure, which amounted to my being fired. "How come?", I asked the administrators, citing my many publications and excellent student evaluations. They refused to say, alleging only that it was "something in your file" which, out of a very deep concern for my reputation, they felt bound to keep secret. Of course, I challenged them to release whatever it was immediately, and to honor my decision to keep things open and public; they never did. I tried to get support from our local AAUP, the American Association of University Professors, but was told that they could only help if I had been fired *after* receiving tenure.

I did my best to stand my ground, and as the semester ended I gave a final talk at LSUNO, at the request of several student organizations, on the beauty of non-violent anarchism. But in the end, I had to leave the New Orleans friends, students, and community I loved. There were no winners: the administration forced me out, but no one believed its phony story, and its credibility took a direct hit.

Leaving NOLA was hard: as Dan Anderson, my philosophy colleague at LSUNO put it, we had set down deep roots, both in the city and at that university. NOLA had been an ideal place for me, fresh out of several years of graduate school, to come alive – in ways that I could not have predicted. It brought me in touch with the wide world outside the academy, surrounded me with allies and friends I still cherish, and gave me a myriad opportunities to become more courageous, to oppose, resist, and attempt to transform what I saw as inhumanity, injustice, or illegitimate authority. When I left in 1968, I didn't feel quite so ashamed as I once did of bailing out of that Freedom Ride in 1961.

And in the spring of 1968, I accepted a university position up north at the University of Connecticut's main campus in Storrs, where a previously small department of Philosophy had begun to hire generously, doubling its former size.

CHAPTER 2: ANARCHIST EXPERIMENTS IN NORTHEAST CONNECTICUT

CIRCUMSTANCES FAVORABLE FOR ANARCHISTS

For the next eight years, I had the opportunity to experiment in much greater depth not only with anarchist ideas but with anarchic ways of living in community. Though I may have fallen in love with the exuberant free spirit of anarchism in New Orleans, what emerged tended to be fragmentary and fugitive: I'd not attempted to construct anything like a continuous, day-in-day out, anarchist community. But in my new home in northeastern Connecticut, circumstances conspired to enable me to move from this "romantic" stage to one involving far more focused, comprehensive, and sustainable experimentation. And one that most often took shape as a *community of learners.*

Those favorable circumstances included the increasingly wide – and turbulent – rejection of the U.S. military presence in Vietnam, the massive general strikes in France and elsewhere during May of 1968, and the pervasive Woodstock Festival counter-culture. A cultural revolution, begun in the early '60s, had grown in size, indignation, and legitimacy by 1968, creating the soil for disruptive innovation, especially on college campuses. It was largely youth-led; many college students, almost everywhere, were ready for active resistance, and University administrators were fearful of it.

CREATIVE VANDALISM, LEARNING BY DOING

One course that I regularly taught was "Social and Political Philosophy". Of course, I managed to spend time discussing anarchist thinkers like Thoreau Prince Kropotkin, and Emma Goldman, along with the traditional lineup of Hobbes, Locke, J.S. Mill, Marx and Engels, and John Rawls. But what I recall most is my students' willingness – enthusiasm – to experiment creatively and in practice with the ideas we were discussing.

Once in 1969, the students in this course came to class on a Tuesday with a collective proposal: that we "learn by doing" rather than continuing to merely discuss social and political theories. That is, actually put some of these philosophical theories into practice.

OK, I said, but how do you want us to begin going down this new path? What sorts of "practice" do you have in mind? Why not think about this in some detail, I continued, so we can discuss it on Thursday more fully.

No, no, they responded; we've already chosen an application: we want to paint over this dull and uninspiring, institutional grey, classroom, using some philosophical ideas we've studied, and some colorful images they suggest. Our model for this, they continued, is that article you recommended on "Creative Vandalism", which appeared in *Anarchy Magazine* in March, 1966). It was risky, but how could I, as a self-styled anarchist, resist?

We then decided to meet at our classroom the following Saturday; classes were not in session on weekends, and it was still normal for classroom buildings to remain unlocked. Everyone showed up, with their own paint, magic markers, butcher paper, and tape. For the most part, I watched in amazement, much like a spectator at a high wire circus event. It seemed important that I *not* interfere, judge, or inadvertently shape the process or the outcome. They were the ones they had been waiting for, creating an action of innovative rebellion as they drew and painted on what had become "*our* classroom".

What emerged was a thoroughly delightful mosaic with quotes from philosophers we had studied, and a huge beautiful sun over the chalkboard shining down from the front and center of the room, All upbeat, imaginative, spontaneous.

So what did these creative vandals actually learn from all this? Maybe, that learning is more than reading and discussing other people's ideas; that philosophical notions, especially when applied in real situations, can be a source of coming alive; that a good community encourages and supports risk-taking experimentation, even when it involves rebellious activity....

Unsurprisingly, not everyone on the campus was happy with our exercise in applied social and political philosophy. A few days after the "paint-in", Charles Fritz, then the head of my department, stopped by my office to warn me that some administrators (here we go again) were extremely dismayed by it; he sympathetically suggested that I consider meeting with them to address their concerns. When I related this to the class, their reaction was immediate: "*We* decided on this and carried it out, *not* you or you alone; so we should all meet with our critics. Let's invite them here, to our recreated classroom, to dialogue with us."

The invitation was sent out, announcing an open public forum on the "creative vandalism" hosted by Philosophy 217 to be held in the Home Economics Building, room 104. Several curious students from outside in our course joined us, and then our three critics – the dean of my College, Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS); the professor whose class met in the same room just after ours; and the dean of Home Economics.

The first dean had little to offer beyond claiming that he had seen better graffiti in men's bathrooms. (Perhaps he was suggesting that we needed to take courses in the University's Fine Arts College, before engaging in more creative vandalism?)

The professor whose class followed ours scolded us as well, lamenting that "No one in my History of Fashion course is looking at my slides."

But it was the Home Economics dean who was most visibly upset with our experiment in creative vandalism. She seemed to find what we had done incomprehensible, as if we had poured the paint over ourselves or had swallowed our magic markers. With a mix of pain, anger, and bewilderment, she told us, *"We don't even let our pre-schoolers paint on the walls."*

A deep voice from the back of our classroom responded, *"That's the problem!"*

After our visitors left, we talked together and assessed our situation. What now? After considerable discussion, a consensus was reached that we would return the next Saturday and whitewash away our rebellious art work. Our initiative was not aimed at either pleasing or annoying others, but at enriching our own learning, taking a different, other-than-verbal, look at what we had studied and discussed, and "coming alive" in a spontaneous and inventive way a way that we hoped might attract others weighed down by inert ideas, enforced passivity, or uninspiring classrooms.

IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, CREATE YOUR OWN

In another semester, my social and political philosophy class read *The Community of Scholars*, a short and very provocative book by anarchist philosopher, novelist, poet, educator, and social critic Paul Goodman. In it, Goodman contends that many of the world's finest universities, for example, some in what is now northern Italy, *were founded by "secession"*. Disgusted with the bureaucratic and rigid controls within church-run and state universities, a dozen or more faculty each rounded up many of their students, and together set up their own learning communities, and handled most of the necessary "administration".

It is way past time, Goodman maintained, for this kind of secession to happen again. Today's educational systems, even at the so-called higher levels, mimic the rigidity and far

exceed the bureaucracies that spawned new universities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Goodman was not alone in his view what we have at lower levels is “compulsory *mis*-education” (the title of one of his books), and that teaching at colleges and universities rarely aims at reversing that. Thus, in general, hardly any room is left for passionate aliveness, for the kind of exhilarated learning that is mainly shaped by yourself and your peers.

The academic bureaucracies that were tolerable or largely escapable four decades ago have often increased, even doubled: at many universities, there are more vice-presidents and other administrators than members of academic departments. What too many college graduates find as the major outcome of their four or more years of education is life-crippling debt.

Better – much, much better – *to secede*: to learn from digital sources, from peers and learner-centered mentors, and ultimately, from immersion in life - spontaneous, imaginative, reflective, or rebellious engagement in what moves us, and makes us come more fully alive. To paraphrase Karl Marx: *Students, you have nothing to lose but your ever-increasing debt.*

The idea of secession resonated with much of the class, even though student debt was pretty much unknown in the late 1960s. (Think about that; how did higher education institutions get by without depending on huge numbers of student loans?) In particular, Anadine, way in the back of our classroom, wanted us to consider going even further than Goodman by initiating what she called “internal secession”. Why not, she asked, form a new kind of learning community right here *within* the old, inflexible one at UCONN? Individualized evaluations would be substituted for competitive grades, and students and faculty could collaborate on what and how they would learn. Learners could avoid most if not all the dreadful, and often not useful, “required subjects” imposed by faculty senates, and learn how to democratically manage their own innovative communities.

Furthermore, seceding *outside and away* from our university would make us invisible to the rest of the campus, and fail to inspire others to experiment in similar ways. And if we forged a place for ourselves on campus, we would then have access to library, laboratory, and human resources, rather than having to somehow duplicate them on a shoestring budget.

Much like creative vandalism, this was no idle suggestion, but a call to experiment with an idea that resonated with us, in a very practical and innovative way. Within a few weeks, a group of nearly a hundred students and faculty met to consider how to most forcefully insist on the need for and value of a place right on campus for “internal secession” – a place we had begun to call, the “Inner College”(IC).

