



*Ralph Shapira,
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MY FORTUNATE LIFE

Chapter 14, Fire

Posted on August 27, 2022

In October and November each year, Southern California intermittently experiences a weather phenomenon known as “Santa Ana winds.” For a three or four day period, these “Devil Winds” — high velocity, hot and dry — blow from the North and East, reversing the usual pattern of cooler, moister winds off the ocean from the South and West. The Santa Anas bring a high risk of catastrophic wildfires.

I was well aware of the risks of wildfire to my Malibu house. In 1993, the “Old Topanga” fire burned through Malibu, including my recently purchased land. The only thing I had on the property then was a porta-potty. All that was left after the fire passed were the steel hinges and clasp that had secured its door. The rest of the property looked like an asphalt-coated moonscape of singed earth, with tufts of rabbit and other animal fur here and there.

Knowing that these terrible fires occur in Malibu every 20-30 years, I had done much to prepare my Malibu house for the inevitable fire. Most of the exterior walls were concrete and the roof was heavy corrugated steel, both un-burnable. But sections of the exterior walls and the undersides of the wide overhanging eaves were wood. In the summer of 2018 I had all the exterior wood stained with an “intumescent” stain designed to swell up when flames touched it and shield the underlying wood from fire for up to a half hour of direct flame exposure.

Moreover, the interior of the house was fully sprinklered. However, I had become aware of a serious vulnerability in the sprinkler system. The water pressure from my well and water storage tanks was generated by two electrical pressure pumps. I learned that Southern California Edison has a practice of shutting down the electrical grid in areas threatened by approaching wildfires. My sprinkler system would become non-functional when Edison turned off the power and my pressure pumps ceased to function.

To address that risk, I hired a company in the summer of 2018 to install a fireproof backup battery unit to power the pressure pumps in the event of a grid shutdown. The equipment was ordered but hadn't yet been installed as of early November 2018.

For additional fire safety, there was a Ventura County fire station on Pacific Coast Highway just three miles from my house. And my fire insurance company advertised that it retained private firefighting teams to dispatch to homes in a crisis.

On November 8, 2018, I was at my Malibu home during a major Santa Ana event. The wind was howling from the Northeast at 60 miles per hour and the air was tinder-dry with humidity under 5%, a formula for explosive fires. Like all Malibu residents, I was very much on edge.

At around 3 pm a large fire ignited on the other side of Boney Mountain, 4-5 miles away and plainly visible from my house. Fortunately, the winds were blowing the fire West toward the ocean, and my house was South of the blaze. Unless the winds shifted, the so-called Hill fire was not a threat.

I spent the afternoon dragging porch furniture, firewood and other flammable material away from the house. I sent Lynn back to Los Angeles to stay in a spare bedroom in her daughter's house, away from danger. My children called my cellphone many times that day. They hectored me to leave and return to the safety of LA, but there was still too much fire preparation work to do. Their calls became more insistent as the day wore on. I promised I would leave at nightfall.

As evening approached, I climbed a hill to look upwind toward the Northeast. I saw a small plume of smoke on the horizon in the far distance, about 30 miles away. By this time I was utterly exhausted and unable to do anything further. I went into the house and retrieved my fireproof strongbox with the deed to my house, my passport and other important documents. I had a collection of 25 Persian rugs in the house and thought of taking my favorite with me, a gorgeous 7 x 10, but it was under the dining table and by that time I was too exhausted to lift the table and chairs to remove it. I closed up the house and left for Lynn's daughter's house in town to spend the night. I thought that even if the distant smoke was a fire coming my way, it would take days to burn to my place. I planned to return the next morning to do more cleanup.

I had no concept how fast a high wind-driven fire could travel. By morning the next day the distant fire I had seen at nightfall was approaching Malibu. There was a mandatory evacuation order and all inbound access roads were closed; it was impossible to return to my house. The news reported later in the day that the fire was burning through Malibu on its way to the ocean. All I could do is wait helplessly to learn whether my house survived its passage.

It was three days before I got the call from a neighbor. He said my house had withstood the initial passage of the fire but then burned during the night of August 9th. There must have been a spark smoldering somewhere that eventually ignited the whole structure. Neither the County firefighters nor the insurer's firefighters had gone up my canyon when the fire approached — it was deemed too dangerous.

