

PASSPORT RENEWED



**STEVEN B.
WILLIAMSON**

Passport Renewed

Steven B. Williamson

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Dedicated to:

My daughter Elizabeth, who has the task of continuing our
family's story into the future.

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“When I was younger I could remember anything,
whether it happened or not.” – Mark Twain
(photo by Jennifer Titus)

Introduction

“Before I refuse to take your questions, I have an opening statement.” – President Ronald Reagan

There were a few things missing from my first book, *Keep Going*: running with the bulls in Spain, skydiving over Normandy Beach, sailing around the world, surfing the shark-infested waters of Australia, hiking through the wilderness in Yosemite National Park, and climbing tall mountains in the state of Washington.

I didn't do any of those things and they're never going to happen. They're not even on my “bucket list” (things to do while I'm still alive). I avoid dangerous pursuits when possible and I tend to be risk-averse. I have no problem admitting to this fact. **If the shoe fits, wear it.**

You Had One Job

I suppose you're going to ask, “Why is the title of this book *Passport Renewed*?” According to Dictionary.com, one definition of a passport is “Anything that ensures admission or acceptance.” In writing my books, I have been trying to review my memories, compile some of my accumulated knowledge, and chronicle everything before it disappears forever – in order to thoroughly describe the world that I have lived in, while here on Earth. In these pages, you are being granted admission to my world. Also, this is the second volume of my story, a companion text to *Keep Going*. With those things in mind, I thought that *Passport Renewed* was an apt title.

A brief bit of background about me will help you follow along with the rest of this book. I lived and worked in Richmond, Indiana until 2009. That's when I relocated to

Phoenix, Arizona. In 2011, I moved from the east side of the Valley across town to Avondale, where I lived with my girlfriend Janet. Then in 2014, I had a hemorrhagic stroke and spent several months of recovery and physical therapy at Osborn Health and Rehab in Scottsdale. (For simplicity, henceforth I will refer to the period following the stroke as “my recovery.”) Later that year, I met my current girlfriend Jennifer. In early 2015, I left Osborn and moved into an apartment in east Phoenix. These places are the settings for many of my stories and so I will refer back to them often.

In my previous book, I mentioned many of the most important events from my past. Yet as I’ve continued remembering things that happened long ago and then jotting them down, writing a second volume containing those memories started to seem like a good idea. There are a whole lot more stories that I haven’t told you yet.

A major difference between this book and my first one is the general subject matter: *Keep Going* was a biography of me, for better or worse. By contrast, this text looks back on some of the more noteworthy and/or possibly amusing events that I’ve witnessed, and it also contains observations on (and my personal experiences with) a number of topics such as farm life, cars, and animals. By the way, although I have altered some minor personal details and/or the names of a few individuals, the events in my books are not fiction. Everything in here occurred just as written.

In the first few chapters, I’ll update you on life here in Phoenix since I wrote *Keep Going* two years ago. Then, I’ll write about some specific subjects, as I just mentioned. Finally, I’ll sneak in a few more words about me before I’m done here (because I can, since it’s my book). As Telly Savalas used to say, “It’s bonus time, baby!” If they can make a sequel to an awful movie like *Sharknado*, then I can certainly write a second book.

Foreword 2022

“A goal is not always meant to be reached; it often serves simply as something to aim at.” – Bruce Lee

In early 2021, I finished my fifth book *Existence in an Infinite Universe*. It had taken me three years to write, so afterward I decided to take a bit of a breather before diving head-first into another book, which might possibly be a sequel called *Beyond the Infinite*. I thought that it might be a good time to proofread this, my second book, again and recheck its formatting as well.

(I also did the same thing for my third book, now titled *From the Pages of the Golden Book*. Additionally, I did a quick review of my sports book, *A View of Our Games*, mostly just a brief exam of the formatting and pictures. I fixed those issues and a revised 2021 version is available.)



Figure 1. Selfie of me in December 2021.

For this third edition, I've eliminated blank pages that

separated the text into three main parts, removed a handful of unnecessary photos, followed some recommendations on fixing common punctuation mistakes, and addressed numerous issues with poor grammar and sloppy phrasing. I didn't add any new sections (except this one) but I think this is a cleaner-looking book now and much better to read.

Reading again though the past events in the pages of this book made me think back to how I wondered about the future in my younger days. For those of you over age 50 like me, isn't it amazing that we are living in the world of the 2020s? When I was in high school back in the 1970s, the upcoming decade of the 1980s seemed like a vast and vague unknown that loomed large in front of us all, an era when major cultural shifts and profound technological changes would occur. Everything was going to change. Would we be ready for it?

Now here we are over 40 years later. Computerization, the Internet, and cell phones are the types of changes that I suppose we thought might happen to the world during the 1980s, but back then we just couldn't conceive of those items specifically or their exact effects. On the other hand, change might be inevitable yet not all change is good. But that's a subject for my next book.

Chapter I: The Heat Is On

“There are many ways of going forward, but only one way of standing still.” – President Franklin D. Roosevelt

The summer of 2017 got off to a blazing start. The first weekend of June featured several days with temperatures over 107 degrees.

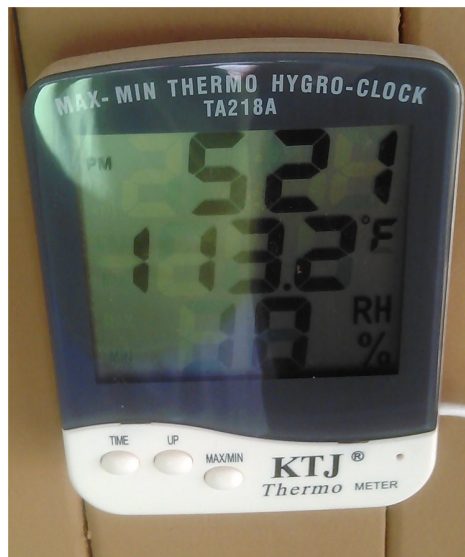


Figure 2. June 2017 heat wave.

At times like these here in Arizona, air conditioning is running almost constantly everywhere, so things can get chilly indoors after a while. One afternoon, I told my girlfriend that I was going outside so I could get warm.

Time Flies

It's 8:30 a.m. on Monday and the alarm is buzzing, time

to get up and take my prescription pills. Simultaneously, the phone has started ringing. Someone else in the building is cooking stinky food and the bad smell has gotten into the ventilation system somehow. I arise to find that I have left my wallet in my girlfriend's car and she has gone to work. It looks like it's going to be a bad week. The bells are pealing loudly at the Methodist church across the street, frequently reminding me (and the constant march of pedestrians out on the sidewalk) of the time – *tempus fugit*.

I'm actually OK with those church bells but I don't like ticking clocks. Their sound is especially annoying to me (for the same reason, I can't stand wind chimes). My father had a noisy grandfather clock in our front stairwell and Grandma Williamson had a cuckoo clock that I believe Uncle Jim had brought to her from Germany. I don't think I would want either one in my place today.

Recently while I was trying to sleep, a carpet cleaning truck was idling obtrusively in the parking space outside my bedroom window while water was loudly running in the bathroom of the next apartment, creating stereo noise. I suppose that I should have been used to it by then from my experiences during my stroke recovery. Whenever I would go and sit for a while in one of the big green lounge chairs near the forward nurses' station at the rehab center, attention-seeking patients would be yelling endlessly inside their rooms from opposite directions down the hallway. That's not unusual, it seems to be just the normal situation at such a facility.

In an auto repair shop commercial a few years ago, customers tried to describe the funny noises emanating from their beat-up cars. People make peculiar noises all the time, but because those strange sounds are not a part of normal speech, those folks usually seem embarrassed when they do. When someone abruptly utters a funny sound while talking

to me, I usually put them on the spot by asking, “How did that go again?” Normally, they won't repeat the odd sounds though.

Expressions and nicknames are another normal part of human communication. When someone familiar comes to the door, often I jokingly exclaim, “Here's trouble!” When I was much younger, if I told a story about some occurrence that had happened in an unbelievably ridiculous or stupid manner, my friend Dave often would reply (with mock amazement, feigning the reaction of a medieval villager), “Of course, is there any other way?” When I worked at Sanyo Laser Products (SLP) in Richmond, there was a vice president there who liked to float ideas and make suggestions for others to consider. Whenever he sensed that his thoughts might not be accepted by his listeners right away, he would quickly add (suddenly playing the role of devil's advocate), “I'm just saying...”

When uttered aloud, some expressions sound puzzling or even downright hilarious. In the fifth grade, our fussy librarian-like teacher often would become absolutely furious over students talking during class. As her face became red and contorted in anger, peals of laughter would reverberate throughout the room each time she threatened to punish everyone “in two shakes of a lamb's tail.” A funny nickname that you sometimes hear is “silly goose.” And the phrase “it's all Greek to me” would have been lost on my college roommate from Athens. My Russian ex-wife has picked up a number of American expressions over the years. When she doesn't want to listen to something important that I am trying to explain to her, she usually just says, “Whatever.”

Around the Valley

The Phoenix metro area is often called the “Valley of the

Sun,” a large region spread out between distant mountain ranges (most of which are hikeable and not all that tall or rugged). In this book, often I will simply refer to all of the Maricopa County area by its shorter nickname, “the Valley.”

This area includes the city of Phoenix itself; Scottsdale, part uber-wealthy area, part western town; Paradise Valley, smaller and even richer but not very western; Tempe, home to massive Arizona State University; Mesa, its large neighbor to the east; Chandler, Gilbert, Goodyear, and Surprise, pleasant bedroom communities for those who are willing to commute; Sun City, home to retirees from all over; and other suburbs such as Peoria, Glendale, Avondale, Buckeye, Ahwatukee, and Apache Junction. Each city has its own unique character. With so many different ones located in the sprawling metro area, the geography was difficult to remember when I first moved here.

In *Keep Going*, I wrote about the days when I lived in the far western part of the Valley. At that time, the area was full of housing additions that had been left unfinished from the time of the 2008 recession. On the opposite side of Phoenix, there is now a building boom going on in desirable eastern neighborhoods such as Arcadia, Biltmore, and “old town” Scottsdale. Mega-dollar condos are quickly going up everywhere, while older homes located on valuable real estate are being torn down and rebuilt in bigger and better fashion. HGTV’s “Property Brothers” would love them. Even the old Phoenix Swim Club grounds, located just southeast of the exclusive Biltmore financial district, was purchased by real estate developers who tore it down and built expensive new houses on the old lot. Undaunted, the swim club built a new state-of-the-art aquatic facility just a few blocks away.

The northern part of Scottsdale is one of the wealthiest parts of the Valley. It has many unbelievably expensive neighborhoods filled with tiny, winding streets and unique

homes concealed by a virtual jungle of desert vegetation. Celebrities and various types of millionaires (who mostly seem to want out of chaotic California and frosty Canada) reside there. (Those overgrown areas of chaparral are advantageous spots for scorpions and rattlesnakes to live in as well. It's likely that you will find some unwelcome critters hiding there.)



Figure 3. Me sitting in front of a store window in old town Scottsdale. I think I’ve played poker with that cowboy before (photo by Jennifer Titus).

Further south in Scottsdale, you will find “old town” – home to trendy bars and eateries, small art galleries, boutiques, jewelry stores, western and Native American goods, and numerous souvenir shops aimed at tourists. Its centerpiece is Scottsdale Fashion Square, undoubtedly one of the most upscale malls in America. There, you can find exclusive shops inside, such as a Louis Vuitton store full of extravagant items that even a Kardashian would covet. The

mall even has a Tesla auto dealership with a few of their expensive electric sports cars parked right inside.

Strolling through the streets of old town, you encounter three distinct smells: coffee, tobacco, and food (Mexican and Italian restaurants seem to be everywhere there). But you do have to watch out when passing by the numerous taverns: at any moment, someone with too much alcohol on board can obviously burst through a door and out onto the narrow sidewalk right where you are walking.

Around the State

Despite its broad expanses of nothingness, Arizona has many historic spots of interest that can be reached easily on a short day trip. So one spring morning, I went with my girlfriend on a two-hour drive north from Phoenix to Sedona. Its scenic locations were very crowded, even on a Thursday afternoon. Parking at those spots was not free and it was scarce. However, you can view spectacular rock formations there that you can't see anywhere else. It seemed to be an excellent place if you want to “get back to nature.” There are plenty of popular hiking trails in Sedona and it also has ample fishing areas. If you give a man a fish, he can eat for a day. If you teach a man to fish, he will keep on fishing for a lifetime, and some will go fishing every chance that they can.

Sedona has become a center for the “new age” movement (which embraces alternative forms of spirituality influenced by metaphysics and Eastern mysticism). Many of its adherents believe that “energy vortexes” (magnetic waves from inside Earth) swirl around and emanate from Sedona's “magical sites” and rock formations, so we visited some of them. In fact, I did feel a powerful force while I was there. I believe it was trying to extract dollars from the wallets of tourists.



Figure 4. Me at Bell Rock in Sedona, Arizona (photo by Jennifer Titus).

On another day trip, the two of us traveled about 90 minutes north to Prescott. (Williamson Valley is just a few miles farther to the northwest but we didn't go over there to take a look around. Presumably it's a small western village much like the others here in Arizona.) Prescott sits at an elevation of 5,400 feet, so my ears popped regularly during some parts of the drive. In the distance, the peaks of tall mountains gleamed with snow.

Back in the days of the Old West, Prescott featured a number of rowdy saloons and busy hotels along a downtown street located just across from its large courthouse square, in an area known as "Whiskey Row." Some of those places are still operating today, although things aren't quite as wild as in yesteryear. On a sunny March afternoon, we toured the historic district as the temperature reached a record high for the date (92 degrees). I told my girlfriend jokingly, "You knew the job was dangerous when you took it."

To look at the buildings in downtown Prescott, you could

be visiting any small burg in the Midwest – except that its sidewalks were crowded and the stores were busy. A few touristy jewelry stores and souvenir shops resembled those in old town Scottsdale. In addition, there were numerous restaurants and saloons, a bakery, and a couple of hotels in the historic district. It was a bit puzzling to see that people walking dogs were *everywhere* at midday.



Figure 5. Me at The Palace, a historic old saloon in Prescott, Arizona (photo by Jennifer Titus).

It seemed a shame not to have a beer in every saloon on Whiskey Row, but I did not. I did get a blue western-themed Prescott t-shirt. The town's perfect souvenir shirt would probably read: **I got drunk on Whiskey Row and spent the night in jail at Prescott, Arizona!** They didn't have one like that, but I think it would be a big seller.

A small hotel was located upstairs from one shop. My girlfriend wondered aloud if it was haunted, and then she remarked that it was a good thing the place was small so that

you could make a fast exit. I replied that if the rooms are small, a ghost would be sitting right on top of you.

Rural Arizona is definitely not the same as in the Old West era when cowboys and Indians rode horses across the desert. High voltage power lines and their massive steel towers are never far from sight, running roughly parallel to the freeways as their wires stretch across rolling brown hills covered in tall cactus. Large trucks roar along the highways that pass deep, deep valleys lined with scrubby-looking bushes.

Returning home in the afternoon from Prescott, I quickly noticed the stark contrast between the dry, brown, and sometimes bare scenery that we had passed in those rural areas, and the green, carefully-manicured yards and other landscaped properties in eastern parts of the Valley (where tall palm trees, colorful flowers, and healthy desert plants abound).

Boom or Dust

Arizona is much windier than outsiders might imagine, even on hot summer days. Sometimes called “haboobs” by local weather forecasters, desert dust storms can move fast. While my girlfriend and I were walking through a park in Scottsdale, one of those dust clouds quickly came up from behind and caught us as we tried to make it back to our car. We ducked inside the public restrooms, where we had to stand and wait for a few minutes until the winds subsided. During this time, nearby Camelback Mountain disappeared completely and the sun became nothing more than a strange white orb in the dusty brown afternoon sky.

I was sitting at a fast food restaurant in Avondale once when one of these storms struck the area. Outside, the trees shook as if thrashed by a hurricane. At a state swim meet in

Chandler, after the first session had just ended around 1 p.m., one of these weird weather anomalies struck unexpectedly. Elizabeth had already left with her mother, so I sat in my car and watched the air turn brown as the wind blew dirty clouds past and spectators ran for cover. When these dust storms suddenly appear, all you can really do is stay inside for 10 or 15 minutes and ride them out.



Figure 6. Dust storm approaching Scottsdale (photo by Jennifer Titus).

In 2015, we had a somewhat large earthquake here – at least it was relatively large for Phoenix. (When I was still in high school and lived back in eastern Indiana, we experienced a couple of very minor quakes there that rattled the walls a bit. They were small and happened long ago, so I was not really accustomed to such occurrences.) I was sitting in the living room watching television when a powerful vibration started at 11:29 p.m. The floor and the couch shook violently like someone heavy was jumping up and down on the ceiling. I could feel the wall shuddering behind me. The quake was quite strong and it was easily the scariest one that I had ever experienced.

Even the Heat Needs a Break

Many Americans probably think of Arizona as a large desert, dry and hot. Western movies have usually portrayed the state as full of sand, cactuses, and cowboys. But in fact, the northern part of the state has a very different culture, geography, and climate from the southern section.

The Colorado Plateau extends from the Four Corners region down into Arizona. (The Grand Canyon is also part of this rugged territory and receives winter snow on its rim.) At the high altitude that the plateau occupies, there are forests, cold winters, and abundant snowfall. As part of this vast, highly-elevated stretch of land, the massive San Francisco Peaks rise eminently into the sky just north of Flagstaff. Although a couple of those northern behemoths reach heights of over 12,000 feet, the tallest mountains down around the Phoenix area are the Four Peaks, still looming imposingly on the eastern horizon at an elevation of over 7,500 feet. They are easily visible in Scottsdale, although over 50 miles away.

I thought about the significance of that fact once as I sat daydreaming while looking at their snow-covered summits. By comparison, that would be like seeing something rising up from the city of Indianapolis while standing on the street in Richmond. That scale was difficult for me to comprehend. On a clear day (with no haze or buildings in the way), I could even see the Four Peaks from Avondale, about 80 miles away. The tallest of the four mountains, Brown's Peak, is climbable by a healthy hiker without gear. I used to think about attempting it someday, but that is no longer on my bucket list.

Although winters are relatively mild here in the Valley, December and January temperatures can dip below 40 degrees. In Scottsdale, we even had a few snow flurries

during January 2015. At times, a few tall mountain peaks can become covered in snow (and shine brightly far away in the distance). On a Monday morning in February 2010, one of the other tenants living in our west Phoenix rental house drove up with snow all over his car. It was quite stunning. He revealed that he had been up to Flagstaff for the weekend, where they had experienced a winter storm. At that time, I didn't yet know that there could be snow here in the Copper State.

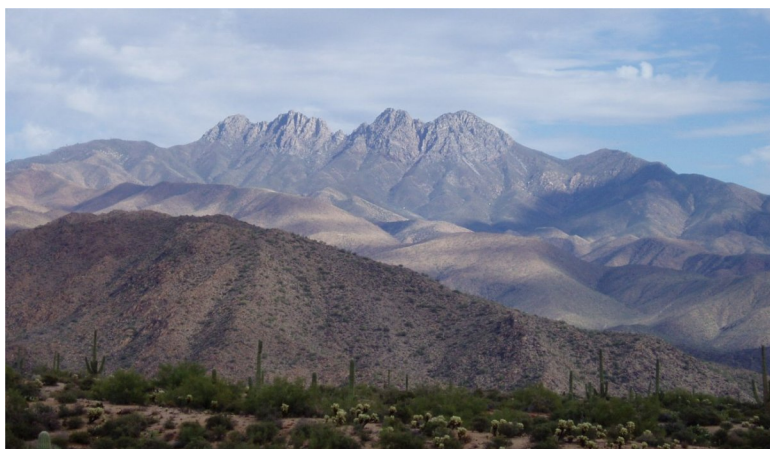


Figure 7. The Four Peaks mountains in Maricopa County, Arizona (photo by “Jsayre64”).

I didn't have a jacket anymore during my stroke recovery in 2014, but I didn't really need one at that time either. Naturally, the weather had cooled off considerably a few months after I went home. By November, I was getting pretty cold whenever my girlfriend and I went somewhere. I was able to purchase a very nice (yet inexpensive) once-worn coat from an eBay seller living in Colorado (who had gotten it at Dillard's). Finally I was able to stay warm while outside. I told her, “I've never been so glad to have a winter coat.”

Chapter II: The Spring of Hope

“Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.” – Seneca, Roman philosopher

I don't miss my past life too much. I only reminisce sometimes about my lost ability to do activities like freely walking down the street or playing sports (things that specifically pertain to me, not to my interactions with other persons).

Most people make a big difference in the lives of others just by all the little things that they do. Often, they don't realize how important their own efforts are. I hope I can give the same kind of encouragement to my daughter so that she can reach her goals and leave her mark on the world. When I look at her, I frequently see myself. She and I usually think alike and therefore we often come up with similar ideas at the same time. We also share countless mannerisms and like many of the same things. I once told her that I am glad she is on “our team.”

I also revealed this insight to her: it's easier to do things first and ask forgiveness later than to ask permission up front. I suppose that might be considered as bad parental advice. (Oops! Although I did add that I probably shouldn't have said that.)

Adrift in a Sea of People

Friday, October 14, 2016 was Sun Devil Day at Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe. It was an event designed to welcome prospective students to the college, let them look around, and answer their questions about everything from majors to academic programs, and from clubs to housing. I went with my daughter, who was interested in attending the

school. Surprisingly, there were many other parents at the event. I was not a unicorn after all.

Expansive event rooms were packed with teens browsing through folders full of brightly colored papers describing the day's busy agenda. Simultaneously, speakers answered questions such as, "Why ASU?" with the help of a slideshow projected on two large wall screens.

After some seminar-style meetings kicked off the event, an upperclass student led a group of us on an hour-long campus tour. There was a self-absorbed woman in the back who probably didn't hear anything that the guide said because she chattered away at her daughter during the entire tour. Nearby, I brought up the rear, rolling along with the help of my four-wheeled walker. It was quite tiring, but the visit was for my daughter's benefit and not mine, so I trudged along intrepidly. During my recovery, I recall that the nurses often referred to me as "the young guy." At ASU, the students walking around campus probably looked at me and thought, "There's an old guy."

In the science library, there was a phone charging station near the door (an intelligent nod to modern technology). Then we passed through an outdoor aquatic facility where there were more people tanning than swimming. Next, we went inside the fitness center where a couple of basketball courts were located. Just a single lonely player was shooting hoops there by himself. Nevertheless, I exclaimed, "I'm home!" After the tour, we had only a few minutes for a quick lunch. Then a long line of teens marched back to the Memorial Union for more meetings. I just followed everyone else.

Many things that I observed were eerily similar to my own experiences at Indiana University (IU) in Bloomington. For example, an Asian girl named Emily gave a lecture about the honors college program (which caused me to have a

flashback in which I recalled that one of my college roommates had a Korean girlfriend named Emily).

The campus itself was also much like the one in B-town, with its buildings mostly located between two major avenues with a grand Memorial Union in the center. Also, the sports stadiums and parking lots were similarly situated just north of the central campus area. The university's large size was comparable to that of IU as well. During the tour, my daughter remarked on the unusual architecture of one of the buildings. I told her that many of the older buildings at IU had the same style, except that they had been built with limestone that was quarried near Bloomington.



Figure 8. Skateboard rack outside the ASU computing center.

What **was** very different at ASU was the atmosphere. Countless bicyclists weaved precariously through crowds of pedestrians. Even worse, there were *way* too many skateboarders zipping through the sea of people. I never

expected to see anything like that. Racks for all those skateboards (and scooters, too) were placed prominently at a number of building entrances.

Despite a few stark contrasts to my own time in college, and even though I had to make my way around slowly with the help of a walker, I did not feel out of place on the ASU campus. Everyone was very nice and opened doors for me all day. There seems to be much greater acceptance of personal differences (such as my disability) today than when I was younger. So I felt better about the future after my visit.

Reaching the End Zone

A few months following our autumn visit to ASU, high school graduation rolled around in the spring. The need for basketball seating capacity in Indiana (for “Hoosier Hysteria”) means that even small high schools have gymnasiums of moderate size (and large public schools like the one I attended in Richmond often have college-size arenas). In Arizona, the gyms are necessarily much smaller.

However, the Valley does contain numerous venues large enough to host a proper graduation ceremony. The Phoenix city schools use the old Veterans Coliseum just west of downtown. Once the basketball home of the NBA Suns, the facility is now part of the state fairgrounds. To make the schedule work for its many high schools, the city school district just staggers the big event starting times over a couple of days. Other sites in use include spacious Wells Fargo Arena on the ASU campus and even the giant University of Phoenix stadium located on the far west side of the Valley in Glendale. Yet a number of high schools, apparently in order to save a few bucks, insanely hold their graduation ceremonies outdoors in the heat, usually on their own football fields. It's not just the poor schools choosing

this path, either. My daughter's high school, part of the wealthy Scottsdale school district, has apparently been doing this for a while.

On top of that, in a naked grab for money, the high school only gave parents two free tickets and charged \$10 each for additional ones. By contrast, ritzy Chaparral High School gave out six free tickets to each graduate (although no additional ones were made available) and held their graduation ceremony at Wells Fargo Arena.

All this lack of good judgment insured a cluster f**k on graduation night. There were *way* too many people inside the grounds for the number of seats available up in the small bleachers, so throngs crowded around the fence surrounding the football field. As opposed to the clear sightlines afforded by a normal ceremony held indoors, those at field level could barely see the platform where the action was centered, which had been erected at the west five-yard-line.



Figure 9. Graduation night on the football field.

As darkness fell, the lights shone brightly on the pitch, causing the football field's artificial grass surface to radiate with a vibrant greenish glow. Next, seated in the west end

zone, the underclass members of the school band played music while the graduating students paraded out in a long single-file column. Dressed in red gowns (although the school's main color is blue), the students sat orderly in white folding chairs placed neatly in rows across the gridiron.

Following a few all-too-lengthy speeches (one in which the principal memorably quoted Dr. Seuss) and a terrific piano number performed by one student, two lines of graduates formed. As their names were announced, they took the stage and alternately received their diplomas.

For me, the entire evening was mainly about my daughter's graduation, and from that perspective the ceremony was a great success (despite its aforementioned shortcomings). Nevertheless, one pleasant surprise still awaited me at the event's conclusion.

Following the parade to the podium, the ceremony wrapped up and parents swarmed the gridiron to take photos of (and with) the new graduates. This unexpected development created a great opportunity for me: I got to walk across the green football field and even sit down on the blue artificial turf in the end zone. Already so proud of my daughter on that night, the ending was a triumphant moment of sorts for me too. I felt like I had just scored the winning touchdown. After having a stroke in 2014, I thought that I would never be able to walk on an athletic field again.

Chapter III: Catch of the Day

“Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.” – Henry David Thoreau

One of my counseling “assignments” was to learn about controlling anxiety. As I sat on the couch one evening, reading relevant essays on the *Psychology Today* website, I fell asleep. So I accidentally discovered the cure for anxiety – you only have to read about it.

No One Else Can Be You

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, research has shown that the brains of most humans are not developed enough to make mature decisions until they are in their early 20s. Although many teens think they are already able to do so, high divorce and accident rates within that age group are solid evidence in support of this hypothesis.

Today's culture has put pressure on young people to make major personal choices at an earlier age than ever before. This is a mistake. Given time, individuals can grow and become “comfortable in their own skins.” A little bit of self-expression is not a bad thing. Abe Lincoln once said, “Whatever you are, be a good one.” So whatever you discover that you are, own it and be that to the max.

My father's poorly-considered mantra was, “Why don't you join the Army?” Yet military service is not a good direction for everyone. For some, it is a perfect career option. They thrive in that environment and enjoy their work. A special camaraderie often develops between members of the armed forces. We should support everyone who makes that life-altering decision but also acknowledge that for others it would be the wrong choice.

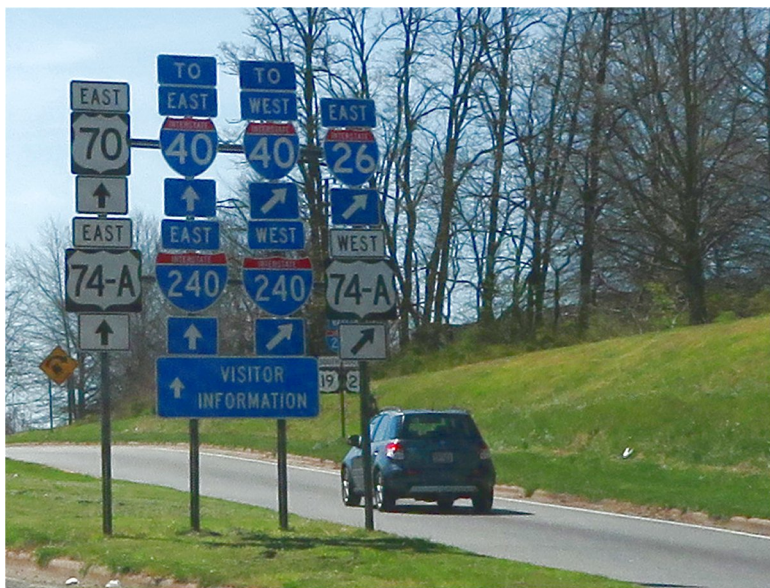


Figure 10. Whatever direction you take in life, the choice is up to you (photo by Ken Lund).

An old adage says, “There’s safety in numbers.” In ultra-conservative rural areas of the Midwest like the one in which I grew up, there were many simple people who did not understand anything that was different from their own limited experiences. Cultural ideas such as great literature, modern music, and fashion trends were things to be feared. The largely-unsophisticated residents of such small towns clung to conformity as their safest option and any hint of flair was therefore totally discouraged in those communities. Rural schools were full of dull-witted redneck boys all wearing identical “buzzcuts” (very short army-style haircuts), flannel shirts or plain t-shirts, and discount store blue jeans – because that was how their fathers dressed and what most of the other kids looked like. You could see the lack of intelligence in their eyes and hear it in their voices. The

lights were on but nobody was home.

In recent years, a different problem has emerged. National news networks, popular TV programs, and a blitz of social media sites have revealed that there are many people who are not at all as they represent themselves. To paraphrase Buddha, “Be true to yourself.” So don't act like someone whom you are not (a “poseur”). **I can put my hand in my shirt, but that doesn't make me Napoleon.**

Circle of Trust

My girlfriend had a college class project in which she had to photograph two of her friends together. The catch was that they had to be people who didn't know each other. I asked her whether the students weren't afraid that their friends might like each other better and “cut out the middleman” (in this case, the student). Many of my own pals have started out as just the “friend of a friend.”

Humorist Will Rogers wrote in a 1927 newspaper column, “I never met a man I didn't like.” (Rogers had a variety of other memorable quotes worth reading, usually about the dysfunction of our government.) Today, his philosophy would be a naive one to follow. If you took a similar approach in our modern era, many people would definitely try to take advantage of you. Watch out for such people, those who just want to take advantage of your good nature and generosity – because there are lots of them out there.