After a few months of advocacy, of bringing folks from similar university experiments in Maine and New York to campus, and of attracting a multidisciplinary group of faculty supporters, the university admins gave in. (We often wondered why; perhaps they thought their support would make us less likely to participate in protests and demonstrations?)

We were given a year’s time to convince the university senate that the IC should go forward. After much canvassing of liberal faculty, and to our most joyful surprise, the senate eventually voted to give us two more years. And they did so with only a few restraints, for example, we were limited to accepting no more than 60 students in any semester, and required to report regularly on how the program was taking shape.

Later that same year (1970), the IC applied for and received a three-year National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant. This ensured that we could continue to rely on several staff members, who had been working, often with little pay, since our program started. (All had been students in – and founders of – the IC.) Just for us, the university had set aside a little-used trailer in one of its peripheral parking lots. It was a place for general meetings, some classes, continuous mentoring, a photography dark room (remember, it’s still only the early ‘70s), the development of the “Inner Tooth”, our literary

magazine, and many other activities. Many of these and other activities also took place at a house immediately off campus, where I lived along with several others involved in the IC.

For the most part, our experiment with internal secession worked very well. Tracking our students, we found that they were accepted into graduate and professional degree programs at a rate higher than CLAS students generally. Many had put together unique projects, including WALE (Willimantic Alternative Learning Experience), which tutored its young public school students so well, that the city's Natchaug Elementary School invited them into its classrooms to do their good tutoring work.

A serious problem affecting the most dedicated of the student learners was that their preferred learning projects often had to be set aside in order to help run and sustain our experiment; several times, conservative faculty in the university senate tried to abolish us. One partial remedy was to offer our students academic credit for an entire semester away from the IC and the demands of our critics; students could travel to Cuba to examine that country's innovative childcare programs, or to Central America to see what people there thought of our country; make a full length movie, or study photography or pottery with off-campus mentors.

Predictably, there were clashes within the IC, some of which we handled well, others poorly. At one point, we had two faculty coordinators, who disagreed during an IC meeting over whether or to what extent we should put a priority on "academic excellence", along with our emphasis on being learner-directed. Rather than seeking a compromise position, both coordinators offered, or more accurately, threatened, to resign if their position was not upheld by the whole group.

None of us were well prepared for, or had much experience with, "conflict resolution", a skill – or art, really – that we gradually recognized as indispensable in an almost totally egalitarian environment. In mainstream institutions, if two or more people disagree, there's typically someone in place whose formal position – as a boss, a manager, a university president, a section chief or department head – allows them to settle disputes. Eliminating those positions of authority requires the development of new norms and relationships – especially as regards settling conflicts – agreed to by the whole community. This was not always our strongest suit.

COMING ALIVE AND A SAFE REFUGE

But perhaps what has always struck me most forcefully about our educational secession is its very direct connection to "coming alive", a connection it shares with a family of similar forms of community life. While some people can come alive and remain enlivened on their own, most of us need at least occasional guidance and support from others. More specifically, we need *some sort of very safe refuge* where the masks and habits that we have internalized can be seen for the external and often disempowering forces they are, re-examined, and discarded. In far too many cases, for example, students enter colleges and universities with "career goals" others have chosen for them. And their experience with "education" has been one compromised by endless and heartless competition, and the threat of penalties for non-compliance. To move beyond these and find our own genuine desires may well require a safe space that honors self-direction and enables us to become and remain fully alive.

The IC, despite its deficiencies and lack of experience, frequently played this important role, offering a substantial degree of safe refuge, within a community supporting self-direction. Here's part of a poem which beautifully catches our common experience:

….One day the head of the Honors Program
Called me into his office and said I had to choose —
My place in Honors or my class with you.
There was no contest. I knew freedom when I saw it,
The heady music of thought and action combined,
The brilliance that bloomed in all of us
Because you had the courage to believe in it.
I walked away, and stumbled headlong
Through that door you opened
Into a field of struggle and light
Where nothing goes down smooth
But meaning and purpose always beckon. (written by Elena Stone)

In their remarkable book, *A Tradition That Has No Name*, Mary Belenky and her collaborators identify this crucial kind of social space as being at work within the USA's civil rights movements, as well as in several organizations focused on enabling women to cope with a range of oppressive conditions. They call it a *"public homespace"*, as it involves in their view both private, self-directed experiences and a context of highly sensitive collective support. Belenky *et al* quote Bernice Reagon, a civil rights activist and co-founder of the musical group Sweet Honey in the Rock:

> *That space while it lasts should be a nurturing one where you sift out what people are saying about you and decide who you really are. And you take time to construct within yourself and within your community who you would be if you were running society. In fact, in that little barred room where you check everybody at the door, you act out community. You pretend your room is a world....It's like, "If I was really running it, this is the way it would be."* (page 163)

Much of the support in a public homespace comes from one's peers, but a significant form of it arises from what *A Tradition That Has No Name* calls "developmental leaders", such as civil rights icon Ella Jo Baker and Myles Horton, the founder of Highlander Education and Research Center. Developmental leaders awaken and nurture the leadership capacities of those whom they mentor, and enable them to become find their voices, and become risk-takers and problem solvers. (For more of Ella Jo and Myles, see the Resources appended to section 2.)

Decades ago, when the IC made its unexpected appearance, *A Tradition That Has No Name* had not yet been published. But we resonated unknowingly with what that book would call public homespaces and developmental leadership. I now see our experiment as a small part of that nameless tradition. There is no magic bullet or general recipe for creating a learning community, much less a whole society, that honors coming alive. But this tradition provides both a step in that direction and a good sense – *a pre-figuration* – of what such a society might actually be like. Almost all of our dominant institutions face in the opposite direction, failing to offer either of these two powerful and empowering resources. They prefer, indeed depend on, our remaining confined, captive, and other-directed, rather than being whole, exuberant, and self-directed.

As Goodman, Belenky, and many others in the nameless tradition have claimed, we often need to secede from what is disempowering, and either find or create a homespace that supports our coming

alive and makes our full development its central priority. The IC's inner secession provided this sort of safe and nurturing space for me as well as our students and other dedicated staff.

In particular, through our experiment in secession, I came to see a role, a path, a calling for myself as a developmental leader, and an architect of safe spaces in which I and others could grow and rebel constructively. A role I felt more and more drawn to, both intellectually and emotionally. Intellectually, I could now understand why leaders did not have to be tyrants or dominators, and why there was no need to choose between communities run by remote and bureaucratic authorities or totally leaderless organizations in which everyone heeded only his or her private judgment. Emotionally, I discovered that the work of developmental leadership and community building based on creating safe, nurturing spaces was where I felt most alive, most hopeful, and had some skills to offer.

Despite the occasional annoyance of having to re-prove ourselves to outsiders, we had much the same experience as Bernice Reagon: we were creating our own learning community together, drawing on and fostering what was alive and creative in each of us.

Chapter 3: A NEW JOURNEY WITH NEW ALLIES

A Tumultuous Transition

The segue to the next and final part of this life-period of mine, 1974-5, was a particularly tumultuous time for me. At the end of it, a good part of my life, and my experience of coming alive, would be fundamentally altered. But along the way, I found rare and supportive friends, people all of me resonated with, who made that journey not only worthwhile, but joyous.

This transition began on a night in April 1974, when almost all of the African American students enrolled at UCONN – some four hundred, as I recall – walked in silence from their cultural center into the main library, just before it officially closed for the day. They sat in silence asking only, with a written request, to meet with then-President Glenn W. Ferguson concerning the absence of tenured black professors, and admission policies that were hampering prospective black students.

Ferguson refused their request, and instead called in the state police, who brutally shoved the several hundred silently protesting students outside, threw their books down the library steps, and then hauled them away under arrest for “trespassing”.

The next night about 90 of us, mostly white, used the same non-violent strategy to show solidarity with the arrested students and support for their issues. We were very courteously escorted into busses, and also charged with trespassing. Our charges, and I think, those brought against the students were eventually dropped – it was before the Reagan years. The semester ended, and I quickly headed to California on a previously approved yearlong sabbatical leave.

A few months later, as the fall semester began, I received two messages. The first, from my department back in Connecticut, told me that the university’s administrators had attempted to deny my sabbatical, demanding that the department recall me to face an on-campus hearing about the library incident. It then went on to say that *the department had voted to reject this demand*, telling the admins that it had assigned me to complete research projects at the University of California, Berkeley that should not be interfered with.

Wow! What an amazing and courageous act of support. I was deeply grateful, and am still ashamed that I did not convey that feeling more strongly to my colleagues.

The second message was more ominous. It came from my IC (Inner College; see chapter 2) students, who had been told that university funding for our secessionist experiment had been withdrawn. This took me by surprise, since UCONN had signed a pledge with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to continue our funding for at least three years after the initial grant ran out in 1974. And I was deeply disturbed by the underhanded way this decision was reached; that is, when I was three thousand miles away from campus, and with absolutely no discussion or input from anyone in the IC.

My response to all this chicanery evolved gradually, and by the spring of 1975, I was still unsure what might be next for me, or what exactly I wanted. In a number of largely unconscious ways, I was already heading for a major life change, and the rest of this decade put me on a new and different road, and away from much of what had previously brought me joy.

In May of that year, I got wind of a conference on “workplace democracy” in Ithaca, New York. It sounded intriguing and would put me close enough to visit my parents, who I had not seen since I left for California a year before. I had no idea where this conference, or better, one specific part of it, would eventually lead me.