What did I find when I was finally allowed to return to my Malibu property two weeks after the fire? Although the concrete walls were still standing, they had turned pink. This indicated that they had been structurally compromised by the heat of the fire and could not be reused in a rebuilt home.

The County required me to hire a demolition contractor to bulldoze the place to the ground. My magnificent country paradise, my refuge and the singular artistic creation of my life, was utterly destroyed by the fire, then completely erased from the land by the demolition.

The "Woolsey fire" that destroyed my house burned 97,000 acres before it reached the ocean and stopped. It destroyed more than 1,600 homes.

I was stunned, devastated and badly depressed by the loss of my house. I was surprised, however, in the aftermath, how little my possessions meant to me once I accepted that they were gone. Only one thing survived the fierce fire: an antique 11" tall bronze Buddha that I had bought 40 years before in Thailand on Bonnie's and my around the world trip. Amid all the devastation, I found it sitting upright on the floor of the burned house. Still stained by soot, it overlooks me now in my new residence.

Chapter 15, Water

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Fortunately, I had purchased the best available fire insurance policy for my house, the "Masterpiece" policy issued by Chubb, a huge and well-respected insurance company. Lynn had experience with our predicament — she had been burned out of a house she owned in Malibu in the 1993 fire. To deal with her insurance company after that catastrophe, she and her then-husband had hired an independent public insurance adjusting company, Greenspan, to communicate with their insurance company on their behalf. She recommended that I do the same, and I did, for a fee of 10% of the dollars recovered.

Lynn and I were staying in her daughter's spare bedroom in Sherman Oaks when I hired Greenspan. Its first job was to find us a more appropriate place to live. They initially had Chubb put us up in a room in the luxury hotel Shutters, on the beach in Santa Monica. When living out of a hotel room became oppressive, they moved us to a suite in the equally tony Hotel Casa del Mar on the beach next door.

For a more permanent solution, they hired a relocation firm who paired us up with Melissa Oliver, a Coldwell Banker real estate broker. Over the course of several weeks, Melissa took us to a number of possible rentals that we didn't like. Then she took us to a house that sat directly on the sand on a beautiful Malibu beach, on uncrowded Malibu Road. I was amazed that we might get to live on the beach, and excitedly said I would take it. Melissa called us that night and said she didn't want us to take it, there was a better place for rent, also right on the sand, down the road. The place she showed us astonished us.

The house had four bedrooms — three directly overlooking the sand and the ocean beyond — five bathrooms, a lovely great room and a private stairway down to the beach. I bought many Persian rugs to warm up the main floor. The rent was a mind-boggling \$38,000/month. Greenspan asked Chubb to rent it for us, and Chubb agreed. We lived in that palatial beachfront house for the next two years, rent-free to us.

I missed the magnificent mountaintop isolation of my lost Malibu house, but Lynn and our friends and relatives loved the beach even more. We had many happy gatherings on our outside decks overlooking the beach.

In the meantime, Chubb compensated us full value for the millions I had spent building my house. I invested it all in the stock market, and it has grown. I try to comfort myself for the loss of my beloved Malibu CountryPlace with the fact that at my death I will be able to leave my children hard cash instead of the remote Malibu house they otherwise would have inherited.

At the end of our second year, Greenspan tried to persuade Chubb to extend the lease for a third year, but the insurer balked. The purpose of the rental was to give us time to rebuild or otherwise find a new place to live. But my children had voted against my rebuilding the Malibu house, and, content on the beach, we had done nothing to look for a new place. If we had been in the process of rebuilding or relocating, Chubb would have extended the lease, but they wouldn't if all we were doing was sitting on the beach at their expense.

As the months passed toward the two-year expiration of our beach lease, we hired a broker and began looking for a house to buy in Santa Monica. We finally found one we liked, substantially overpaid to win a bidding war against other would-be buyers, and moved in in January 2020. That's where Lynn and I live now. It will probably be our last home until one or both of us can no longer live independently. At nearly 76 and in good health, I hope that day is distant.

Chapter 16, BMW 650CS

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We go back a decade. About halfway into my ten years with Holly I decided to buy a motorcycle, my first since I crashed my Honda 305 Superhawk in college. I settled on a BMW 650CS, a fast, highly maneuverable street bike perfect for someone my size. Because BMWs are quiet, and making noise is an important safety feature of motorcycles, I had the standard muffler replaced with a significantly louder aftermarket muffler so that cars would hear me coming. I also bought a luminescent yellow riding jacket and helmet to increase my visibility. Then I took to the freeways and streets of Los Angeles.