Our eminently-quotable President Abraham Lincoln said, “I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends.” I have tried that myself, but frequently it doesn't work because (1) not everyone wants to be your friend, and (2) there's always a reason why *you* don't like to hang out with certain people too: either their personalities conflict with your own or they

exhibit socially unacceptable behaviors that you frown on. Usually people will judge you based on the actions and character of your friends and often their opinions are correct. Therefore, you should be selective about whom you associate with, especially those whom you let into your “circle of trust” (your confidants), even on social media websites.

Some individuals might feel that they can act in any way that they want within their own social circles, but in public they *should* use more common sense as well as better discretion. And in my home, I certainly *don't* have to indulge behavior that I object to (whether dangerous, offensive, or simply silly). You don't have to like everyone whom you meet, no matter what the media and pop culture figures say. Use your best judgment and surround yourself with people whom you are comfortable with and in whom you have learned to trust.

Be especially careful about choosing bitter, cynical persons as your friends – you are playing with fire by doing so. People with behavioral issues or addictions usually hurt the ones closest to them the most. When things go poorly (and inevitably they will, sooner or later), those individuals will turn on you and blame you for all their problems. This might not be a popular view with some, but it's the safest course of action for you.

(Let me add that you can choose your friends but not your family, so you might consider being a bit more flexible on this subject in regard to your immediate family members – just try to think clearly when dealing with them.)

I've also learned that it's not a good idea to “stick your neck out” for others (take “helpful” action on their behalf). They will seldom appreciate it and often you will suffer the repercussions yourself. Typically, either the recipient is ungrateful and resents your efforts, or someone else who is caught up in the situation turns on you for getting involved.

In my experience, the people who need the most help are usually the ones who want it the least. As my mother used to say, **“No good deed goes unpunished.”**

So just let others handle their own problems. If someone dislikes you for not giving away your time and money, then the two of you were never really friends. That person just wanted to use you.

On the other hand, do keep in mind that sometimes meeting other types of people can introduce you to many new ideas and enjoyable experiences, as happened to me when I went off to college. It's OK that they are different from you. It's also OK to hang out with individuals who are like you and with whom you feel comfortable. The fact is, that's what most of us usually do anyway. It's all up to you, so don't let others tell you what to do or how to think.

If you are honest and genuine, but encounter other people who don't like you the way that you are, then just don't waste your time being around them. I can't emphasize this strongly enough: *remove negative people from your life completely!* They can do you absolutely no good. Rely on yourself whenever possible. **Don't expect anything from other people, and you'll never be disappointed.**

Here and Now

Many sources of self-help advice, including the counselor who used to visit me at Osborn, say that you have to forgive people who have played negative roles in your life but I don't necessarily agree. I admit that I am not a very forgiving person, but I think that you can still let go of negative feelings from your past and move on.

It is important to understand that all of our past experiences combine to make us who we are as individual human beings. I don't think that you can completely forgive

someone else unless you forget most of the negative things that they have done. That probably isn't going to happen for most people, however it might not be totally necessary. I think that you can *let go* of those bad people and unhappy episodes by reminding yourself that they are buried in the past and are not important or relevant anymore today. Accepting that idea as reality would seem to be far more important than any phony words of forgiveness that we might keep repeating in order to reassure ourselves.

I read a number of things about Zen philosophy and Buddhism during my recovery. Among their teachings is that you should “live in the here and now.” They say that in order to succeed at this, you must give up your desire for other things and enjoy what you already have, if you want to be truly happy. This approach involves letting go of your own passions and learning to appreciate the life that you have (and especially, this moment in time). If you can do that, then Zen suggests that you will find yourself more in tune with others and more compassionate toward them. Become friends with yourself. I think perhaps Henry David Thoreau might have approved.

In one book that I read about Zen philosophy, the author described a comparison to the Moon being reflected in water. If you are standing by the sea, it will reveal the Moon's pale light emanating from space. Yet in the desert, there will be no reflection to see. However, that fact is someone else's problem, not the concern of the Moon – it doesn't have an opinion of whether to care or not. It just exists up in the sky.

(In a side note, I have noticed that in TV news polls for which the viewers themselves must phone in to vote, usually about three percent are idiots who call just to say that they have “no opinion.”)

The theory behind this story is that trying to do things in order to have them affect others does not help us become

more in tune with those persons, because then we are only trying them to convince them to accept our own views instead of being truly compassionate. We become missionaries, not friends. So the idea is that we should try to become more like the Moon – not in the sense that our nocturnal companion is unfeeling and distant, but by just being ourselves, “shining on,” and not caring whether other people are “reflecting our light” or not. Then we can be more in touch with *their* feelings.



Figure 11. The Moon reflecting on water (photo by Giuseppe Milo).

I believe that our views are derived from three diverse sources. **(1) Perspective:** if a position benefits us personally, we are more likely to support it, even if it is detrimental to the greater whole. **(2) Emotion:** when an idea stirs our biochemistry and pushes our buttons, that can cause us to embrace it, even irrationally. **(3) Logic:** thinking with our heads instead of our hearts, even when it doesn't necessarily help us individually.

An example of #1 is when groups claim discrimination

where it does not exist in order to gain support for things that benefit them. #2 comes into play when we are told of events that shock or distress us (and are often used as propaganda). Sometimes #3 can occur when confronted with a prescription for “nasty, bitter medicine” such as Ronald Reagan's budget cuts for federal funding to college financial aid and school lunch programs.

So I'm not sure that I completely agree with the Moon hypothesis. What if your friend believes things based on emotion (#2) that are so irrational that they have a negative effect on his or her life and personality? Do we have a responsibility to advocate an intelligent opposing view based on logic (#3)? [Note that this objection does *NOT* apply to those holding subjective opinions that fall under both #1 and #2, such as religious beliefs. Also, I doubt if you can change beliefs based mainly on perspective (#1) very often. Probably better to not even try.]

Another of my counselor's assignments involved avoiding the word “frustration.” This emotion is caused when we feel stress about events which we cannot do anything about. But is that actually what's occurring?

Frustration is really just a disguise for other emotions such as anger and disappointment. When we uncover the real ones, we can find ways to successfully deal with them. We might not be able to change external situations or difficult people but we can adjust our responses to them, thereby alleviating the associated feelings of stress. We can't make a traffic jam go away but we can take another route or stop for a break. We can't make a line at the bank disappear but we can go to a less crowded branch or use an ATM.

Buddha once observed, “You will not be punished *for* your anger, you will be punished *by* your anger.”

Chapter IV: Business as Usual

“If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?” – John Wooden

My girlfriend's daughter was going to the mall with a friend on a Sunday afternoon. She called to ask her mother how late she could stay. I overheard the time quickly change from 5:00 to 5:30, and finally to 6:00 p.m. I told her, “It sounds like you were negotiating with Donald Trump.”

On the Money

While I was married, I used to tell my wife (who was from Russia) to play the lottery because foreigners always seemed to win. It never worked for us, though. During the writing of this book, the Powerball jackpot reached \$1.4 billion. Finally, three winners emerged. I had not purchased a ticket, in any event. I do consider one or two lottery tickets to be “acceptable risk” (a very low loss with a very high potential reward). I told my girlfriend that I didn't need a billion dollars anyway, that I would just spend it on a basketball team (probably a losing one like the Phoenix Suns).

I used to enter those mail-in magazine sweepstakes but I never won anything in those, either. I still joke about looking in my mailbox for a check sent by Ed McMahon (from beyond the grave). Now *that* would be a story worth writing about. Someone told me recently that a phone salesman had tried to convince him that he had \$8,000 in grants. To claim it, he just had to give them his bank account information and Social Security number. Fortunately, he knew that it was a scam and refused. I replied that I had inherited millions from a variety of late relatives, all I had to do was just answer the emails from their overseas representatives and send my

bank account number to their purported offices somewhere in Nigeria.

Dollar stores are a great place to get an entire basket of useful items for a few bucks, so you feel like you are getting a lot for your money there. I tell my girlfriend not to be afraid to use these items because if we run out, we can buy more. I always say, “They're not going to close China.”

The local news reported that the average person spent \$512 on Valentine's Day. That figure sounded awfully high to me. All it takes is for one rich guy to spend \$100,000 on a diamond necklace to screw things up for all the rest of us.

What to Wear

To make my limited financial resources stretch as far as possible, I shop online on auction websites and look for lightly used items. This costs so much less than shopping at expensive stores in places like Scottsdale.

Occasionally, several good deals might appear all at once on an auction site, but just as often there might not be any real bargains for weeks. When multiple cheap auctions are listed at the same time, budgeting money can be a challenge. So now, I organize items into two categories: First are things that I would like to have and would purchase if I were rich, but that I don't really need. (Those I don't try to buy.) The second group has things that would be quite useful right now. (I *might* bid on those, if the price is right.)

At any given time, my “watch list” has many more items on it than I will ever bid on. Often I just want to see if anyone buys an unusual object and how much they are willing to pay for it. Also, *everything* must go on the watch list overnight now before I make any decisions, for two reasons: (1) potential purchases have to meet the criteria specified above, and (2) I often change my mind after “sleeping on it.”

There used to be a TV commercial for a car-buying website featuring a man with a lime green automobile that he thought no one would want. Yet on the Internet, there was one fellow who did. The online shopper exclaimed (with a Scottish accent), “A lime green car!” Everything in his apartment was that same color. Often, looking for bargains online is like that for me. I might see 50 shirts priced at less than \$2 each, mostly in bland colors and ugly patterns, before I might finally notice the “right” one that apparently only I am interested in. And it’s surprising how many people cannot spell the word “striped.” Online auctions are full of “stripped” men's shirts.

A few years ago, a survey found that women wished men would wear more green. When I tried a dating website, their advice was NOT to wear yellow on a date because that is a color of warning, but I used to have a yellow plaid Tommy Hilfiger shirt that I often went out in anyway. Nevertheless, I do avoid wearing yellow with black (the colors of Pittsburgh's sports teams – I’m not a fan).

A big marketing wave preceded the release of the new *Star Wars* movies. T-shirts and sweatshirts quickly appeared in large department stores. However, what adult would be caught wearing them? (Maybe the nerdy cast of TV's *The Big Bang Theory*.) I love the films, but those clothes are for kids. On the other hand, sci-fi fans probably think the same things about sports jerseys. Myself, I’ve worn those often in the past, but I seem to have grown out of the trend in the last decade.

Style Points

Shaving is an important part of good grooming for many men. I'm not a big fan of the unshaven look some guys sport today – I think you should either grow a beard or neatly trim

your whiskers off. Another tip for men: I often remind myself in the morning, “Don't be in a hurry to shave.”

During my recovery, my ex-wife would often bring my daughter to visit me for a few minutes on Sundays. Occasionally, she would also bring me a couple of things that I might need. Part of my hair had been cut short for my brain surgery and therefore it was uneven on one side. So I requested a rounded pair of kids' safety scissors from the dollar store so that I could try to give myself a trim. She told me that she didn't want to give me scissors because I might try to hurt myself with them. Then I asked, “If you know that about me, why am I still in *here*?” The environment at Osborn was mentally stressful, making it hard to live in. But eventually I met a new girlfriend (Jennifer) and she gave me that much-needed haircut.

The worst one I ever got was at a large department store in Richmond. (A few of those places have some type of barber shop inside.) A young bohemian-looking woman with an extreme type of short hairstyle and tattoos all over her arms chopped off almost all of my hair. Usually I tell the stylists not to be afraid to cut because the hair will grow back – it always has – but after that hatchet job, I was a bit worried. So if you see someone holding scissors who looks like he or she belongs at a punk rock concert, you might want to visit another salon (unless you are into that sort of thing).

My spots of gray hair on the sides are much more noticeable if I do not keep them cut often enough. When I recently noticed that I was getting too gray again, my girlfriend didn't have to try very hard to convince me to go to the hair salon that time. I tried a bit of men's hair color a few times before I moved to Phoenix but eventually I gave up. I figured that if George Clooney could live with a little gray, then I could too.

There used to be a car dealer in Dayton who appeared

frequently in local TV ads and who had messed up his hair coloring. He must have left the dye in for too long because his poofy blow-dried hairdo had turned jet black, which was not at all the appropriate color for his age (mid-40s, most likely) and skin tone (pale white). I'm also pretty sure that it was not just a toupee, either.

There's no substitute for a good comb. Because there are fewer women who play poker than men, ESPN often highlights successful female players during its annual World Series of Poker coverage. During the 2015 Main Event, a former Dutch national field hockey player made a deep run in the tournament. Her long blonde hair was quite unkempt and appeared to have not been brushed for several days. Musicians seem to be able to get away with this look, though. About his famously disheveled-looking hairstyle, singer Rod Stewart once said, "I've tried to have a regular haircut, but it just pops back up again, so this is the way it's going to be."

It has been suggested that I spend too much time looking in mirrors and windows, combing and arranging my hair. I always reply that I have to, because I don't have much to work with. My concern seems far from that of former basketball star Steve Alford, whose hairstyle was always perfect during his playing days at Indiana University during the 1980s. His coiffure appeared to be blow-dried and covered generously with extra-hold hairspray because not a lock ever moved out of place, even during important games against big rivals.

When I get up in the morning, my hair is usually standing straight up on top of my head. I had always hoped to have more in common with Einstein than his hair.

Chapter V: Nighttime is the Right Time

“Usually, when people get to the end of a chapter, they close the book and go to sleep. I deliberately write a book so when the reader gets to the end of the chapter, he or she must turn one more page.” – Sidney Sheldon

NSFW is an Internet acronym that stands for “Not Safe For Work.” It is typically used by entertainment news websites at the top of pages containing racy photos of celebrities having “wardrobe malfunctions” in front of some fortunate paparazzi. In my case, NSFW would probably describe me and my inability to do any type of real job these days without accidentally harming myself or others.

Tomorrow is Another Day

The structure of a daily routine usually works well for me but my body fights against it. Today, matters are even more complicated: since I have no fixed schedule to maintain, I have to set an arbitrary bedtime to prevent me from staying up too late at night. (If I keep watching television too long, often I just fall asleep on the couch.)

In college, sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night with a dry mouth from drinking too much beer. Then I would open up my mini-fridge and have a cold Pepsi or Coke. It tasted great, especially when the dorm room was hot, but afterward the caffeine usually kept me from falling asleep again.

For the final couple years before my mother passed away, usually I would visit her after work each evening to check on her. While there, I would prepare some easy-to-fix type of

dinner for both of us (I can't cook, so there was a lot of spaghetti and garlic bread), and then watch TV with her for a while before leaving. Often I would not get back home until after midnight. Then I would fix a bowl of cereal (typically something healthy full of flakes, nuts, and raisins) and tune into an overnight talk radio show about weird paranormal topics (many times, it also featured lots of flakes and nuts). On such nights, I listened well into the early a.m. to those offbeat programs. Like ghost stories around a campfire, the discussions were ideal fare for late night listening, but soon afterward, the morning alarm would ring way too early.

Then during the late 2000s, I often stayed up far too late playing online poker, then not get enough sleep, and eventually I woke up tired the next morning. This situation usually left me running behind and after I hurried to work, I had to eat a cereal bar for breakfast while sitting at my desk. (They don't taste very good.) By Wednesday or Thursday evening of each week, following that exhausting schedule would catch up with me. On those nights, I would take a short walk after work. Next, I returned and fixed a simple and fast dinner. Then (grudgingly) I went to bed early. Alternatively, sometimes I would just tune my satellite radio to the cool jazz channel after getting home from work, then lie down for a couple of hours and relax before dinner.

Another common nemesis of sleep was reading. I would get involved with a terrific novel, couldn't put it down, and would stay up with it all night. Then I would be really weary the next day at work. This was much more commonplace before I got married, of course. Since about 2010, I have used reading glasses. Having reached middle age, books make my eyes fatigued quickly now and so I become drowsy quite easily. Although reading has become more difficult, it has now become sleep's staunchest ally.

In early 2010, I had to get up at 5 a.m. and catch two

buses to arrive at a job located across town in north Phoenix. My work there involved selling challenging and difficult business opportunities over the phone. I really didn't want to be there doing that (especially insanely early in the morning), so to hold off the boredom and stress of working at the call center for as long as I could, usually I stayed up too late the previous night watching old *M*A*S*H* reruns on a local TV station starting at 11 p.m.

Most of us end up in that type of monotonous job. Few people actually get to do the kind of work they would enjoy. British philosopher Alan Watts once said, "Although we all realize that monotony is boring, almost every form of industrial work – banking, accounting, mass-producing, service – is monotonous, and most people are paid for simply putting up with monotony."

Serious Moonlight

Since I was young, I've been a night owl. I prefer sleeping late in the morning and staying awake at night. Perhaps I've watched too many scary movies and read too many chilling books about alien invasions. In truth, the world really is a different place after dark, so I do feel a bit safer sleeping during the daytime.

While I was a club DJ during the early 1990s, my work was at night. After spinning records for hours, often I would stop at the 24-hour diner near Earlham College. There, I would be seated among students (sometimes cramming for tests) and drunks (who had left the bars looking for something to eat). My usual order was either biscuits with sausage gravy or a bowl of chili with cheese. Next, when I started work at SLP, I was on the second (evening) shift, which also suited my internal schedule.

The way things felt to me was: when I went to bed, then

the next thing I had to do was get up and go to work again. I wanted to postpone that as long as possible. That led to things like watching talk shows or reruns on late night TV, as I mentioned above. It didn't take late nights of online poker to mess up my days.

I am definitely *not* a morning person. Getting up early for school or work was always very difficult for me. I just wanted to stay in bed for a while longer and so I would hit the snooze button on the alarm clock a couple of times. Who hasn't? Frequently I had to rush to get where I was going and avoid arriving late. Some people seemed to think that getting to the office extremely early and doing unpaid work was a good idea, but I disagree. It never got any of them promoted, it just let others take advantage of them and steal their hours. You need to allocate your time wisely. Work smarter, not harder.

I tried going to bed at a "reasonable" hour and getting up *really* early (as some people claim to do), then watching a bit of the morning news or reading a newspaper with a leisurely breakfast. But that amount of time wasn't nearly enough for the things that I really wanted to do, like playing basketball, joining online poker games, going to movies, reading books, and watching TV programs. It didn't even allow time to do important chores that I needed to do, such as laundry and grocery shopping. To me, that early morning period was just unproductive, wasted time.

I've found that I usually prefer to remain in the state I'm in, whatever that is. If I'm up late, I prefer to stay up and keep doing things. If I'm in bed, I don't want to get up. I often suspected that my circadian rhythms did not operate on a normal 24-hour day-night cycle. Today, science has discovered that many people (especially the blind) can develop an actual disorder of this type.

Birds also are supposed to follow their own internal

clocks and only sing during the daylight hours. (Internet sources confirmed my suspicions.) However, outside my apartment in east Phoenix, we had a “night owl” of sorts. This nutty bird would sit in the tree by my bedroom window and sing under the starlight into the early a.m. hours. Apparently, the migratory American Robin is notorious for this behavior and is likely our mixed-up amateur astronomer. I can’t confirm this because I couldn’t see him. Every single night when I looked outside, it was always dark. What are the odds?

In Dreams

A few months ago, I awoke with great concern one morning because I thought that I was about to get fired by ODS. I couldn't recall clocking in or out for several days. Then as the fog lifted, I remembered that I hadn't worked there for many years. Previously, I have had similar dreams occasionally. One recurring dream is about returning to my old workplace in Richmond – that would have been a puzzling decision, and why I would have chosen to do that, I don't know. At other times, I would abruptly wake up in the morning worried that I had overslept and was late for work. Perhaps those specific dreams happened because that period was a lengthy, memorable, and important time in my life.

One time, a short self-analysis involving dream interpretation was my recovery counselor's weekly homework assignment. Books and websites that claim they can decode your nighttime visions are plentiful. Yet many experts think that these texts and essays are all rubbish. They maintain that symbols and metaphors appearing in your dreams only pertain to you individually. In fact, an online article for *Psychology Today* even went so far as to insist that any interpretation of dreams is completely impossible.

(Imagine a physicist stating that it is futile to study atoms – perhaps because they are too small – therefore we should toss out the entire Periodic Table of Elements!)

Dressed for Success

From time to time, Indiana's wild weather would force a change of clothes upon arrival at work. One wet and blustery spring morning while driving to work at SLP, I saw that my car was running low on fuel. I was actually early on that day, so I stopped for gas. There was a tiny Vortex gas station located on the corner just across the railroad tracks from the large company parking lot. As I got out of my vehicle, strong winds immediately began blowing thick sheets of cold rain under the tall roof over the gas pumps. In just a few moments, I became soaking wet. Fortunately, I kept a change of clothes in my locker for such emergencies, so I was able to put on some dry pants once I had made it inside the building. Nevertheless, that was a bad way to start off the day.

A few months after I moved to Phoenix in summer 2009, Arizona had one of its coldest winters ever. (Yes, chilly weather can occur here in the desert.) In the months of February and March, I had to catch a 6 a.m. bus to get to work. To reach the bus stop, I needed to cross several blocks on foot in the dark, so on those frigid mornings I bundled up against the cold in a ski jacket, sweatshirt, and black stocking cap. (This was *not* something that I had expected to experience in Arizona.)

Walking quickly and riding buses made me sweat under all those layers of clothes. When I arrived at work, I would have to duck into the restroom and change into a dry dress shirt. (I carried a canvas bag with my lunch and an extra shirt.) Then I would go to the break room and quickly eat a couple of donuts before the drudgery of making phone calls

for several hours commenced.

When I worked at SLP, there were two large rectangular buildings on the grounds that ran north-south and Sanyo North America actually owned both of them. The eastern building was mostly rented out as warehouse space and also featured a fitness club in the front, while SLP leased almost all of the western building.

One continuing problem at SLP was that its designated employee parking lot was located west of the building, but the only available entrance (as well as the time clock itself) was on the southeast corner where the security office was located. After parking, you had to walk completely across the front of this massive brick facility, go around the fence at the gate between the two main buildings, hike up a concrete ramp, and enter through the side door to finally get inside the place. The front door leading into the lobby was for business customers only. (Eventually when SLP became ODS, the company locked the front door and let go of the receptionist to save money.)



Figure 12. Sanyo Laser Products in Richmond.

There was one door on the southwest corner that opened

out directly to the parking lot but management would not move the main entrance over there. Whenever there were big storms (as is frequently the case during spring and summer in Indiana), the journey around the front of the building seemed somewhat dangerous, especially if you were carrying an umbrella. I occasionally reminded various managers that there was potential for the company to incur massive liability if someone got struck by lightning out front, but those suggestions fell on deaf ears (as most ideas normally did in the SLP/ODS organization.) Fortunately, I don't believe that any accidents ever resulted from this situation.

The parking lot was not quite flat so it sloped downhill toward the south end. That often resulted in another problem when strong storms occurred: heavy rain would completely flood the front row of the parking lot, which fortunately ran parallel to Sheridan Street (an easy exit). After a good shower, it was not uncommon to see employees wading through standing water (sometimes more than a foot deep) in order to reach their cars.

Mark Twain once said, "Climate is what we expect, weather is what we get."

Chapter VI: Rendezvous with Drama

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” – William Shakespeare

My girlfriend and I watch a lot of television together (you might be a dedicated TV viewer too), so I'll offer you some of my thoughts on a few of those programs in this chapter.

We watch lots of TV shows recorded on a DVR. I try not to tie up the tuner by scheduling two things simultaneously, so sometimes I have to go through the program guide and manually change some of the recording times. Fortunately, many cable TV episodes are repeated late at night and early in the morning. Those hours have become a sort of second prime time for me. Also, “On Demand” episodes have eliminated the need to record some series.

Because our DVR is often short on empty space, I finally learned a useful trick to help solve that dilemma. **Helpful hint:** if your DVR is near its capacity, review your list of recordings and look for any cable series for which you have a bunch of shows “in the bank.” If you have far too many episodes to watch right away, you probably don't need to have them all. Search the program guide; you might be able to rerecord some episodes as reruns in the near future and delete them for now. (Then get started watching the remaining ones and clear some space!)

Low Comedy

Quality sitcoms like *Cheers* and *Seinfeld* have always been atop my favorites list. I always thought *M*A*S*H* was terrific too, and I also enjoyed *Two and a Half Men* before

Charlie Sheen was replaced. Unfortunately, most of today's comedies are poorly written rehashes of old story concepts. I think the genre has been in decline since the 1990s.

Perhaps a bit surprisingly, I also like watching automotive shows such as *Counting Cars* with Danny Koker on the History Channel, and *Wheeler Dealers* on Velocity (Edd China is the real star of the program as he actually works on the vehicles in the garage). I used to watch *Overhauling*, but I grew tired of it – each week, essentially the same story plot happened all over again.

Lou Grant was an excellent TV series about journalism that ran in the late '70s. Ed Asner was great in the title role as a newspaper's chief editor. In his previous job (TV newsroom boss), Lou used to keep a bottle of booze in his bottom drawer to help him deal with the eccentric personalities in his office. Perhaps not so unusual in that era, but today you'd have to keep the bottle hidden in your briefcase, if you were even brave enough to take one to work at all.

Next, I've never cared much for police shows myself, and I've also avoided made-for-TV contests like *American Idol*. However, my father watched all those old '70s detective series on CBS like *Magnum P.I.*, *Mannix*, *Cannon*, etc. while my mother loved watching *Survivor* in the 2000s.

At times, I've been concerned about the Japanese anime shows that my daughter watches, which are now widely available on the Internet. Some of them are dark and many have adult themes. But I explained to her about my own similar situation as a teenager: I read lots of novels with mature stories that I obtained from the Science Fiction Book Club. I'm certain that my parents had little idea what was really in those books. To them, I suppose "science fiction" meant campy old movies like *It Came from Outer Space* or *Forbidden Planet*.

I do feel that my daughter seems to use good discretion

though and knows how to keep those videos in proper perspective. We can't prevent our kids from being exposed to the world, really we can only prepare them for it as best as we can (especially in today's Internet Age).

Renovations and Tiny Houses

Reality shows comprise a major portion of our options in contemporary television programming and some series obviously are better than others. (One reason that I like sports is that they are the *ultimate* reality shows.)

My girlfriend enjoys watching a series on cable's HGTV network called *Tiny Houses*. The buyers on this show are shopping for miniature one-room homes that can be towed around much like a camper but are shaped like a traditional house. In a TV ad for the show, a woman looking around inside one of these houses opened the oven door and remarked, "Look how tiny that is." I didn't think that was a good way of promoting the series to male viewers because no man wants to hear a woman say something like that.

HGTV has numerous other home improvement shows (their flagship series is *Property Brothers*) that we watch frequently. Most of those programs are just variations on a common theme: an aging, outdated house with lots of wear and a poor layout needs fixing up. *Love It or List It* is one of HGTV's most popular home renovation series. Each episode, a self-assured interior decorator makes plans to fix up the residents' old home while a beleaguered realtor tries to find them a better one. I try to use my limited poker skills to "read" the homeowners and try to figure out whether they will "love it or list it." Generally, I think I do pretty well at that. The correct move is almost always to sell if the renovation adds real value (which is often questionable), but it seems like only about 25 percent of the TV families actually

choose to do that. (Nobody really wants to move if they don't have to, and I can understand that feeling.)

On most of these home renovation series, what the families need most is to add more space to their houses. Usually that's almost impossible short of building a much too-expensive addition. When the designers can't add more space, then they try to improve the function of such homes as best they can. Occasionally they can't do that very effectively either, so then they just dress up the places as best as they can by removing clutter, reorganizing the laundry area and closet spaces, repainting rooms, and buying new furniture that fits the home better. Sometimes the end result is much like putting lipstick on a pig.

Entering an old house that needed a lot of work and was decorated with far too much of a particularly ugly shade of sage, one of the Property Brothers said that the inside was "Green, the color of sadness." Naturally, the use of tasteful colors is a major factor in interior decorating but most HGTV designers want to paint everything gray, both inside and out. I guess to them, that color gives old houses a more modern look, but perhaps gray is the true color of sadness.

Back in the 1990s, I lived in a 1970s-era rental house on the west side of Richmond, Indiana. It had walls that were painted a variety of bold colors such as wintergreen, golden yellow, bright orange, plum, and teal. The one spare bedroom that was painted white had royal blue carpet and curtains, so we simply called it the "blue room." (And of course, the 1970s kitchen appliances were avocado.) Had they toured that house, the HGTV interior decorators would have been distraught and painted the entire interior gray.

Although I was particularly fond of my red library in our old house on Richmond's east side, the Property Brothers have frequently insisted that red is an "angry color" for bedrooms and that area should be a peaceful place of refuge.

But to me, my red library was exactly that. Our master bedroom was decorated in warm colors of beige, maroon, and gold. Things are a bit different today. Here in Phoenix, I used light blue throughout the bedroom, but the color red hasn't disappeared. The dining table now features plates trimmed in red, along with red placemats and napkins.

Viewing the homeowners' current residences on those HGTV shows, it quickly becomes apparent that many of them have made plenty of odd decorating choices. This embarrassing dilemma makes for good television when the designers single out the most unusual items. In one such family's bedroom, the camera focused on a particularly ugly comforter with a busy, multicolored pattern. One of the Property Brothers then pointed out how bizarre it looked. Good thing it wasn't red. Would the Property Brothers have felt angry inside? I told my girlfriend that I would have been angry too if I had walked in there and saw *that* comforter.

One of the Property Brothers works primarily as a contractor and the other as a realtor, although they both seem to share a similar skill set. As part of getting the new home owners involved in their renovation project, the contractor convinced one fellow (who believed that he was a handyman himself) to build his own custom coffee table out of an old multi-pane glass window. Aside from the obvious danger of such a strange creation, it was entirely impractical and ugly. The table ended up looking very dark as it appeared to be painted black. My girlfriend noted that it was supposed to be blue. I replied that it looked like it blows.

The biggest problem with all these home renovation shows is that the financials seldom add up. For example, two single mothers living together "only" had \$700,000 for their new home. Commonly, houses featured on these shows have price tags far out of the reach of ordinary people. Where are these individuals getting their funds? (This happens only on

TV.) Then, if the total purchase price is sufficiently under the buyers' bank limit, somehow their loan (which is typically necessary to buy a house) also covers the proposed renovations that usually cost anywhere from \$50,000 to \$200,000. Finally, if the completed project can stay under their max budget, the prospective purchasers are told that they will have “money left in their pockets” after these costly fix-ups are complete.

Incredible Junk

Another TV series that I've often watched is *Pawn Stars* on the History Channel. People take strange and rare items (often found at garage sales or in deceased family members' attics) to The Gold and Silver Pawn Shop located in Las Vegas. There, they try to sell their “treasures” for crazy high prices. A variety of local experts are often brought in to help appraise the oddest and oldest offerings. The show is at its best when it focuses on bizarre objects and less on artificially contrived plots involving the store's employees.

Personally, I've never understood the appeal of Disney movies and merchandise. One episode of *Pawn Stars* featured a Disney memorabilia collector living in Los Angeles who had hundreds of aging Mickey Mouse figurines from the 1930s. So I told my girlfriend the old joke that “Disneyland is infested with giant mice.”