George Benello, and Starting From Practice

For the most part, the conference was typically academic: panels of speakers, set up in classrooms, read papers to largely passive audiences. But towards the end, in the middle of a plenary session, a singular person strode confidently to the front of the large auditorium where we all had gathered, and asked whether we wanted to learn about something altogether unique, something real and tangible that industrial workers had put together themselves and were democratically managing.

This person, I learned later, was George Benello, someone with almost boundless energy, imagination, and versatility. Hearing no dissent, George unveiled a fascinating slide show about Mondragon, in the Basque region of Spain, where over two decades a federation of almost one hundred worker owned and controlled enterprises had been formed. Most were highly industrialized, only a couple had failed, and workers in those were guaranteed positions in other cooperatives within the federation. Mondragon had in addition created its own bank, the Caja Laboral Popular (Bank of the Peoples Labor), its own educational institutions and health insurance system, and a wage system with uniquely low differentials between the highest and lowest paid workers – and lots more.

Benello’s slideshow on Mondragon struck me as something utopian; it might have come from an Ursula Le Guin novel, and seemed almost too good to be true. But George had actually been there, and when he announced that he would stay on in Ithaca after the conference to meet with anyone interested in bringing the Mondragon model across the Atlantic, I was hooked.

Later that same year, at his cottage on Cape Cod, George met with a wide range of people – labor and community organizers, civil rights activists, and a few maverick academics. Soon afterward, some of us who had met formed a new organization, the Federation for Economic Democracy (FED), which had chapters in Washington, DC, Philadelphia, Boston, Ithaca, and mine in eastern Connecticut. FED’s goal was to help start enterprises – and a movement – based on workplace democracy, with control over all of these enterprises shifted away from those with investment capital to rank-and-file workers organized into democratic cooperatives. If this had been so successful in Mondragon, why not also in the U.S.?

Ultimately, FED was not sustainable; most likely, because it tried to do too much too soon. (It took many years before Mondragon put together its very first worker cooperative.) But George’s dream had plenty of traction, and other organizations with similar goals soon sprung up – among them, the ICA Group in Boston, the first of many U.S. firms aimed at developing worker owned enterprises. Some of these organizations are still functioning, and many others have taken shape in the nearly four decades since FED collapsed.

Gradually, George and I became close friends. I admired his passionate integrity, his protean gifts and ambitions – he once sailed a catamaran into the Pacific Ocean to protest a threatened nuclear bomb test – and his unflappable capacity to begin anew whenever a project fell through. And I was especially drawn to his notion of “working models” as a particularly useful guide on how to make genuine, lasting social change.

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One of the more thorny challenges facing all of us who want a better world is where exactly to begin. Do we start, e.g., with a theory or vision of an ideal society (community, workplace...), one that has not been built but promises to take us far beyond whatever entrenched injustices we want to displace? But this approach must face a formidable question: how would we know which of the many and incompatible theories or visions to choose?

George's working model concept offers a way out of this quandary. *It starts with practice* rather than with theories or ideal visions, with actual cases where longer range goals are being achieved. Of course, for democratic social and economic change, Mondragon has often been the poster child, but it has now been joined by other working models, such as the Emilia Romagna network of cooperatives in northern Italy, and Quebec's Chantier de l'Economie Sociale (Social Economy Development Organization). As George insisted, all of these are imperfect, but they do work ("deliver the goods"), have proven to be sustainable over decades, and prioritize continual experimentation and refining. And they do all of this without "grinding up human beings"; on the contrary, they foster individual self-development and self-directed activity.

Using working models reverses the common relationship between theory and practice. It's the latter that shows us where to begin, and how we might devise achievable replications. As George put it so well, "*If a picture is worth a thousand words, an effective working model is worth at least a thousand pictures.*" Drawing on working models, as George saw it, did not involve rejecting theory. It insisted, rather, that our theory-building be shaped by the wisdom of experienced practitioners.

I appropriated George's notion of working models in a number of ways over the next few years, and far beyond that. It has continued to help me come and stay alive; in particular, it excited me to think of a kind of philosophizing or theory building virtually anyone could contribute to, and which had its roots squarely, though not rigidly, in the work done by people on the ground, engaged directly with developing humane and just communities.

In late 1975, a chicken processing factory called Menorah Poultry closed down in nearby Willimantic, Connecticut, after a very lengthy and unsuccessful strike by workers for safer, cleaner conditions, and decent wages. It turned out that the Inner College's WALE program had been tutoring many young students, especially some from Puerto Rico, whose parents had worked for Menorah. Learning this, as part of FED, I offered to hold a meeting with any or all of the workers, to bring a translator, and see what might emerge.

About 50 or 60 actually showed up, but things started off slowly, with little participation from the workers. Finally, I asked the group what they thought went wrong at the factory, and a woman rose – one of the WALE mothers – speaking in Spanish, more rapidly and passionately than anyone had before. She sat down, and the audience exploded with applause. After the translation, which involved a long list of the workers grievances and the company's abuses, I decided to press the issue by asking "Perhaps all of you, the workforce, could run this plant better than the former owners?" That was then translated and, after a moment of silence, it drew the same heartfelt applause, and the journey of developing a worker takeover began.

What Develops When Workers are Empowered

International Poultry (IP) was our new name, chosen because some workers were Polish, others French Canadian and, most numerous, Latina. Unofficially, we called ourselves, El Pollo Criollo – Creole or Down Home Chicken. What I most recall from IP was its empowering effects on our workforce, or at least, a good many of them. One morning, for example, I found them gathered around a cassette player listening to, and accompanying, Sister Sledge's "We are Family". This is our song, they told me, and we want to hear and sing it while we do our chicken deboning. We were, after all, supposed to be a democratically self-managed workplace, so it delighted me – much as did the creative vandals of Philosophy 217 – that the workers felt entitled to make it their own.

Here are two additional stories that point in the same enabling direction. The first centers around a young man – I'll call him Billy – who was sent to us by a federal agency program that assisted unemployed persons find jobs. At the outset, we explained to Billy that he'd be hired on a trial basis for three months, so that both he and the cooperative could decide whether there was a good fit between us.

Billy was an unusually congenial person, and he arrived every day, on time, and with a happy greeting to everyone in the plant. But he was also known to be subject to epileptic seizures, and could not be trusted on the chicken processing or deboning lines. So when his three months had passed, we were faced with a problematic case. Billy had been assigned to take boxes of chicken out of the freezer and onto our delivery truck, and he had done that job well enough. But could we afford to hire someone who could not produce anything we might sell, and who would draw a salary for a simple task that others could readily accomplish along with their deboning?

The decision on this, like others in this democratic cooperative, was left to the workers, and I was overjoyed with the result. Billy was rehired as a full member of the co-op, on two grounds: first, because he made us feel happier by his congeniality and ever-present smile; and second, because, as Iris, one of the worker owners put it, "If we do not hire him, who would?"

As you may have guessed, Billy was not Puerto Rican, nor was he African-American, French Canadian, or Polish. To us, he was a human being in need of work, and he had become part of our workplace family.

The second story also left me delightfully surprised, and not a little abashed. Its background was a very pronounced difference in production between the very facile Latinas and many of the other workers. The former could typically produce between 30 and 40 pounds of deboned chicken an hour, while the latter had difficulty getting up to 20, and some were mired below 15.

But everyone was being paid the same hourly wage, regardless of their productive output. The Latinas felt this was unfair and, at first, I strongly disagreed with them. We were, I said unnecessarily, a cooperative, and this prohibited any and all "inequality". The response to me was direct and forceful:

> WORKERS: *Right now our enterprise is in bad financial shape; it needs more chicken production to succeed. Equality in wages among us may be good once we are sustainable, but it won't prevent us from shutting down.*
>
> LEN: *OK, but what's your counter proposal?*

> WORKERS: *Let's give a bonus to all deboners who reach 30 pounds/an hour. This may motivate slower workers to become faster and more productive. If so, it might help to keep us from going under.*

And it did just that. Virtually all of the workers moved up or over the thirty pound goal. Bertolt Brecht, the German Marxist playwright and director, once wrote, "First comes food; then comes morality." The IP workers had their own version of this: First comes survival, then comes philosophical or egalitarian principles.

What these stories illustrate for me is that real democracy, democracy of the best sort where every voice, every concern, is heard, can bring out the very best in each of us. It allowed us to see one another as part of a caring family, and it enabled subtle and humane ways of thinking. In short, this sort of democracy can help us come alive.

For me and most of the other volunteer organizers, IP was a step towards Mondragon, or at least, should it succeed, evidence that our own native soil was fertile enough to begin creating a Mondragon-like system. We worked long and hard to build a new plant and keep it running, but in the end we could not compete with the likes of Perdue and other large-scale processing plants. After about three years, we went bankrupt, as our main customers for deboned chicken – supermarket chains – could typically find cheaper ways to purchase that product, and none would agree to make long term contracts.

Actually, so we learned later, some of those huge chicken processing factory operations, after losing customers from eastern European countries, had dumped tons of processed chicken on the domestic market at far below ordinary market prices; this caused several small New England processors, along with IP, to close shop.