People justly complain of Los Angeles traffic, but a motorcycle, skillfully ridden, cuts through traffic like a hot knife through butter. California is the only state that allows lane splitting for motorcycles, which means that a ride on a crowded freeway becomes like a slalom ride through and around traffic. I have never had more fun with my clothes on than riding my bike through Los Angeles traffic.

I had years of happy riding. Then one beautiful late-spring day I took the bike on a cruise over Malibu's back roads to see the annual wildflower displays. To savor the experience I rode very slowly along the roads' shoulders to avoid holding up passing cars. I had just passed a gorgeous blooming meadow when the road turned uphill and curved to the left. I leaned slightly to the left and began accelerating slowly to get back to speed on the road. At about 10 miles per hour my rear wheel hit a gravel patch on the shoulder and spun out, slamming the bike down on the pavement, pinning my left leg and smashing my helmeted head hard against the concrete.

I was dazed and confused by the blow to my head. I got up, bleeding from my left leg through a tear in my pants, and tried to lift the bike upright to get it off the roadway. The next vehicle behind me was another motorcycle. Its driver pulled off the road beside me. He helped me get the bike upright and push it off the road. The bike was largely undamaged — the handlebars were slightly out of alignment — and it restarted. I thanked the Good Samaritan and remounted, then drove myself to my Malibu house to bandage my leg; after a long rest, I drove back to LA and Holly.

The physical trauma of having my head slammed against the road remained vivid in my mind; that memory convinced me to sell the bike and stop riding.

Years later I became bothered by my hands shaking. Fearing I had MS or Lou Gehrig's disease, I made an appointment with a neurologist. She sent me for an MRI of my brain. The results showed two things. First, I did not have a serious degenerative disease like I feared. My shakes were the result of an "essential tremor," the same condition that caused Katherine Hepburn's shakes in her later years. Although the condition is progressive, the shaking so far has been easily managed with medication.

More surprising and troubling, the MRI revealed that I suffered from “normal pressure hydrocephalus” — the cerebrospinal fluid passages in my brain’s ventricles were enlarged, and the brain tissue compacted. This is a serious condition that often leads to dementia if not treated. The treatment, which arrests the condition but usually does not reverse the brain compaction that has already occurred, is brain surgery: drilling a hole in my head and placing a valve on my skull that drains excess fluid from my brain to my abdomen.

My neurologist couldn’t say what caused my hydrocephalus but I feel confident it was the blow to my head in that motorcycle accident.

I had the surgery and now have a valve permanently affixed to the right side of my head, thankfully concealed by my hair. Slightly more visible is the tubing under my skin, running from my head down my neck and chest on its way to a drain in my abdomen.

The brain part of the surgery went well, though sewing my abdomen up after placement of the drain did not. The surgeons screwed up and left a plainly visible “surgical hernia” just beneath my rib cage. In the horror movie *Alien*, a large lump appears in a shirtless actor’s abdomen and a horrible alien baby monster bursts through his skin and runs amok. My surgical hernia looks exactly like that monster just before it breaks through the victim’s skin. I am very self-conscious of it whenever I am shirtless.

The neurosurgeon whose surgical team caused it recommended against repairing the hernia because a new surgery in that area could cause an infection that could travel up the drain tubing into my brain. So I’m stuck for life with my *Alien* lump.

More concerning but subtle are the consequences of having my brain squeezed by the fluid pressure of the hydrocephalus. Notwithstanding the many stories from my past that I have recounted in this autobio, my memory is worryingly deficient. To my embarrassment, in talks with friends and family I often don’t remember experiences I’ve had just a few months past. I joke that I have the memory of a goldfish — each swim around the bowl seems a new experience. That’s an exaggeration, but there’s an underlying very-troubling reality to my memory problems.

Chapter 17, Lifesavings

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On five occasions I saved someone's life. I only get half credit for the first two, since it was me who put the person in jeopardy.

The first was in 1968 when I was a lifeguard at the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley. I was giving swimming lessons to a 20-ish young man, and it wasn't going well. He was tight and muscle-bound, with no fluidity in his movements. I taught him all the right motions for swimming and he could mimic them, but rigidly like a rusted tin soldier. All my efforts in the shallow end led to him sinking, swallowing water, standing up and sputtering.