Many of the pawn shop's visitors don't actually take their profits home or to the bank. One woman remarked, “It's time to move on. It's time for new shoes.” Another typical customer remarked, “I'm good with the \$250. I'm going to take it to the casino and try to turn it into thousands.” As sellers leave the pawn shop with cash in hand, I often say, “The casino's right down the street.” It is Las Vegas, after all.

What if the store was simply designated as a drop-off spot

for old junk? Then the boss (Rick Harrison) could just send checks out directly to a few casinos and gambling halls each month, thereby eliminating the need for haggling over his purchases – but then there would be no more new episodes.

Then there's a series called *American Pickers* that just seems unintentionally funny. Two men go to old barns and shops full of rusty items that no one needs, buy them with insanely high cash offers, and then try to resell them for a profit (under the guise of nostalgia, I suppose). Whenever I see this program on TV, "Junk!" is what I always say.

Immer Essen

Every time I sit in the waiting room in a doctor's office, it seems like *Judge Judy* is on the TV there. Also, the crime show *Law and Order* always seems to be on in hospitals. There must be a special satellite channel just for medical buildings. Oddly, the waiting room in my Richmond family doctor's office always had the Food Network on (although that might have been good for business, like getting lollipops from a dentist).

The stove in my girlfriend's apartment doesn't work very well. So on many Saturday mornings, I discover the aroma of cooking drifting through my apartment. Looking out in my kitchen, I find her out there, busy fixing her teenagers a variety of dinners for the week ahead. I think a few of her creations are inspired by the Food Network shows she has going on the TV, at least in some measure. I'm glad she gets a lot of good out of them. Those series are totally lost on me, as I am not much of a chef myself.

Food Network broadcasts a series called *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, hosted by flamboyant restaurateur Guy Fieri. The show visits obscure eateries across the country where local chefs make their house specials, usually piling on

everything but the kitchen sink. Most of these peculiar dishes don't look much like anything the average person would ever really want to eat. After Fieri tastes all these strange recipes, remarkably he always tells us how great they are. I've never seen him dislike one of these bizarre creations. Of course, one large benefit that he receives from these visits is that he never has to *buy* dinner.

On the reality show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, the rich girls always seem to be eating, usually salads. (*Immer Essen* was the name of a cruise ship in the Steve Martin comedy film *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*. In German, it means "always eating.")

Well, the Kardashian girls do seem to be making healthier food choices than I am, so I must give them some credit there. Watching their TV series has been a guilty pleasure of mine for some time. The programs are at their best when they are not focused entirely on the five sisters and their mother. For balance, they need more air time for their unique male characters like "over the top" fashion plate Scott Disick, mellow former pro basketball player Lamar Odom, and the girls' milquetoast brother Rob (the one member of the family who tries to avoid the limelight).

Following his split with Kourtney Kardashian and subsequent absence from the series, Disick reappeared as a frequent character on the show during late 2016. The girls told him that they missed the "Lord" (Scott's grandiose alter ego) who strutted around proudly and often dressed in a highly eccentric style. He agreed and stated that he needed to "get his Lord on." At that point, I realized that some of my own pre-disability character had disappeared too, and that I needed to make an effort to find that missing part of me too.

In reality, the Kardashians seem to be average, ordinary people who happened to inherit tons of money from their successful father (a famous attorney), and who are generally

outgoing, happy, and enjoy living the glamorous life. The appeal of the series is based on viewers at home getting a peek into the fast-paced lifestyles of the rich and famous. If you watch the programs for a bit, you will quickly get the idea and you either will like it or you won't.

I believe that P.T. Barnum would have thought highly of Kris Kardashian, the family matriarch. She seems to be a smart businesswoman and realizes that the group's financial success depends on their continuing fame, which is directly related to the ratings of their TV series. So she lets her girls get her into some sticky situations and accepts the inevitable pratfalls because it makes for good television. (There might be a little bit of Lucille Ball in Kris, too.)

The Kardashian family reminds me that I have always defined “celebrities” as “people who are famous for being famous.” They don't have to be rich but it sure helps. Southern California is teeming with individuals who have never starred in a successful screen production, sang a hit song, or written a best-selling book. They used to appear in ensemble casts each weekday afternoon on game shows like *Hollywood Squares* but now celebrities can have entire made-for-TV reality series of their own – if they are outlandish enough.

Dragons and Dancing

Recently, my girlfriend and I started watching the medieval soap opera *Game of Thrones*. It's a wonderfully-written adventure show but it's strictly for adults only. The series is full of explicit sex and graphic violence, along with three dragons and a few thousand zombies (and many other story elements mixed in). However, *Game of Thrones* is also a sort of reverse morality play in which the good people often fail in their efforts and eventually get killed, while the evil

characters usually prosper – just as in real life.

We also watched a short TLC series called *90 Day Fiancée*. Americans can obtain K-1 visas for foreign fiancées, after which they have only 90 days to get married while in the country. In the series, a young Mormon man had met a girl who was living in Prague (and “dancing” in clubs there). He had brought her to his small town in Idaho, where he then introduced her to his extremely religious parents. His mother had sad eyes and looked very depressed. His father reminded me of Dana Carvey’s “Church Lady” character and the self-righteous reverend from the movie *Footloose*. I thought that at any minute he would burst into a sermon or say something like, “Dancing is of the devil,” or “We refrain from having fun.”

Most Americans are probably aware that the New Testament describes the life of Jesus Christ. If that story happened today, what a hassle it would seem like to many people – some guy just going around and preaching to everyone! (When I made that remark to my girlfriend at home, I added that “I’m going to Hell anyway.” Curious, she asked me if I thought I was going to Hell. I replied, “I don’t, because Hell isn’t real. I tend to agree with my father that the church made it up.” After a moment of deep thought, I asked her if I had just said that I agreed with my father. She confirmed that I had – and then she asked if I was OK.)

On the other hand: as we were watching a movie called *The Bucket List*, the two terminally-ill main characters were discussing the question of “burial or cremation.” I told my girlfriend that I wanted a burial, because it’s already going to be hot enough where I’m heading. We’ve heard the phrase that “book learning is of the devil.” I’m not too concerned with church people reading this chapter and becoming angry. Of all the books that they might look into, it seems unlikely that they will choose this one.

Chapter VII: Screen Time

“I am a giant proponent of giant screens. But I accept the fact that most of my movies are going to be seen on phones.”

– George Lucas

Like many others, I enjoy movies and go to the theater when I can. The big screen experience is still something special to enjoy, even among rude and noisy patrons who think they are sitting at home in their living rooms. So in this chapter, I’m just going to ramble on and on about movies.

While working at the weekly newspaper back in Indiana, occasionally I wrote film reviews. I also got to study TV programming during my telecom courses at IU. By most accounts, Hollywood is full of phonies and other deceitful types, so I’m not sure that I would have made a very good screenwriter. However, I think that I could have done some good work as a “script doctor” (a paid rewriter). I used to feel that I was a better editor than a creative writer (or news reporter), but today I think that the reverse is probably true.

Space Exploration

It was exciting when both *Star Wars* and *The X-Files* came back with new adventures in late 2015 and early 2016. I got a good, warm feeling inside watching them on-screen again, much like visiting old friends or going someplace familiar that you really enjoy. I got to see *The Force Awakens* in the theater twice: once with my girlfriend and a second time with my daughter (who said, “It did not disappoint.”) Together, she and I watched all the original *Star Wars* films on DVD during the first summer after I moved to Phoenix.

For long-time fans of *Star Wars*, there were a lot of

familiar elements in the new chapter of the old space saga. Some sci-fi aficionados did not like *The Force Awakens* but I enjoyed it nevertheless, although it wasn't nearly as good as the original three movies. I had hoped that Disney would do a really good job with the production but it appears that they came up with something a bit less than the previous standard. I look forward to seeing what they will do with future films in the series, but only time will tell whether or not Disney will produce Star Wars movies that are up to the level expected by fans.

A few fans are also disappointed that the post-*Jedi* books are no longer "canon" (recognized as an authentic part of the official storyline). Fortunately, Disney wisely reused some of the best story elements from those novels. I read many of those books while I was living in Avondale because I was always curious about what would have happened after *Return of the Jedi*. In general, I have always liked the concept of sequels and the idea of taking familiar characters in new directions – although many film sequels are poorly written and are only made as a grab for quick cash.

I enjoyed *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* when the movies first came out and I still like good science fiction films. On the other hand, I don't watch the Sci-fi Channel much because I think most of their shows are not written or produced very well. Those were the main reasons why I liked *Lost* so much – it was one of the most cleverly written and produced TV series ever made.

But I didn't always like science fiction. When I was a kid in the 1970s, there were far fewer viewing options on television than there are today. Even with our tall antenna outside, we could only receive about eight stations that were broadcasting in our area. Many shows that were on TV in the late afternoon and early evening were syndicated reruns of popular TV series such as *Star Trek*. My father often watched

those episodes and then I would always get up and go play someplace else. I didn't care at all about *Star Trek* until the fifth grade, when I first found the James Blish novelizations in the school library.

While I might have become interested in science fiction then, I was never like some fans who become obsessed with the genre and get all dressed up as fictional characters to go to conventions. It is OK for young people to have fun doing that (and there is far too much hate directed at them for it), but eventually adults need to move on and put those things into their proper perspective. It's important for us to understand that future reality will be just like life is now. All the crew members of those starships will be doing the exact same things that we are today. (We just don't see the banal, trivial moments depicted on-screen, although in books...) The everyday existence of those people won't be glamorous like many sci-fi fans imagine that it will be.

Yet there might be a few interesting stops on those deep space voyages. Scotty (the resourceful chief engineer of the USS *Enterprise* on *Star Trek*) often preferred to stay in his quarters and read technical manuals rather than going on shore leave. That was a good thing too, because the ship stopped frequently at wild and swinging locales featuring powerful varieties of booze and lots of wild women (the uninhibited green ones were shocking to TV viewers in those days). Whenever Scotty did beam down to one of those exotic planets with some of his "red shirts" (mostly expendable crew members), he always got drunk, partied hard, and then all Hell would break loose.

On a side note, the original Klingons were just about the best (or worst) villains imaginable. I don't think the producers should have tried to remake them into honorable warriors in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (ST:TNG), although Worf did become a deep and interesting character

over time. The original Klingons had no honor. They were dirty, despicable, ruthless, and completely untrustworthy. They would do anything to achieve their objectives. By partially redeeming them, *ST:TNG* had to create new villains like the Borg, but none were as downright nasty as the original Klingons.

It has been said that all the most interesting people are in Hell. Likewise, the most memorable fictional characters are usually villains – such as Darth Vader, Khan, the Joker, Hannibal Lecter, the Grinch, and Goldfinger. For example, the quality of the villain usually makes or breaks a James Bond film. Fictional heroes often do not have the same depth of personality as villains.

The unusual psyche of Batman has always made him a hero worth analyzing. I thought George Clooney could have been the best film Batman before Christian Bale came along, but he only got one movie and it was the worst one. Clooney was a masculine fellow who closely resembled the Bruce Wayne of the comic books, yet his Dark Knight did not have the written depth of character that Batman deserved. What do you do when you look like a superhero but have an awful script to read? That was a riddle that not even “the world’s greatest detective” could solve.

The Dirty Dozen

The Internet is full of best and worst lists. Like critiquing art, rating movies is subjective. Plato once said, “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.” You might ask, “Surely you have a ‘best list’ of your own?” So I came up with one for you. While I’m not going to try to rank dramas here, or pick a greatest movie of all time, here are a dozen of my favorite comedies, in no particular order:

1. *Airplane!*
2. *Caddyshack*
3. *There's Something About Mary*
4. *Animal House*
5. *The Waterboy*
6. *Dinner for Schmucks*
7. *The Hangover*
8. *Office Space*
9. *Groundhog Day*
10. *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*
11. *Talladega Nights*
12. *History of the World, Part I*

There are many other good comedies that just weren't quite funny enough to be on my list. *Stir Crazy* might have made the cut if the second half of the movie had been as good as the first but the plot took a detour about midway through. Both Richard Pryor and Robin Williams were great stand-up comedians whose styles of humor never completely translated onto the big screen. Both made some funny films but unfortunately not great ones. I also want to mention *The Nutty Professor* (the remake with Eddie Murphy).

Next, a few of my opinions about various other movies. There are some films that I didn't think were very good at first, but that seemed to get better each time I watched them. In that list I would put *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Waterboy*, *Office Space*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*. (I usually didn't like John Hughes' movies – but obviously a couple of them grew on me over time, and I think that he improved as a filmmaker through the years too.) Then there are movies that I liked in the 1980s but that don't hold up very well today, for various reasons. Some of those would include *Twins*, *Fletch*, *The Jerk*, *Moonraker*, and *Rocky IV*. There have also been a few

films that were really popular or critically acclaimed but that I just never cared much for. Some of those are *The Breakfast Club*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Scarface*, *Pulp Fiction*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *Inglourious Basterds*.

I do prefer comedies to action films but I like submarine movies. I have always liked Denzel Washington's work and I even used to have all his DVDs. I can usually sit through most kids' movies but I can skip those with talking (live) animals and I detest those with animated babies that act like adults.

Many of the suspenseful films made by director M. Night Shyamalan seem to be of high quality, including movies such as *The Sixth Sense* and *Signs*. Although I've never really cared for horror movies all that much, I think that the first film in a horror series has sometimes been pretty good, such as *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *The Omen*. Both of the first two Hellraiser movies were interesting to watch – but the following sequels, not so much. *Alien* was terrifying to see on the big screen back in 1979. John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing* is now a classic. Jack Nicholson's performance in *The Shining* was particularly outstanding. Feel free to disagree with my opinions here.

And don't call me Shirley.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Just some random thoughts on the cinema:

Movie audiences don't get as emotional now as they used to. I remember clearly how the audience applauded at the ending of *Casino Royale* (when Daniel Craig said the immortal line “Bond, James Bond”) and how the crowd cheered when Rocky's punch cut Ivan Drago, the giant Soviet fighter in *Rocky IV*. I admit I was a bit misty-eyed at the end of *Rocky Balboa* when the aging former champ visited his

former wife Adrian's grave.

I saw *Casino Royale* and *The Dark Knight* back to back during the holiday season. I went from watching the Daniel Craig 007 film directly to the nearby dollar theater to see Christian Bale's Batman sequel. It all turned out to be just too much action for one day. The second movie lasted too long for me. I was worn out halfway through *The Dark Knight* and at that point just wanted it to be over.

I liked the character of Old Biff in the second *Back to the Future* film. He had wised up from experience and tried to help his cocky younger self (who was too dumb to “get it”). That made me remember my father's saying about his dad getting smarter every year. It doesn't make one feel any younger when the studios keep remaking movies that you saw and liked many years ago. The original films from yesteryear look really dated now when you see things in them like old cars and corded telephones. A few motion pictures might benefit from a quality remake but most classic scripts should not be produced again.

One discussion around the Internet is who should be cast if a film studio ever remakes *Caddyshack* – a tall order. I would nominate Paul Rudd for the role played by Chevy Chase, Steve Carell for Bill Murray, Dave Chappelle in place of Rodney Dangerfield, and Ty Burrell (realtor Phil Dunphy from *Modern Family*) to follow Ted Knight as “Judge Smails.” It would be tough to top the original cast but I think this lineup could make a good movie together, if the new director lets them improvise as the great Harold Ramis did in 1980.

With all the movie remakes coming out of Hollywood these days, isn't it time for a sequel to *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*? It's been 30 years now! In the sequel, Bueller's kids would pull the same type of stunts that he performed in the 1980s. (Or did he? An Internet theory suggests that the

entire adventure was merely a fantasy dreamed up by his apprehensive best friend.) Then again, perhaps today's teenagers would be too busy on their cell phones to attempt to pull off an adventure like this. The whole idea might not make sense anymore.

I have a few thoughts about John Hughes' *The Breakfast Club*. I feel that it was really just a mediocre film about high school that aspired to be more than it actually was. Just because you can come up with a story idea doesn't necessarily mean that it is a good one. The characters were somewhat overwritten (except for the stereotypical mean and overbearing principal). It had an implausible plot, mainly because the cool kids would never have made friends with the school losers. Although that was the story's plan, only in a Hollywood script would the jerky principal be able to drive them together during their long Saturday detention. The entire movie has just a single setting: inside a suburban Chicago high school. In fact, Hughes filmed much of both *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *The Breakfast Club* simultaneously at the same Illinois school, to save money.

The current movie trend seems to be films for younger audiences about dystopian future societies, such as *Hunger Games*. I am glad to see that the major studios are introducing science fiction to a new generation by presenting a few stories that are a bit more thoughtful than simple action adventures.

The cinema experience is not quite the same without good snacks. A package of Raisinets or Junior Mints has often been my choice at the concessions counter. (The episode of *Seinfeld* where Kramer drops a Junior Mint while watching surgery is a must-see classic.) Fortunately, you can get movie-sized boxes of these candies at big retailers and dollar stores now. These days, I put a couple of packs of fruit snacks in my pocket before going to the show, in case I need

to eat something during a long film.

My father used to get Jujufruits (probably as close to fruit snacks as you can buy at the theater), Milk Duds, or Goobers. I don't remember Mom eating movie candy, although at home she liked candy corn, sugary "orange slices," York peppermint patties, and Three Musketeers bars. She must have preferred popcorn at the cinema, as both my daughter and my girlfriend do as well.

Myself, I used to enjoy popcorn a lot more than I do today. But once just before Little 500 weekend while I was at IU, some of the girls from another dorm building filled our entire hallway with it. Today, the smell of freshly-popped kernels always reminds me of that time back in college.

Chapter VIII: Pop Music

“I don't know where I'm going from here, but I promise it won't be boring.” – David Bowie

In 1985, Tipper Gore (Senator Al Gore's wife) stirred up controversy by pushing for labeling of music containing adult content that might be accessible by minors. Of course, opponents pointed out that radios had two knobs: one to turn it off and one to change the station.

Radio stations used to tell us to tune in and then rip the knob off. So what are modern listeners supposed to do now that radios don't have knobs anymore?

I Want My MTV

The 1980s found an outlet for creative expression in the MTV (Music Television) cable network. The channel's format was something that had never been seen before: a continuous stream of short videos illustrating the popular songs of the day. A few were just concert clips but many were catchy little dramas, tightly edited and visually striking. Bands often tried to cultivate their own unique look in order to get more airplay for their videos.

Although many strange and unusual groups appeared on MTV in the 1980s, often with odd visuals that bore little or no relationship to their songs, there were a few bands that nevertheless made great music videos. Duran Duran was probably near the top of that list. Almost every one of their videos told a story and was much like a short movie.

The group had a distinctive look that was very appealing. In an era when black clothes had become popular, lead singer Simon Le Bon often dressed in white or other light, summer-type apparel as the band traveled to warm and

exotic locales. Even their video for “The Reflex,” an edited concert-style performance, featured high energy and dancing onstage. It captured the styles and music of the era very precisely.

If Le Bon accurately represented the look of the '80s, Boy George was much the opposite. The polarizing lead singer of Culture Club wasn't the only crossdresser on MTV, but he got the most mileage out of doing it (and also drew the most ire from young adult viewers).

In retrospect, the controversial British music video star might have only been ahead of his time by 30 years or so. Today, Boy George might have his choice of restrooms.

The Brightest Stars Continue to Shine

As I was working on this book, the passing of three famous musicians from the '80s – Prince, David Bowie, and George Michael – was in the news. They were a bit unusual so I didn't always understand them, but I enjoyed their songs. Amazingly, Keith Richards has outlived them all.

While I was attending college, Hall and Oates was my favorite group but I don't really listen to them much anymore. Today I mainly prefer classic rock. Also, I might listen occasionally to some '90s rock and even some smooth jazz (if a saxophone is involved). Unfortunately, the great sax solos of the '80s are lacking from today's popular music.

I do have a variety of playlists for different decades – I even have one just for the techno one-hit wonders that heavily influenced the music charts in the '80s – but I have come to enjoy classic rock more than I did when it was new. It just feels comfortable and familiar to me. In the early 2000s, my daughter had swimming practice each weekday after school and so I usually drove her to the pool. During the 20-minute afternoon drive to her house, I would tune in to

the local classic rock radio station until I arrived there. But on the two-mile trip to the swim club, my daughter often wanted me to switch to the top 40 station, so usually I did. That helped me discover some pop hits that I liked during that relatively recent musical era.

I still enjoy hearing some of the musicians whom I liked in high school, such as Elton John, Queen, the Rolling Stones, and AC/DC. The Eagles seem to get better every time that I listen to them. From my college years in the '80s, I'll add David Bowie and Van Halen to my favorites list.

(AC/DC helped Motorola sell millions of black RAZR cellphones with their great song, *Back in Black*. The TV commercials for those phones also led to the group's resurgence in popularity.)

I used to enjoy rap music but I think perhaps that genre has somewhat run its course, although it has certainly influenced many of today's popular songs. The mid-2000s seemed to be the time when rap hit its peak of excellence. The melody is a very important aspect of creating a good song, even in rap music – but nevertheless, some fellows will talk over anything with a beat. Even in the 2000s, I couldn't stand to turn on a rap station and hear a bunch of poor quality tracks, so I tended just to repeat the playlists that I had made of the best ones. I used the Internet to research what was hot and then I would check out those tunes and artists for myself.

My favorite rappers were the Geto Boys and 50 Cent (and I liked a lot of tracks from the rest of his group, G-Unit). Eminem writes intense lyrics and does that very well, but personally I don't think his tinny voice is very good for rapping. (The first time I heard him on the radio, I thought it was a parody.) The Geto Boys' *Mind Playing Tricks on Me* is probably my all-time favorite rap music song *and* video. I suppose it would be cooler to pick something by a critically-

acclaimed group like OutKast, but I did not.

I had to listen to a lot of classical music while working in the studio at SLP because we made tons of CDs featuring obscure European orchestras. I even picked up some of those discs very cheaply at places like large department stores but I don't play classical music very often. My ex-wife liked to play them during dinner. It was relaxing, I suppose.

My time working at SLP has made me more flexible in listening to different genres of music periodically. Country music is very polarizing in the area where I am originally from (Indiana). There, some people love it and others can't stand it. I'm not really a big fan of it myself, and while occasionally I might play a couple of songs which I like, that doesn't happen very often.

Listen to the Music

When I first started working at SLP, the company had a big 100-CD changer located in the security office. Then the guard on duty would play music (whatever albums that employees brought in) over the PA system. That sort of use seems like it should be fair, but apparently the ODS administrators learned eventually that it was not OK and then they switched to a satellite radio service. Each day, at noon and then again at midnight, a security officer would change the channel according to some predetermined rotation. There seemed to be no bias in the selections. The company played a little bit of almost everything (pop, oldies, rock, etc.) except rap. It was certainly a more balanced format than before.

For example, Tuesday mornings featured an '80s rhythm and blues channel. I've always liked that genre, but long before noon the sameness of the songs' sound from that era started to become monotonous. Then, Thursday mornings

brought us country music. Somehow I was able to mentally tune that out when necessary and so I actually did better dealing with those tracks than the R&B music that I liked much more. Fortunately, our weekends got started the right way with classic rock on Friday afternoons.

I listen to music on my desktop PC rather than on a cellphone. To go with it, I created my own unique screensaver featuring classic rock bands and singers. For that, I picked out a bunch of old pictures that I found on the Internet, including numerous black and white snapshots for artistic emphasis. I chose a combination of live on-stage performance images and still photos of long-haired, bearded rock groups from yesteryear. Then I sized them to fit my screen, put them all in one folder, and set that as the destination for my standard screensaver (Windows photos). I must say, it looks pretty cool while my old favorite songs are playing.

Since I'm doing lists in this book, I've got one for music too. This is not a "best ever" lineup, only a few songs that I really like. So here is my list of a dozen really enjoyable songs, somewhat randomly sequenced:

1. "Back in Black" by AC/DC (if I had to choose one tune as my theme song, this would probably be it);
2. "Here Comes the Sun" by the Beatles;
3. "Space Oddity" by David Bowie;
4. "Daniel" by Elton John;
5. "Year of the Cat" by Al Stewart;
6. "Midnight Train to Georgia" by Gladys Knight and the Pips;
7. "Under Pressure" by Queen and David Bowie;
8. "Hotel California" by the Eagles;
9. "For All We Know" by the Carpenters (the chords in this song are terrific);

10. “100 Years” by Five For Fighting;
11. “When I Was Your Man” by Bruno Mars;
12. “1999” by Prince.

I had to stop my list there because I could go on writing about the songs that I like for many more pages.

In *Keep Going*, I praised my high school friend Dave for teaching me a lot about rock music, which was still quite new to me then. A few years later when I was an oldies DJ, the club had a thick book in the booth documenting the history of number one hits. During my evenings spinning records there, I often read through that text and learned a lot of trivia about music groups from years past.

Every so often, a song gets stuck in your head and won't go away. Usually it's the tune that you hate the most. I would put *Mickey, Don't Worry Be Happy*, and *Black Horse and the Cherry Tree* at the top of my “worst music ever” list. That's it, I'm trying to avoid writing out an entire page of that crap. If you disagree, feel free to compile your own list.

Chapter IX: Those Were the Days

“I don't know which is more discouraging, literature or chickens.” – E. B. White

Parents like to exaggerate how bad things were when they were kids. My father lived on a farm about a mile away from his small town school. He often told us that he had to walk through waist-deep snow every day to get there. That was during the Great Depression of the 1930s, so he liked to tell us that for Christmas he got an orange and a pencil (and said he was “glad to get them”).

Down on the Farm

I grew up on a farm in eastern Indiana, just outside of a small town called Economy. Located on a hilltop (hence the name), there were only about 300 residents in and around the place, but it did have a cozy wooden gym used by the tiny local school's basketball team (the Cardinals) before consolidation closed it like many others during the 1960s.

On a farm, “outstanding in your field” has an entirely different meaning. My father would come in from riding the tractor all day and his neck would be sunburned red. (That's where the term “redneck” comes from.) My brother would help out by driving the big tractors sometimes. There was an overweight teenager from town who came and worked on our farm for one summer. He was a very nice fellow but was also a very big eater. At lunch time, when Mom would fix hamburgers for everyone, our summer farmhand would take an entire plate of burgers and then eat them all by himself.

My father didn't plant wheat very often but he usually grew corn and soybeans instead. At harvest time in the fall, area farmers would take orange “gravity wagons” out to their

fields and fill them up with grain, after which they would slowly pull them by tractor to the local storage facility. Naturally, the Economy Elevator was located where the railroad tracks passed by the edge of town, the same route used by the fast trains that sped by our north field twice daily. (That rail line is no longer operating and the train tracks were removed many years ago.)



Figure 13. Early picture of our farm in its better days.

Those big orange metal wagons not only held grain, but after being filled up would also contain all sorts of odd and interesting bugs inadvertently collected from the fields. (Today we know that climbing around on top of a wagon full of grain is very dangerous, so don't try this at home.) Grasshoppers would jump across the wagon load of amber grain while other bugs would scramble around, exploring their strange new environment.

In retrospect, the condition of our homestead could best be described as “run-down.” The house was poorly insulated and had an old, inefficient coal furnace, so it was bitterly cold in the winter. Water pipes in the single bathroom downstairs would frequently freeze up. Attached to the house was a dirty shed with numerous broken windows. It was haphazardly crammed full of old, useless junk, and it also contained bees, wasps, and many non-interesting bugs such as spiders.

The decaying garage next to the north hog yard was grungy and dark with a muddy, dirt floor. Behind a sagging fence and a couple of small dilapidated buildings, a thick overgrowth of bushes and tall grass surrounded the west side of the property, making it a great habitat for wild animals as well. A few graying sun-faded rickety wooden shelters remained standing in the pigpen but their collapse was in continual progress.

The old wooden fence around the barn had bowed outward, leaned at a 45 degree angle, and was not at all sturdy. A small pigpen also existed next to the barn. Absurdly tall weeds would rise up around the fence and inside the pigpen's runway each summer, then I would have to go out and chop down this virtual jungle in order to clear the area for use. The barn itself was filthy inside and appeared as if it had never been cleaned out. Many years earlier, the farm had been used for cows. Old rusty hardware from that era remained inside the barn, while an abandoned shed remained by the back gate with a discarded concrete trough always full of stagnant green water.

My father seemed to accept all this as “situation normal.” He actually wanted to have the house that he grew up in (where Grandma still lived, just two stops westward down the highway). She had arranged for him to inherit it eventually, while Uncle Jim was to receive our current homestead. So my father had no interest in maintaining the

grounds where we lived. I even told him once that I could help him demolish some of the old, decrepit buildings that were falling down. His astonished reply was, “Why would I want to do that?” He simply didn’t care about replacing them with new, functional ones. My father coveted nice things like expensive cars, new clothes, flashy jewelry, and pricey collectibles – but was unwilling to keep his own home and property looking neat.

Housework kept Mom really busy, whether on the farm or after we moved to Richmond. When chores around the home piled up, Mom used to say, “No rest for the wicked.” (This phrase is more commonly said as “No rest for the weary.”) And if something caused you trouble, she would say that you had to be “smarter than the (object).”

Bon Appétit

My mother’s chicken and dumplings were very tasty. She was a good cook but didn’t really enjoy it though. My father used to buy cheap cube steaks and my mother would have to beat the hell out of them with a wooden meat mallet. They were still as tough as old shoe leather so she had to smother them in homemade gravy. Summer also brought fresh blackberries from the briars along the fence in the east field. Mom would bake blackberry pies, which were at their best while still warm from the oven.

Biscuits were Mom’s one weak spot. We sometimes teased her that she was the only hillbilly that couldn’t make biscuits – they were hard, like little hockey pucks. But after retiring, she took up baking and became very good at it. She regularly brought a variety of delicious cakes over to my wife and me.

Although we had very fertile farm land, Mom did not care for gardening, but together we tried planting a few things

once or twice. My sad little pumpkins and watermelons only reached the size of baseballs. My carrots looked like orange highlighters. On the other hand, my Aunt Doris enjoyed working in her colossal garden each summer and gave visitors excellent home-grown tomatoes and cucumbers. Often on a sweltering summer evening, she could be found sitting at her dining table with a bucket of fresh green beans, snapping them in half and tossing them into a tall container.

When I was still in school, our family always ate holiday dinners at Aunt Doris' house on the south side of Richmond. She would fix a huge and terrific meal, while my cousin Sue would make her specialty: apple upside-down cake. The dining room was very small and there was not enough room around the table for everyone, so my cousin Tim and I would take our plates upstairs and watch football on TV while eating. (Tim must have gotten more than a wee bit of Irish from my mother's side of the family. He can grow some of the most remarkable sideburns that you will ever see – long, curly, and surprisingly red.)

Periodically, Aunt Doris would yell out things like, “Boys, there's more turkey down here.” Or, “Come downstairs and get yourselves some pumpkin pie.” She had offered us almost everything on the table by the time we were done eating, but we were definitely going back for seconds anyway. Aunt Doris always put green olives on the salad platter, probably because she knew how much I liked them. I'm not sure if anyone else ate them but me.