Why, then, did this worker takeover fail? It was certainly not the fault of either the workers or the organizers; we all put enormous time and effort into making it a sustainable success. We were also able to raise almost $200,000 in start-up funding – quite a lot in 1976. Looking back now, there was only one feasible path to success, and that involved getting government contracts to deliver processed chicken to state or federal facilities, military bases, hospitals, school systems, etc. Such longer term contracts could have aided our experienced workforce to become even more efficient and to survive the ebb and flow of market-based competition. But none of the many state or federal organizations to which we applied with great eagerness was willing to give us that opportunity.

But there is one aspect of IP on which I do fault myself and other organizers, and which I very much regret. Here's what I wrote recently about this:

> ...[In 1976,] a support organization (the Federation for Economic Democracy) assisted laid off workers take over a defunct chicken processing plant using a genuinely democratic structure that gave them controlling numbers on the firm's Board. But this structure, by itself, had nothing to offer them when IP was forced to close due to egregious competitive pricing by multi-national chicken processing corporations. Why not? *Because the workers had not been empowered to design ways to continue working together, or even separately, should their enterprise go under.* A good structure was not enough.

What we organizers could and should have done, I think, is what some other factory workers in England managed to do. Here's a bit of their story. It also took place during the mid-'70s, when an old London plant within the Lucas Aerospace complex discovered that its owners had decided to close it

down. Joining with a number of affected unions, they hit upon an unusual strategy, which they called the *Alternative Corporate Plan*. Its main and most novel feature was a process whereby the entire workforce identified “alternative products” which their skills and the plant’s technology would be able to make and sell. The criteria for “alternative” were simple: not military aerospace (Lucas’ main product), and serving a socially useful purpose or unfilled need. As one worker put it: "Why can we not use the skills and abilities that we've got to meet the interests of the community as a whole? Why can we not produce socially useful products which will help human beings rather than maim them?"

To cut short this good story, over 150(!) such products were designed by the workers and their consultants, from hybrid road-rail vehicles to kidney dialysis machines, and from heat pumps to a hob-cart for children with spina bifida. For the whole campaign, see Mike Cooley’s *Architect or Bee*, or his acceptance speech for a Right Livelihood Award in 1981. Mike was an engineer at Lucas, as well as a union official and a prime mover in developing the Lucas Plan. Here’s some of his thinking:

> *It's frequently asked of me, 'Do you really think that ordinary people can deal with these problems?’ I personally have never met an ordinary person in my life. All the people I meet are extraordinary. They've got all kinds of skills, abilities and talents and never are those talents used or developed or encouraged. What we've got to remember, as we're driven down this linear road of technology, is that the future is not out there someplace as America was out there before Columbus went to discover it. The future hasn't got pre-determined shapes and forms. The future has yet got to be built by people like you and I, and we do have real choices. It can be a future in which we are not threatened with mass annihilation through nuclear weapons or ravaged with hunger. It could really be a world in which we treasure all our people equally and get science and technology to serve people rather than the other way round. In a word, we could begin to perform the modern miracle, we could help to make the blind see, the lame walk, and we could feed the hungry.*

What was needed, and absent, at IP was something akin to a Lucas Plan, through which the skills and desires of everyone in our initiative could be identified, and plans to cope with a potential shutdown of the chicken processing operation could be developed. But their hidden interests, abilities, and talents were ignored, rather than identified and encouraged to develop. If we had put together our own “Alternate Corporate Plan”, I think the outcome – everyone laid off, our workplace family disbanded – would have been immensely different.

In any case, it strikes me now that having some sort of Lucas Plan would be a great way for any workplace to honor each person’s opportunity to come alive, and remain so.

Frank Lindenfeld, Brother-in-Life

George Benello was not the only, or the closest, friend and ally I found myself working with in the late 1970s. In the final years of this period, *Frank Lindenfeld* coordinated FED’s Philadelphia chapter; however, I hardly knew him then. But in the early 1980s, he, George, and I attended some conferences on “democratic businesses” and “economic democracy” down at Guilford College in North Carolina. It soon began to be clear that we three shared a lot; we were all very practical anarchists, and we found in Mondragon and other working models both the spirit and some key steps towards a new sort of social change movement, one that was both oppositional and constructive.

Frank and I had both had been actively engaged in free schools, and in radically learner-centered education during the 1960s and 1970s, he on the western coast, and I on the eastern. And when an article of mine advocating worker co-ops appeared in an anarchist magazine in 1980, and was roundly trounced for not being "radical" enough, Frank weighed in to support me, writing:

> *I endorse and applaud efforts of comrades like Len to help launch self-managed ventures like International Poultry (though I am a vegetarian myself)....The movement toward a more democratic society could be accelerated by the establishment of thousands of democratic workplaces. Such workplaces could organize into regional federations, which could constitute a third economic sector, neither government nor big business. This would constitute a very real step toward a society of substantial empowerment for many.*

Moreover, our separate lives seemed mysteriously scripted from an identical story line; we were born in the same year (1934), and grew up in the same city (New York City); as undergraduates in the 1950s, we had attended the same university (Cornell) during the same four years; and, in the late 1960s, we had each been fired from our first jobs as college teachers for teaching by our own lights, and for refusing to acquiesce to overreaching and misguided administrators.

But Frank and I knew nothing of these strange and magical affinities when we initially met in the late 1970s as partners in the FED initiative. It was later in that decade that we bonded together (and with George), to bring more and more workplace democracy and practical anarchism to an America that in the Reagan years seemed increasingly willing to give its future and democratic integrity away to a third rate actor.

Somehow that did not deter us. Though physically separate – George in Massachusetts, Frank in Delaware or Pennsylvania, and I in Connecticut – we communicated constantly. Frank and I were on the phone daily, or so it often seemed. Mainly, we listened patiently and gave support to each other's endless plans and projects to build a more grassroots democratic economy – whether through our college teaching, our local town organizing, or more widely. The two of us both felt, I believe, as if we had found a missing brother, someone it was always easy to talk with, and whose wisdom and intuition resonated with and enhanced our own. Frank died much too soon, in 2008, at only 74. Here's a poem I wrote for his memorial:

> *Irreplaceable, Inseparable Brother-in-Life*
>
> *Some give us light, others love,*
> *For decades, without effort, you gave me both.*
> *Some are the backbone, others the heart,*
> *You were both, of all our fantasies,*
> *Our insubordinate plots and reckless plans.*
>
> *Today I started to phone you, yes, once more*
> *As I may have done a thousand or ten thousand times.*
> *To hear that always welcoming, always patient, voice.*
> *To laugh together again, to share our crazy dreams,*
> *To comfort each other when those dreams crash*
> *To feel the wild joy of them spreading now like dandelions.*

But no, I brokenly thought, you would no longer answer.
Where does one turn to replace the irreplaceable?
How does one twin survive the loss of another?

I will find a way, but not without you.
Drawing on what you gave, light and love
Laughter and comfort, wild brotherly joy
I will still hear your calming voice in my sorrows and defeats
Your hopes will guide and enrich my dreams, as they always have.
Death can no more separate us
Than a song can be erased by a censoring pen
Or a book by a burning fire.
I will see you in every place our agitation and enthusiasms reach,
Find you at my side whenever a gentle word is needed,
Or an authority?s presumption needs challenging.
We will walk, we will talk, suffer and delight, together
Though my eyes will not always be dry when we do.

By 1983, George, Frank, and I began to think about weaving more of our energies together, through developing a new magazine focused on chronicling and supporting grassroots efforts to build a new economy and a new society. By 1984, Chuck Turner, then the ICA Group's educational coordinator, had joined us in putting together a prototype for this magazine, which we called *Changing Work, A Magazine for Liberating Worklife.* Some twenty activists, researchers, workers, poets, and artists, some from outside the USA, had contributed to CW's pilot issue, and in a motel room we hurriedly assembled dozens of copies to give away and draw support at a Washington, DC conference on employee ownership and workplace democracy. The response was very positive, so we went on to re-edit the prototype and get several thousand issues printed.

Today, both George and Frank are gone, but CW is stronger than ever. Way back in 1992, we changed its name to *GEO, Grassroots Economic Organizing*, and it is now mainly available online and free of charge, at www.geo.coop. But its mission remains constant, and still reflects the editorial preface to our first issue:

"Why another magazine? How will Changing Work be different?....

[It] has distinctive aims: to provide a forum for sustained dialogue on the goals and strategies of reconstructing work (e.g., on how worklife can be made not only more democratic, but a source of joy and creativity); to help build solidarity among the often disconnected groups seeking to increase democracy at work; to foster alliances between these groups and others with allied goals, such as labor, ecological, and health care groups; and to develop collaboration on changing work across national boundaries."

Summing Up

When I look back on this period, I see both continuities and discontinuities with those that preceded it. But some of the latter have had a longer lasting impact on me.

Yes, I did contribute to both the IC and IP as a “developmental leader”: I listened as much or more than I instructed, relishing the chance to assist others find what made them come alive, and helping them use their voices and abilities to shape the directions of our common initiatives. But at the same time, I began to withdraw my energies from academic life — not entirely, but substantially.

In a way, this was a kind of personal secession. Once again, a university, or its admins, had shown itself unable to countenance constructive resistance. This time UCONN had reneged on its pledge to the federal government to fund the IC once our grant run its course. They had tried to take away my tenured position, and when that failed, they eventually blocked me from ever receiving merit increases.

On a more positive note, through working with Frank and George I found myself drawn more and more to the development of hands-on working models, and less and less to theorizing or teaching about them. My friendship with these very experienced peers, with whom I resonated in so many ways, was something new to me. They needed no mentoring from me; they were already exemplary “developmental leaders”. The multiple synergies between us created bonds stronger and deeper than I had experienced before.