I decided we needed to try in the deep. He was holding onto the pool's edge near the 8' sign when I told him to push off and tread water like we had practiced. He pushed off, moved his arms and legs correctly — but as stiffly as a board — and sank to the bottom. I had to jump in and haul him to safety, preventing my own student from drowning. I'll never forget watching his arms and legs cycling stiffly as he slowly sank.

The second was during a kayak run north of San Francisco. My girlfriend Kim — the beautiful dancer in our clown show Transfusion — had invited me to dinner at her parents' home in Belvedere, Marin County. Kim showed me around their gorgeous house, and in the basement I saw her physician father's beautifully crafted, expensive wood and canvas folding two-person kayak. Kim and I asked whether we could borrow it to take a run on the Russian River, and he agreed.

We took two cars. Kim parked one at a haul-out, then we drove several miles upriver in my pickup truck with the kayak. I was skilled with a canoe on a lake, but had never been in a kayak and had never run a river. Nevertheless, I was full of naive youthful confidence.

It was a hot summer afternoon. We pushed off and enjoyed the slowly unfolding tableau of redwood trees, spreading oaks, meadows and vineyards. After an hour I grew bored with our slow speed. At that point the river curved slightly toward the right. While the main channel ahead was mildly ruffled, from the left bank we heard a roar of what sounded like rapids behind an island. We paddled upstream of the island in hopes of a whitewater ride. As we passed the end of the island we saw that the entire left branch of the river channeled into a narrow gap eight feet wide, where it rushed furiously between huge rocks. There was a loud roar and a high spray of mist above the gap.

The quickening current seized our kayak and spun it like a top, rendering our paddles useless as we were sucked into the gap. Our paddles jammed against the narrowing rock walls, jarring us as we accelerated. Then the kayak hit the gap crosswise and jammed against the rocks on each end, in effect forming a dam. The current bore down on us, rotating the suspended kayak a quarter turn upstream and throwing me into the onrushing rapids.

Somehow I found footing. With my back braced against the kayak, I stood up and reached for Kim, who was still in the kayak but being sucked under as it continued to rotate under the weight of the rushing river. I grabbed her arm and with all my strength hauled her out and up to the

surface. Together we struggled out of the current and onto the island, where we rested, badly shaken. Then, holding one another tightly, waist- to chest-deep in the Russian River, we forded the main channel over unsteady rounded river rocks to the other shore, where we climbed out and reached the road. Kim was shoeless and her feet burned against the hot asphalt. We hitch-hiked upriver to my truck, retrieved the second car and made it home, bruised and chastened but without serious injuries — conspicuously without her father's prized kayak.

The next day I returned to the scene with some burly friends and ropes to try to pry the kayak out of the gap. By the time we got there it had broken in half and we could not budge it out of the current in any event. The kayak was a total loss. Kim's father and I agreed that I would pay him back half its value over time, which I did. Kim recently told me that she has never ceased thanking me for saving her life that day.

The third lifesaving occurred on a Massachusetts Interstate at around 2 in the morning. Bonnie and I had flown to Boston, rented a car, and were driving toward a midpoint destination on the way to a vacation in Maine. I was tired from the trip and lulled into somnolence by the long, dark ride. I pulled into the left lane to begin to pass a truck when, coming over a rise, I saw the headlights of another car, in our lane on the wrong side of the highway, speeding directly at us at what must have been 100 miles an hour. I reflexively swerved to the right, narrowly missing the speeding car as its wake of passing wind buffeted ours. If we had been 20 yards further ahead, beside the truck, there would have been no place to swerve. I believe what I witnessed was an attempted suicide by car, from which we narrowly escaped with our lives. I don't know who or what the driver may have hit further down the road.

The fourth involved my oldest daughter when she was a toddler. We went to a backyard swimming party at the Hancock Park house of one of my law firm's partners. We were standing near the entrance to their yard, greeting others, when our daughter walked off toward some other children. I absent-mindedly watched her toddling away, then saw her disappear into the host's hot tub about 50 feet away. I ran and leaped into the water fully clothed and hauled her up, sputtering, from the bottom.