On almost any given holiday, Mom would remark that it was “just for the kids” and when you got older each one was “just another day.” I do feel that Thanksgiving should be a bit earlier, perhaps on the second Thursday in November. Except for Halloween (which isn't a day off for anyone) and Veterans' Day (which is more of a solemn observance than a fun day), we don't really have another holiday between Labor

Day and Christmas except Thanksgiving, so we should space them out better. Since we really can't change the date of Christianity's biggest day, why not move the annual big family feast instead?

A mid-November Thanksgiving would be good for business because we would have a longer Christmas shopping season. In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved the date one week earlier for this very reason. We should do that again. (Retailers seem to put out their merchandise sooner each year anyway.) Also, this switch would give families a little more space between school breaks. We would all be able to enjoy the season more if it lasted longer. Currently, it jumps on you immediately after Thanksgiving Day, starting with the “Black Friday” shopping day. Then, only a month later (and just as suddenly), the whole thing is all over for another year.

Cash or Credits?

In *Keep Going*, I wrote about the years that I spent in our nation's educational system. Despite massive budget cuts directed by the federal government during the 1980s, I managed to squeeze out enough money from grants and loans to attend college part-time for a few years. That was back when state schools like IU were still relatively inexpensive.

During those days, I was able to live at home for two-and-a-half uneasy years as I went to IU East, the small commuter branch campus in Richmond. My parents could not pay for college, that was for sure. Following his heart attack, my father had closed his tobacco shop, declared bankruptcy, and was receiving disability checks (“the dole,” as he put it). My mother was working for less than minimum wage (thanks to the federal government) and earning meager tips as a

waitress. When I later resumed my studies during the mid-1990s (as the home study option was just starting to grow into the big online business that it is today), I paid for it all by using a credit card. Things had really changed in just a few years, although they weren't necessarily any better.

The difficult financial situation that my parents had faced during the 1980s had actually made it easier for me to qualify for federal education funds, although not nearly enough of them for me to have many college options or to get by very easily. The families of modern farmers face even more challenging problems.

As working in the field of farming (literally) has gotten more complex, the amount of knowledge required to manage such operations has increased substantially. Today, a college education is now a great asset in farm management.

However, parents who own farms have too many assets on paper for their children to qualify for very much federal student aid – although the costs associated with agriculture are nothing short of astronomical. (As a result, farmers are typically drowning in debt). Rural students that really need an education frequently cannot afford to go to large agricultural universities like Purdue, so they leave their farms and move to cities where more financially-rewarding work is often available.

Beginning in the late 1970s, these factors combined to make family farms start disappearing. Today, things look very different around the small farming town of Economy than they did when I was in school.

Family Business

Cartoon skunks have acquired a well-established comedic reputation. Perhaps the most famous is Pepé Le Pew, an amorous but stinky polecat that has been featured in many

Looney Tunes animated shorts over the years. But neither my father nor the greeting card companies knew that those critters were apparently unwelcome on romantic occasions. One year, my father gave my mother a Valentine's Day card with a joyful cartoon skunk on the front – and she was not pleased about it. In fact, I can't remember seeing her more unhappy about anything. (That was in the 1970s. Today, somebody seems to be offended by almost everything.)

My father was not as detail-oriented as I am. Sometimes he wouldn't look closely at what he was buying in the grocery store and would bring home the wrong thing. But he did teach me that you have to be assertive with people or they will never do anything for you. He also had a lot of physical problems that he had to deal with, and since I have some of those now myself, I think I understand a bit about how he must have felt at times.

When faced with financial difficulties, my father would often remark, “You can't squeeze blood out of a stone.” He also liked to quote Richard Pryor (his favorite comedian), “You don't get old by being a fool.” (Somehow Pryor succeeded at that, despite his extremely well-known troubles.) There is a passage in the Bible where Jesus says, “The truth will set you free.” My father kept reminding us about that one. I don't know exactly what he had in mind when he kept saying those words, but I've tried to keep that thought in mind when writing my books. (There is a lot of truth in these pages and not much B.S., but things were quite different at home when I was growing up. They say you can't spell “families” without “lies” – and it did seem that way in our house.)

Numerous times, I have said that my father “liked this” or “often did that.” By contrast, I haven't written much about my mother's preferences, but she did not seem to have many strong opinions or interests – or she chose not to express

them (except in regard to cartoon skunks). On the surface, everything was usually just fine with her, and whatever her husband liked or wanted to do was OK. I think she was just glad to have the illusory security of a home and family, even a dysfunctional one like ours.

To summarize this chapter, we did not have a happy home full of well-adjusted members, not like the typical TV families of the 1970s. Our problems could not be resolved within the usual 30 to 60 minute periods of a prime time TV episode. However, I'm well aware that is also the case in many other families, and that my unsatisfactory experiences are not all that unusual. Perhaps the biggest cause of all this discord was that my father was a very controlling person (in respect to both my mother and me) and didn't seem to understand that times change – that the world of the 1970s was not the 1950s or even the 1960s. There is no doubt that those considerable character flaws contributed largely to the anxieties I experienced, both then and later on as an adult.

Billy Carter (the outspoken brother of President Jimmy Carter) once remarked, "You can choose your friends, but you damn sure can't choose your family."

Chapter X: The Animal Kingdom

“Dogs and philosophers do the greatest good and get the fewest rewards.” – Diogenes

On his nightly talk show, Indiana's own David Letterman used to have a recurring segment called “Stupid Pet Tricks.” While it was continually amazing to see the things that animals could learn, the best trick ever involved a very smart German Shepherd whose owner had taught him how to fetch a beer. The clever canine would go to the kitchen, open the refrigerator door, take out a beer can in his mouth, and take it to his owner who sat comfortably on his living room couch.

The Terrifying Leatherneck



Figure 14. Bowser, our English bulldog (photo by Keith Williamson).

At any given time, numerous animals were running around on our farm. We had three dogs, two of which were

grossly overweight from getting fed too many table scraps. (I guess to a farmer's way of thinking, a fat animal was a healthy animal.)

Eventually my father bought an English bulldog that he named Bowser. It slobbered a sticky substance that resembled ectoplasm (check out the movie *Ghostbusters* if you haven't seen that stuff before) and he pooped all over the house. My father bought Bowser a leather collar with spikes all around it, even though the dog was completely harmless and extremely friendly. When we moved into Richmond, my father found a good home in the country for his clumsy canine, but long afterward he still used Bowser as his tobacco shop mascot in his local newspaper ads. He even put the dog's picture up on his store wall.

One day, an insurance agent rolled up the long tree-lined driveway to our farmhouse and stopped his auto. Although the scowling bulldog appeared quite menacing in his spiked collar, he just sat quietly in the yard by the back door. The salesman was so scared that he wouldn't get out of his car until my father finally went out and brought the dog inside. The visitor didn't know that the worst thing Bowser might do was drool on his shiny shoes.

Barks and Bites

After moving into town, my father built a dog pen in the backyard (much to the consternation of one old fart who lived down the street), then he bought a gray and white Siberian husky. Alex was a friendly dog but looked scary because of his size. Huskies also tend to bark a lot. He should have just kept the bulldog, I guess.

At the time, I had an O. J. Simpson model leather football from a large department store chain. It had been removed from its box and thrown in the bargain bin with their crappy

rubber footballs, so I got it for only about \$5 and I was really happy with that bargain. I liked to throw the pigskin around in the backyard, regardless of the weather – cold, snow, wind, or rain. (The messier it got out, the more I enjoyed diving for those long passes that I threw to myself.)

One damp and chilly winter afternoon, I kicked the football and it went sailing over the fence and into the muddy dog pen. Alex picked the ball up in his huge mouth and started running around with it. He must have been having fun because he bit into it, hard. The air came hissing out and that was the end of my good leather football.

Philosophy for Dogs

Dogs are eternal optimists. They stand and wait by the dinner table, thinking, “Today might be the day that a plate of people food finally falls on the floor.” What if one of them missed his big chance? Can you imagine if a meatball rolled off the stove, dropped on the floor, and no little doggie was there to grab it? It would be a tragedy in the animal kingdom.

When bowling was a much more popular sport, there used to be a TV show called *Bowling for Dollars*. Here in our apartment building, we have a live version, *Bowling for Dogs*. The young woman upstairs has a medium sized dog, possibly a pit bull. Her pet likes to play catch in the evenings (apparently with her boyfriend), and for a while the dog goes galloping back and forth across the floor. This sounds like a team of keglers practicing in a crowded bowling alley full of busy lanes.

There’s an old adage that says dogs don’t like mailmen. This certainly includes the noisy one upstairs from me. On the rare occasion when the carrier must trudge up the outside steps and leave something on the neighbor’s

doorstep, her dog always loudly expresses its unfriendly feelings about the postal service.

In Avondale, our Chihuahua Russell could locate any unused blanket left on a sofa (he liked pink ones the best), and usually you could find him taking a nap there. Most little doggies want a warm blanket to snuggle under and that makes them happy. Sometimes I would ask Russell, “Are you an air dog or a sea dog?” Then I would hold my palm out in front of me, and he would jump up high into the air. Russell could almost touch my outstretched hand. He sure had a lot of spring in his legs for such a small dog.



Figure 15. Russell (nicknamed “Batboy” for obvious reasons) waiting on the back porch to come back inside.

Boo, my girlfriend's pet Chihuahua, comes over to visit with her periodically. He is very needy and excitable, and he won't sit still unless he gets petted with both hands. He's always nosing around, trying to get more attention. Every

time we have a visitor and Boo meets someone new, it becomes the new greatest day of his life. Like Russell, Boo also enjoys being under a fuzzy throw blanket on the couch.

Our two dogs in Avondale liked it whenever we added some leftover green beans to their kibble. To them, it was just “people food.” It turns out that a few green beans are good for dogs. Like humans, animals’ tastes can be puzzling and unexpected. For instance, Grandma Williamson’s cat Midnight would even eat watermelon and cantaloupe.

On the nearest corner to the west Phoenix rental house where I stayed in 2010, there was a house where many little Chihuahuas lived. (Having a few Chihuahuas doesn’t seem all that uncommon here in the Valley.) There was a hole in the bottom of their backyard fence, so the tiny dogs would all squeeze out underneath it and roam the block together. Then whenever anyone walked past their corner, the small pack of little canines would stroll behind the pedestrian, yapping noisily as they went. One day as our housemate Brady walked down the block with the dogs trailing behind him, he turned around and quickly took their picture with his camera phone. For some reason, that did the trick and all the Chihuahuas ran away quickly. I don’t know if his camera had a flash or not.

While living in west Richmond during the 1980s, our neighbor owned a cocker spaniel that might have been the dumbest dog of all time. Usually it stayed inside but periodically it would dart out the front door. Then the dimwitted mutt would stand next to their house, staring off mindlessly into space and barking – at nothing.

Very Important Pets

The Arizona Diamondbacks periodically have a promotional day called “Bark in the Park” in which pet

owners are invited to bring their dogs to the baseball game. Usually this occurs on a Sunday afternoon. The Fox TV cameras pan around the stands between innings to show all the doggies doing cute things. (Although in classic tales of the hunt, the fox runs away from the dogs.) One day, a large gray dog sat on his master's lap in the first row with both paws stretched across the railing. Perhaps he was really watching the game or maybe he just wanted to chase the ball.



Figure 16. Grandma Williamson's cat, Midnight, leaps high in the air for a ball of yarn. This picture was taken sometime around 1970 (photo by Keith Williamson).

People in Phoenix often take their dogs with them into grocery stores. Although this unsanitary practice would seem to violate something in the city's health codes, the stores don't try very hard to put a stop to this strange practice.

The grooming shop down the street here has "Pet Club" on the outside in big yellow letters. (I know, it's some sort of

franchise.) Two things came to mind: “The first rule of Pet Club is: you do not talk about Pet Club.” And next, “Is the president of Pet Club also a member?” As I thought about the paintings of dogs playing poker, I got a mental image of shaggy canines sitting next to a stage, barking and laughing with drinks in their paws. Would doggies pay to watch kitty cats dance on poles and take off their collars? Probably. Wolves might think it was great fun too.

Those Annoying Pests

In *Keep Going*, I mentioned that nocturnal animals often appeared suddenly when driving through Indiana. In the years following my divorce, I often took health walks at night through the area near Earlham College on the west side of Richmond. Along my normal route, I had to pass by a creepy-looking old house surrounded by a spacious fenced-in yard. It faced busy National Road West (U.S. 40) and it was also located just across a tiny side street from a typically-crowded Dairy Queen. The spooky house didn’t seem to scare anyone away from getting ice cream, though.

I did encounter something very strange there one night when I walked past the oddly-quiet two-story building, but fortunately no ghosts were involved. As I trudged down the dark sidewalk by the east side of the house, I could hear the usual noisy throng of people waiting in line to buy ice cream over on the other side of the lot, just as always. I could see the yellow glow of Dairy Queen through the trees. Suddenly, despite the bright lights of civilization being only a few dozen feet away, three skunks scurried out of the shadowy yard. They crossed my path a short distance in front of me and scampered quickly across the deserted street. Cautiously, I waited for several minutes to be sure that they had “split” before continuing on. I never saw them again.

The best advertising slogan ever is “Raid: Kills bugs dead.” That is exactly what I want to do to them! We don't seem to have tons of bugs here in Arizona. The climate is probably too hot for most of them but the change of seasons still brings mosquitoes and fresh produce attracts tiny fruit flies. Mosquitoes were everywhere at the former Phoenix Swim Club (the old facility on Campbell Avenue). Sometimes I waited in the Hospitality Room during my daughter's swim practices. While I sat in there and used my laptop, I had to wear long-sleeved shirts and dress pants.

Having neighbors with pets is helpful because their owners usually put out bowls of food on the floor. Then creepy-crawly critters leave me alone and visit other spots where the diner is “open all night.” When I lived in Avondale, I used to save the postcard-sized, glossy advertisements that came in the mail. I called them “bug catchers” because I used them to trap crickets in red disposable drinking cups (the kind you pour beer into) and then I tossed the bugs outside into the backyard.

Bugs don't live long enough to gain valuable experience and then learn from it. Some will fly straight down into glasses of water and bowls of milk. Once, while I was eating lunch in my car outside a fast food joint in Richmond, a not-so-bright bee dive-bombed straight into my cup of hot chili and immolated himself. Not sorry. He should have stayed outside where he belonged.

We humans should be able to do better. If you pay attention, you can learn many valuable lessons through your lifetime, such as that advertisers are only trying to sell you their products or that things aren't always as they seem. I hope that “millennials” (the current generation of young adults) will absorb these important ideas over time, as many of us have previously (generation Xers like me, as well as baby boomers). I try to stress the value of experience when

talking about the world with my daughter.

If humans were as dumb as bugs, we would have perished long ago. Which raises the question: why haven't we exterminated all of the useless bugs yet? We've put plenty of other species on the endangered list. The one critter that persists and has even thrived within the city of Phoenix is the bee. Walking out of my apartment one afternoon, I heard someone exclaim, "I've just treated a beehive, so be careful!" I looked up and saw a fellow wearing a beekeeper suit on the second floor patio next door, with bees buzzing around him unhappily. (It would have been nice had the management warned residents about this in advance.)

Later, I heard our neighbor tell another person that there were 5,000 bees in the hive. I'm not sure how the exterminator arrived at that figure, but even one bee is cause for concern in Phoenix. Experts at ASU say that nearly all the honey bees in Arizona have been taken over by more aggressive Africanized bees, an invasive species which is much more dangerous. But since I don't like bees anyway, avoiding them is something I already try to do.

While visiting Tucson for a few days in 2007, I drove my daughter to her elementary school each day at about 8 a.m. A scrubby-looking "dry wash" (dried-up creek bed) ran past the grounds. Leaving the school one morning, I heard a teacher standing near the dry wash call on her radio for another staff member. She reported that they had a "critter visitor" but did not specify what kind. I can only imagine what it might have been, but I did not stick around to find out. (Here in Arizona, there is a wide range of unfriendly possibilities.)

The Cat in the Box

Kitzer was my daughter's cat, an adventurous feline that proved to be extremely intelligent. He knew how to open

sliding closet doors with his paw and liked to go exploring inside. Cats are independent creatures and usually each one likes to do things his or her own way.



Figure 17. Kitzer, the very curious cat.

Frequently I had to pick up my daughter from her middle school in Phoenix before taking her to swim practices. On many occasions, we would drive through a fast food place and pick up an afterschool snack. Then at her house, we would sit down at the kitchen table briefly to eat. Almost daily, Kitzer would choose that as the exact time to jump in the hallway litterbox and take a crap.

Chapter XI: Driving Excitement

“Driving fast on the track does not scare me. What scares me is when I drive on the highway, I get passed by some idiot who thinks he is Fangio.” – racing legend Juan Manuel Fangio

Hondas are typically ultra-reliable cars and silver/gray seems to be their most common color. In research done by Cartelligent, a California auto sales broker, a whopping 51 percent of their Honda clients chose gray (apparently this total included silver cars as well).

The color black has usually been associated with luxury cars and not small sporty models. Cartelligent reported the following sales numbers for black Japanese cars: Honda, 11 percent; Toyota, 14.5 percent; and Mazda, 11 percent. (By comparison, sales of black German cars included Porsche, 25 percent; BMW, 25 percent; Audi, 23 percent; and Volkswagen, 21 percent.) Those numbers are fairly small today and I think they must have been even lower 10 or 20 years ago. I don't recall seeing very many black Japanese cars zipping around.

My cousin once bought a black Honda. Could its unusual color have been a warning sign that the vehicle had suffered through a difficult existence? Whenever it had problems, I used to kid him about that by saying, “The Japanese don't make black cars.”

There is No Substitute

During the early 1980s, I was fortunate enough to own a dark gunmetal gray 1977 Porsche 924 with a black leather interior. (I added white racing stripes, high performance tires, and fuzzy black sheepskin seat covers). To pay for my

car, I had to work for my father's store, just as I had during high school.

The 924 was originally planned to be a joint venture between Porsche and Volkswagen (VW) to create an inexpensive sports car. When VW opted out of the project following the 1973 oil crisis, Porsche decided to carry on and replace its tiny 914 model. Eventually, VW provided them with four-cylinder engines and assembled the cars under Porsche's supervision. The 924 also contained an Audi four-speed manual transmission.



Figure 18. A grey Porsche 924 very similar to mine (photo by “Pgagliardi”).

So by using numerous lower-quality VW and Audi parts, the 924 wasn't quite up to the performance standards of Porsche's flagship car, the 911. It was slow and unreliable but it looked cool, handled great, and had a really high top speed. There was a five-mile long straightaway on a quiet east-west country road just south of Richmond. I ventured down there one sunny summer afternoon and got my Porsche up to 147 mph before I let off the gas.

Bad weather was tricky in the 924 though. Mine went skating on the ice one winter afternoon, spinning completely around 360 degrees on west U.S. 40 in front of Earlham College. Then there was the time when the Porsche and I slid sideways for a few feet down an icy railroad crossing on a bitterly cold December night. But the scariest moment for me was the autumn evening when the 924 skidded on a big s-curve located a few blocks southeast of downtown. The road was damp from a mist of rain and as I exited the curve, the car spun off the right side of the road into a vacant lot. Wide tires can be extremely slippery when wet.

Finally, I got tired of having a car that refused to run almost as often as it actually operated, and so I sold it to a guy who worked as a waiter at a fancy Indianapolis restaurant. After that, I said I would never own another foreign car. I didn't for more than 25 years. (By then, they had improved a lot.)

An old racing adage says, "You've got to work on the nut behind the wheel before you start fixing bolts on the car." I guess that's why I was never good at working on my cars, I was always starting in the wrong place.

We Are the Competition

During the 1980s, the red Ferrari 308 GTS seen on *Magnum P.I.* was my most wished-for fantasy car. Although now an iconic design, those 308 models are slow compared to contemporary vehicles. But with today's congestion on city streets and freeways, it's hard to drive high-performance autos as they were intended to be used. Still, if you own an exotic Italian sports car, you can at least feel like a real racing driver even if you can't zip down the highway at track speeds. In the spirit of things, Enzo Ferrari once said, "What's behind you doesn't matter."

During the 1970s, a series of illegal car races crossed the country from New York to California. Known as the “Cannonball Baker Sea-To-Shining-Sea Memorial Trophy Dash,” accounts of those zany long distance driving contests filled the pages of automotive magazines and became the basis of movies like *The Cannonball Run* (a campy big budget all-star film featuring Burt Reynolds and his pals, among many others) and *The Gumball Rally*.

One evening over a few beers, my college roommate Marc (who hoped to become a successful tennis pro in the future) and I watched Reynolds and his buddies cannonball across the TV screen. Afterward, we both agreed that if either one of became wealthy someday, we would drive the race together. We planned to buy a Ferrari, speed across America, and have a fun time – win or lose.

Of course, anyone who knows me well is probably aware that I don't like long drives, but I thought that it would be a great opportunity for a once-in-a-lifetime experience so I was willing to give it a try back in those days. However, it never happened. (The Cannonball Run is not on my current bucket list either because with the back problems that I have now, I would never make it as far as the Mississippi River.)

Eventually, the dangers of street racing and looming liability concerns forced the organizers to change the race to a rigidly-timed road rally (one that strictly observed all speed limits) called the “One Lap of America.” The “One Lap” tour still continues today, although in a slightly-altered format. (Some unofficial races similar to the original event were reportedly held by others during the years after the original Cannonball Run ended.) Individuals still occasionally try to beat the cross-country speed record. Remarkably, a three-man team drove a Mercedes CL55 from New York City to Los Angeles in just under 29 hours (over 2,800 miles) in 2013.

Ask the Man Who Owns One

While I was working as a DJ in the early 1990s, I owned an old 1977 Ford LTD. It was like a boat with a big gas-guzzling V8 engine, plain brown with tan vinyl seats. Then I moved up to a brown 1985 Buick Regal when I started working at SLP in 1993. Its V6 was better on gas and the Regal was more nimble.

During my October excursion to Chicago in 1993, I was driving the Regal on the bypass around the city when a truck driver going way too fast (probably high on uppers) started tailgating me. So I pulled into the right lane to let him by and he nearly ran me over. That Friday at around 5 p.m., I encountered the worst traffic that I've ever driven in. It took me over eight hours to get to Chicago's north suburbs from Richmond, and nearly seven hours to get back home again on Monday morning.

The brown Buick got stolen one Friday night while I was working at the newspaper. I replaced it with a red Ford Tempo that my father found on a low-budget used car lot. They looked futuristic but were lousy little cars though. Mine got rear-ended by a redneck woman with kids playing in the backseat who was busy talking to her friend and not paying attention. I was just sitting at a stoplight on North "A" Street. The crash totaled my old red hoopty. Apparently the other driver was living with an old man and using his car with no insurance. For some unknown reason, the county prosecutor failed to send her directly to jail. Our local government was completely inept.

Our uninsured driver coverage paid for two used replacement cars: a white 1985 Buick Regal that I bought for my wife (she hated it and it didn't seem to like her much, either), and a beige Buick Sunfire with a bad thermostat that overheated at every restaurant drive-through. After three

years or so, my wife insisted that we finally get a different car and so we traded in the clunker Sunfire for a new Pontiac Grand Am. (I wanted a red one but the car at the dealer lot didn't have leather seats. A black one did, so we ended up with that car instead.) After our baby was born, my wife wanted a van that she could put the stroller in, so then we bought a top-of-the-line white Ford Windstar with tan leather seats. I gave the Regal to my parents because they were driving the old brown LTD that I had previously owned.

When we had money problems a few years later, we decided to trade the Grand Am for something less expensive because our credit union wouldn't refinance it. I was interested in purchasing a used Grand Prix, but my wife insisted that we go to Ford first because they had loaned us the money for our van. (Mainly, I suspect that there was another big factor at work there: two of her Russian friends had new Tauruses and so I think that was what she wanted also.) In the end, we ended up with a Ford Taurus.

The Taurus was an ugly silver car (which I feel is a bad luck color for vehicles) that oddly resembled a flying saucer. Tony from SLP had given my daughter a large stuffed green alien doll, so "Jarod" rode shotgun next to me in the passenger seat. My wife did not like that at all. I bought four new Michelin tires for the sedan so it handled well, but the car had very little power, having just a small V6 engine under the hood. The Ford was good, reliable basic transportation but it was a plain vanilla vehicle and just not for me. Perhaps it would have been a better choice for someone's grandmother. Ford made millions of virtually-identical silver Tauruses all just like ours. Twice I mistakenly tried to unlock someone else's car. Once at "Sam's large blue store," I walked past three silver Taurus clones before I found our car. I decided that it had to go.

At that time, I wanted a Mustang convertible. I'm not

sure why, maybe because a lot of items were available to customize them, perhaps because I had never owned a convertible before and they looked like fun. In fall 2002, the local Ford dealer took in a used 1998 white Mustang in trade. Soon afterward, I saw the Mustang as I was driving past the lot, and then I bought it. Next, we sold the dependable-but-plain Taurus to one of my wife's coworkers.

I bought reflective red aftermarket Mustang stripes for the sides and carefully applied them. Cruising around in the countryside with the top down turned out to be quite fun. I was very proud of that car and how great it looked, but it had its drawbacks. Most frustratingly, the seat backs were oddly shaped and seemed to be designed for a much smaller driver. The Mustang became very uncomfortable to sit in after about 30 minutes. I learned that **sometimes wanting is better than having.**



Figure 19. Me in my Mustang convertible.

Because there are so many broken-down used vehicles floating around, car buying is often a challenging affair.

Financial and ergonomic concerns only increase the difficulty. For example, taking all the variables into consideration, now I can see that buying the Mustang was a bad decision on my part. But at the time, I thought, “Why not? You only live once.”

In my experience with the people around me, I have come to recognize that sometimes individuals make very significant decisions mainly because they want to demonstrate to others that they have the ability to make those judgments on their own. Often they do so without considering the effect that the final results might have on others or even themselves. Disability further colors our capacity to make good choices. In such cases, these matters frequently turn out poorly.

Hand Built by Robots

As I mentioned earlier, my wife and I bought a black Pontiac Grand Am (which was our first and only new car) in December of 1998. It had gray leather seats, aggressive-looking low profile tires, and a powerful 3.4 liter V6 “Ram Air” (supercharged) engine. GM had completely redone the Grand Am for 1999 and thereby dramatically improved its fifth edition over the previous models. When Allan at SLP asked me how I liked it, I replied, “They really did it right this time.”

We were lucky that our Grand Am was a good one because you should never buy the first version of anything. The last year of a car model is usually the most reliable one because the manufacturer has worked out all the bugs by then. But not surprisingly, auto aficionados usually want the newest and most advanced style of car as soon as it is available. By comparison, my personal ownership experience has not been typical. The quality of our first year model

Pontiac was terrific but my final year model Mustang was much less reliable.

Cars are massively better today than just a few years ago. Even when we bought the Pontiac in 1998, I was amazed by how much better it performed than the cars that I had been driving previously (from the '70s and '80s). Both the Grand Am and my 1998 Mustang were quicker and more responsive than my underpowered 1977 Porsche 924, but the 2000 Mercedes C280 that I had while living in Avondale was a much better performer than any of them. (*Ausgezeichnet!*)



Figure 20. Our black Pontiac Grand Am.

Many autos that were considered to be supercars when I was a teenager (like my father's Porsche 911) would not be able to match up with most of today's average Japanese family sedans. When you watch gearheads customizing and restoring classic cars on TV shows and Internet videos, you learn how little horsepower the autos actually had back in those days. (Some of those video mechanics will drop a modern engine in an old car for more power and better reliability. This type of updated vehicle is known as a *restomod*.)

Even the muscle cars of the late 1960s would be second best against many of today's sporty-but-stock autos, which often have double the horsepower of the mass-produced standard models of 50 years ago. That doesn't even take into account all the vehicles that young drivers have customized after seeing them zip around in popular movies like *The Fast and the Furious*. Mostly inexpensive Japanese models, those quick little modified cars are a common sight on American streets today. Who would have guessed that in 1967?

Also, the lethargic cars from bygone eras were really heavy, generally made from all steel with no fiberglass body parts. A third factor limiting the autos of yesteryear was poor aerodynamics (a field of research that was almost exclusively the province of racing teams for many decades). And while little or no aerodynamic testing went into consumer automotive styling until the energy crisis of 1974, the primitive tires, simple suspensions, and basic brakes of those vehicles also made them far inferior in comparison with today's models.

Despite all those technological advances, many of today's American cars have fallen far behind their foreign counterparts in quality. Domestic automakers should feel bad that their vehicles continue to earn such poor grades from consumers and road testers, when most types of American workmanship are coveted and envied by the rest of the world.

Manufacturers love to tout their latest meaningless awards on TV commercials, but long-term quality and reliability are the attributes that actually matter the most. Walking down busy city streets and watching a variety of cars motoring on past, it is still disheartening for me to see a "bucket of bolts" roll by, rattling precariously like it is being held together by duct tape and hairpins. Unless it is some young driver's small high-mileage foreign car, almost

invariably the clunker is a cheaply-made American model.

My old Benz ran on premium gasoline, but you really shouldn't buy anything except regular grade unless the owner's manual specifically states that your auto requires premium. It's all about how your car's engine is tuned and so higher octane does not automatically mean better performance. Here in Arizona, purchasing high octane fuel is difficult, as grades of 87, 89, and 91 are almost entirely what stations sell. (You can buy additives that supposedly increase your octane, but they are expensive and their effectiveness is questionable.) Supposedly, a couple of hard-to-find locations in Scottsdale sell 100 and 95 octane gas or "racing fuel" on the side for about two or three times the price of premium. Back in the 1980s, I used to put 94 and 95 octane fuel from Texaco or Shell in my Porsche because even good gas was still cheap back then.

A vehicle is the second largest investment most people will make. I am not very mechanically inclined but I watch a lot of automotive shows on TV and I also like reading about cars. I've learned a lot about my vehicles, as well as how to do some minor repairs on them, by lurking on Internet auto forums.

I have never been a fan of Chryslers. I think they are ugly cars and undependable. Major consumer research usually seems to place vehicles made by Chrysler (also including Dodge cars, Ram trucks, and Jeeps) at the bottom of the list for quality and reliability. That hasn't prevented the corporation from making a fair amount of sales, as some buyers must like what they see in showrooms and what they experience on test drives. However, the honeymoon doesn't last forever. Whenever I see a car in a parking lot that somebody can't get to run, I always say, "It's a Dodge!" Often I am right. My father used to tell me that, in the years when he was young, Dodges typically would not run when it was

damp outside. For a short while during the late '80s, I had a light blue Dodge Dart that didn't like to run in *any* kind of weather. What a hoopty. It was the worst piece of crap I ever drove.