Changing Work was a tangible product of our collaboration. And it too offered me a different way to come alive. The magazine’s primary goals included opening its pages to *practitioners* engaged in bringing a new economy to life who wanted to write about their experiences, and to offer them both editorial and comradely support. Very quickly I found a new passion in editing and providing supportive feedback to such newcomer writers.

Given all of this, I made a bold decision, and shifted voluntarily from full-time to half-time status at UCONN. The loss of income, I told myself, would be more than compensated for in two ways. First, by having a good bit of additional time free from the oversight and demands of university admins.

And second, by the joys of collaborating in the birth of a new economy in this country, one in which workplaces of every sort were created and run far more equitably, and by those who labored within them: an economy built in the spirit of the Mondragon or Emilia Romagna cooperatives. (I had a hard time convincing my Dad, who worked as a salesman in a dressmaking factory, about this; but Mom accepted it well, telling me that if this decision made me happy, she was happy with it.) Today, more than three decades later, the dreams of people like Frank, George and several other pioneers for a new and democratic economy, are blossoming in ways we could not have then imagined. But that’s a story for another time, or memoir; ongoing elements of it can always be found at geo.coop.

One lesson of this turbulent period is clear to me: if others invalidate or undermine your current form of coming alive, *secede, and find a new venue for it*. Secession can often elude or displace domination.

But enough of me, and my adventures. It’s now time for you, a reader who has stayed with me this far, to consider *writing your own coming alive memoir*. And that’s a journey we can begin to take together, in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 4: YOUR TURN NOW

***"If you don't sing your own song, who will sing it for you?"(*Maya Angelou)**

If you've made it this far – *Congratulations!* However, as I warned earlier, that journey was to be a prelude to *your own coming alive memoir.* In this chapter, my role shifts to that of a "peer mentor" offering suggestions and encouragement. But how exactly and most usefully to do this – especially since my own experience writing memoirs, coming alive ones or otherwise – is so limited?

It took a while and several faulty starts, but after a long walk on a mild November day, it struck me that I needed to somehow take more of a back seat, and *enable your questions to set the direction for this chapter.* So this will be a *learner-centered* chapter – as far as possible, since right now I'm still the one writing it.

Below in ***Bold Italics***, you'll find eight questions that I imagine may have already occurred to many of you. To these I'll respond by drawing on my own experience, and that of my wise hour exchange editors, in writing this memoir. Usually, I will engage an imagined reader in dialogue; in one case, where we discuss getting past writer's block, I'll appeal to some helpful reflections from some much more experienced writing mentors.

Obviously, this might land us in a dilemma, as the questions *I* will pose may entirely miss the mark, rather than being ones *you* might naturally raise. But we need to start somewhere, and at the end of this chapter I'll suggest a way out of this dilemma, a way for your actual, not just imagined, concerns to take a much more central place.

Here's the first of the "your" questions:

1. Why should we think that our own lives are really worth writing a memoir about?

LEN: Most probably, we all experience this kind of self-doubt, though not everyone admits it. And I've certainly had my share.

But there's a prior question you may want to consider: "*What do we see as the value, or worth, of a **coming alive** memoir?"* Or, better perhaps, *"For whose benefit is such a memoir written?"*

Here's how one of my editors responded to this question:

> ….My answer to what discourages people from writing memoirs specifically is the tussle between ego and heart. It's a balancing act to believe our stories are of value... of service to others without the attachment of vanity in the telling. As a recovering Catholic, this was deeply embedded into my psyche. Why should YOU write a book? Why would anyone want to hear from YOU?....What makes YOU think your tales are "better" than anyone else's. Yada, yada, all that crap….
>
> EVERYONE has great stories to tell. We hunger for connection and relationship. The root of that is storytelling. Babies say, "again" and reopen books. Kids want to hear how their parents fell in love. Adult children crave the answers to their ancestry, sometimes too late to ask their relatives. Stories around the fire are the oldest method of communicating and

> they are coming back, with an insistence. We want to reconnect; memoirs give us permission to do that.
>
> The sum of the above is to make the point that it's not only ok to write our memoirs, we have a responsibility to do so.

In short: if your memoir does its job – enabling your coming aliveness and gratifying your hunger for human connection – would it then be worth writing, even if other people's memoirs might be more fascinating or heroic?

IMAGINED READER (IR): Yes, it would seem so.

LEN: You don't sound all that convinced. So here are a couple of thoughts to ponder. The first comes from an interview of novelist Wally Lamb; it's his response to the question, "What is the most valuable advice you received as a young writer?"

> *"When I was an MFA student at Vermont College for the Fine Arts, my teacher, Gladys Swan, told me I should never write for a preconceived audience. Rather, I should write for myself and have the faith that the audience that was meant to find my story would find it."* (Gotham Writers: http://www.writingclasses.com/WritersResources/AuthorAdviceDetail.php/author_id/175165)

In a very similar vein, our coming alive guide, Howard Thurman, once wrote:

> *"There are two questions that we have to ask ourselves. The 1st is " Where am I going?" and the 2nd is "Who will go with me?"* ***If you ever get these questions in the wrong order, you are in trouble."***

What I think he means here is that we must first find and listen to our own genuine voices, *and then* decide who to share our life journeys with. A coming alive memoir is a way to do this: it gives primary importance to Thurman's first question. And this enables us to produce something of real worth for ourselves, regardless of how it may be judged or evaluated by others, or how it compares with what others may have written.

2. What got you going on your own memoir?

LEN: My answer here needs to start at the very beginning of the memoir process, and actually just before it. At the outset, before any actual writing, there were two things I knew would be essential – much more than helpful – for me. The first was a *safe, sanctuary-like space,* one that would protect me against distractions and interferences of all sorts: e.g., other obligations, neighbors, family members, repair people, phone calls, texts, loud traffic nearby, etc. You can find this sort of supportive writing environment in many different locations: at home, in a library, a good friend's available study, or on a remote mountain trail or ocean beach. Often, within my safe spaces, *I felt allowed to write as if nothing mattered more than bringing the memoir to life.* And this certainly helped to get me going.

IR: *But how do you keep your "safe space" quiet, and protected from interference?*

LEN: It's not always easy, especially if you are living with others, or have no real control over a room in a public library. That's why I sought out a number of separate spaces: a fairly solitary basement room at home, an under-utilized library in my small town, a friend's office he hardly ever used, and, occasionally, a very quiet, welcoming, and inexpensive writers retreat in western Massachusetts called Wellspring House.

IR: *And the second essential condition?*

LEN: Along with a safe refuge, I also needed to set *a reliably regular schedule of "protected times":* writing sessions that would be planned in advance for designated days and hours. (Much like establishing a regime for physical exercise, yoga, or meditative stress reduction.)

My own plan (not always adhered to) has been to write for several hours three or four times a week, giving myself generously-sized breaks, e.g., enough time for a unhurried two mile walk.

IR: *That's seems like a lot more discretionary time than most people can count on. Right now, for example, I'm limited to at best a single day, for a few hours, once every other week. Would this be enough time to write a coming alive memoir?*

LEN: Intriguingly, many famous writers often complained of having too little writing time; Kafka, Tillie Olsen, and Dickens among them. It would be great to know how *they* overcame that obstacle.

However, there's much we can learn from some less-than-famous memoir writers, who also had their struggles with "too little time to write". On this, you may want to check out these web sites: www.the**momoir**project.com/ – *that's the correct spelling;* and http://www.circleofmoms.com/question/what-tips-would-you-give-mom-who-wants-write-book-1702472. [both of these websites are now offline. -ed]

But even a few hours twice a month can yield good results, if you can keep that pace going. What helped me is an approach we could call "taking small steps" or "Slow Writing" (similar to "Slow Food" or "Slow Money", etc.). *Writing my memoir,* taken as an entire book, can seem overwhelming. But *selecting a single period to write about* or *recalling several stories of my coming alive* doesn't have that crippling effect. Try to imagine your memoir as a venerable but welcoming mountain that you are not planning to climb all at once, but a little at a time over many weeks (or months, or longer).

In this same slow vein, it may help to give *each writing session its own specific intention*: e.g., "today I will be recalling stories from my military service", or "from my adolescence". Once that intentionally narrow focus is fixed, stay with it. You can put any other memories or thoughts that emerge during your session aside, or onto a notepad, to be considered later**.**

In my own case, it took around ninety-five writing sessions over eight months before a decent first draft emerged; each session usually produced, or revised, about three or four pages. Given your much heavier time constraints, your memoir might take two years, or even more. (Or less, if you are a faster writer than I am.) In the beginning, you might find this slow pace disconcerting; I certainly did at first. But gradually I found a kind of relaxed pleasure in it and the often surprising details and connections it allowed me to recognize. Gypsy Rose Lee, the actress and burlesque queen, had it right: *"Anything worth doing well is worth doing slowly."*

3. Is there a best way to tell my stories; and which stories should I include?

LEN: I'm not at all sure there is any one best way. One thing I learned from several of my editors was to include *personal stories*. They strongly suggested that rather than just describing external events or situations, I needed to let readers know how I and others around me had been affected or changed, and what feelings were provoked or awakened in us. For example, when the state troopers pulled us over in Mississippi, what emotions did this trigger, and how did we feel when we recognized the troopers' benign intentions?