My fifth and last lifesaving was the time I saved my 65-year-old mother-in-law. She had accompanied my family on a car trip in the Canadian Rockies. At one point we pulled off the highway to admire a lake about a thousand feet below, surrounded by steep slopes of scree that fell away below the highway, forming an amphitheater centered on the lake. Mom spotted wild blueberries beside the car on the narrow shoulder before the slope, and we all got out and began picking them. I wandered about 50 feet ahead of the car searching out unpicked bushes.

Suddenly, I heard my daughter scream. I looked up and saw my mother-in-law tumbling down the steep slope toward the lake, head over heels as if doing cartwheels. I sprinted diagonally down and across the slope, keeping my eyes on Mom as I fine-tuned my intercepting route. She seemed to be falling in slow motion as I ran.

I caught up with her about 100 yards down the slope, grabbed her arm and pulled her down and back, arresting her fall. She was bruised and bloody but miraculously not seriously hurt. If you ask my children whether there was ever a time their dad was a hero, they'll tell the story of Grandma's fall.

Chapter 18, Singing

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In 2009 an advertising flyer caught my attention: “Singing for People Who Can’t Sing,” a four-day workshop at Esalen Institute on California’s Big Sur coast. I couldn’t carry a tune but loved music and Big Sur, so I signed up. Holly signed up for an Esalen yoga class at the same time.

I was apprehensive as we drove up the dramatic fog-bound coastline. As a child I’d been mocked by siblings and classmates when I tried to sing, and I had grown up afraid to sing in public.

The class met in a large open room in an Esalen outbuilding. The teacher, Claude Stein, sat on a stage by a piano, while my 30 classmates and I sat on folding chairs in rows facing him.

Stein began by asking the class to stand and sing along while he played a song on the piano. We stood and joined his impromptu chorus. Some voices were jarringly off key, although I couldn’t have said which ones. Stein could. He pointed to the three loudest offenders, all men, and asked them to join him on stage by the piano.

He picked one to begin with. He hit a note on the piano and said “sing that note.” The man tried to sing it but was way off key. Stein said gently, “Listen carefully to the note and try to bring your voice to match it until you get it.” He then played the note again and again while the man’s voice wandered, searching to match the tone.

Within a minute, the man hit the note. Stein then played a higher note. Again the man searched, this time finding the note more quickly. Then another. In a few minutes the man was able to sing the entire scale in tune with the piano. Stein repeated the demonstration with the other two apparently tone-deaf men with equal success. It was a stunning demonstration of what Stein told us many times: “Everyone — absolutely everyone — can sing.”

Over the days that followed, Stein worked individually with each student, calling us in turn to the stage facing the class. Each of us would name a song, and Stein, with a limitless repertoire, knew how to play every song suggested. He accompanied each student as we tried to sing our song, giving helpful suggestions as we went.

After each performance, the rest of the students were encouraged to comment, but only if what we had to say was positive. We began to root for one another. Quickly, we 30 strangers became friendly and mutually supportive.

I befriended Laurie, a very tall film director who hunched over when she stood, self-conscious of her size. Laurie was petrified about singing solo in the class.

For each student who, when called to the stage, proved reluctant to sing, Stein inquired about childhood experiences with singing. This would bring up memories in which the student had been ridiculed and asked to keep quiet and mouth the words while others sang. These childhood scars had lasted a lifetime.

Gradually and patiently, Stein coaxed song out of every student. Although not credentialed as one, he was a master psychotherapist whom I watched cure each class member's singing insecurities and fears.

The most intractable case was a woman who had traveled from Buenos Aires for the class. Although she worked as an elementary school music teacher, she told Stein she was utterly incapable of singing. When he asked about childhood experiences singing, she recounted painful memories. But her revelations didn't seem to help. She steadfastly refused even to open her mouth and try to sing.

After a long back-and-forth, the woman dissolved in tears. She began to walk off-stage back to the audience, sobbing over and over again, "I can't sing!"

Stein stopped her and asked her back to center stage. Then he ordered, "Say that again."

She repeated, "I can't sing."

"Say it louder," Stein urged. Louder, she said, "I can't sing."

"Even louder," he demanded.

"I CAN'T SING," she shouted, in utter exasperation and exhaustion.

Stein said, "Now lie down on your back, look up at the ceiling so you can't see the audience, and say it again, loudly."