Chrysler gained a lot of success when they launched the first American minivan in 1984. A van that drove like a car, the minivan replaced the familiar station wagon in driveways across America and the Big Three automakers (GM, Ford, Chrysler) all sold millions of them for a few years until those vehicles went out of style in the late 2000s. But it seemed like whenever I saw a Chrysler minivan on the road, it belched blue smoke and smelled bad, so then I would make a few negative comments about them. My daughter (who was then about age two) picked up on that and started looking for minivans as we drove along. If we stopped behind one at a red light, she would announce, "There's another stinky Dodge van."

There are Fords in Your Future



Figure 21. Snow plow clearing the street following an Indiana snowstorm.

One of the things that I hated the most about living in Indiana was winter driving. You would walk outside to go to work and by the time you reached your car, your fingers already hurt from the cold. Then you had to scrape ice off the windows and drive in a frigid vehicle on slippery roads with reduced visibility. (Here in Phoenix, this is not a problem. We also don't get those huge winter potholes in our streets.)

Indiana businesses didn't seem to care about the possible safety issues presented by dangerous winter weather driving. At ODS, there was one asshole manager with a pickup truck who would ask other workers the next day, "I got here, why couldn't you?" Since I lived only seven minutes away, I was always able to make it to the facility myself. However, a lot of the other ODS employees were from Ohio and had a much tougher commute whenever snow and ice struck.

Immediately after we bought our Grand Am, Richmond was hit by a terrible storm full of freezing rain and our beautiful new car was completely encased in a thick shell of ice. During the college football championship game that night, I went outside and carefully banged on the ice with the handle of an ice scraper, in order to break it off gently without damaging our new automobile and so I could get inside. Doing that was a pretty cold job but it enabled me to drive the new Pontiac to work the next day.

A few years later when I owned my convertible Mustang, I soon discovered that winter weather made driving it a safety hazard. Although it was fun to drive in summer with the top down, it had no traction at all in the snow. So I bought an inexpensive 1990 Lincoln Town Car to safely take our daughter to preschool on snowy mornings. For only \$3,000, it was a really good purchase and I ended up driving it all season. It was a strange winter in 2002-03, with snow falling almost every other day, only two or three inches at a time, but it consistently made the streets more dangerous.

Eventually I got rid of the Mustang. Besides being unsafe to drive in the snow, it also was cramped, cost too much money, and proved to be unreliable. After that, I kept the old Lincoln and drove it daily until the transmission went out. It was really safe but difficult to maneuver because it was so large.



Figure 22. My aging Lincoln Town Car in 2002.

At some point soon thereafter Mom stopped driving, so then I resumed motoring around town in the old 1985 Buick Regal until I couldn't get parts for it anymore. The outdated coupe had zero traction in bad weather. One morning, I slid off the road three times on the way to work. I changed the brakes and tires but that didn't help very much. The aging Regal had bad shocks too and even in fair weather would barely stay on the highway at 50 mph. Smoke was pouring out of the engine when I finally drove it into a used car lot, but by then it was a well-used auto and had run well for a long time.

So without many good options, I traded in the old Buick for a forest green Ford Explorer, an Eddie Bauer edition that was loaded with options including a V8 engine, four-wheel drive, a six-CD player, a sunroof, and tan leather seats. It was

a great vehicle that I kept until I moved to Arizona.

The Explorer's four-wheel drive made braving those treacherous Indiana winter roadways much easier. It went through all types of weather with no problems, and got me to work through a couple of snowy seasons. Unfortunately, it only got about 13 miles per gallon of gas at the exact time that fuel prices rose to over \$4 per gallon. Every fill-up cost me over \$50, and plenty of those refueling stops were necessary.



Figure 23. My Ford Explorer in winter 2008.

But being out on the road in the Explorer was quite enjoyable. Every time I cruised down the street while sitting up high with the bass thumping through the speakers, I felt like a celebrity, a millionaire, or a rap star.

Chapter XII: What a Feeling

“Have you ever noticed that anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac?” – George Carlin

The city of Hollywood wanted to name a street after legendary martial arts champion and movie star Chuck Norris, but the California Office of Traffic Safety vetoed the plan because “nobody crosses Chuck Norris and lives.”

Let's Go Places

For the first year or so that I lived in Phoenix, I walked or rode the city buses. After moving to the far west side of the Valley (the suburb of Avondale), I quickly realized that I needed my own transportation again because of the great distance to the east side of town where my daughter lived.



Figure 24. Our sporty little white C280 in 2011.

My girlfriend Janet saw a car on Craigslist that she wanted me to test drive: a small white 2000 Mercedes C280 sedan. (Her ex-husband had owned a Mercedes SL two-

seater and she praised their reliability.) When we arrived at the dealership just a few blocks northeast of downtown, we had to hunt around to find the C280. Since it was an older model, it was the very last car parked in the back row of the lot, just days away from getting sent off to auction. We went to look at it on the last day of the year, so the salesman who was stuck there on December 31 needed to sell something at almost any price to make his quota. We didn't need to bargain too hard to get a really low price.

Although this might sound like an expensive car, it was not. Older luxury autos are usually easy to purchase. They are inexpensive because many people are afraid of the potential repair costs. Originally our C280 had come from Beverly Hills, but as far as I could tell it had not been owned by anyone famous there. The original paperwork was still stashed down between the seats.

I needed a safe, reliable car to drive my daughter to swimming practices. That was something important that Mom had always talked about so I think she would have liked our choice. We never had a problem with the C280 and it was the nicest, best car that I have ever driven, by far. The 11-year-old sedan was very stable at high speed and fun to drive. It had a strong V6 engine and so I could fly down the I-10 freeway at 75 mph effortlessly.

A few months later, Janet traded in her grey Nissan for a roomy red Honda van, something that would hold both of us and all three of our teenagers comfortably. It did the job for many family trips across the Valley.

Just before my stroke, we put new brakes all the way around on the C280 and for Christmas I received a new Alpine stereo with a CD player and an HD radio that sounded absolutely amazing. Unfortunately, I didn't get very long to enjoy my present. Even after I completed my therapy, I never got to drive the C280 again. It was gone by then.



Figure 25. Our red Honda van in Avondale.

When she received her driver's license, my daughter was supposed to get the Mercedes but she wanted something else. It's possible that my sporty little sedan will be the last car that I will ever own. A couple years later, Jennifer and I went to the theater to see the new James Bond film, *Spectre*. **Spoiler Alert:** As the final credits rolled, I said, "Unlike me, James Bond got his car back in the end."

The Streets of Arizona

Past a moderate volume required for normal listening enjoyment (a happy medium), the level of a car stereo's sound usually is inversely proportional to the IQ of the driver. In my apartment complex, there is one jerk who always just parks his car next to the building and then walks over to the mailbox to get his letters, while leaving his vehicle running with the stereo blaring. There are plenty of other drivers passing through the parking lot who roll by with their windows open and their music playing way too loudly.

Unloading groceries from the car inevitably results in an immediate parade of vehicles and pedestrians passing close

by you in the parking lot. Most of those on foot don't seem to understand the concept of "sidewalks." Also, there are a lot of walkers around the area where I live, which is normally packed with busy traffic already. Whenever you are trying to enter or leave the apartment complex here (pretty much at all hours), it seems that someone is crossing the entrance simultaneously, including rambling pedestrians and/or meandering bicyclists.

You really have to be on the lookout for pedestrians in Arizona because far too often they dress in black at night. Of course, black is a clothing color best avoided during the hot and sunny daytime hours in Phoenix.

So let's work this out logically. Whatever people are wearing after dark, chances are good that they had their clothes on all day long. Pedestrians especially are probably not going home from the office or headed out to the nightclub. (On the other hand, if they're dressed for running or working out, consider that an exception – and the warm weather in the Valley means that there are lots of recreational athletes here.) Eventually, I began to seriously wonder if wearing dark colors during the intense heat of Arizona's midday sun was one potential sign of mental problems. (That might actually be worth a research grant to an ASU psychology professor.)

Studies have found that exterior paint color makes a very real difference in the temperatures of cars subjected to intense sunlight and extreme heat. Not surprisingly, work trucks are almost invariably white in Arizona. If you drive down the freeway, a multitude of white pickups will speed past you. So you might conclude that there would be very few dark-colored private vehicles in the Valley but there are plenty of them here. Yet it does seem that if you see a black Mercedes zoom past, it often does have a California license plate.

The Phoenix Metro bus system seems to operate well although its short schedules are often unable to accommodate riders going to jobs at early or late hours. The light rail is nice to travel on although its routes are very limited. However, it's really convenient to take the train from a “park and ride” lot to the ballpark downtown and avoid all the traffic there. In most cities, taxicabs are yellow – but here in the Valley, many of them are lime green. The thrifty, non-polluting, electric Toyota Prius seems to be their model of choice.

For some reason, people in Phoenix drive into houses a lot. You see this seemingly-unlikely occurrence on the news quite frequently here. Even bus stops and street corners are areas for pedestrians to be extremely cautious, due to inattentive drivers that end up on sidewalks periodically. On one occasion as I drove down a major street just west of downtown Scottsdale, traffic was stopped and being rerouted due to a car that was resting upside-down in the middle of the road. It had gone up on the curb, taken out a bus shelter, and then flipped over. I believe that no one was seriously injured in that mishap, fortunately. The shelter was replaced by an inexpensive bench.

There are a lot of careless drivers in the Valley. Many are millennials that can't put the phone down long enough to focus on navigating busy city traffic. Also, more than a few others are posers – the fake “\$30,000 millionaires” of Scottsdale – who are too self-important to miss a call while out driving in their leased German luxury/sports cars.

Landscapers pull rickety trailers (often poorly-made wooden ones) behind their white pickups with lawnmowers, leaf blowers, rakes, buckets, etc. crammed inside. Typically the drivers don't slow down for speed bumps. Instead, they *accelerate* and hit them at full speed. These jarring obstacles are common on side streets throughout the city.

More expensive areas have better streets. Thomas Road is a six-lane, major east-west thoroughfare going right through the middle of the Valley. The street rides terribly rough through Phoenix itself, than (not surprisingly) it smooths out just as soon as you reach the Scottsdale city limits.

Arizona drivers put a lot of miles on their vehicles because frequently they must commute long distances across the Valley. Used cars often have 150,000 miles or more on them. Auto ads on Craigslist can be unintentionally humorous. The dishonesty of many private sellers is apparent when they like to claim that a major problem “just needs a \$20 part.” If so, why doesn't the owner just buy one and put it on? Another common and misleading claim is that a car was declared as “totaled” because of a “minor fender bender.”

Although the area has an impressive system of freeways that make traversing the Valley easier, the local stretch of Interstate 10 has its own dangers. A recent insurance company TV commercial was right on target when it showed a careless driver swerving across freeway lanes at high speed with a mattress tied to his roof. This image is a familiar one to Phoenix freeway drivers. Once while driving east on I-10 near downtown, I saw an abandoned brown recliner chair sitting squarely in the HOV lane.

Commuters on the west side turn I-10 into a parking lot each morning as hurried drivers enter the freeway, push into traffic, and immediately try to cross five lanes. Accidents and breakdowns are common throughout the day, halting traffic as most other motorists feel required to slow down and take a look at the disabled vehicle while passing it. The side of the freeway is often littered with old cars that have broken down in the heat, as their owners must leave them behind for a while.

In Indiana, road construction is usually done while

summer weather permits (known locally as “orange barrel season”). In Arizona, work continues year-round but slows down considerably under the blazing summer sun and extreme heat. Many freeway projects are done late at night on weekends. While I lived in Avondale, ADOT rebuilt the interchange at Avondale Blvd. and I-10, in order to ease the biannual traffic jam headed down the street to the big NASCAR speedway there. It took two years for the state to complete the project. The intersection was left mostly unfinished during this period.



Figure 26. One afternoon in old town Scottsdale, we parked next to this beautiful orange Bentley (photo by Jennifer Titus).

American cars are not as common in the Valley as in many other parts of the country. Imports are far more numerous here. There is a car with a “Knight Rider” license plate, but it's actually a Nissan Altima. And when you do see a car made by a U.S. manufacturer, it's often an old hoopty

that stands out in a bad way. In *Keep Going*, I wrote that the Biltmore area (an enclave of high-rise financial institutions located a couple of miles northeast of downtown Phoenix) is a great spot to see expensive and exotic cars. Scottsdale is another such place, where vehicles made by Mercedes Benz and BMW are just average cars. You might even see a Bentley, Ferrari, Maserati, or Lamborghini there. The wealthy adjacent suburb of Paradise Valley is home to a variety of electric sports cars made by Tesla, as well as exclusive autos with nameplates like Rolls Royce and Porsche.

Scottsdale drivers tend to be extremely impatient and often will quickly honk the horns in their expensive cars if you don't make a jackrabbit start from a green light. And if Hell exists, there's a special place in it for the person who decided to make car horns sound off whenever the doors are locked. Nearby in our apartment parking lot, someone has a totally ridiculous car horn that sounds like he swiped it from Harpo Marx.

Like Nothing Else on Earth

People come to live in Arizona from many other spots, especially from California and Canada. "Snowbirds" who can afford two residences often ride out the winter months here in the relatively warm desert climate. Midwestern license plates are also not uncommon around here. Walking through a condominium parking lot just north of Tucson, out-of-state tags from all over the U.S. were visible. Inexplicably, there is a car with a *Hawaii* plate parked here in our apartment complex.

Often the worst motorists in Arizona are California drivers, and there are lots of them here in the Valley. Many of them make U-turns in odd places, perform sudden lane

changes, and generally drive erratically. (These odd maneuvers must be commonplace in California.) A lot of them like to park illegally too. Sometimes these drivers seem completely oblivious to the other cars around them. This type of motorist can be very dangerous. Whenever I see a California plate, I give the driver a wide berth.

Recently, I saw a man whose car sported a California plate speed through our apartment complex parking lot. After he had almost reached the end of the lane, he stopped. Then, reversing direction, he drove *backwards* (presumably to his original starting point), accelerating all the way through his retreat. After a few seconds, he then raced past all the buildings a second time.

There are far too many careless people riding bicycles on the sidewalks here, mainly because it is too dangerous for them to try pedaling down our busy streets. Even Crazy Brady (one of our 2010 rental housemates in west Phoenix) once said, “I don't do bicycles.” I can only assume that a lot of Valley bike riders came here from green states such as California, but Phoenix is not a college town like Bloomington, Indiana in the 1979 film *Breaking Away*. This is a very big city. Commuters here really need to get a car, ride the bus, or walk. In fast-paced urban areas like Phoenix, commuting on bikes is for idiots. (Recreational riders can still ride safely on the side streets of most Valley neighborhoods, however.)

Valley Parking

In the fall of 2015, my daughter and I went to practice driving in anticipation of her test. We wanted to go to a parking lot that would be empty on a Saturday but we had to visit three different schools before we could find one that we could use.

The nearby high school had closed their main lot for the weekend, so we couldn't drive there. Next, we tried an elementary school just down the street. We had hardly arrived when two cars full of clean-cut, neatly-dressed people (led by a fellow, likely a teacher, who apparently wanted to show off the building to his relatives) pulled into a pair of parking spaces directly next to us. They all got out and went for a walk around the building.

So we left and motored on over to my daughter's former middle school, just a few more blocks away. Within five minutes, two young boys were walking around the grounds dribbling a basketball, but they were out of luck: the school courts were locked up. One big problem with most Homeowners Associations (HOAs) in Arizona is that kids there can't have basketball goals in their driveways. In Indiana, nearly every house seems to have one! Keeping an eye on the two kids ambling down the sidewalk, we circled the lot and practiced “backing out of the driveway” and parking. After a few minutes, I took my own turn to demonstrate how. Although I had not been behind the wheel in over a year, it was like I had never been away. My driving was smooth and felt perfect with no problems of any sort. It was a good experience for me, and my daughter got some valuable practice time and a little bit of instruction too.

I don't drive very often these days, yet I'm still able to drive without difficulty. I would prefer not to go on any long trips though, as I would probably get tired after a while. Well, who doesn't? When I turn or go around big curves, I do feel the pull of gravity a little more now. But I'm like 1000 percent better at driving than the very elderly folks who can barely see, are high on prescription drugs, and whose reflexes are shot.

On one recent occasion, my ex-wife decided to skip the taxicab ride and somehow convinced me to drive her home

from a doctor's appointment in Scottsdale, just a few miles away. The sky was grey on that cool, rainy afternoon. In short, it was a great day to be a duck.

Although I used to like to get out and go fast on the freeway, I was always very smooth and careful when driving on city streets. (Also, Scottsdale is well-known as an easy place to get a traffic ticket.) So in the gloomy and damp conditions, I cruised along smoothly, staying well under the speed limit while cars quickly passed me on both sides. Nevertheless, my ex-wife kept saying that I was going too fast, although she typically drives much faster than I do. The absurdity of the situation reached its zenith when even the Scottsdale Police CSI vehicle passed us. Eventually we made it back without any major problems. The only minor one had occurred when I got wet while walking in the rain outside the doctor's office. I move too slowly now to dance between the raindrops.

It's probably fortunate for today's drivers that most modern cars don't have a manual transmission. (That option is still available on a few sports models and economy cars, but it is a generally unnecessary feature unless you are taking your car to track day.) Learning to work a clutch takes some practice.

I took driver's education class during high school but my father was the one who taught me how to drive a stick shift. The first time we went out on a crowded street, I had to turn left across busy traffic and I accidentally stalled the engine. Naturally, that made him fairly nervous. (I've had that feeling myself a couple of times while teaching others how to drive.) But I stayed calm, fired the engine back up, and completed the turn. Everything ended up just fine.

Chapter XIII: Right Before Our Eyes

“Kids, help your parents if they don't know how to use a smart phone.” – astronaut Buzz Aldrin

Green might be the color of sadness in interior decorating and home renovations, but not in IT. When your computer crashes, you get the “blue screen of death.” So in the tech world, blue is the true color of sadness.

What a Tangled Web

If you attempt to make a wireless connection (wi-fi) with your computer, a list of available networks comes up on your screen. When setting up a wi-fi network at home, you can name it anything that you want. Many people just go with whatever default number or name that the router assigns to it, but not always. Once when I was trying to connect to a public *hotspot* (a wi-fi network access point), I saw that someone nearby with a sense of humor had named their network, “CIA Surveillance Van.”

With today's super-fast cable modems, it's easy to forget the days when loading a web page could take minutes – or when we had no Internet at all. Thirty years before the World Wide Web became a reality, Canadian media writer Marshall McLuhan successfully forecast our future. He wrote, “The new electronic independence re-creates the world in the image of a global village.” Computer technology advanced quickly at a time when I was present to see it happen and take advantage of those innovations. The World Wide Web was invented in 1990 but was not widely in use for a few years. However, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) was utilized by

civilians to keep up with breaking news events during the 1991 Gulf War. After that, both the Internet and personal computing itself really took off.

We went a long way in a very short time.

At the newspaper where I worked on weekends in 1993, we were then using some of Apple's early Macintosh desktops. Shortly after that, a basic 486 personal computer (PC), running at just 33 MHz and that used MS-DOS with the Windows 3.1 operating system (OS), was placed in one of our music studios at SLP. Just two years later, the new Windows 95 OS made computing accessible to the masses with its easy-to-use *graphical user interface* (GUI).

In 1981, I had entered college as a telecommunications and journalism student but after five years of mostly part-time study, I had not completed my degree. After getting married in 1995, my wife insistently urged me to begin taking college courses again, so I did. But with computers entering our workplace and the big buzz surrounding the introduction of Windows 95, my new major was business information systems. Said Apple founder Steve Jobs, "Of all the inventions of humans, the computer is going to rank near or at the top as history unfolds and we look back. It is the most awesome tool that we have ever invented."

One evening recently, my girlfriend and I discussed the current state of education and inventions. She felt that people were smarter in the past because they thought of big concepts in areas like math and science. Certainly, advanced technology does make it easier today to do complex tasks without thinking about *how* things work, while instant global communications ensure that scientific work is not done in a vacuum. At the same time, because contemporary researchers are building much of their work on academic foundations that were laid long ago, it is likely that modern innovations are not publicized as highly as in the past

because (while still significant) they are not considered to be as revolutionary as the originals.

For example, most U.S. students are taught who invented the printing press (Gutenberg), the telephone (Bell), and radio (Marconi – a lot of political mischief has historically surrounded the competing patents of Marconi and Tesla). But most people today probably could not tell you who invented the Internet, the cell phone, or even television.

Regarding the Internet, it had many contributors in its creation. First, the U.S. government agency DARPA created ARPANET. Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn invented Transmission Control Protocol (TCP, later becoming TCP/IP), which was eventually adopted by ARPANET. Tim Berners-Lee of CERN then created the World Wide Web, which joined linked pages to the Internet itself. Congressional funding for the creation of the Internet was sponsored by Senator Al Gore (who later became vice-president). Gore also coined the once frequently-used phrase, “information superhighway.”

Working for Motorola, Martin Cooper invented the cell phone in 1973, helping bring it to the market in just 10 years. But his creation would not become popular until 2G (2nd-generation technology) arrived in the 1990s. Spurred by the demands of text messaging and streaming data, the creation of 4G phones in 2009 enabled the current boom in personal handheld communications.

Today, scholars credit Philo Farnsworth with the invention of television. His patent was approved long before that of Westinghouse/RCA engineer Vladimir Zworykin, who is often incorrectly given credit. In fact, Zworykin never built a working TV set... but he did visit Farnsworth's lab once.

Worse for the Software

It's Monday morning and the Internet is glacially slow.

Everyone in America has gone back to work and they are all sleepily sitting at their desks, browsing their favorite websites. Using the computer is highly addictive, like smoking crack. If Richard Pryor was still alive, I'd guess that he would be busy surfing the Internet all day.

I go online and search for answers when I need to solve an information technology (IT) problem. Many online advice contributors automatically assume that anyone asking for help is totally computer illiterate. Often these self-appointed experts post unhelpful replies like, "You have to buy a new (program/computer)." There are plenty of other smart-asses who don't know the answers but only read these message boards in order to make sarcastic comments ("trolling"). Forums are full of space wasted by these trolls. The best thing to do is ignore them. Reading angry replies to their provocative remarks is apparently the only life some jerks have. (Anyone can type up almost any kind of outrageous, crazy, or ignorant piece of writing that they want today and post it on the Internet. But because the Internet has gotten so large, pieces like that usually get lost – fortunately – and so no one reads them or even notices them anyway.)

As a result of all the useless posts by trolls, frequently I have to hack through a jungle of nonsense to find a correct answer that might have been written by a person of actual intelligence. Often the best answers involve closely checking some complex, hard-to-access software settings. However, my computer usually seems to have those options already set properly and then I have to keep searching for a solution.

Green might be the color of sadness in interior decorating and home renovations, but not in IT. When your computer crashes, you get the "blue screen of death." So in the tech world, blue is the true color of sadness.

Despite the intellect required for computer work, there is still an abundance of stupidity in IT (or it might be more

accurate for me to call this an epidemic of obliviousness). I am reminded of the software developer in a *Dilbert* comic strip who created an “easy” keyboard shortcut that everyone would remember: “CTRL-ALT-F4-DEL.”

When I revisited Banner Thunderbird Hospital in mid-2014, all their computers were set to play an email notification sound. Some genius in their IT department had decided on a very elaborate “ta-da” sound complete with trumpets blaring that was probably supposed to evoke images of the arrival of angels from Heaven. So every minute or two, you would hear this irritating blast of noise erupt from the nurse's PC out in the hallway – over and over, all day, often multiple times in succession. I can't imagine working in an environment with that amount of distraction, and remember that I've worked in a few noisy call centers.

I usually set my own computer and phone sounds to the shortest, least annoying ones I can find. For months, I was typing this book on an old second-hand laptop that had no sound at all. I was mostly OK with that. Some people need to have television programs going or music playing while they work or study. I understand the need for white noise, if that is what they are doing. Personally, I have to turn everything else off or to a very low level. If I don't, I will be continually distracted by whatever is on.

Our electronic devices don't care if they piss us off. It seems like whenever I am texting or sit down to eat, my cell phone alarm invariably goes off. The further away I get, the greater the chance is that the phone will ring, beep, or sound an alert. My word processing program has an autosave function that often freezes the screen in order to make a backup copy of my file. This usually occurs right while I am in the middle of typing a paragraph, interrupting my train of thought. (Hey, it just happened again now!) This might foreshadow a dire future for all of us if machines ever do

actually take over the Earth. They probably wouldn't destroy us, they might decide that it would be easier to just keep us under their control by tormenting us with inconsistent, glitchy operation – kind of how things already are today.

Slow websites really frustrate me and I know I'm not the only one. There was one manager at SLP that would just keep clicking on links when web pages didn't load right away. Networking was a lot slower then but technology (like work) seems to expand to fill the time allotted to it. Why does this happen? It's “all about the Benjamins,” as usual. Many websites make the majority of their income off of advertising revenue, so they will sell space to anyone that will buy it. This results in pages that draw ads from remote addresses with servers that are frequently much slower than the host of the website that you are viewing. When you hit a page full of those ads, your web browser freezes up while trying to load those sluggish offsite images.

Ad prices are determined by *hits* (the amount of page views that the site can document). This creates another Internet problem that really bothers me: developers for greedy websites use *clickbait* (sensational headlines) for feature stories. To find out the point of the story, you must click through many webpages of pictures with short captions known as a *slideshow*. If a webmaster can put each item from a list on its own page, than the number of hits can increase immensely, but so does the length of time it takes to find the information that you wanted. Recently, I clicked on a slideshow called “The 12 Most Boring Movies of All Time.” (Unfortunately, I had seen three of them.) When I got to the end of the slideshow, the number one film wasn't even listed. The last page only contained more ads. (You shouldn't confuse “bad” and “boring” here. Most awful movies aren't really boring, usually they're rotten because they have a terrible story.)

Another problem with the web: sometimes companies try to pack their website with fancy graphics that load slowly or make navigation difficult. Artsy webpages might look great but aren't very user friendly. Website designers should remember the term KISS: "Keep It Simple, Stupid."

Three things usually cause me to leave a website that I've entered from a search engine: my browser starts to freeze up from trying to load slow offsite ads, or a link brings up a slideshow, or I encounter a page that doesn't load within a few seconds. In these three cases, normally I back out quickly to the page where I started and go look somewhere else. If we don't patronize these companies, their pages will stop getting hits. Then either they will go bust or take steps to speed up their pokey websites.

Purchasing computer software is a bit like buying a car (see Chapter XI). You should never buy Version 1, just wait for V1.1. If you don't wait, you might wish you had. A Russian proverb says **greedy people pay twice**.

Then there are the used electronics that you find on Internet auction sites. They don't seem to work as well as they used to and inexpensive gadgets made in China don't last for very long. Many people blame RoHS for this decline in quality. The Restriction of Hazardous Substances Directive (RoHS) went into effect in 2006 in the European Union and a number of U.S. states have enacted similar legislation. It restricts the use of six materials (including lead) in various types of devices. In short, the lead solder that used to make circuit boards work reliably has been replaced. The effective lifetime of most electronics is now about five years. Heat is especially damaging to these circuits and so keeping them cool is more important than ever.

RoHS was dreamed up by idealists who were concerned about used electronics being dumped in third world countries and possibly contributing to pollution there.

Manufacturers were enthusiastic about RoHS because it promotes the concept of “planned obsolescence,” meaning you must replace your devices more often – so big corporations make more money.

With the open availability of so much information on the Internet, including websites that let you keep in touch with distant family and acquaintances, finding old friends has become a snap, or so the social media companies want you to believe. Personally, I haven’t had much success with those types of projects. For example, I’ve never been able to locate my college roommate, who presumably is still living in Greece. On the other hand, one member of my high school crowd who now resides in California was able to look me up online and became one of my Facebook friends.

It’s likely that some people whom I knew in school are still not involved with social media and probably never will be. It’s a bit of a puzzle that most of them don’t reply to online messages. I’d like to think that it’s only because they spend even less time on social media than I do, and not that I was that big of a jerk in school (although I might have been).

My online friends today are mainly just a few classmates, colleagues from past jobs, and family members. (I choose quality over quantity. I’m not trying to acquire the most friends in my class, unlike many young computer users today). I do still get friend requests from long-unseen former co-workers – usually people whom I didn’t really know all that well – so I just ignore those. Maybe that’s the answer to the puzzle.

I also get a lot of invitations to play online games like Farmville. I have no interest in joining those pointless activities. Once I posted my thoughts on the subject: “If you had grown up on a real farm and knew what it smelled like, you wouldn’t want to have one.”

Picture Perfect

I've enjoyed staging cover photos for my books and have set up numerous self-portraits over the years. Even an inexpensive tripod can be a very useful thing in photography (especially to unseasoned amateurs like me). But often, I've just set my camera on a stack of books, marked a spot on the ground to stand on, set the timer, and jumped into place.

I think that one of the best photos I've ever taken was during our 1997 vacation in Clearwater Beach, Florida. I snapped a shot of a spectacular golden sunset over the gulf waters, as seen from our hotel balcony.



Figure 27. The Gulf of Mexico at sunset.

One of my friends was a photographer for our high school newspaper and I got some good advice from him. I also learned a lot about photography from my father. When my early photos turned out poorly, he helped me by suggesting

which things I was probably doing wrong. (I was.) Also, my expectations were too high. He told me, “You are lucky if you get one good picture out of a roll (of film).”

My father was an enthusiastic amateur photographer. He had a Nikon camera, several interchangeable zoom lenses, and an aluminum case to hold everything. Mostly, he seemed to like taking close-ups of Mom's colorful garden flowers. Looking back now though, it would have been nice if he had taken more pictures of our family and its activities. While I was in high school, my father gave me an inexpensive SLR camera meant for beginners. A few years later, I bought an autofocus camera that made taking good pictures a lot easier.

My daughter has made photography a bit of a hobby and enjoys taking snapshots of the sky and stormy weather. I also have an aunt who is also an excellent photographer. She has posted many terrific pictures onto social media, ones that she has captured as she has traveled the globe during her retirement. We could fill a wonderful coffee table book just with the amazingly good photos that they both have taken.

Pictures were not originally planned for this book, but I decided that since I might have less written content this time around, I should include some good photos. They make the printed editions quite pricey so the e-book versions are a good choice for most readers. I chose to avoid using a lot of photos of other persons because I didn't want to try and obtain a lot of release forms. Some people just don't want to have their picture in a publication.

I've tried to use photos with special meaning that are relevant to the book and not just put in a few images at random for illustration. I have had to do a bit of digital airbrushing with art software to clean up a few aging photographs, something I taught myself how to do years ago. It just takes me a longer time to fix them now. Sometimes the pictures have little white spots from wear or markings on

them that need attention. However, although tempted, I did not airbrush out my old mustache.



Figure 29. Photo of me at the Lenin Museum on Red Square in Moscow, Russia during November 1994 (photo by Alla Williamson).

Almost every cell phone made today contains a built-in digital camera and the capability of taking good pictures. Yet it is amazing how few people are unable to grasp the basics of photography. Among their most common mistakes: standing too far away from or not centering their subjects, pointing the camera at an angle, holding it the wrong way entirely (vertically or horizontally), or not capturing obvious details (especially if trying to include a background image).