Additionally, what I found useful is to write those stories – initially – as if I were telling them to a close friend or family member. This enabled me to get something of my own down on paper, even though I knew it was imperfect at best. (It's often easier to rewrite or revise, than it is to start from scratch.) At this early point, I banished the critic within, who would have demanded lots of detailed self-editing and reformulation. Instead, I tried to write truthfully, clearly and concretely, and from the heart.

Eventually, you may want to share those stories with others who are good listeners, who can raise questions that awaken or sharpen your own creative voice, and who support the kind of coming alive memoir you have chosen to write. But this takes us to your next question.

4. Would you recommend working with another person as a mentor?

LEN: That would largely depend on how comfortable you feel working with that other person, and with their style of mentoring. Some questions it might help to ask yourself include*: Do I trust her with my personal memories and reflections? Is she supportive as well as candid? Does she listen well and ask me questions frequently, favoring these over direct instruction? And does she recognize what's uniquely involved in a coming alive memoir?*

It may sound clichéd, but my own memoir would most probably have never gotten beyond my own mind and onto paper without a great deal of assistance from a host of peer-to-peer mentors. Not only did they make me feel far from alone, but they continually spotted gaps or murky passages I had missed, raised questions I needed to address, and much more.

IR: *But I don't really know anyone I'd consider asking to be a writing mentor. How can I find someone to take on that task?*

LEN: You might want to try something similar to what I mentioned in the *Introduction:* put out a call, in your own community or a group you belong to, for mentoring assistance. I was able to attract over thirty readers in this way, through my local time bank here in eastern Connecticut, which is connected with over 400(!) similar labor exchanges throughout the country. Many of these very helpful readers had considerable past experience in proof-reading, editing, and providing constructive feedback to authors. And those with less experience lent both their enthusiasm and fresh perspectives to the comments I received. Most of my peer mentors were virtual partners, which worked for me, as so much of my other work is done online.

If there is no time bank in your community, you might be able to get your local library to help bring together a group of memoir writers, much as mine has put together groups of mystery story or

historical novel readers.

Or you might want to help *start a local time bank*, an idea we'll return to in the next chapter, as part of our focus on the "Memoirista Revolution". If so, here again is the link you'll need: http://www.hourworld.org/.)

5. What if I encounter writer's block, or some part of the memoir just won't flow no matter how much it gets revised?

Good question. This quote might help a bit, just to see that blocked flows are far from uncommon:

> *"I get a fine warm feeling when I'm doing well, but that pleasure is pretty much negated by the pain of getting started each day. Let's face it, writing is hell."* William Styron (author of *Sophie's Choice*, and lots more)

Even accomplished authors have their struggles. But they manage to push through. How do they do it? There are probably almost as many answers as there are writers, but here are some I've found helpful.

First of all, you may want to check your writing environment. Does it need amending? Maybe, at this particular point, you require an even safer refuge, or writing sessions of greater length?

I had to face these possibilities after several unsatisfying efforts to revise this very chapter. Somehow a graceful shift from recalling my stories to mining them for suggestions others would find useful for their own memoirs kept eluding me. After the third or fourth revision, I decided to seek a new and even more distraction-free venue, and postpone other work so that drafting this chapter would become my unrivaled priority.

Here's another suggestion to help release your creativity, one often recommended by writing mentors: *try writing non-stop for a short period without thinking or judging*. A good statement of this exercise – a counterpoint to the William Styron quote – is provided by Wally Lamb, who has *"facilitated writing workshops at a maximum-security prison for several years."*

> Q: What is your method for overcoming writer's block?
>
> *A: I complain on paper. Try this exercise: Grab two or three sheets of blank paper and a pen. (No computer.) Title the first page "What I Will Write About." Then, for ten minutes, write without stopping, even if you have to resort to whining about how hard writing is or why your stomach is gurgling. You don't have to come up with anything brilliant or profound. You just have to keep moving the pen across the page. Don't stop and think and then write. Think while your pen is in motion. At the end of ten minutes, read over what you've written and underline whatever seems most interesting to you. Chances are you'll have a lot of throw-away lines but what you've underlined just may lead you into your next writing project. Voila! Writer's block vanquished.* (From an interview on Gotham Writer:
>
> http://www.writingclasses.com/WritersResources/AuthorAdviceDetail.php/author_id/175165

Another extremely useful tool is Wendy DeGroat's *Kiva Ladder for Creative Writing.* Wendy is a poet, a librarian, and a writing mentor, and she has worked with people who, at first, often had trouble coming up with pages of writing.

Here's how her process works. There are four steps to the Ladder: *Observe, Appreciate, Clarify, and Suggest*; you'd be taking them in just that order. As Wendy puts it,

> *Imagine descending a kiva ladder as you discuss a creative work. Begin by observing what's on the surface, then deepen the analysis gradually, each rung of the ladder moving you closer to the work's core.* (Note: a "kiva", in its original sense is a room, often underground and often of a sacred nature, where tribal ceremonies would take place. Such rooms were utilized by indigenous tribes in the American southwest.)

She continues, offering examples of each step:

> **What do observations sound like?**
>
> Resist adding judgments such as "I really liked that" or "that turned me off" to your observation. Notice, name, and summarize in a matter-of-fact manner.
>
> • The poem is written in free verse and organized into four stanzas with six lines each. Images of light and brightness appear several times.
>
> • In this story, two people argue about walking the dog, and while they're arguing, the dog disappears.
>
> • In the last paragraph, the point-of-view shifts from third-person to first-person. The first-person narrator sounds angry or bitter.
>
> • Current action is written in present tense; flashbacks are written in past tense. In the escape scene, the sentences become much shorter.
>
> • There are many long vowel sounds, mainly "o" sounds, in the description of the funeral. I also noticed four clichés.
>
> **What do appreciations sound like?**
>
> • The images of light and brightness created a joyous, almost reverent mood. I especially liked the vivid description of sunlight dappling the rocks.
>
> • I could sense the speaker's fear through vivid verbs like peered, crouched, and clutched.
>
> • The short sentences in the escape scene heightened the suspense.
>
> **What do clarifications sound like?**
>
> • I'm confused about the age of the narrator. I thought he was a child, but his vocabulary sounded more like a teenager.

• Is the third paragraph part of the flashback?

• I got lost in that five-line sentence in the opening paragraph. I reread it, but I'm still not sure I understand it.

What do suggestions sound like?

• Consider leaving out the part about the parrot. It's funny, but it distracts from the main point of your essay.

• Use more vivid verbs and sensory details to convey the anxiety and exhilaration the narrator felt as she climbed toward the diving platform.

• Try starting with the campfire scene; it would hook the reader right away. You can fill in the other details later.

• Loosen up the dialogue so it sounds more like a conversation.

Wendy's Kiva Ladder process is typically used by two people – a writer and a writing mentor or facilitator. But you can play both roles. Review the recalcitrant piece of writing you are working with *as if you were your own external mentor*: start with a *straight-forward observation* of what you see on paper; next *select – underline* – passages you appreciate and want to preserve; then focus on *clarifying* places that seem to you *fuzzy* or *otherwise obscure, awkward or out-of-place*; and, as a final step, offer yourself *suggestions that address what's missing or needs to be altered.*

Of course, you can also ask that friend who listened to you earlier – or anyone else – to act as an observant, appreciative, and constructive mentor.

6. All of this is well and good for people who communicate primarily by the written word, but does it really work for those who do not, and prefer to speak or sing or dance their stories, or to rely on visual images?

As we saw in the Introduction, memoirs need not be written exercises, and can be expressed in many other ways. This memoir of mine is offered here in written form, but I have often presented it, or some of its parts, much more directly, as one speaker to others, without notes, a written script, or a power point presentation, etc. (Some day, I'd like to try giving it a non-verbal form.) Throughout the earlier chapters, we have understood memoirs not as exclusively filled with words, but much more broadly.

Given this, all of your questions and my responses in this chapter should be re-construed to avoid any apparent bias or preferential treatment in favor of wordsmiths. For example, our first question would be understood as: ***"Why should we think that our own lives are really worthy of a memoir – however created, whether written, sung, told, danced, or visualized?"***

Still, a sticky problem remains: can these divergent forms of memoir appreciate and support each other? Arising from such very different places, can we expect that they will be able, or even want to, collaborate? We'll return to this question in the following chapter, where we consider the goals and prospects of a *Memoirista Revolution.*

7. You've frequently emphasized that coming alive memoirs are really different than other memoirs. Could you go over the contrasts again?

Sure. As we've seen, coming alive memoirs:

• *focus on enabling us to become more inner–directed*; they are not written to captivate, impress, or otherwise appeal to others (though they may, and often do, have these effects);

• utilize *peer-to-peer mentors* more than professional writing coaches;

• draw upon editors who receive time credits or labor hours rather than dollar fees;

• are typically *made available on an "open source"* or *"pay it forward" basis*, rather than being sold through commercial outlets. For example, as mentioned in the *Introduction*, you can now read mine *for free* on the www.geo.coop web site. All *GEO* asks is that you offer me constructive feedback or create your own coming alive memoir, for which you also can get help with from other peer mentors on the same basis;

• are *not intended to be finished*, or to reach a pre-designed final stage. On the contrary, they remain incomplete and open to critiques, amendments, new perspectives. (Recall here, from the *Introduction*, Dewey's notion of "democracy" as always needing to be reborn.)