She laid down on her back on stage.

"Say it again," Stein ordered, and she shouted loudly to the ceiling, "I CAN'T SING."

Then Stein hit a note on the piano, "BONG," and said, "Say it on this note."

"I can't sing" she said — right on the note.

Then Stein hit a higher note, "BONG." "Say it on this note."

"I can't sing," she followed, again on the new note.

Stein hit a third, higher note, "BONG." "I can't sing," she sang.

He continued all the way up and down the scale while the woman, flat on her back, sang to the ceiling, "I CAN'T SING" — on every note, right on key.

Finally, he asked her to stand and face the audience again. He accompanied her, first on the scale and then on a song. She sang beautifully, and wept profusely at her breakthrough. There wasn't a dry eye in the house.

Stein said that on the last day of class we would hold a final show for one another. We each picked a song the day before to sing with his accompaniment. I commiserated with Laurie that night as she fretted with anxiety. When the show began and Laurie's turn came, she began tentatively. Then, with Stein's gentle coaching, she stretched to her full height and sang beautifully. It brought tears to my eyes.

I had chosen the Tina Turner version of “Proud Mary.” When my turn came, I too started timidly. Stein quickly stopped me. “Don’t hunch your shoulders,” he said, “and don’t look down at the stage. This is a rock and roll song. Look out at the audience, sing loud to them and get them rocking and rolling with you.”

No one mistook me for Tina, but I stood straight, scanned the audience and belted out the song while my classmates clapped enthusiastically. My one moment of rock-and-roll stardom was utterly exhilarating.

In all my years of schooling, Stein’s workshop was hands-down the best, most transformative class I ever took. Holly enjoyed her yoga, but I regretted that she hadn’t shared with me the amazing experience of Stein’s class.

I have never again felt shy about singing aloud with others, and I enjoy occasions when I do tremendously.

Chapter 19, Family

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My father told me that of all the things he had done in his life, by far the most meaningful was raising and loving his children. That was my mind-set — great excitement for our new life — when I learned that Bonnie was pregnant with our first, a daughter. She had long harbored doubts whether she would be a good mother, but the moment our daughter was born it was like a switch was thrown. She instantly transformed into the warmest, most loving and attentive mother I’ve ever known. She has been and still is the sun around which our extended family revolves.

Our children brought out a far deeper, richer quality of love than I had ever felt before, and it will shine brightly in my heart all my life.

We had an adorable son 2½ years after our daughter, then Bonnie got pregnant a third time. She suffered a very late-term miscarriage which deeply distressed us both. For some reason the medical professionals showed me the dead baby in a plastic bucket — it would have been our second son — and I have never gotten that image out of my mind. Thankfully, our spirits were restored two years later when she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl whom, like our first two, we absolutely adored. If it hadn’t been for the miscarriage, we never would have known our precious second daughter.

Blessedly, all three of our children have been healthy and happy.

Having children was the final step in outgrowing my physical cowardice, like a snake shedding old skin. Becoming a father transformed me completely. I realized then to the core of my being, and know to a certainty still, that to protect my family I would and could do anything I had to. Absolutely. Anything.

Los Angeles' public schools were not highly regarded then and we shopped for private schools. We attended open houses at three or four, seated with 50 or 60 other sets of parents hoping to get their child one of the limited number of places available. It seemed hopeless.

It was more of the same when we went to the open house at the Center for Early Education (CEE), a very highly regarded private elementary school in West Los Angeles. Once again there was a crowd of parents vastly outnumbering the number of spaces. Bonnie thought one of the two women who made presentations looked familiar. When she approached the woman after the session ended, there was a flash of mutual recognition. "Bonnie!" the woman said eagerly. "Lois!" Bonnie replied, and they hugged warmly. The two had been classmates at Montgomery Blair High School in Washington, D.C.

Perhaps our daughter would have been admitted to CEE had we applied as strangers, but I thought the amazing "Bonnie!"—"Lois!" coincidence vastly improved our prospects. Our daughter was admitted, then later our son and younger daughter. CEE was a wonderful school. It was also a feeder school for the superb Harvard-Westlake private high school, which all our children attended. It helped them all gain entrance to the colleges of their choice.