You can't have a good picture taken of you *and* the Eiffel Tower. This is impossible because it is big and you are not, so you will be an unrecognizable “ant” in the photo – and this is exactly how poor snapshots are often taken. You can move away far enough to get the entire tower in the frame, while

you stand close enough to the photographer to be clearly seen on one side. Or you can stand near the tower, with you clearly in the photo and a giant metal leg visible behind you (looking something like part of a transformer robot). The lesson: **People always want what they can't have.**

Digital cameras have simplified photography immensely because you can see right away whether you have a good picture or not and re-shoot it if necessary. No more waiting for prints from the photo lab or wasted film. But nevertheless, some folks are not satisfied with this “development” in photography. Recently, my ex-wife asked me to use her cell phone to take a couple pictures of her as she stood next to her car. Then she didn't like any of them and kept asking me to shoot them again. I finally replied, “I'm a photographer, not a miracle worker.”

Phone Company

Before cell phones or even cordless models existed, most houses only had one basic unit attached to a *land line* (a physical wire running into a house from a pole outside). A trim, stylish-looking second device, called a *princess phone*, could be plugged into a wall jack inside a teenager's room, but it was usually on the same circuit. (Adding a second number was expensive and so it was unusual to have one.) This meant that a teenage girl talking to her friends for too long would often tie up the line and important calls could not get through. Then her father would have to yell something like, “Get off the phone!” (Confession: I did this many times myself, too.)

Not long ago, I read a forum post on the Internet that left me shaking my head. Some millennial asked why it wasn't rude to read a book while sitting with someone but it *was* insulting to talk to a third person on a cell phone. Although

both acts could be considered impolite (and in the past, certainly each would have been a demonstration of bad manners), logically it does seem to be quite a different matter to simply look at an inanimate object (like a book or a television) than it is to interact with a third individual (such as on the phone) while ignoring someone else right sitting next to you.

As a 2016 April Fools' joke, I texted my daughter that both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump had pledged to ban cell phones from schools. She asked why the candidates thought they didn't need their phones, and said that they should have them. So I finally admitted that it was a good thing the story wasn't true.



***Figure 28. Rainbow over east Phoenix in 2015
(photo by Elizabeth Williamson).***

Early in the career of '80s music group Duran Duran, one of their hits was called "Girls on Film." Today, that song

would have to be changed to “Girls on Phones.” Here in the Valley, frequently you will see girls with cell phones glued to their ears, whether while driving around town or just out walking along in the park. But to be completely fair, it's not just the ladies who are guilty, it's us fellows too. I do see men doing the same thing, so perhaps it just seems one-sided because I'm looking at pretty women more of the time.

And I do. During a recent trip to a large department store, I passed by three young women who couldn't stop talking on their phones long enough to just shop. I notice it happening on TV too. On the Kardashians' reality TV show, sometimes you will see the sisters thoughtlessly playing with their phones, texting or showing off photos, while ignoring their mother Kris who is usually trying to tell them about something important such as their upcoming schedule.

I see this sort of thing during almost every walk I take through a local business district, large store, or shopping mall. Pedestrians stroll down sidewalks and cross busy streets while staring down at their phones, often without even a glance up at the bustling world surrounding them. And everyone has a cell phone now, regardless of their income or life situation. While I recently stood on a corner and waited with my red walker to cross a busy street, an apparently homeless woman pushed a wheelchair overflowing with her personal possessions along the opposite sidewalk. As I watched her trudge past, she suddenly stopped in place and paused silently for a couple of minutes *to look at her cell phone*.

Chapter XIV: Wild Cards

“Each player must accept the cards life deals him or her: but once they are in hand, he or she alone must decide how to play the cards in order to win the game.” – Voltaire

My girlfriend told me that her college class after work started at 5 p.m. I said that was a coincidence, because our poker game started at 5 o'clock too.

Poker Boom

During high school, our group of friends would gather to play poker at someone's house about once a month. Those contests were always five-card draw poker – that was the only game we knew then. We used a one dollar box of 100 lightweight “interlocking” red, white, and blue plastic chips (for nickels, pennies, and dimes) and paper playing cards from the drugstore. If somebody knew someone over age 21 (and usually we did), we also would buy a couple of six-packs of Mickey's malt liquor or Little Kings cream ale (both variants of beer that came in little green bottles).

Our parents all knew what we were doing but they were OK with it because we were home where they could keep an eye on us. Anyone that needed a ride home, got one. Parents couldn't let their teenagers do that today because they would get in big trouble from the “morality patrol.”

Watching other people play cards at parties and at work during breaks never seemed like much fun to me. Then one day, a couple of years after the “poker boom” started (a period when poker was massively popular in the mid-2000s), I picked up a book at a grocery store about how to win at small stakes

poker. I was fascinated, so I took up the game.

From about 2005 until I moved to Avondale in late 2010, poker was a major passion for me. I played online, got a lunchtime game going at ODS, and later hosted weekly contests with some of my co-workers from eTelecare. I also read books on poker strategy and the colorful history of the game. I even began collecting casino chips and spent a lot of time on the Chiptalk.net online forum, where both the hobby of chip collecting and poker itself were discussed daily.

In the big picture however, poker was just an enjoyable hobby for me. While you might find a few high-rolling card sharks over at a local casino or around your city, I only played in micro-stakes games and freerolls online, plus a few small stakes tournaments at home. Another big consideration was that I didn't like losing money. Some guys are OK with the risk because they get a thrill from the action itself, win or lose, but not me. If you want to get an advantage, you have to study poker strategy really hard and learn how to read your opponents. (Yes, unlike in other casino-type games, this can be done in poker.) The whole idea of playing *winning* poker is to reduce your risk of losing as much as possible. It all sounded too much like work to me. I just wanted to have fun.

Investment Objective

The poker boom has resulted in a lot of reading material including many (generally worthless) poker strategy books. I prefer stories about the backroom games from the “old days” as told by colorful veteran players like Doyle Brunson and T.J. Cloutier. Most of the “how to” books are dry and far too complex for casual readers, but basic strategy books can help a new player become familiar with the game.

A quick overview of the game of poker might help you with

this chapter, if you are not a player yourself. The object of poker is to make the best five-card hand that you can. Wagering is done with chips that can represent actual money in a cash game or just an arbitrary total score in tournaments. In cash games, you want to win as much money as possible while you sit at the table. For tournaments, you try to stay in the game as long as possible until you lose all your chips, and then the last man standing is the winner (prize money is divided up and paid out at the end according the order of finish). Many tournaments have an early *re-buy period* when you can get back into the game if you *bust out* (lose all your chips). Others are *freeze-outs* where no re-buys are allowed.

In Texas Hold’Em, everyone is dealt two cards (your *pocket* or *hole cards*). Then there is a round of betting (or folding). Next, the *flop* is dealt: three community cards (for all players to use) are exposed face-up on the table (often called the *board*), and more betting ensues. After that, a fourth card is turned up (the *turn*), and additional wagering commences. Ultimately, a fifth card is exposed (the *river*), followed by a final round of betting and possibly a *showdown* (when the pocket cards are revealed and a winner is determined).

To *fold* is to give up your (seemingly) losing hand and toss your cards into the middle of the table (the *muck*). My girlfriend was doing her college math homework one day and said she had three problems finished. I asked how many were left and she replied that there were 27. I remarked, “In poker, if there are only 3 good cards left and 27 bad ones, you should fold.” In retrospect I guess that wasn’t very encouraging, but I now realize that’s how I personally give progress reports on my writing projects such as this one.

The ranking of hands is based on probability. A *set* is three of a kind and it beats two pair. Next, a *straight* is five cards in numerical sequence. A *flush* is five cards of the same suit

(hearts, diamonds, spades, or clubs), and this beats a straight. Then comes a *full house*, which is a set plus a pair. *Quads* is a hand with four cards of the same rank (aces, kings, etc.) A *straight flush* is just what it says, five consecutive cards of the same suit. A *royal flush* is just the best possible straight flush, having an ace as the highest card.

A quick burst of poker terminology and slang might also be useful. Think of your *hand* as the group of five cards you are currently playing. A *hand* or a *deal* can also refer to one complete series of play, including the dealing of cards to everyone and the subsequent rounds of betting, and is also the name of a ranked group of five cards (a pair, set, etc.).

A *kicker* is the second best card in your hand, and breaks ties if each player shows the same top cards. The *nuts* is the best hand possible using the community cards available on the board. A *draw* is when you need another card to “make your hand” (complete the hand that you are aiming for). Playing too many draws is a good way to go bust. *Pot odds* are the chances of making your hand compared to the amount of money you must bet to stay in – a complex calculation good players must learn to make on the fly. To “bet someone off his hand” is to try and force him to fold weak cards by raising the bet. (You can make playing draws unprofitable for your opponents by doing this consistently.)

A *call* is when you match some else's bet and a *raise* is when you increase it. A *push*, or going *all in*, is when you wager all your chips. The *pot* contains all the chips bet by everyone, piled in the middle of the table. A *runner-runner* happens when you are dealt consecutive cards on the turn and river that make a winning hand (usually against 1 odds). That results in a *bad beat* for your opponent (having a strong hand that loses to a long shot draw), while making that lucky hand is known as *sucking out*. Poker players are *rounders*, who sometimes go

“round” town looking for a game. A *fish* is a bad player, a *shark* is a really good player, and a *donkey* thinks he knows a lot about poker but really doesn't. (A donkey frequently must suck out to win, so if you are experiencing a lot of bad beats then you are probably playing correctly.)

Many hands have nicknames. Pocket kings are sometimes called *cowboys*. In poker parlance, 7-2 offsuit is the *hammer*, the worst starting hand possible because you can't make anything good out of it. Pocket aces are sometimes called the “weapons of mass destruction.” But *aces cracked* is when your pocket aces lose, and that happens occasionally. (Against one player, you are an 88 percent favorite with pocket aces, but that drops to 77 percent against two players – not a sure thing, but still some of the best odds that you will get at the table.)

This might seem like a lot of lingo to learn, but it isn't. You'll pick it all up very quickly when you start to play.

Card Sharks

For the last couple years that I worked at ODS, we played cards at lunch every day. Some of the guys that played at our table included Tommy, Aaron, Brandon, and Joe. Of course, we couldn't compete for money there, those games were just for pride. (We'd all seen the World Series of Poker on television and wanted to be like the famous card sharks of Las Vegas.) But we did have some memorable games, nevertheless.

One day, another player called my river bet with one king showing on the board. I said, “Did you guys see that western on TV last night? It was about a posse of three cowboys.” And I showed them my pocket kings. I outlasted a few very good players to win our informal “ODS Poker Championship” in 2008. (We played fairly loosely that day and since it wasn't a big field, the game went pretty fast.) While I held the chip lead,

a mastering supervisor and I became the last two players remaining (heads-up play). Then I pushed my chips all in after drawing pocket 8s. They held up when all low cards hit the table, and suddenly I was the champion. That was something I really wanted to achieve and so I was pretty happy about winning, even if I didn't actually win anything.

After I moved to Phoenix in 2009, a few of us (from the call center where I worked) got a regular poker game going on the weekends. A day working at eTelecare was virtually a United Nations event and our poker nights reflected that. Our game had regular players like Joey (a large Native American gentleman), Roberto (a burly Mexican fellow with lots of tattoos), Danny (a skinny black man), Kevin (a thin white dude who often wore a Deion Sanders football jersey), and me (the transplanted part-Irish guy from Indiana). Occasionally, their spouses or another co-worker would play too. We would compete in \$5 or \$10 tournaments lasting three to four hours. Special software on my laptop kept track of the blinds schedule while it sat on the nearby kitchen counter. The second place finisher got his buy-in fee back while first place won the rest of the money.

Although I suspected that I was a bit better than this enthusiastic group of inexperienced young players who were still learning the game, I really just wanted to have fun playing cards with them. I usually played "tight" (conservatively), staying in the game as long as possible, and thereby finished in second place a lot. I enjoyed the company along with a 24 oz. "tallboy" can of smooth Icehouse beer. Usually we would buy pizza, I typically provided a big bag of Fry's (Kroger) nacho cheese chips, and the other guys would drink a case of whatever brew that the nearby Qwik Trip mini mart had on sale that week.

(Friday was a much better night for me to play cards than

on Saturday. I had to go to work at the call center early on Sunday and sometimes that tall can of beer messed with my medication overnight. Then I *really* didn't want to get up the next morning and go earn that “big” paycheck.)

Unhappily, I lost twice in consecutive weeks after reaching heads-up play. The bad beats came from runner-runner cards (once completing a straight, the next time a flush). I think the odds of that occurring back-to-back are about 10,000-to-1. I really was trying to win the games at that point but I was extremely unlucky on those two occasions.



Figure 30. Playing in a home poker game with a pint of Icehouse beer next to me.

Sometimes Joey and I would duel it out in dealer's choice cash games all night for nickel blinds, just playing heads-up after the tournaments ended. We also played cards at his place occasionally (which was just four blocks west of mine) and at

Roberto's apartment (located down on the south side of town). Then we all went our own ways after Stream purchased eTelecare and our days working there together ended. That was the conclusion of our regular game, one that had some extremely enjoyable poker nights.

Next, while I lived for a few months at a rental house in west Phoenix, I had no trouble getting games going there. Fellow residents Omar and Parker were usually part of our tournaments. Sometimes "Crazy Brady" and even "Henry the Hat" joined the games, too, but we didn't play for real money because none of us there had any. There's an old joke where an inept gambler says, "I hope I break even. I need the money."

Night Games

Online gaming grew quickly in popularity during the poker boom. The "big three" websites were PokerStars, Full Tilt Poker and Absolute Poker. People could sit at home in their pajamas and play cards against players from around the world.

On PokerStars, "real money" players could compete in freerolls where 10,000 people would enter a tournament at no cost. These games would go on all night, and in the wee hours of the morning the final 24 players eventually advanced to the "Sunday Million" (another tourney where the top few contestants could win mega dollars). I made it to the Sunday event a few times but I never won any money there. Full Tilt also hosted freerolls but fewer of them.

The cards were supposed to be randomly dealt (in the sense that a computer can actually do that), but games on PokerStars famously had a lot of odd and unlikely results. On one hand that I got out of (fortunately), I folded a *weak ace* (holding a low card as the kicker, not really a good hand to play). Two other players then went all in. One showed pocket aces and the

other had pocket kings. On the flop, the last remaining ace appeared, giving the first player a set of them. But stunningly, the two final cards on the table were runner-runner kings to massively improve the second player's hand, and so he finished with quads to beat the first player's now-full house. (I figure those odds to be less than .02 percent – two in a thousand.)

In my first online tournament, I was eliminated after only about an hour. In my final hand, I was dealt the queen and jack of hearts. The ace of hearts was on the flopped board along with the 10 of hearts, and then a third, low heart came on the turn so I pushed all-in with the “second nut flush.” But then the chip leader sitting across the virtual table called my raise, and showed that he was holding the king and 9 of hearts, which gave him the “nut flush” and caused me to go bust.

I did have some good nights playing online poker too. Once I flopped a straight flush, busted out two players, and nearly knocked out two more. In the 2007 World Series of Online Poker (WCOOP), I entered several *satellites* (inexpensive play-in tournaments that give people a shot at qualifying for much bigger games) and played some of my best poker ever.

One of those nights in the WCOOP, my poker career hit its peak in a game of Omaha High (a more wide-open version of Texas Hold’Em that uses four pocket cards). Nearing the end of the first hour with the re-buy period about to end, I pushed my virtual chips all-in on the turn with a four flush of hearts and was called by one of the chip leaders. The fifth heart came up on the river and completed my flush, so I moved up into third place. I immediately began playing aggressively and bullied the other big stacks into folding to my raises. (They were doing well and since the top 12 players advanced to the next round they didn't want to bust out – but I wanted to finish first that night. **It was my time.**)

In just a few minutes, I became chip leader and eventually

got a 3-to-1 chip lead on the second place player when the 13th man busted out. (I even saved screenshots of my accomplishment.) I didn't win any money in that game, just a pass to the next tournament. But for one night, I might have been the best Omaha High poker player in the world (or at least I felt that I was).

A few Chiptalk.net forum members held an online poker event called the Turkey Bowl during the 2007 Thanksgiving holiday. I was leading this tournament with just three players left. Perhaps I should have let the other two guys battle each other but I went for the win and tried to knock them both out. I got all my chips in with the best hand twice – but after two bad beats, I ended up in third place.

Online poker software always had a small chat box in which some interesting table banter was usually going on, along with a fair amount of “smack talk” as well. My favorite line happened one night when some random dude went all-in holding nothing but a draw. The opposing player had tried unsuccessfully to bet the first fellow off what seemed like a weak hand, then he became very unhappy when the mystery fellow responded with an unexpected all-in raise. When the puzzled opponent questioned the mystery man's odd decision, the chat box reply was, “I had to you donkey the odds.”

Chips Ahoy

I got involved in casino chip collecting around 2005. I started buying cheap \$100 singles from defunct cardrooms because I thought they looked cool. Using a piece of foam from an arts and crafts store, I cut out circles to hold the chips and then I put my favorites in a frame on the wall. The chips are “obsolete” because their casinos have closed and you can't cash them in anymore, so they are probably worth between \$1 and

\$3 each. Although they are not valuable today, those \$100 casino chips still look expensive. However, there are a few really rare old *cheques* (an outdated casino term for chips) out there worth thousands of dollars each.

I tried other pastimes like collecting baseball cards and building model trains (while my cousin Tim collected stamps). All those other hobbies were just money pits. Poker chips were the only hobby items that were ever actually able to return any of my money back to me. One day I was at the post office mailing some poker chips to another player. The clerk asked me what was in the box so I told her. She said, “I guess some people will collect *anything*.”

Poker players want nice chips because they feel the same as real casino chips and stack much better than plastic ones. The main benefit of this is that the chip stacks don't fall over every time somebody bumps the table. (Think of the effect that beer has on the poker players you probably know). The word “clay” is a partial misnomer when it comes to authentic casino chips. They are actually made of a clay composite material. If poker chips were made entirely of clay, they would be extremely brittle. In reality, most sets advertised online as “real clay” are just made cheaply in China from injection-molded ABS plastic. These include the dice chips and suited chips commonly found at big department stores, and even “China clay” chips. Many of the most slippery chips have a metal slug embedded in the center for added weight. (No, those heavy 13 gram chips are not “authentic casino weight.” The true figure is typically between eight and eleven grams, depending on when and where those plastic chips were made.)

After going through a couple of heavy cases full of crappy plastic chips, I found out about high quality, authentic clay chips. One manufacturer of custom home sets still exists, known as Classic Poker Chips, formerly ASM. Many other clay

chips can be found on collectors' forums and in online auctions. These include both obsolete casino chips in various grades of condition and older home game sets formerly produced by Paulson (maker of most real casino chips). Both types are getting more scarce and expensive. A few others were produced by the Blue Chip Company and TR King (both of those companies are now closed).

I tried out a few of the playable sets from closed casinos, but the used chips just took too long and too much effort to clean them. (If you buy used ones directly from a broker, your chips will arrive in filthy, "casino-used" condition. Then you get to clean them yourself with a toothbrush and a big bucket of Oxyclean solution.) Sometimes there are unused mint-condition chips available for higher prices, typically over \$1 apiece. Too pricey for my limited budget.

Plastic cards are great to have too. They are far better than the cheap plastic-coated paper cards from the drugstore but are more expensive. (These are typically \$15-\$25 for a setup of two decks, often one with red backs and one with blue. Other colors are available though.) They slide across the table much easier and last far longer. Also, real enthusiasts don't use the cheap, thin folding poker table tops that you might find in a department store. Often they make their own tables with vinyl rails and "suited speed cloth" (felt doesn't actually work for poker tables) so the cards glide smoothly across the playing surface. Some enterprising fellows have even made a lucrative side job out of building these tables at around a grand each. Righteous bucks. You can also buy foam rubber table toppers like my blue one that work great, too. They're like big mousepads that roll up. Sure, they're not as nice as custom tables but they cost much less (about \$50).

There are online forums devoted to poker chip collecting, such as Pokerchipforum.com (PCF) and Chiptalk.net (CT).

While I used to spend hours every week on CT reading about chipping, I am not into the hobby nearly as much now, so I'm not really on the forums that often anymore. And the cost of chips can be quite expensive. Chip prices have gone up substantially in the last few years.

After moving out to the west side of the Valley in 2010, I was unable to continue playing poker: the regular games were too far away as were the other players. I tried collecting chips for a while longer, but the hobby seemed to start fading away as the poker boom ended. Also, I had very little money while I lived out there. Because at one time I used to be a regular contributor on CT, the brother of my former girlfriend Janet read some of my posts, somehow got it into his head that I was a professional poker player, and tried to convince her that's who I really was. That was not cool.

During my recovery, apparently the owner of CT had some personal issues of his own and left the website unattended for a few months, so most of the remaining collectors moved to PCF. Both sites continue to operate today. Another popular website is ccgtcc-ccn.com, home to an organization of chippers who are involved in collecting rare (and sometimes old or valuable) casino singles. One well-known online forum for general poker discussion is known as twoplustwo.com but it is not always a warm and fuzzy place. Unfriendly replies to less-knowledgeable posters and novices ("newbies") are a common occurrence there. I would encourage "lurking" there, just reading the board and learning what more-experienced players have to say about those topics that interest you.

(A classic thread on the latter forum involved a teenager who wanted to start an illegal poker club in his parents' basement. It was a really bad idea but it made for a hilarious discussion. I'm not sure if the author was serious or if it was all just a prank.)

Late to the Game

Poker on television is really just a game show. In 2002, the introduction of tiny cameras hidden in the table rail changed everything. Being able to see the hole cards let the viewers at home play along. ESPN's heavily-cut weekly World Series of Poker (WSOP) coverage is still interesting to watch. They do a great job of editing the action to keep viewers interested (the episodes are mostly full of the largest pots and bust-outs) so the shows move much faster than the final table broadcast almost-live now in November. ESPN used to cover more WSOP events than they do now and I miss seeing some of the other types of games such as Omaha and stud. A few years ago, the World Poker Tour (WPT) on Fox Sports Net was more enjoyable but now their final table coverage has gotten slower and noisier, so I find it harder to watch than in the past.

NBC capitalized on the poker boom by broadcasting a regular program called *Poker After Dark*. A made-for-TV contest featuring well-known professional players was staged in the back room of a Las Vegas casino. Each game was split into five one-hour episodes, one shown each night for a week. The programs were broadcast in the wee hours of the morning when there was no other network programming, and they were heavily supported by advertising from the Full Tilt Poker website that sponsored the show.

The network's production costs for this series were almost zero. The casino provided the set in exchange for the promotional air time provided by the show itself. The players put up their own money to play. The endless game breaks taken to run the repetitive Full Tilt ads made the whole show seem much like an infomercial. However, Full Tilt had produced a wide variety of slick, catchy, black-and-white commercials about the game of poker using many of their in-

house pros. Those were possibly some of the best TV ads ever. You can still find them on the Internet and they're definitely worth a look. (I can watch them over and over.) But when Full Tilt went under in 2011, NBC pulled the plug on the show.



Figure 31. My favorite Arizona cactus.

Poker has been featured in some terrific movies such as *Rounders*, *Casino Royale*, *The Cincinnati Kid*, and *Maverick*. (Unfortunately, many other poker films like *Lucky You*, *Deal*, and *The Grand* have not been quite as good.)

During the casino scene in the film *Out to Sea*, the wealthy high-class villain asked the late Walter Matthau's uncultured character where he went to college. Matthau replied, "That's a little place called F.U." When I was thinking about possible titles for this book, I considered *My Days at F.U.* but that option did not make the final cut. Seems like it should have been in here somewhere though.

Chapter XV: The Sports Page

“If it doesn't matter who wins or loses, then why do they keep score?” – Vince Lombardi

With basketball being such a huge deal in Indiana, I have attended dozens of games in person and watched hundreds more on television.

During the years when I was enrolled at IU East, many times I would go over to my cousin Tim's house in the evenings after class. There, I usually watched college basketball with Tim (an IU Hoosier like I was) and his father, a diehard University of Kentucky basketball fan. Uncle Warren would often get drowsy and nod off during the games. Tim would reach over and shake him, “Dad? Dad, are you awake?” My uncle would sit up with a start like he was never asleep (although I'm not sure how often he knew what the score was).

The Cold and the Miserable

During my first semester at college in 1981, I attended a quite memorable football game there. The weather was nice and sunny as IU hosted the Trojans from Southern California. USC was ranked #2 in the polls and #1-rated Michigan had already lost to Notre Dame by game time. Were the Hoosiers suddenly facing America's top team? We certainly thought so.

Indiana's head man was future TV sports commentator Lee Corso, who was a terrible coach and seemed more concerned with getting laughs than wins. He told the press, “I said I would bring a Rose Bowl team to Bloomington, so I got USC.”

Oddly, Corso chose to punt the ball away on a third down, after the Hoosiers had finally taken the ball across midfield into Trojan territory. That was as close as they came to denting

the end zone. The first half ended 0-0. (Scoreless or pointless?) In the second half, future Heisman Trophy winner Marcus Allen was virtually unstoppable, running for three touchdowns and setting the stadium's all-time single game record for rushing yards. USC won 21-0.

There was one shining moment in 1987. The lone time when the IU football team beat Michigan in decades, I was there. The stadium was cold and windy, while dreary gray clouds poured rain all day. Our seats were located high up at the very top of the east stands, where the inclement weather could hit us with full force.

Early on, the Hoosiers blocked a punt to set up a touchdown. It was destined to be a defensive struggle in the dismal conditions on that Saturday in Bloomington. During the third quarter, the Wolverines were ineffective as they had to battle against the relentless wind. The Hoosiers held on to a slim lead. Eventually dark shadows began to fall over the field and the stadium's lights came on. Meanwhile, ominous black clouds began gathering overhead and the wind began to howl like something straight out of a hurricane. At the end of the third quarter, the game paused as always for a couple minutes and both teams got a short break. Then it happened.

Exactly at that moment, the wind started swirling in big circles. You could see its ferocity in the driving rain, which was illuminated by the towering banks of lights. Suddenly, the wind reversed direction. How could that happen? It was like the hand of God had reached into the stadium that afternoon. *That was maybe the most incredible thing I have ever witnessed in my lifetime.* As the Wolverines changed ends of the field for the final quarter, the storm was blowing right back in their faces again. Michigan absolutely could not move the ball into that raging tempest and Indiana claimed a soggy 14-10 victory.

Also, it always rained during IU's homecoming weekend in

October. One year as Lou Holtz was coaching the Minnesota football team, they slogged it out with the Hoosiers in a torrential rainstorm while I sat drenched and freezing in the stands. College wasn't teaching me the right lessons, I guess. After the Golden Gophers won a low-scoring game on that damp day, I went back to the dorm and put on some warm, dry clothes. (Did I mention that I wanted to live in sunny Florida, back when I was still in junior high school?)

Then there's November in the Hoosier State. The fields are empty and barren as the harvest is finished. The leaves have fallen off the trees. The sky turns gray. Winter is coming and things are looking gloomy. Typically November weather in Indiana is even more awful than October. First, it rains much of the month. Second, it's started getting chilly outside by then. When November begins, it's already a bit cold in Indiana. However, about midway through the month the temperature usually drops severely. Then the two previous weeks of somewhat-tolerable drizzle is followed by a fortnight of bitterly cold rain, which can be some of the most miserable weather imaginable. That's the time when Hoosiers go inside where the basketball games are.

My college roommate gave me a court level ticket for an IU basketball game against Purdue once (he was on a tennis road trip that week, I believe). The seat was located behind the south basket, near the edge of the bleachers. I was close enough to the tunnel that when the Boilermakers came out of their locker room, I could yell at Troy Lewis that he was a bum. That's what fans used to call the opposing players. (Lewis, an All-State prep player, previously had played for Richmond High School's conference rival, Anderson. For all I know, he was probably a good guy in real life.) In a thriller, Indiana won by a single point in overtime.

Sitting at court level for an Indiana-Purdue basketball game

was just about the most excitement that you could have in our state at that time. It epitomized Hoosier Hysteria and was as close to nirvana as we could get during the 1980s.

I got to see the Michigan baseball team play IU once and watched the amazing Jim Abbott (a one-handed pitcher and future major league star with the Angels) throw against the Hoosiers. Hal Morris, future Reds first baseman, was also a member of the Wolverines. However, two of Cincinnati's 1990 World Series heroes, Barry Larkin and Chris Sabo, had already graduated from Michigan and moved on to the pros by then.

Our dorm building was just behind the baseball field. The IU ballpark was not an elaborate place yet in those days. If the doors were left open on a warm spring afternoon, occasionally a wayward foul ball would go rolling down the hallway.

Supposedly future football star Pete Stoyanovich lived on our dorm floor but no one seemed to ever actually see him there. Nevertheless, girls would write all over a message board that was stuck to his door. Pete was busy kicking for the football team (which was a perennial bowl team in those days) and was also a top soccer player for IU's national powerhouse squad. He later made millions of dollars as a kicker for the Dolphins and Chiefs in the NFL.

Diamond Life

The angry bird is back again in the tree outside my window and is very noisy today. It's as loud as a car alarm going off. I'm not sure what kind of bird it is, but I'm pretty sure it's not a cardinal. Although technically, redbirds are supposed to range as far west as Phoenix, I have never seen one here. As far as I can tell, pro football players are the only cardinals in Arizona.

But I would rather attend a pro baseball game than an ultra-expensive pro football game that I could see better on TV

at home anyway. And the food at the ballpark is way better than when I was a kid.

At Chase Field here in Phoenix, I saw the Reds play baseball against the Arizona Diamondbacks on a bright Sunday afternoon in April 2011. Janet and I went to a “park and ride” station and took the train downtown in order to avoid traffic. The stadium roof was open and our seats were located under an overhang a few rows behind home plate. We were not in the sun, so it was windy and cold sitting there and I wore my ski jacket. A lot of runs were scored but Cincinnati lost, sadly.



Figure 32. At Chase Field for the Reds vs. Diamondbacks game in August 2015 (photo by Jennifer Titus).

I got to see the teams meet again in August 2015, on a Sunday birthday outing with my new girlfriend Jennifer. This time, the train ride was from the east side of the Valley. The stadium roof was closed, so it was more temperate inside, but

we were sitting in uncomfortable backless seats in right field. (I didn't know that such things still existed in a professional baseball stadium. It was like 1927 or something out there.) Even so, I became drowsy by the seventh inning. The Diamondbacks wore their pinstriped purple and white throwback uniforms from their 2001 World Series season. During the game itself, there was not as much action as in 2011, yet the Reds still lost again – in extra innings, no less.

Live Sports from Space

Cable TV was just taking off when I was in high school. When we got a whopping *seven* extra channels of satellite networks, we could tune in to the early days of ESPN. It had no professional sports back then. Its schedule consisted mostly of college events (with a lot of basketball) and one-hour SportsCenter programs – an unprecedented show full of scores and amazing highlights.