• are understood broadly, as diverse forms of communication, rather than being solely composed of the written word.

• believing that we all have great stories to tell, they *open opportunities to join a "Memoirista Revolution"*, where the "lion's stories" – those so often ignored or silenced – are told, shared, and appreciated within a culture of mutual aid: *"Each One Tells Their Own Story and Helps Others Tell Theirs."* (More on this in the next chapter.)

8. *What about your promise to go beyond these imagined questions, and to give our actual concerns and questions a more prominent place?*

Just send them all to me at lensmemoir@geo.coop. [this email address is no longer functioning. -ed] I will email back responses, which I hope will provoke further dialogue between us. My plan is sift through these dialogues, and draw out your real questions to augment those imagined in this chapter. There's no strict deadline, as my memoir will remain open as long as there's interest in refining or expanding it. All of whatever you send, of course, will remain anonymous, unless you explicitly grant me permission to use your name.

CHAPTER FIVE: FROM MEMOIR TO MEMOIRISTA

What My Memoir Taught Me, When I Wasn't Looking

In many ways, what has surfaced in this memoir is not what I initially intended. Much has emerged during, and from, the writing itself — through unexpected nudges and messages that eventually led me to a new and unforeseen way to come alive.

At first, I only wanted to write and share my stories, feeling that they might offer a different and very largely overlooked side of a rebellious time, and one often misunderstood and maligned. The first nudge came a month or so into the writing. The stories were unfolding easily enough, though some of the earliest ones were hard to recall fully. But after I finished the initial draft of all three periods (chapters 1-3), I felt that something was missing. Though I liked the stories well enough, I wasn't sure what messages, if any, they would hold for the lives of my readers. Or for that matter, what messages my stories held for me, and my own future life.

After much rumination and debate internal, an answer slowly surfaced. I began to sense that some of what was missing was *a vivid and direct connection with my readers*, similar to what I had enjoyed within the learner-directed Inner College, and while working with Willimantic's cooperatively-run chicken processing enterprise.

But now I had to confront two tough questions: *what that connection would actually look like, and how to bring it about*. I considered reading my stories through an online webinar, but that required a good bit of technical acumen I didn't possess. Moreover, in my own experience of webinars they often seemed to retain, rather than reduce, the disconnection between authors or facilitators and their audiences.

At this point, maybe a month or so after finishing my first draft, I browsed the web for "memoirs", hoping to find a model or two for my own; that is, memoirs that had – or at least tried to have – the sort of close connection with readers I was earnestly pursuing. No luck on that score.

What I did find were numerous references to Howard Thurman: a memoir and an autobiography he wrote; an illustrated biographical memoir for children by Kai Jackson Issa and Arthur L. Dawson (illustrator) of his *Great Hope.* Still in search mode, and aching to learn more about this fellow, I travelled to a site that contained his coming alive quote, along with many others.

> *"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." ~Howard Thurman*

This as they say was a game changer. My memoir would do more than shine light on my own coming alive experiences. It would also – by drawing on the quote – somehow attract readers to the dual tasks of responding to my own memoir and sharing their own ways of coming alive. The lack of connection would be substantially reduced. Of course, just how this would be accomplished still perplexed and eluded me. But at least a good part of the end was in sight, even if the means were still obscure.

These, however, were not far away; I actually found some of them on the same search list of "memoirs" that had led me to Thurman and coming alive. For among the items on that list was Jerry Waxler's *The Memoir Revolution.* As we saw in the *Introduction*, the revolution Waxler describes is two-fold. It involves, first of all, an explosive increase in the *quantity* of memoirs and memoir writers:

> *In the twenty-first century, memoirs have exploded from a specialized niche into a central feature of our literary and popular culture. Aspiring memoir authors fill writing classes, and published authors appear on talk shows. We're in the age of the memoir....I decided to call this trend the Memoir Revolution.*

Secondly, going beyond quantity, Waxler sees memoirs playing a new role in social change, and on a global level:

> *By exploring our lives and sharing them, we are breaking out of isolation and drawing together into a global community in which we empathize with each other's race, religion, gender, economic and geographic history, infirmities, strengths, and longings.*

I could readily grant Waxler's first point, but it wasn't clear to me that or how today's new cohort of memoirists and their more numerous memoirs were actually enabling an empathetic global community. Additionally, Waxler appeared to be holding onto the narrow idea of memoirs as primarily made up of *written words*. Perhaps, I conjectured, coming alive memoirs could help fill those apparent gaps?

Perhaps. But simply writing a different sort of memoir, focused on one's coming alive, might not guarantee that these memoirists would break out of isolation, or help to form any sort of community, global or otherwise. For a genuine Memoir Revolution, so it seemed to me, something additional would be needed.

At this point, through the very process of writing the memoir, I had already strayed quite a distance from my initial intentions. I didn't know where exactly I was headed, but couldn't help feeling that something novel might be struggling to emerge. I had gone out on a shaky limb by wanting a direct connection to my readers, and by advocating memoirs that emphasized coming alive experiences. Why not take the idea of a Memoir Revolution even further?

Even Further, by Memoir Magic

Slowly more pieces of the puzzle emerged, often almost magically, and through what are sometimes called "synchronicities": events that not only happen together, but – unintentionally – work harmoniously. Unanticipated gifts, for example, would arrive at just the right time from sources as much unaware of me as I of them.

One evening while driving home, I listened to a Terry Gross interview on NPR with singer and song writer Nick Lowe. Mostly, Nick sung his new and older songs, and talked about his most recently released CD. But at one point, Terry asked him about his "approach to song writing". Nick's response sent chills down my spine, as his words resonated what I had been stumbling towards in writing my memoir.

According to Nick, his best songs have been written piece-meal, at unpredictable times, and *by being patiently receptive and listening for them*. Not so much by design, plan, intention, or goal-directed effort, but by letting them arrive on their own. Here's a quote from his interview:

> *I think the best songs that come to me are the ones that you sort of listen for. The ones - when I listen to some of my old stuff, I can tell when I had a good idea, but I forced it*

through, and I can hear myself - the bit that I've written, which sounds clunkier than the stuff that just sort of comes.

And…the older I get, the more I think it's this listening. You listen for it, and you have a bit of patience. And it'll come until it sounds - to me, the best songs I've written, I think, are ones that I can't hear anything - any of myself in it. It sounds like a cover song, like somebody else's song - really something you've stolen wholesale off a radio that you've listened to in someone else's flat.

I quickly realized, or maybe decided, that the message for me in Nick's interview was to become more patient, less fearful of not knowing where things might wind up, and more receptive to gifts from sources unfamiliar or unknown; e.g., messages in dreams, from friends long missing, etc. In that way, the memoir itself could guide me to my next steps.

While writing the first chapter's stories, I already had one such experience. I was having trouble remembering some key New Orleans stories, as well as some important details about those I did recall. At that very point, my department head received an email from Brian Ampolsk, asking him how to contact me. Brian had been a student and friend of mine back in the 1960s, and once we had connected, he was delighted to send me many of the stories, and details, that I had been hunting for unsuccessfully.

Eventually, what came through this more receptive approach was the notion of a *Memoirista Revolution*, something I imagined might take us further towards an empathetic global community than Jerry Waxler's account of a *Memoir* Revolution. But who or what were "memoiristas", and how did they connect with coming alive, especially if this was understood as a very personal experience of separate individuals?

Not to worry. As I brewed over these new and unexpected questions, more gifting magic intervened. Kate, one of my editors, sent me the following epigram, saying only that she thought I might appreciate it.

Appreciate was way too mild a response! Kate's gift was awesomely, if unintentionally, right on target. Memoiristas not only come alive and empower themselves, they also help enable others find and express their own voices. Coming alive was of course a vivid personal experience, but it was more than that. It was a way to offer the beauty and fulfillment of this sort of experience to others as well.

Concretely, I now saw memoiristas as going beyond telling their own stories, and becoming *peer mentors* – sharing their memoir journeys and their coming alive experiences, guiding and supporting other memoirists. Much as I have tried to do in this memoir.

Seen in this light, memoiristas can bridge the gap between the solitude required for reviving and reinterpreting one's personal stories, and the solidarity of offering a safe refuge where others can find support to come alive in their own ways. The ultimate aim of a Memoirista Revolution is to undo the silencing of the discounted and disempowered, offering resources and encouragement so that every

voice has the fullest opportunity to be heard, appreciated, and grow stronger. (Very much like the public homespace tradition described in chapter 3.)

Consider again Muriel Rukeyser's marvelously wise statement: *"The world is made of stories, not of atoms."* I've always loved that thought, and its implication that if the voices and stories of others are silenced or discounted, our own world will shrink and depreciate. But now I saw it as yet another gift, one that could help me clarify, more fully understand and communicate, the mentor role of memoiristas.

But what concretely might this grassroots revolution of memoir mentors look like? By what steps would it get started?

One answer to these legitimate questions is offered by a feature of my own memoir: *mentors could receive time or labor credits*, which in turn they could use to receive the same sort of mentoring from other time bankers, either locally or globally: *"Each One Mentors, and is Mentored by, Others."* Requests could be sent to one's time bank seeking people who wanted support for writing their memoirs, and who might also be interested in becoming memoiristas. If too large a group responded, it could split into two or more smaller ones.