We were involved parents who contributed financially to the schools beyond paying their frightful tuition. Bonnie rose to become chairperson of CEE's board and actively assisted its fund-raising for a major new school building. We became friends of the amazing African-American headmistress Reveta Bowers; I can't imagine a better head of school. Our social life, previously centered on O'Melveny lawyers and spouses, vastly expanded to include the parents of many of our children's classmates.

People say teenage daughters are hell to raise, but I had only one problem with ours. When my youngest daughter was 15 in her sophomore year at Harvard-Westlake, she began dating and fell hard for a huge bearded senior who sang lead in a rock and roll band. I tried to discourage the relationship but she was adamant. I was worried that she would be pressured into sex by the older boy before she was ready. At one point he abruptly ended the relationship, which broke her heart. She was morose for weeks.

After a time, she told us he wanted to get back together again and that she was considering it. I went ballistic. I insisted that she refuse him, and told her that if he ever came around again I would take a baseball bat to him. We both knew I meant it, at least in that furious moment. As far as I know that was the end of the relationship. I never saw or heard of him again.

I had a more protracted problem with my son having to do with reading. In my growing up, there was no more hallowed activity in my parents' home than reading. They read to us every night at bedtime and always encouraged our own reading. Each of us developed a deep love of reading and learning. Especially in the cold months, spare times during evenings and weekends were spent reading together and discussing current events.

Bonnie and I continued that tradition with our children. My two daughters became voracious readers. But my son was different. He enjoyed being read to as a child but never developed a love of reading independently. Stubborn as a board, he flatly refused to read or do schoolwork when I asked him to. It became a clash of wills I was unable to win. Our reading wars lasted years and badly strained our relationship.

It came to a head during a vacation in Ecuador when he was 12. I had packed a copy of *David Copperfield* and pestered him throughout the trip to read it with me, always provoking an argument. One night I sat beside him at a restaurant in Quito, took out the book, and asked him to read a chapter with me while we waited for dinner. He refused and I got fuming mad. Then, without another word, he stood up and walked straight out the front door into the dark night.

We sat stunned, waiting for his return. It didn't happen. I searched the surrounding streets but couldn't find him. Bonnie and I sank into a growing panic that our pre-adolescent son was lost at night in a strange city where he couldn't speak the language.

After half an hour, he calmly walked back into the restaurant to our table and sat down as if nothing had happened. We leapt up, embraced him and thankfully welcomed him back.

Tearful at his safe return, I had an epiphany: at that moment, I surrendered unconditionally. Though only 12, he would be his own man and make his own decisions about reading, academics and everything else. My role as his father would be to love and support him wholeheartedly and unconditionally. I hoped we could restore our frayed relationship.

It worked. I never again nagged him about anything — even when it appeared his college major was beer. He found his own way, with our family's complete love and support. Today he is an independent, happy, successful professional, and we are all very close.

And ... he reads! He has become an avid consumer of political and financial journalism. Today, nothing brings me greater pleasure than discussing the state of the world with my son.

Bonnie strongly believed that girls should play team sports for the camaraderie and leadership skills they developed. All three of our children played AYSO soccer, and we attended their games most weekends. Both daughters were standout defenders on their Harvard-Westlake high school teams. My youngest also starred on her Ivy League college team and was captain or co-captain of every team she ever played on. Friendships developed among the children and the parents.

Bonnie and I loved watching them play; they were so strong, fast and brave. In one close college game, our daughter and an opponent leapt for a high header at the same moment and our daughter came down with a split brow and bloody face. The coach took her out for medical attention. As soon as the blood stopped flowing, she insisted on going back in, and played heroically. We were incredibly proud. She is now a successful executive at a leading tech company, and I have no doubt that the leadership talent and team spirit she learned playing soccer helped pave the way.

I burst with pride when my oldest daughter was elected by a school-wide vote one of two chief prefects — the heads of student government — of the Harvard-Westlake senior class, and got to wear a crimson cape at graduation. She reminds me that I helped her with her campaign speech.

The biggest difference between Bonnie and me was our taste in vacations. She loved traveling the world and making her way in different languages and cultures. I was hopeless and reticent in foreign languages and preferred to vacation in nature at our CountryPlace or on car trips in the

American West. But I almost always gave in, and under her leadership (and with her superb planning) we and our children traveled extensively. We used my annual three-week summer vacations from work to travel with the kids to Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Gibraltar, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Cambodia, Singapore, South Africa, Zimbabwe, New Zealand, Mexico, Hawaii and — the one time I got my way — the Canadian Rockies. All our children caught Bonnie's bug and travel widely with their children and friends, often with Bonnie and me in tow.