Another fantastic innovation was televised daily baseball. WGN broadcast all the Chicago Cubs games and WTBS showed the Atlanta Braves nightly. It was great to come home from high school every afternoon and see baseball on TV. (The Cubs had no lights at Wrigley Field yet and so they only played day games then.) That was an incredible thing in those days because, although we did get to see the Reds play on our local stations, the only other national games we had were on Saturdays and Monday nights (and those featured the same few teams over and over).

The Major League Baseball All-Star Game (held annually in July) was a big event back then because you could see players from teams like Texas and Cleveland that were never on TV. You only knew about their star players from studying baseball cards.

Once cable and satellite TV became a normal part of Americans' home lives, sports programming became a staple of the regular viewing fare for many people. (OK, most of them are probably still men, but I'd guess those numbers are changing.) For example, there are football games on TV several nights each week. After sitting with my daughter during the afternoons of 2010, I would have to catch the bus back to my apartment in old town Scottsdale. Around sunset, nearby Camelback Mountain would turn red as I walked down to the nearest bus stop, which was located in front of a tavern. By that hour, evening football games had started in the East. So while I waited outside for my bus, I was able to watch games on the big televisions inside the pub through its large front windows.

While I lived in Avondale, my girlfriend Janet would often leave the room for the last two minutes when sports were on TV and so she missed the end of many games. I could never quite understand that because I don't get up before the finish of a movie (even a bad one) if I've watched it all the way to the last scene and then just leave without seeing the conclusion. And frustratingly, my ex-wife would *always* wait for the final timeout of a game to suddenly walk in the room and want something or other.

When I worked at *The Graphic*, I once discussed "reading the daily newspaper" with a lady clerk from the front office downstairs. I noted that women generally seem to skip the sports pages but that men don't throw away a whole section like that (or at least I don't – maybe I was wrong). Although there usually wasn't a lot in the business section that was interesting to me, I typically looked at it and at least skimmed the headlines, then I always read the entertainment section.

I haven't known very many men who don't follow sports (I thought they were all just fictional characters on *The Big Bang Theory*) but I seem to have met most of their exes, wives, and

girlfriends over the years. These women always *claim* that their husbands and significant others “don't like sports” and that they “never watch games on television.” Usually, they also insist that these fellows enjoy working in the kitchen and do most of the cooking at home...

OK, there was one fellow who occasionally wrote a culinary column for our newspaper in Richmond. I guess cooking was his hobby because he had a different regular profession and was well-known in the community for his work. One day while I was waiting in the doctor's office for an appointment, he was there too but I never actually met him. How did I know it was him? Unlike me, he actually looked like his newspaper photo.

Bad Breaks and Fast Breaks

When most people think of karma, they probably think of it as either good or bad. Perhaps they believe that it is fixed one way or the other. But sometimes bad karma reverses itself, and thereby brings a certain harmony to the universe – becoming like the opposites known as yin and yang in Eastern philosophy. At least that's my take on things.

The world of sports is full of examples of this phenomenon. Think about the Chicago Cubs of 2016, the Boston Red Sox of 2004, and John Elway's Denver Broncos of 1997-98. Another illustration of this matter is one that most sports fans have probably never heard about, except around my hometown.

As a student at Richmond High School (RHS), I learned that the school had experienced a lot of disappointment in basketball. Their teams played in Indiana's powerful North Central Conference (NCC), and RHS was the only school in the league to have never won a state title in hoops. Even when they had outstanding squads, the Red Devils had always seemed to hit the wall during the semistate (round of 16) games held at

the famed Hinkle Fieldhouse in Indianapolis (the one in the movie *Hoosiers*). The unbelievable always seemed to materialize at precisely the wrong moment, giving rise to the phrase, "Hinkle jinx." Was the school mascot somehow causing their unlucky fate? People wondered.

The school hoped to change its seemingly bad karma in the early 1980s. A large, modern (and long-overdue) new gym was built for basketball and a successful head coach hired from South Bend. RHS then conquered the Hinkle jinx and reached the state championship game twice, in 1985 and 1987.

But it still wasn't quite enough. Bad luck struck Richmond again. In almost any other season, those highly-talented teams would have dominated their final game opponents, but RHS had the misfortune of twice facing a historic state basketball dynasty. Loaded with star players and two Mr. Basketball award winners, the Marion Giants won three state titles in a row from 1985 to 1987. The unlucky Red Devils seemed eternally cursed.

Bouncing right back in 1988, RHS was ranked #1 in the state all season. The high-flying Red Devils looked unbeatable as they dunked all over their overmatched opponents each weekend. But the Hinkle jinx returned at semistate time. Against Ben Davis (a much larger high school from the Indianapolis west side), Richmond repeatedly fired quality shots at the hoop that somehow kept spinning in and out, over and over again. It was like the proverbial lid was on the basket. The apparent season of destiny was merely an illusion. RHS had fallen short once more.

Four years later, RHS again put together a talented bunch of players, but that group seemed destined to go down as underachievers who couldn't quite seem to get their act together. They kept losing close but winnable games to top teams like Anderson High School. Again, it seemed like the

Red Devils' best wasn't good enough to overcome the school's bad karma, but they kept at it and gradually kept improving.

The scrappy Red Devils made it through the regional, reaching Hinkle Fieldhouse with rising hopes but as a decided underdog. In the opening game, Ben Davis upset #1-ranked Anderson, giving the Richmond fans some optimism as the Red Devils then won their own game to reach the final.

In their battle with Ben Davis on a Saturday night, Richmond stayed even until the final seconds, when the Red Devils suddenly had the ball with a chance to win the game. But as one player drove to the hoop, the ball was stripped loose by a defender and it bounded away – straight into the hands of the smallest RHS player on the floor, who picked it up and hurriedly tossed a three-point shot at the basket. It hit the bottom of the net with only one second left, and the unlikeliest of Richmond's teams was going to the state finals. Somehow, their decades-long bad luck seemed to be reversing itself.

A week later, the unheralded Red Devils played in the 1992 state semifinals at Indianapolis against a young team from Jeffersonville, a southern Indiana city located across the Ohio River from Louisville. Jeffersonville's quick, athletic players were like a mirror version of the RHS squad.

Although more experienced, the Richmond players found themselves trailing by five points in the final minute. Then destiny arrived at the dance again. A player who had not made a three-point shot all season finally made one, a surprising bank shot off the backboard. After an opposing player threw a long pass out of bounds, RHS scored again to improbably send the game into overtime. Suddenly it was Jeffersonville that was experiencing all the bad luck. As it turned out, those Richmond Red Devils were very talented free throw shooters and after taking the lead early in the extra session, they effortlessly put the game away from the charity stripe.

Next up for RHS was a rematch with Lafayette Jeff in the state championship game. (Richmond had stunned Lafayette late in the season by making an unlikely full court shot at the buzzer.) The Bronchos were strong, tall, and physical but the smaller Red Devils were much more athletic. Although Richmond was behind late in the game, Lafayette couldn't shoot free throws very well, which kept RHS in the contest. Trailing with just seconds remaining, the Red Devils raced up the floor with the ball for one final play, sinking a long clutch three-point basket to send the state final into overtime.

The Red Devils scored first and then the Bronchos' shooting touch went completely cold. From there, RHS just needed to keep knocking down their free throws to capture the school's first Indiana state basketball championship, which they did.

After losing twice in the state title game to the first school (Marion) to ever win the championship three years in a row, the RHS basketball program had bounced back. They had become the first team to ever win two overtime games at the same state finals. Karma had reversed itself and balance was restored somewhat to the sports universe. There seems to be a lesson: your fate is not predetermined, bad luck is not always forever, and you can change your own destiny.

(Just a postscript to the story: Jeffersonville's unlucky young team was also called the Red Devils – but their fortunes would soon change as well. They had only arrived in Indianapolis a year too soon. The following March, they would break their own jinx and win the state title themselves. Another amazing aspect of this tale to think about.)

Chapter XVI: It's Just a Fantasy

“There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.” – Benjamin Disraeli, former British prime minister

I have always been sort of an organizer, starting clubs and holding get-togethers at my house. So in 1990, I created a fantasy sports league for my friends and me, which made me the commissioner by default. At the time, rotisserie sports sounded like a fun idea and I didn't realize what I was getting myself into. Originally our group was known as the Late Night League but eventually I changed its name to the Greenbears League. (“Greenbears” was actually a long acronym for some words that I can no longer remember.)

We started by competing in a trial run season of summer baseball but then we quickly added pro football and then pro basketball. We even tried hockey once or twice and had annual “pick 'em” contests for college football and basketball games. But by the early 2000s, we were back to having just pro football and baseball leagues. All the others were just too much for everyone to do. Getting enough players for fantasy leagues seems like it should be easy but in reality it's like pulling teeth.

My cousin Tim and a few of my longtime school friends were all founding members of the league. My neighbor and my editor at the newspaper also played in those leagues at the very beginning. Over the years, a few folks at SLP also participated randomly in our various leagues but mostly in football. I called our members “owners” more often than “managers” and “coaches,” although in the world of fantasy sports these titles are pretty much interchangeable. After so many years, it's amazing to me that some of the original guys are still participants today. Occasionally, a random person on the Internet from parts unknown has joined in a league for a year

or two with mixed success but they've never stayed with us for very long. And even though I added a second football league a few years ago, one that is open to anyone on the web (and always fills up quickly), I've never really had much luck in recruiting new coaches from here in Phoenix.

Remarkably, our fantasy leagues are still going strong in football. Although we still compete in baseball, it's not with the same level of enthusiasm that we had during the 1990s, when the concept of fantasy sports was still a hot new idea. I missed one baseball season during my stroke recovery but I was able to resume my role as commissioner in time for football season.

To the Stat Cave!

Before the Internet automated the process of fantasy sports statkeeping and team management in the late '90s, I (as our league commissioner) had to do all the scoring by hand. At that time, we used a point system for baseball (similar to fantasy football) instead of the more complicated rotisserie format. I started by making photocopies of blank scoresheets that I had drawn up. **Necessity is the mother of invention.** Then, each week of the baseball season, I would:

(1) buy copies of the national newspaper containing the full page lists of player stats that usually appeared on Tuesdays and Wednesdays (they were 50 cents each and worth every penny);

(2) calculate the new raw season totals for each individual player on all the fantasy teams' rosters and write those down on the blank scoresheets;

(3) subtract their previous season totals to produce weekly scores for all those players, writing those down in the grid;

(4) using a calculator, I added up the players' weekly scores in order to tabulate all our team totals.

Now that I had the results for the week, I also had to:

(4) rank the teams and produce our league standings;
(5) make corrections to update the pages of team rosters;
(This last task was done using an old manual typewriter,
which frequently required buying new bottles of Wite-out
correction fluid.)

(6) list all the roster transactions made during that scoring
period by all the teams;

(7) Then I went to a nearby convenience store to photocopy
the results for each team's owner; and finally

(8) I passed them out as soon as possible (or mailed them,
in some cases as necessary).

Doing the football scoring was only slightly different than
the process for baseball. In step 2, I just totaled up that week's
points for each player using the box scores from Monday's
newspaper, and so no step 3 was necessary. Basketball
statkeeping was similar to football. These two sports were a bit
easier to score than baseball but still took quite a bit of effort.

Of course, playing in those leagues required each team's
owner to pay a small stat fee to cover all those copies (and also
postage, if necessary). I didn't make any money from doing all
that work, I did it entirely to have fun playing in fantasy
leagues. There weren't really any alternative options back then
except paying an exorbitant fee to a commercial fantasy league
scoring service. Also, wading into the middle of all those stats
every week greatly helped me manage my team (although
anyone else could have read the newspapers and stat sheets too
and gotten the same information that I had). To make player
transactions ("roster moves"), owners had to phone me on
Mondays, starting at a specific time (usually 12 noon).

This entire process lasted from our inaugural season in
1990 until 1998. Football and basketball league scores could
take up to two hours each week to complete. Baseball statistics
were much more intricate and took a good four or five hours to

tabulate (although frequently, I tried to split up the work by doing the American League player stats on Tuesdays and then the National League player scores on Wednesdays, as each league's statistics were published on those days).



Figure 33. During the calculation of weekly fantasy scores, there were way too many numbers going around inside my head (image by Willfried Wende).

I often spent time calculating fantasy league scores during my evening dinner hour at work, since the cafeteria was quiet at 8 p.m. There were lots of afternoons when, on the way to work, I stopped outside the liquor store near SLP to quickly buy the national newspaper for two quarters from the machine that looked like a little TV set. Alternatively, the tiny gas station located across the railroad tracks usually had them too. During a long session of calculating fantasy sports scores, all those numbers going through my head often started to seem overwhelming.

In those days, you conducted each season's draft in person.

Everyone met at somebody's house (usually in my basement) for two or three hours with food and drinks. It was much like a poker night. This often resulted in a few memorable moments.

Like many other fans, some of our managers enjoyed a few cold beers during our league meetings. This decision could sometimes result in bad draft choices by a coach on selection night. For example, Albert Bentley was a mediocre running back for a number of years with the Indianapolis Colts. One year, during a preseason game in August (right before our meeting), Bentley unluckily broke his leg. Unaware of this, a coach named Sam picked Bentley late on draft night. We tried repeatedly to tell him that his selection was injured and was out for the season, but Sam wouldn't believe us and insisted on his draft choice. Finally, we all wrote down "Albert Bentley" on our worksheets for Sam's team. After the meeting, Sam kept asking everybody, "Did Albert Bentley really break his leg?" So after that, drafting an injured player forever became known as "pulling an Albert Bentley."

By 1998, fantasy sports games were being offered online so we started using Yahoo to run our leagues. I had usually won them before the Internet took over the arduous task of statkeeping, but on the Web I didn't do as well. I wasn't paying as much attention to all the numbers as I had done previously (when I had pored over the stats and compiled the scores by hand each week, using the newspaper). On the other hand, that fantastic advance in technology meant a lot less responsibility and work for me. Without that, I would not have been able to keep our leagues going. (I definitely did not have that kind of spare time after my daughter was born.)

We continued to have fun with the league after making the big change to online contests. One year as an April Fools' joke, I emailed our owners that I would be resigning as commissioner so that I could spend more time writing a

screenplay for a film. Based on a book about a baseball catcher who doubled as a spy during World War II, the movie was to star famous actor George Clooney. I added that the new commissioner would be Justin Nutter Holkes (“just another hoax”). The Nutter family was prominent in Dayton sports so I thought that their name would add credibility to my story. Unfortunately, I don't think anyone actually believed it for more than a moment or two.

From the Game Board to the Keyboard

In the early '70s, my cousin Tim and I played Strat-O-Matic (SOM) board game baseball almost weekly. *Simulation sports* are a relative of the classic board games used to recreate famous military battles (with you as the general, of course).

Using SOM, you could recreate entire past sports seasons, choose teams' lineups, and decide their strategies. By replaying their games, you could attempt to improve a team's performances through your own managerial skills. You could also draft your own squads and create new leagues, like a more advanced and hands-on version of today's fantasy sports.

SOM's baseball games proceeded with the manager at bat rolling a pair of dice, then consulting individual player cards (and often numerous charts) for the results of each play. It sounds complicated, but actually each game only took about 30 minutes once you got the hang of it (far faster than a real baseball game). SOM's football game worked pretty much the same way but its contests seemed to move a lot slower.

Despite a lot of painstaking work by the good folks at SOM, the use of cards and dice meant that those board games had some built-in limitations to their accuracy. Today's simulations are played on computers instead. (Another modern feature is that PC games allow many people to compete against each

other in online contests). These strategically advanced matches are more akin to chess than to action video games. By contrast, software like EA's Madden Football relies mostly on a person's ability to control a joystick. Action video games can be fun and their graphics often look great (for instance, I really enjoy playing EA's FIFA soccer), but their results will not be nearly as accurate as the much more complex simulation games that are based on detailed statistics.

Diamond Mind Baseball (DMB) was one of the best early computer baseball simulations. I completed several seasons of DMB on my laptop over a couple of years during the late 1990s. In 2013, I started a project in which I began coaching a career franchise (one in which you operate the same team over multiple seasons) using APC Pro Football software from Dave Koch Sports. Its accuracy and attention to detail is amazing, plus the software's artificial intelligence (AI) is highly skilled. So in 2017, I added APC Baseball. Even though I just play APC games against the computer's AI and not against human opponents, these programs have allowed me to write my own personal sports history and do things my way.

I understand the enthusiasm of today's gamers for competing against each other in contests like Madden Football. Playing the contests yourself is often much more fun than just watching sports on TV. However, it seems like most modern video games have gotten too difficult to just have fun with them. Such games involve pressing multiple buttons to execute even routine moves, which requires the player to have very nimble fingers. These functions could be simplified for greater enjoyment. (This also might explain the current popularity of relatively uncomplicated cell phone games.) On the other hand (perhaps literally), many highly-talented gamers prefer the ability to do more difficult maneuvers ("tricks") with their controllers, so they prefer having this complexity. Video games

have become the province of piano players.

Going even farther on this topic, research has shown that playing video games can improve dexterity. I can affirm that this is true. Learning again how to control FIFA Soccer using a laptop during my recovery turned out to be valuable physical therapy. My left hand does work better now, although not as well as it should. I am just now beginning to clumsily shuffle decks of cards again.

Today, almost everyone has video games on their cell phone. I used to play neat-looking little apps like “Swipy Man,” “Words with Friends,” “Angry Birds,” “Super Hoops” (shooting basketballs), various card games, and air hockey. I enjoyed them for a short while but I have lost interest in them now. I do have a bowling game on my Kindle that I enjoy occasionally.

One of the drawbacks to most sports video games is that the canned announcers repeat themselves too often because there are only so many sound files for the software to use. Fortunately, FIFA 08 does include a few good lines from its two colorful British soccer commentators, Clyde and Andy.

Verbose halftime analysis by Andy can range from how much he “enjoyed the first 45 minutes” to “poor” (in his Scottish accent, this sounds like “poo-uh”). In a high-scoring contest, occasionally Clyde says, “It’s gone from bad to worse for the poor goalkeeper. He’s having what they call ‘a nightmare’.” After a great score, Clyde might exclaim, “I say! What a cracker!” or “Everything he touches turns to goals!”

But following a bad shot, Clyde might shout, “Oh dear, he’s missed it!” or “Not quite what was required!” Then Andy might add something gruff like, “The lad couldn’t hit a barn door with a machine gun.”

Chapter XVII: Better Literature than Never

“Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man.” – Francis Bacon

As I compiled information for the appendices, I added a few short stories and notes about reading to go along with them. Eventually, I decided that they belonged in their own chapter. So here they are, assembled without regard to any definite pattern and yet secure in their location here in the aft section of this book.

Elementary, My Dear Watson

Over the years, my interests in reading have changed significantly. As a youngster, I began by learning about historical events and famous persons, then I tackled sports novels and magazines. In the fifth grade, everyone was reading *Star Trek* books from the school library, so eventually I took a look to see what all the fuss was about and actually liked them. (My father watched *Star Trek* reruns on TV every afternoon but I had no interest in them. I have a suspicion that he secretly wanted to be a science fiction writer.)

By the time that I became really interested in the series, the fad had already passed at school and *Star Trek* wasn't cool anymore, but I kept on reading science fiction and even joined a book club. In those years, there were numerous new sci-fi novels had controversial and mature themes for the first time, so my parents didn't really know what I was reading. Not even realizing that I was breaching the rules for young readers, I became deeply engrossed in plenty of those strange stories.

Beginning in high school, I stopped reading sci-fi for a long time but I rediscovered the genre again a few years ago. In the years just before my stroke, I read many of the book series that followed the movie *Star Wars*.

While attending high school, often I was fighting off sleep to read war stories and I delved into strange tales of the supernatural. During my college days, I was usually immersed in textbooks but in the years afterward I read works written on a wide variety of subjects. Among those were political biographies, spy novels, informational texts about Russia along with some of its typically-difficult literature, memoirs of famous entertainment figures, tales of alleged alien encounters, and exposés on sports “from the inside” (as written by those close to the action). Since my divorce in 2013, I’ve read many bestselling legal thrillers, zipped through a few more sci-fi adventures, and gambled on some poker books.

I used to read frequently while eating. As a youngster, I often brought books and sports magazines to the dinner table. As a young adult, my meals were regularly accompanied by newspapers and weekly news magazines. At SLP, I wasn't the only one who brought newspapers to the cafeteria each day. Out-of-town dailies were surprisingly common, mostly carried in by sports-minded employees like me. Once left behind in the upstairs lunchroom, those papers usually disappeared quickly.

If I didn't have a newspaper with me at work, often I would quickly find four or five interesting articles on the Internet (usually about sports or the paranormal), print them rapidly, and take them upstairs with me to read during my break and lunch times. Today, tablet devices have made reading on the go much easier, especially with the wide availability of online publications. You can even convert your documents to e-book files, copy them to a Kindle, and then look at them whenever and wherever you want.

Since having a stroke, my reading glasses are a bit stronger now than before. My right ear sits a bit lower than the left one, so my glasses rest at a bit of an angle (as do my baseball caps, which tend to point toward my right side for a similar reason). Even after a careful cleaning, often the lenses are still smudged as if I had never washed them at all. However, it seems that using a clean towel each time is greatly helpful. It is quite frustrating when the lenses get cloudy and I need glasses to look at my glasses.

Tiger Beat

A chapter about reading wouldn't be complete without a few words about one of my favorite comic strips, *Calvin and Hobbes*. If you are unfamiliar with the story about a small boy and his stuffed tiger, you should check out some of the large published collections. They are available from Internet booksellers and used copies are not very expensive. (In fact, I used to have them all myself.) Many of the individual strips can also be read online for free.

The general decline in readership of printed newspapers during recent years has also had an adverse effect on the comic strip, which was always a major feature of daily publications. Yet even before the enormous shift to online news, the need to make more room for paid advertising caused a major reduction in page space for comic strip panels. While many excellent cartoons are now published on the Internet (sometimes called *webcomics*), finding them there requires actively searching for the ones that you want to read each day, unlike the funnies page that was always in hand while reading the newspaper.

In the view of many readers, the quality of the few strips remaining in print has become quite poor and they seem to remain in existence largely to sell merchandise. By contrast,

Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* strips were unquestionably some of the most brilliant comic creations ever. He didn't want to sell out and license his characters, not even to make a stuffed Hobbes tiger, so *all* the window decals that you see of Calvin peeing on things are counterfeits. Watterson quietly walked away from drawing his strip in 1995 and completely disappeared from the comics scene. "By the end of 10 years, I'd said pretty much everything I had come there to say," he told a reporter from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in 2010.

There's an epic saga of Calvin going forward in his "time machine" (a large cardboard box) to avoid doing his homework, hoping that his future self will have finished it already. That resulted in three Calvins appearing and two tigers actually writing the report. That one is probably my favorite story. It stretches across several pages in one of the collections.

In another of the strip's classic stories, Calvin's father (who occasionally told tall tales) tried to explain old photographs. He claimed that the world used to be black and white, and it only turned color in the 1930s. Another memorable comic strip featured Calvin telling Hobbes about a sci-fi movie in which humans are only zombie slaves to machines. Then Calvin suddenly exclaimed, "Hey! What time is it? My TV show is on!"

Branches on our Family Tree

Many Williamsons have been successful in their fields of endeavor. A few have become either rich or famous, or both. (A brief Internet search will reveal their identities.)

Among the accomplished Williamsons of yesteryear are: a U.S. congressman who represented North Carolina at the 1787 Constitutional Convention, an award-winning chemist, a

renowned geologist who became one of the richest men in the world through his diamond mine, two former major league baseball pitchers (one of whom captured the 1999 Rookie of the Year award), a legendary science fiction writer, an Olympic hockey coach whose underdog USA team won the silver medal, a well-known British film actor, a pro football head coach, and an Olympic distance runner.

More recently, distinguished Williamsons have included: a 2009 Nobel Prize-winning economist and university professor, a noted medical journal editor and professor of pharmacy in England, a “Giant” baseball outfielder, a six-time Olympic archer who won a bronze medal in 2004, a statuesque Irish model who was chosen as Miss United Kingdom in 2002, a successful Hollywood screenwriter and filmmaker, a vice president of a large cable sports network, a professional poker player with over \$2 million in career winnings and a World Series of Poker bracelet, a bestselling author of self-help books, and numerous prominent executives in world business.

In addition, Mount Williamson is the second highest peak in California and the sixth highest in the United States. There are also six cities and three counties named “Williamson” in the United States (including one here in Arizona, located near Prescott). It should also be noted that “Williamson's Sapsucker” is a species of woodpecker whose habitat ranges from Canada to Mexico, and so it is possible that one could even be found here in Arizona. Finally, Williamsons' woodpeckers have been confirmed by science!

By Any Other Name

In *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare wrote, “What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” During early 1999, while I was writing football

columns online using my middle name (Brian) as my pen name, I received an email from *another* Brian Williamson, who humorously “demanded” that I stop using his name.

This other Brian was quite a nice fellow. Years before java drinks and coffee shops become mega-popular, he drew “coffee humor” comic strips entitled *The BUZZ Shot*. He was most likely a few years younger than me, so I suppose that I really had first claim on the name – but since moving to Phoenix, I’ve gone back to using my first name anyway. I’m not sure if it proved to be a benefit to him in the long term, though. At the time of this writing, I was unable to load the magazine’s former website that had published his strips.

My father claimed that our family came from England. “Williamson” became a popular surname there after William the Conqueror successfully led the Norman invasion of 1066, defeating and killing his rival, King Harold Godwinson, at the Battle of Hastings. Ironically, my grandfather was named Harold Williamson.

Across the border in medieval Scotland, the Williamson family was a *sept* (branch) of Clan Gunn. During the 1400s, there was a bloody feud between the Clan Gunn and the Clan Keith. This feud was finally settled in 1978 through a Treaty of Friendship agreed upon by their descendants, the modern clan leaders. In another strange twist to this story, my father was named Keith Williamson, which is somewhat like being called “Obama Bush.” (Perhaps my grandparents knew that we were really English and not Scottish. Or maybe they did it because there was no Internet during the Great Depression.) Oddly enough, my grandmother always called my father by his middle name, Owen – a traditional Welsh name with ancient Celtic and Gaelic origins.

Considering our family history, I suppose I’m lucky that my parents didn’t name me Napoleon.

Chapter XVIII: Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost

“My favorite things in life don't cost any money. It's really clear that the most precious resource we all have is time.” – Steve Jobs

When I was employed at SLP back in Richmond, Indiana it was good pay (although not great) and we didn't have to work too hard there, so I said to myself that I would ride it out for as long as it lasted. Then I moved to Arizona in 2009, ending up in Avondale after an 18 month adventure. I encountered a few ups and downs in the situation there, but I told myself the same thing then. However, change is inevitable and eventually each of those periods came to a close. In both cases, that led to difficult and uncertain times. Then I had a stroke in February 2014 that reset things in many different and challenging ways.

Since I have sort of a second chance now, I suppose that I might as well plan on doing a few new things and having some new experiences. In numerous sessions during my recovery, my counselor Marlene often emphasized just that. During one appointment, she said, “Lazy people don't get their goals.” For one of her weekly assignments, I had to make a list of things that I wanted to do after I completed therapy and went home.

Here in warm and sunny Arizona, many people enjoy forms of outdoor recreation such as hiking. But I have no interest in going camping in the great outdoors. Hundreds of years ago, many of our forefathers endured hunger and disease, struggled against harsh weather conditions, and battled with various others in this vast, rugged land. Why? So each one of those refugees from European oppression could have their own “home on the range,” where he or she could live free and rest

comfortably inside while sheltered from the elements. Seemingly unaware of America's challenging and arduous past, what do a lot of bored people do here in the 21st century? They head back to the unrelenting, miserable realm of Mother Nature so they can go camping and hiking. They don't know how good they've got it today.

The Bucket List was a film about two terminally-ill men who finally set out to experience all the things they had always wanted to do but had never made time for, before they finally “kicked the bucket.” The first fellow's list contained many heart-warming yet generic wishes like “kiss the most beautiful girl in the world,” “do something nice for a complete stranger,” and “see something majestic.” Then the wealthy second man livened up the discussion by adding risky stunts like skydiving.

The film ultimately succeeds through the characters' fulfillment of the simpler yet more rewarding items on the list before they both reached the end of their time on Earth. (My list would skip the more non-specific goals. I think I've probably done a few of those things anyway.)

Noted mythologist and writer Joseph Campbell believed that people should attempt to travel through a spiritual journey toward the type of life that each one ought to be living. To this end, he often advised others to “Follow your bliss.” If I set my sights high, optimistically I can come up with a few big ideas of my own, including things that I probably cannot do anymore and likely never will. So, having watched and enjoyed *The Bucket List* recently, here are some activities that I have yet to complete, in no particular order:

1. Meet a famous world leader. Mikhail Gorbachev spoke here in the Valley a few years ago but I was unable to attend his lecture.

2. Play in the World Series of Poker. Competing in the \$10,000 Main Event is probably a pipe dream but perhaps I

could enter a smaller \$1,000 contest. An entire month of these tournaments is held in Las Vegas every summer.

3. Drive a Ferrari. This is still a goal of mine in one form or another. I've read that you can rent one of these Italian supercars in Las Vegas at a cost of “just” a few hundred dollars for an afternoon.

4. Visit Mount Williamson, located in California.



Figure 34. Mount Williamson (photo by “Phomchick”).

5. Take a trip along the Pacific Coast Highway. I would drive north through California on S.R. 1 and then on up into Oregon and Washington on U.S. 101 (summer travel is advisable for this route). Since this excursion would not be quite as lengthy as the Cannonball Run, it's still plausible that this outing could happen someday. However, there's no chance that I would try to make the trip in a Ferrari, perhaps in a comfortable luxury car like a Mercedes or Lincoln instead.

6. Attend a poker meet-up event with some other chip collectors from Chiptalk or the Poker Chip Forum.

7. Spend an afternoon on the beach in Southern California. It always looks like fun in the movies. (I jokingly told my girlfriend that I want to be like Bruce Jenner... I want to have a house on the beach, too.)

8. See the Rose Bowl football game. Hopefully, ASU or USC would be playing in Pasadena on New Year's Day. Alternatively, I would be just as thrilled about attending a USC football game in the L.A. Memorial Coliseum (where the 1984 Olympics were held).

In reality, many things that seem like they should be exciting are not all that they are cracked up to be. For example, the Super Bowl has become too large of an event (the festivities last for an entire week now), so it has become overcrowded and overpriced. A lot of popular vacation spots are the same way, while unanticipated seasonal weather there can pose problems too. My ex-wife took my young daughter on holiday to Hawaii and said it rained there every day.

Reading through some websites with suggestions for a bucket list, I dismissed a lot of their recommendations immediately. Many activities would be downright dangerous for me now. For example, mountain biking. My doctor at Osborn said that considering my history of head injury, he advised me against doing that, so I agreed. One Internet list, "World Festivals and Events," had numerous great ideas that I will never be able to do, neither physically nor financially.