Taking this road has lots of advantages. Fueled by labor exchanges, a Memoirista Revolution would run on the basis of mutual aid, good old neighbor-to-neighbor assistance, thus making it available to anyone, regardless of their income or wealth willing to exchange their labor for memoir assistance. A local memoir affinity group could start with just three or four people, and grow over time by word of mouth or reports sent by email to all members of a time bank. Its reliance on face-to-face communication might well generate fuller and better understood feedback, as well as more genuine forms of support for first time memoirists.

Over time, we could see mentoring groups based on labor exchanges collaborate with and learn from one another. They might decide, for example, to request mentors from one another, so as to receive feedback from different perspectives. My own memoir was assisted – and most certainly enhanced – in just that way: editors from both my eastern Connecticut hour exchange joined with ones from several distant time banks – California, Colorado, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, and elsewhere – to offer constructive editorial advice. Given their geographical diversity and my own very positive experiences, I would guess that time banks are typically splendid sources of editorial assistance.

Finally, time banks are an especially good starting point, as they appeal to a wide range of people – older and younger, as well as long embedded and newly arrived neighbors, activists and non-activists, and from many diverse occupations and backgrounds. My own time bank has attracted folks with many different levels of income and education. Given this diversity, time banks might well contain people using divergent forms of expression and communication, who could exchange with, learn from, and create collaborations with, one another (thus addressing question 6 in chapter 4).

But what can really be expected from a Memoirista Revolution? Can it substantially generate wide-scale change; e.g., help create camaraderie on a global scale, across borders of nationality, gender, and ethnicity?

Questions like these sometimes tempt me towards this famous aphorism of G.W.F. Hegel, a German philosopher of the 19th century: *"The Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk."* None of us is wise enough to predict much of the future; we'll need to wait till day's end to see what sort of change, if any,

actually emerges. There's truth in what Hegel wrote, but it still strikes me as an evasive copout.

I've thought a lot about such future-focused and wider scale questions, and have come up with a couple of responses. They seem to be pulling me in two apparently conflicting directions, but at least, so it seems to me, they are not evasive.

On one hand, I feel inclined to dismiss questions about what might or might not or will or won't happen as misguided. *Why not recognize the Memoirista Revolution as worthwhile in and for itself?* Wouldn't the world be a better place simply because some or many of those silenced were enabled to tell their coming alive stories?

Maybe "changing the world" is *not* the core aim of a Memorista Revolution – *if* this means putting in place some pre-identified ideal society. Just as our own memoirs are written primarily for our own benefit (see chapter 4, p. 1), to enable our own voices to sing and come alive, so the Memoirista Revolution aims at liberating ourselves and others from the silencing which surrounds and stifles us. To me, it would be an amazing blessing if Chinua Achebe's lions began to tell their stories forcefully, even if only among themselves, and the hunters remained unmoved. A new found and common power of expression could herald the beginning of many secession-based experiments.

But another part of me feels sure that a persistent and inclusive Memoirista Revolution would contribute substantially to larger scale social and political transformation. Having come alive together through a process of mutual aid, memoiristas would prefigure a very different sort of culture than our alienated and competitive one. They would in a phrase *embody developmental leadership*, and in turn become very well positioned to help renew established institutions, or create and experiment with new ones. This could all occur within their own families, backyards, neighborhoods, workplaces, community organizations, and even significantly affect governmental priorities and processes.

In short, memoiristas could well become champions and ambassadors of a renewed democracy. This is actually the theme of that "Power of Story" issue of *Yes! Magazine* I mentioned way back in the *Introduction*. That issue provides case after case of people and groups often discounted or silenced who – by transcending their own silence - have turned their lives around, while empowering others as well.

Perhaps both of these answers contain parts of the full truth. In any case, they both point to yet another way I've been changed by writing this memoir.

When I first started thinking of doing a memoir, had anyone asked, I would have given memoirs little or no role in reconstructing social and political life, in "changing the world". Now, however, I find myself facing in the opposite direction, my view of memoirs having been immensely, albeit gradually, altered.

In particular, this memoir experience has made me realize how coming alive experiences could be essential for – and were missing from – efforts to regenerate or democratize democracy. How Dewey's call for renewal of democracy by each new generation might also be a call for people to come fully alive. I now think that the absence of such experiences, and the lack of appreciation for their importance, is a major source of the passivity and alienation felt by so many within nominal democracies.

C. D. Lummis describes this disastrously common phenomenon as the "loss of public hope". In his book, *Radical Democracy*, he tells us that:

> *In Japan, where I live most people have private hope. They believe that privately their lives will go well – that they will find work, earn adequate money, live in comfort....Most,*

however, have no public hope. Their attitude about the future of their country, or the future of the world, is typically one of bland despair. They talk easily and vaguely about the probable continuation of the destruction of nature, of the unlikelihood that they will ever achieve popular control over the entrenched political cliques that run their government, about the inevitable death of freedom in the techno-management society of the future. The belief that none of these things can be avoided by the action of mere human beings (which is to say, that democracy is impossible) has become common sense.

How to get beyond this epidemic loss is no simple matter, but I now believe that coming alive experiences, and the memoirs based upon them, along with the further solidarity of a Memoirista Revolution, can play a crucial role in restoring public hope and renewing democracy.

I would not have thought any of this, had I not begun – and to listen receptively to – my own coming alive memoir.

Moreover, guided by these new memoir-generated beliefs, I have begun to feel drawn to *living as a memoirista*, and *to the power and potential of joining with others drawn to a similar aliveness path.*

To Recap

Coming alive memoirs, if we attend to them, can alter our lives, and lead us towards unexpected and new ways of coming alive. This happened to me, and as you create your own story, you may find this to be your experience as well. In my own case, this memoir has

- moved me towards a concrete way to directly include readers, respond to their likely questions, and invite them to create their own memoirs;
- helped me discover and clarify a genuinely new, unorthodox type of memoirizing – based on coming alive experiences, peer mentoring through labor exchanges, etc.;
- taught me to view my memoir as a living and magical collaborator, and to listen receptively to where it was leading me;
- sent me the message of a memoirista revolution, which connects the most personal and individualized of experiences with the tasks of overcoming the silencing of disempowered voices, and of building inclusive communities in which all of our stories are heard and appreciated.

All of these have guided me in a single direction: I have now decided to become a memoirista myself, and to actively offer support to those willing to participate in birthing a memoirista revolution. In the Epilogue which follows this chapter, I'll go into some details about this, and extend readers an invitation – actually three invitations – to join in.

One final point. Though I have drawn contrasts between the Memoir and Memoirista Revolutions, I don't see them as rivals or as conflicting. Both encourage, support, and guide more memoir writing by "the rest of us", rather than leaving this to our culture's Heroes, Celebrities, or VIPs. Of course, there are important differences, but I still see the latter as one of many forms of the former. As we've seen, it departs in several unconventional ways from typical memoirs. But it also provides offers a path by which the global community goal of the Memoir Revolution can be understood, supported, and become manifest. Much as alternative currencies and labor-based exchange

systems can complement conventional money systems, so the Memorista Revolution can complement expert-driven memoir mentoring.

More concretely, nothing in the Memoirista Revolution prevents memoiristas from seeking feedback and resources provided by mainstream writing mentors, or from drawing on the enhanced beauty and clarity of what experienced mentors can add to one's own stories.

EPILOGUE, with THREE INVITATIONS

An "epilogue" typically looks backward, and adds a comment or conclusion to some piece of writing. So this section will be more like an *epi-prologue*, as in it I try to open some new doors, rather than concentrating on what's already been written.

New doors opening? Specifically, I'll be raising and responding to these future-facing questions:

> *Where do we go from here? How might a "we", based on coming alive memoirs, come to life?*

In response to these questions, let me offer *three very practical invitations* for your consideration.

First, *please view my own memoir as "open-ended", and eager for continued critique and renewal*. That's how I see it, as forever imperfect but perfectible. I welcome responses to it, and will continue to update, amend, and correct it, based on your comments. These can be weaved into the memoir either anonymously or by crediting you by name, depending entirely on what you are comfortable with.

Second, *you should feel encouraged to create your own memoir, and to seek out peer mentors* within the time bank community, or anywhere else for that matter. If you encounter any obstacles locating peer mentors you can work with, please let me know, and I will try to find someone to recommend who is a good match.

Last, *I invite you to consider becoming a memoirista, a pioneer builder of the Memoirista Revolution*. This you can do in many diverse environments; e.g., by bringing together a group of friends or family; in a school or college class; or more broadly, within a neighborhood or town, or a church, synagogue, or mosque.

At this point you may feel that some or all of these invitations are overwhelming or out of reach. But consider that:

- *there is a potentially supportive infrastructure in place:* that is, peer mentors within hour exchanges or time banks; and cost-free publication online from GEO (geo.coop), via e-books;
- *everyone's stories are welcome,* regardless of previous writing experience, level of income, ethnic or religious background, native language, etc.;
- *coming alive memoirs can be any length* and can focus on anything from a single events to a lengthy years of life;
- *they can focus on the experiences of solitary or independent individuals, or on common experiences shared by more than one person*; e.g., growing up within the same family or in the

same village or town; attending a class taught by the same teacher; working in the same enterprise or organization, etc.

- *they need not be written, but can be spoken and recorded*, and may be enhanced by images, photos, graphics of all sorts;
- above all, *we construct our memoirs to come alive in renewed ways and to find or regain our own voices*; they are not offered as entertainment for or to be judged by others, though we will be delighted if others can find grounds for hope in them.