Bolivia was probably my favorite. I loved the short square Bolivian peasant women in bowler hats with infants on their backs or suckling in front, mother and child wrapped together ingeniously in folds of thick, old wool blankets with colorful patterns in faded earth tones. I got an intense craving to buy some of the old blankets (the markets were filled with newer ones in synthetics and garish dyes) and eventually found a market stall that sold them. I bought 20 and air-freighted them to LA to decorate my office and home.

Sometime later, I noticed a small white moth in my office and thought nothing of it. Gradually I noticed a few more, not only in my office but in the halls and other lawyers' offices; still I didn't put two and two together. Finally I thought to inspect the pile of old wool blankets I had brought to my office but hadn't yet mounted for display. I was horrified — they were seething with moth larvae that had eaten giant holes everywhere. Every single blanket was ruined far beyond repair.

No one ever asked me and I never told anyone that I had brought this plague into my law firm's beautiful dark paneled offices. The moths disappeared after I threw the remains of the blankets away.

The most difficult trip for me was hiking the beautiful four-day Inca Trail in Peru to Machu Picchu. I have had mild anemia all my life, and get light-headed and weak at high altitude. The Inca Trail crosses over 13,800-foot-high Dead Woman Pass. With our children scampering ahead easily, I plodded slowly up that long trail way past the point of exhaustion. Nearing the top, my head was pounding from the elevation and my feet barely moved at a snail's pace. Without asking me, our guides went ahead and fetched a donkey to haul me to the top. I was appalled when I saw it and refused the help. Eventually I made it on my own.

When we got to our camp on the other side of the pass, I was shaking like a leaf from hypothermia. I put on my down jacket and climbed into my down sleeping bag, and I slowly warmed up in time for dinner. The whole trail, passing over and by amazing Incan stonework ruins, was wondrous, and Machu Picchu fabulous.

Our oldest daughter went to law school and met her future husband, Dave, there. He practiced in a well-regarded downtown Los Angeles law firm but didn't like it. They had three wonderful sons and lived just four blocks from me in the Los Feliz area of Los Angeles. I became extremely close with the boys, and after my divorce from Holly I moved into a spare bedroom in their home. After living there six months, Dave let me know that our cohabitation wasn't a permanent solution and I should consider finding another place when convenient. I took it hard, and moved out in a huff within two days to a rental house nearby. I continued seeing them and the boys frequently.

One of my nephews' sons had a Bar Mitzvah in Pittsburgh and we all flew in for the occasion. While we were there, I asked my niece who runs the supermarket company whether we could get a tour of its warehouse. She agreed and we had a great time on our field trip. Unbeknownst to me, while we were there Dave asked her whether there might be an employment opportunity for him in the company. The company's general counsel was nearing retirement, and she was enthusiastic. She offered him a job in their legal department, and he accepted. Within months they had sold their Los Angeles house and moved to Pittsburgh, severing the day-to-day contact with my grandboys that was so precious to me.

Although my two other children have stayed in Los Angeles and we have always been close, my oldest daughter's family moving across the country tore a hole in my heart.

For many years after our divorce, Bonnie treated me as a pariah and was obviously pained when I passed near her while celebrating some occasion with the children. Gradually over the years her visible revulsion lessened, and eventually faded away completely. Lynn and I now see Bonnie and her new love, a former litigation partner of mine at O'Melveny whom I like very much, frequently at our children's birthdays and holidays. Bonnie and Lynn like each other. We have even accompanied her (and him, when he's not off with his grown children) on vacations with our children. It's probably wishful thinking but there are times when Bonnie seems actually to enjoy my company. Her smile and laugh light up my life as they always have. I'm eternally grateful to her for allowing me back into the family.

Just this year my youngest daughter and her husband had a wonderful baby girl. I visit their home, less than four miles from mine, often to hold, cuddle and play with the baby. I'm ecstatic once again to have a nearby grandchild in my life. We're also close with Lynn's two grown children and her grandson.

Because my love for my children and grandchildren eclipses everything else in my life, this is a fitting place to conclude "My Fortunate Life."

Ralph Shapira

Oberlin College Class of 1968