But getting involved in those kinds of affairs isn't really all that important. After you're gone, whether you did a bunch of big things or not doesn't matter much to your still-living friends, relatives, and peers. The world keeps on turning and they have their own lives to think about. For example, while the actions of famous leaders like Julius Caesar and George

Washington were vitally important, today we only discuss their exploits in history classes. We don't really talk about them in our everyday lives. The personal "to-do list" that I created for the counselor during my recovery was much more valuable to me than any grand bucket list, although not as large in scale.

Also, I was surprised to realize that I already had completed many of the bucket list suggestions from the web article. Having previously achieved some of those goals is much more important to me now than any of the remaining items on my list, and certainly more satisfying. It is really important to do the most challenging and memorable things while you are young, when you can enjoy them the most.

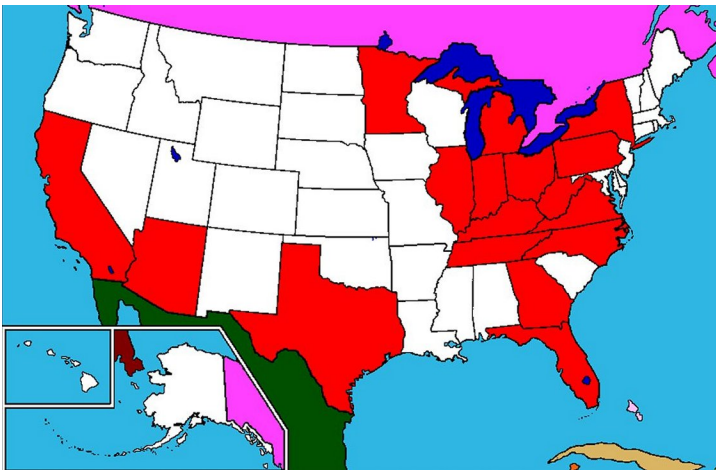


Figure 35. Map of the states that I've visited, pictured in red (plus Canada and Russia).

I have managed to travel a bit. As of spring 2017, I have lived in or visited 17 of the 50 states (including all of the most populous ones), accounting for 325 electoral votes – enough for me to become president!

Chapter XIX: What, Another Chapter?

“It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop.” – Confucius

This is another one of those chapters about me that I’ve composed mainly just “for the record” (i.e., for posterity), so I’ll try and keep it short. If you become bored while reading through this section, you should realize that I had to go through these stories over and over again while writing and proofreading. So things could have been worse: I could have hired you to be my ghostwriter.

There is a noted poker author (I shall keep his identity confidential here) who is very good at writing about the game and its colorful figures but tends to go off on tangents about his own family history. That’s when I often skip ahead to the next chapter. So if you do the same thing now, I won’t hold it against you. I understand completely.

Sense and Disability

When people ask, “How are you today?” they don’t want to hear about all your problems. So I always just say, “So far, so good.” In one of his routines, famed comedian George Carlin commented on people who greet you by saying, “Have a nice day.” He remarked, “Maybe I don’t *feel* like having a nice day. Maybe, just maybe, I’ve had 27 nice days in a row. And, by God, I’m ready for a crappy day.” Perhaps he was right. If we have a bad day once in a while, possibly we will appreciate the good ones more.

We pick up many expressions and mannerisms from

contact with people whom we have known well, and I am no exception. For example, when a cashier hands me a bag of items or a receipt, I often say, “Good deal!” instead of the more generic reply, “Thanks!” I used to be good friends with someone in high school who always used to say the same thing.

I almost completely lost my voice after my stroke and had to practice talking with the help of a speech therapist to get it back. Even now, sometimes my voice is just a hoarse whisper. Last year (for some hard-to-fathom reason), my ex-wife asked if I would be able to answer the phone if she started her own business. I had to decline for this reason (although I would have said no anyway). As Albert Einstein observed, “An intellectual solves a problem. A genius avoids it.” I try to pay careful attention to things that Einstein said.

Personality changes are a common part of brain trauma. I'm sure that I have changed but I wouldn't really know the difference, except that now I seem driven to write. Doing things can be an uphill struggle due to my disability so I break up chores into smaller bits. (There is an old proverb that says, “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.”) I try to do a little bit of one task now, do something else for a while, and then go back a bit later to work on the first activity some more. The trick is to not totally procrastinate and to actually return to the unfinished project. I'm not too great at doing that and so I find that I must continuously pursue improvement, but I know that I'm not the only one. Oscar Wilde once quipped, “I never put off till tomorrow what I can possibly do... the day after.”

Things that other people take for granted – like taking out the trash, changing the sheets, or cleaning the restroom – are a real challenge for me now. My girlfriend helps a lot by taking care of the kitchen. During my recovery at Osborn, I borrowed a tray from a food cart after dinner one evening, washed it, and then stashed it in my room so that I could safely microwave

bowls of soup in the employee lounge late at night.

The loss of balance caused by my stroke is largely responsible for frequent feelings of nausea and uneasiness. After my girlfriend and I watched *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving* on TV last autumn, the *Peanuts* gang appeared in a second half-hour show in which they reenacted the Pilgrims' long ocean voyage. I told her, "Every day, I feel like I'm riding on that boat myself." My left hand is still flaky and inconsistent. Some days, "Lefty" works just slightly better than the hand of a dead man. Often "Righty" isn't much better. They both tend to swing around abruptly with a jolt and knock things over or drop them. There is a medical term for this condition, I just don't recall the name of it, so it seems that I'm not the only one experiencing this problem.

I have made some moderate progress toward a vague semblance of normality over time. The brain repurposes portions of itself and builds new connections between neurons, mapping out new pathways to do the tasks that it once did normally. This process is called *neuroplasticity*. Even so, I move slowly now and it takes me a long time to do things. One recent afternoon, it took me 45 minutes to eat lunch. By contrast, my girlfriend (who is always in a hurry) left here at that same time, made three shopping stops with her two teenagers, and returned in only 45 minutes.

She still doesn't believe me, but I can't make something like that up.

Not Quite My Type

You can twist statistics to prove almost anything. Nevertheless, a good secretary should be able to type at a rate of 75 words per minute (WPM). Also keep in mind, I cannot actually "type" – I really only use four fingers. Through

practice, I have trained them to know approximately where all the keys are. Going at a “blazing fast” speed of up to 10 WPM, also while applying my efforts on an irregular basis, it has taken me about two years to write this book.

In contrast to my tortoise-like pace, my online research has revealed that 1,000 to 2,000 words per day is normal for most “real” part-time writers (those working in earnest despite time limitations) and so typically they can complete a book in about six weeks. Editing can add a bit of time to that process, of course. (Then there are the so-called writers who talk a good game but take years, if ever, to finish the “great American novel” they claim to be working on. These “fake authors” are not included in my analysis.)

I can't sit at the computer for very long because my balance problem affects my ability to focus on a task. (Not to mention the constant lapses in concentration and the frequent loss of short-term memory that I have now.) I also cannot multitask anymore, so if I start on a second project usually I go off on a tangent. I can only fix my attention on the latter activity and so I abandon the former one entirely. “So how did you write your books?” you might ask. Well, I have to type in short bursts with a lot of down time between sessions, resulting in a long, drawn-out process.

Recently, a friend asked me if I could recall something particular. I answered, “Some days, I have trouble remembering my own name. Which makes going to the mailbox more exciting.”

In Line at the Memory Bank

Mindfulness in Zen philosophy means to focus only on the present, not on the past or the future. A notable Zen concept is that thoughts are like clouds and we are supposed to let them

drift in and out of our minds in order to better concentrate our attention on the “here and now.” But my thoughts often float on by whether I want them to or not.

Memory loss represents a major ongoing problem for me. Visions from the past surface briefly and then they are gone again. I’ve learned that if I don’t write my recollections down quickly, they can vanish, possibly forever. I’m sure that I’m missing some important memories now, but exactly which ones, I can’t always be certain.

Some wise guys might suggest, “Your memory actually must be pretty good. Look at all the things you remembered for your books.” But it has taken months (and even years) for all of those flashbacks to randomly surface. During that time, I’ve been jotting down memories on little yellow notepads, brief reminders of noteworthy events that happened in my past. (I think I might know now why my father was constantly scribbling down illegible lists of things on the backs of used envelopes.) Later, having those mental cues on paper to help jog my memory, I can type up some of my notes when I feel rested and ready for a while. Often, after having a bad week, the result is that I have many pages full of handwritten yellow notes waiting, so then I have to play catch-up. At one point in my first book, I was 16 pages of notes behind.

My short term memory is especially poor. If I’m not at home, usually I can’t write down important things before they escape my mind. Worse, often I don’t even realize until much later that I was trying to keep something in my memory and then completely forgot what it was. Occasionally, I still ask my girlfriend to remember something for me – some comment, point, or story that we are talking about – so that I can add it to my notes when I get home. One time a few years ago while at a world-famous fast food chain, I received a double cheeseburger sandwich with only one burger on it – the second patty was

completely missing. Now I know why: my evil twin must have been working in the kitchen!

Sometimes if I'm away from a notepad, a mental picture can help me hold onto a memory for a bit longer. I can add about three different objects to these strange, mismatched images that form inside my head. More than that number and I start forgetting things. Individuals can be especially difficult to remember in this way, even famous persons.

My yellow notepads are not only used for keeping my book notes, they also contain "to-do" lists. They never seem to get much shorter though. If it seems like I'm not getting anything finished on the list, sometimes I will add something that I *did* do to the agenda and then cross it off, so I feel like I have accomplished *something* during my day. If it starts to look like I have far too much in front of me and I start to feel overwhelmed by it all, I try to tell myself that "everything will still be here tomorrow."

In the 1970s, I read a science fiction story called *Overdrawn at the Memory Bank* written by John Varley. (Get the print version and skip the lame movie.) While on a "cyber-vacation" sometime in the future, a man's mind becomes trapped inside a computer and then the host company has to extract him. The bosses assign a female employee to keep in contact with their disoriented client while he is stuck in cyberspace, where he is suffering bizarre effects on his psyche.

As I attempt to summon my own thoughts from the past, frequently I also find myself overdrawn at the memory bank while trying to quickly write down fleeting bits of information before I forget them. (I guess I don't have total recall either.) This isn't all bad. Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "The advantage of a bad memory is that one enjoys several times the same good things for the first time." Now a few old books, songs, movies, and TV shows are completely new to me again.

Chapter XX: All's Swell That Ends Swell

“I think I did pretty well, considering I started out with nothing but a bunch of blank paper.” – Steve Martin

We have reached the end of my narrative. Reliving many more of the episodes in this long, strange trip has been absorbing, yet exhausting. When I look back at my first book and read sections full of poor writing and bad grammar, sometimes I think, “I must have been drunk when I wrote this.” In sports, coaches of perennial losers like to keep repeating that they are “rebuilding.” But eventually teams must get built. The same concept applies to writing and I feel that my texts have kept improving with practice.

The process of writing has made me smarter and so I recommend that everyone should try it. Doing research has enabled me to find a greater depth of understanding about the topics of my essays, to examine philosophical issues such as the meaning of life, and to ponder the thoughts of wise men from long ago. When I began studying journalism during my college years (back in the 1980s), I could not have completed this much writing or done it nearly as well. Of course, back then I didn't have the Internet to help me.

Unfortunately, I don't get any free copies of my books. But even if I could just pass them out to everyone, that would be much like the episode of TV's *Two and a Half Men* in which the Harpers' conceited mother gave her son Alan a really odd birthday present: a framed picture of herself.

In the process of writing my books, I've learned that many more interesting things have happened to me than I ever realized. (I imagine that this is probably also true for everyone

else.) In addition, I've met a lot of remarkable and unusual people over the years. For that reason, my next book will focus on them. Whether by being either especially talented or highly unskilled, those individuals probably deserve some form of recognition. Having already written down a lot of those stories while working on my first two books, I think that they have turned out very well and that you will enjoy reading them.

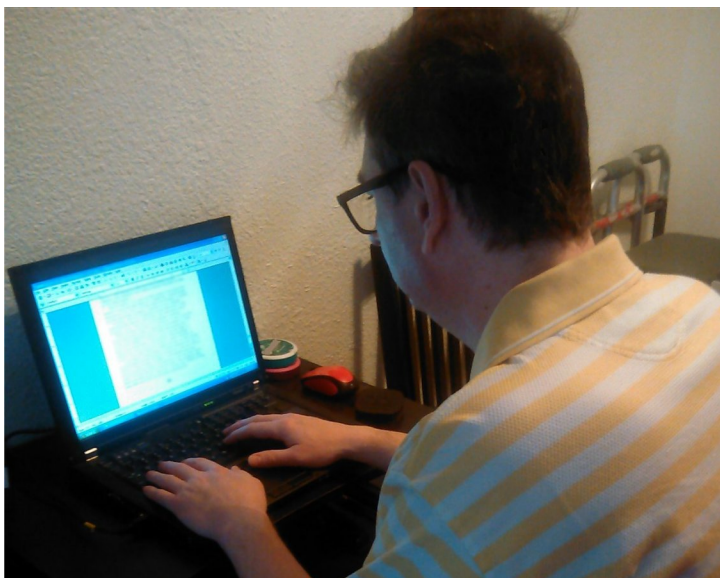


Figure 36. Busy typing a few paragraphs for this book (photo by Jennifer Titus).

I have thoroughly enjoyed reliving many of these events and putting them into print so that perhaps future generations can get a glimpse of how we lived here in 21st century America. At one point, I told my girlfriend that if I didn't make it to the end of this book, she would have to hold a séance so I could come back and finish it.

Appendix A: Writing Instruments

“The sole substitute for an experience which we have not ourselves lived through is art and literature.” – Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Here are a few pages about the process that was involved in writing this book. The text in this section was originally part of the introduction, but for this third edition I moved it back here, to get the reader into the main part of the book a bit quicker.

What’s My Line?

I told my girlfriend that the doctors and therapists during my recovery had said my only job was just to get better. I added that I knew her job (a teacher’s aide) is to work with kids that need help in school. But what is my own job now, I asked her? It seems that my current “job” is to write books, as best as I am able to (considering the obstacles that I must overcome as I can’t really do a real job anymore). In a later chapter, I will write more about those problems.

Each of us has something that he or she is good at. Sometimes it takes most of a lifetime to find out what that is. Hopefully I’ve found my calling now, even if it’s a bit late to really make the most of it. I used to take those useless online aptitude tests because I hoped that I would find out about some obscure yet lucrative career that I had missed out on and which would turn me into a millionaire overnight. But I had no such luck. The results always told me that I should be a writer.

Because of my curious nature, it seems that I am destined to be a journalist (or writer of some type). I explained to my girlfriend that when I ask her a lot of questions, it is not

because I am challenging her judgment, but that is just how I learn about things. She's gotten used to it now. We go places or do things, and then when I get home, I write about them.

When I was still a young lad, Grandma Williamson used to read *Charlotte's Web* to me and so that became one of my favorite books. She also gave me a wide variety of other children's books. That greatly encouraged me to read more – which is largely responsible for the successes that I've had in life. We need to encourage young people to read more.

Go to your local library sometime soon or visit Internet booksellers and browse the wide variety of texts available there. Countless outstanding authors exist whose works remain undiscovered by the masses. (Searching the list of free titles available in the Kindle shop, I can always find dozens of books on almost any subject. There are virtual hordes of writers out there, cranking out texts, one title after another.)

Finding a new author whose books you enjoy, and who makes you want to tell everyone about what you've just read, is much like landing on the Moon with Neil Armstrong or sailing to the New World with Columbus. A good book is like an old friend. You can enjoy its stories over and over again.

All Kinds of Stories

Ernest Hemingway said, "The good parts of a book may be only something a writer is lucky enough to overhear or it may be the wreck of his whole damn life and one is as good as the other." That pretty much sums up much of my writing.

As people get older, they start telling the same stories over and over again. At Osborn, one elderly CNA repeated a trivial anecdote *eight* times in a single day. I'm trying to avoid doing that and I don't want to tell a bunch of boring stories either. (OK, I might not be able to avoid that second part.) Sometimes

I do get the feeling that I've already written in my previous book about a particular event. I don't want to repeat myself, so that's when I do a word search and check the text to be certain. Occasionally I do need to refer back to something, though and I might even go into more detail about past experiences.

One day while I was telling my daughter about things that had happened when she was younger, she remarked, "I don't know where you *get* these stories." I replied, "I *lived* them." I never expected to become some type of storyteller myself but that has become the outcome of writing my books. I suppose I should have taken up fishing as preparation for telling stories.

From 1993 until 2009, I worked at Sanyo Laser Products and its successive incarnations, Sanyo Verbatim and Optical Disc Solutions, in Richmond, Indiana. There, we had some great storytellers (especially Bill and Tony), who could paint vivid pictures with words about their experiences traveling around the nation. Their tales helped pass the time during long days filled with boring computer projects and paperwork. I've realized that now, when I talk to my daughter or my girlfriend (or also when writing), I am doing the same thing myself. I can only hope that my stories are half as good as the ones my friends told at work.

(For me, one of the most memorable parts of the film *Rocky Balboa* was Rocky telling stories about his fights to the customers in his restaurant. Since his career was over and his wife was gone, he just had those old memories to hold on to.)

Singers and comedians seem to use their relationships as material, to a larger extent than might be reasonably expected. While I have tried to avoid that awkward situation, there's always a chance that a story might be in here about something such as that. Within these pages (as in my first book), I have not identified persons who seemed to behave badly (although some of their actions were certainly adverse or weren't very

helpful). I don't want my text to take a negative tone, and I'm also just not going to provide space for those individuals to have their names in my book – they don't deserve it.

A key component of good writing is *descriptive detail*. In some parts of this book, it has been necessary to describe individuals as belonging to a specific group (ethnic, religious, or otherwise) or perhaps leading some type of alternative lifestyle – because (to paraphrase Walter Cronkite) that was just “the way it was.” Some people think *political correctness* (phrasing words so that no one could consider them offensive in any way) means omitting such information completely – but what kind of generic story would we be left with then? Who would want to read something boring like that? By accurately reporting the facts about the people whom I have met, I am passing no judgment on them. As I often say, everybody's got to be who they are.

However, there are a number of stories that I can't put in my books. Tales about some of the wild things my friends have done might not reflect well upon them as adults and could give this entire text a different feel that I don't want it to have. Conceivably, I could publish them in another volume someday, a book to be placed in a time capsule and opened by our robot overlords in the year 2117.

I don't really care if anyone buys these books. I'm just writing them to leave a record of my lifetime's experiences for my family. If someone else picks up a copy and has a couple of laughs, that's just icing on the cake. Nevertheless, art and literature should be appreciated. Books, movies, and TV programs are all better when shared (and discussed) with others. Artists and authors just want to know that someone else out there likes our work. So I always try to take time and look carefully at my daughter's writing and art – and then give her some feedback. I emphasize some things that catch my eye

and that I like about each one.

Since the first edition of my previous book was written, my daughter has graduated from high school and is going off to college, where I expect her to keep studying hard (and find time between assignments to read my books too, hopefully).

Quality Control

John Keel, distinguished author of books on paranormal science, once wrote, “Any art form – music, painting, dance – is done best by those who are completely possessed by it. Such possession often borders on madness. This world would be a sorry place without such madmen.”

The advantage of writing your own book is that you get to do it the way you want to. If you don't like how it reads, you can just change things. Legendary author Ernest Hemingway said, “I rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*, the last page of it, thirty-nine times before I was satisfied.” Before the Internet and Kindle made the path easier, personal book creation was an expensive process called *vanity publishing*. You had to send your text to a pseudo publishing house, which would crank out a minimum order of 1,000 or so copies. You paid for the printing costs up front and then you had to market your inventory to bookstores and/or sell them all by yourself (very similar to how garage bands got their CDs made by SLP.)

There are no footnotes in my books (so far) because these are not textbooks, but I appreciate it when Wikipedia entries use attribution because they make the often-uncertain accuracy of its pages more credible. If you want to know where I found any of my information, just do a Google search for it. You will likely locate the same sources. That's how I did it. **The Internet search tool is your friend.**

Few people realize that choosing a font is a critical part of

the book-writing process. Readability is very important and so I tested numerous fonts. I like Times New Roman but Georgia seemed to be a bit better for this text. To me, some modern fonts look too plain for book publishing and most older ones still in use are just not for me. Also, I was interested in using a contemporary font. However, many of those seemed too light while some others looked more appropriate for a pirate novel.

After getting my hands on a printed copy of my first book, initially I was happy beyond all expectations. Then I read through it and (much to my dismay) found many punctuation errors and typos that I had missed in two previous proofreadings. So I had to correct them and upload a revised edition. A real publishing house would have had a very sharp Girl Friday with a red pen in hand, marking corrections in the galleys for me to fix. As an independent author, I have to take the responsibility of correcting my own mistakes.

I sometimes print articles from the Internet so that I can re-read them later and study them in greater depth. Writers (and even many professionals such as doctors, lawyers, etc.) are only human and they do make spelling and grammatical errors. When I spot those mistakes while reading, the news editor in me appears. I want to take out my red pen and start marking the pages up.

I had to fiddle quite a bit with the formatting of the print edition of this book and then repeat the process for the e-book version. The spacing changes when files are converted for the Kindle. This mainly affects photos. So don't be concerned about what version you have (print, e-book, or PDF file). None of them gain or lose anything of consequence in the conversion. As Mr. Spock used to say on *Star Trek*, "A difference that makes no difference is no difference." I did a much better job this time around with word flow and avoiding redundancies. Nevertheless, both texts required a lot of

editing. (It took 16 uploads to get the spacing correct for the final Kindle edition of *Keep Going*.)

Writing has gotten a bit easier now because I don't think about it so much. I just jot down everything that I remember. Later, I rearrange and revise the text so that it makes sense. Of his great sculpture, Michelangelo supposedly said, "It's simple. I just remove everything that doesn't look like David." That's roughly how I fix my books, too. On the other hand, writing books is more difficult in the sense that you don't have to have them done by a certain target date. When working at a newspaper, writing Internet columns, or doing classroom assignments, everything has to be completed on time – and in fact, I have done much of my best work trying to meet deadlines. So I have imposed my own goals and artificial time limits – such as, "the book should be done by the end of next month," or "I need to proofread 20 pages per day." While these are goals and not plans, I think doing that has helped me keep going toward the finish line. Although the entire process can be quite trying, I do have a comfortable red high-back office chair.

The biggest challenge in writing another book was to not tell the same story all over again. However, after writing a few chapters of this text, I discovered that was exactly what I was doing. As a result, a few of those anecdotes were diverted into an expanded second edition of *Keep Going*, rather than just being included in this book. That was a major change of direction but it brought about a good result.

In the second edition of *Passport Renewed*, I replaced some grandiloquent (pretentious) synonyms, cleaned up a couple unclear passages of writing, fixed an odd mistake or two in grammar, and revised the formatting where needed. However, no new stories were added. It wasn't really any different in content and I didn't want it to be. (*Author's note: The same thing goes for this third edition.*)

Appendix B: Further Reading

“Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all.” – Henry David Thoreau

While writing this text, I accidentally came across a webpage on Pinterest that displayed faux covers of children's classics – parodies. Idle minds had rewritten their titles (and in a few cases, changed the cover art, as well) to give the books new meanings for a new era (with a few dirty words thrown in, seemingly for maximum shock value). Books featuring Dr. Seuss, Sesame Street, Arthur, the Berenstain Bears, Charlie Brown, Curious George, the Hardy Boys, and Nancy Drew were among the old favorites that had been revised for jaded grown-ups. Some of the covers were a bit too adult for my liking but many others were just plain silly.

I laughed out loud for an hour or so, and probably harder than I have in years. Probably because she works with children, my girlfriend did not like the fake book covers and thought they were a bit too... “wrong” I suppose. But if you don't mind some slightly-twisted humor, go online and take a look at them. Do a Google search and I'm sure you can find them. One page on Pinterest linked to a few others with more examples, so this diversion might keep you entertained awhile, as it did for me.

The Write Stuff

Some of the modern writers whose work I have really enjoyed over the years include: John Grisham, John le Carré, Tom Clancy, Isaac Asimov, and Stephen King. I think many of their novels make for great reading and so I encourage you to

check out a few of them (literally if necessary, from your local library). If Hollywood likes making movies out of your books, you are probably doing something right and these authors have succeeded in that regard. But in most cases, their books are far superior to the films that followed.

In addition to the numerous works from those five writers, I also recommend the following selections. My list is by no means all-inclusive, these are just a few books that I've read and enjoyed:

General reading:

The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown

Inside the White House by Ronald Kessler

The Idiot by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Winning Through Intimidation by Robert J. Ringer

Sports:

A Season on the Brink by John Feinstein

October 1964 by David Halberstam

Lords of the Realm by John Helyar

The National Football Lottery by Larry Merchant

Poker:

The Professor, the Banker, and the Suicide King: Inside the Richest Poker Game of All Time by Michael Craig

Championship No-Limit & Pot-Limit Hold'Em by T.J. Cloutier & Tom McEvoy

The Biggest Game in Town by Al Alvarez

Super System by Doyle Brunson

Regarding the last group (poker): a number of savvy veteran players have written some great books full of tales about the wild and dangerous days of underground poker

games, which actually were a lot more recent than you might imagine. Also, there are a few excellent poker strategy guides written by top professional players. You can easily read reviews online that will point you to the best ones, if you want to learn how to play winning poker. But be wary. There are also lots of texts written by obscure players whose main success lies in selling poker books. Their advice might or might not be any good.

And in regard to reading in general, here are a couple more suggestions: for an offbeat experience, I recommend visiting Abebooks.com and their “Weird Book Room.” In addition, Goodreads.com has an avant-garde suggested reading list by this transcendental title: “Books that will Induce a Mindf**k.” Looking through their bizarre lineup, I realized that I’ve read quite a number of those books. That might explain a lot of things.

Appendix C: Notable Quotes

“We have completed all the items, from A to B.” – Viktor Chernomyrdin, former prime minister of Russia

As in *Keep Going*, I have gathered up a collection of quotes and axioms. The Internet is full of quotations, many from individuals who are not famous or especially accomplished. (I have never heard of most of the people who are referenced on various quotation websites.) Ancient Greek philosopher Plato once observed, “Wise men speak because they have something to say; fools because they have to say something.”

In a previous chapter, I mentioned the rambling poker writer who frequently strays off-topic. He also likes to use quotes from obscure sources. Sometimes their sayings ring true, yet if such persons are relatively unknown, how would we know if their words are actually worth following? I prefer quotes from well-known high achievers. We might gain some insight into their successes by carefully considering their advice.

Choice Words

In researching my books, I have discovered that even the most intelligent of persons can say seemingly stupid things sometimes. It could be that one’s perspective has much to do with that phenomenon. By contrast, here are some quotes that I have enjoyed or otherwise have found useful:

“Don’t be in a hurry to win.” – John Wooden

“I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” – E. B. White

“Thus it is that in war the victorious strategist only seeks battle after the victory has been won.” – Sun Tzu

“Never pick a fight with people who buy ink by the barrel.”
– author unknown (sometimes attributed to Mark Twain)

“An egg today is better than a hen tomorrow.” – Ben Franklin



Figure 37. Me standing with a statue of Mr. Drinkwater, the former mayor of Scottsdale (photo by Jennifer Titus).

“Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right.” – Henry Ford

“Accept the challenges so that you can feel the exhilaration of victory.” – General George Patton

“Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far they can go.” – T.S. Eliot

“It seems to be a law of nature, inflexible and inexorable, that those who will not risk cannot win.” – John Paul Jones

“Even Napoleon had his Watergate.” – Yogi Berra
“It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.” – John Wooden
“Men in general are quick to believe that which they wish to be true.” – Julius Caesar
“All men are frightened. The more intelligent they are, the more they are frightened.” – General George Patton
“Life is hard; it's harder when you're stupid.” – George V. Higgins (often misattributed to John Wayne)
“Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana.” – author unknown (sometimes attributed to Groucho Marx)

Advice to the Mindful

Throughout this book, I have noted some of my own favorite sayings in bold text, where appropriate. So I have assembled a master list of them here, for easy reference:

- *** If the shoe fits, wear it.
- *** The Internet search tool is your friend.
- *** I can put my hand in my shirt, but that doesn't make me Napoleon.
- *** No good deed goes unpunished.
- *** Don't expect anything from other people, and you'll never be disappointed.
- *** Sometimes wanting is better than having.
- *** Greedy people pay twice.
- *** People always want what they can't have.
- *** Necessity is the mother of invention.

Appendix D: Photo Credits

“There are no rules for good photographs, there are only good photographs.” – Ansel Adams



Figure 38. Spring flowers at Civic Center Plaza in old town Scottsdale.

This is where I give credit where it is due. Unless noted otherwise, the photos in this book were taken by me, with my camera – many of which I have set up and taken by myself over the years, using timers and tripods, stacks of books, etc. For simplicity, I have generally tried to NOT use photos of other people unless they are deceased and/or in the public domain.

Many of the family photos from my childhood were taken by my late father **Keith Williamson** and mother **Lela**

Williamson as noted herein, and as their current owner, I claim their rights through inheritance. All other photos taken by me are my intellectual property: “all rights reserved.”

Wikipedia has been very helpful as a source of free use photos. I have listed its required licensing information below.

Figure 3. Photo of a statue of a “coyote cowboy” and me in old town Scottsdale by **Jennifer Titus**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

Figure 4. Photo of me at Bell Rock in Sedona, Arizona by **Jennifer Titus**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

Figure 5. Photo of me at The Palace saloon in Prescott, Arizona by **Jennifer Titus**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

Figure 6. Photo of a dust storm approaching the park in Scottsdale by **Jennifer Titus**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

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Figure 11. Photo of the Moon reflecting light on water in Florida by **Giuseppe Milo** through Flickr. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license. URI: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/legalcode>

Figure 18. Photo of a Porsche 924 by “**Pgagliardi**” through Wikipedia. (The photo has been trimmed for size.) This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic license. URI: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/legalcode>

Figure 26. Photo of me standing next to an orange Bentley in Scottsdale by **Jennifer Titus**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

Figure 28. Photo of a rainbow over Phoenix, Arizona by **Elizabeth Williamson**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me; I retain the original on file.

Figure 29. Photo of me at the Lenin Museum in Moscow by **Alla Williamson**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

Figure 32. Photo of me at Chase Field in Phoenix by **Jennifer Titus**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

Figure 33. Image of floating numbers by “**fotoblend**” (**Willfried Wende**) through Pixabay. This file is licensed under the Pixabay license. URI:

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Figure 36. Photo of me typing this book by **Jennifer Titus**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

Figure 37. Photo of a statue of former mayor Drinkwater and me by **Jennifer Titus**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

Figure 39. Photo of me at Civic Center Plaza in old town Scottsdale by **Jennifer Titus**. The license for this photo has been personally obtained by me, I retain the original on file.

Front cover: Photo of a U.S. passport and flag by “**cytis**” through Pixabay. This file is licensed under the Pixabay license. URI: <https://pixabay.com/en/service/terms/#license>

“Mark Twain” photo by **Jennifer Titus**.

Back cover photo by **Elizabeth Williamson**.

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Figure 39. Me at Civic Center Plaza in old town Scottsdale (photo by Jennifer Titus).