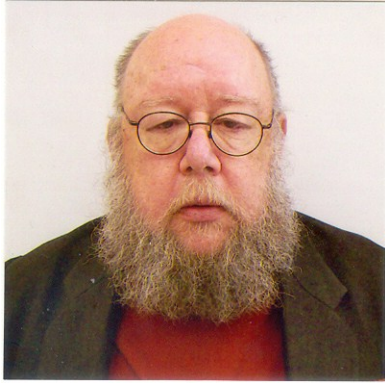


Chapter 35: Summing Up

The first seventy years of a man's life are the happiest.

Bismarck



I have now written more than 350,000 words about what I remember about my life.¹ So what does it all add up to? Maybe I'm not the best person to make the assessment, as I am too close to my subject. On the other hand, who better? No one else has made such a study of myself as I have. I'm the world's leading expert! So here are my thoughts, for whatever they may be worth.

A. Regrets

Looking back, as I am now obliged to do, I suppose the best way to start is with satisfactions and regrets. The regrets come first, as they are sharper and more prominent in my mind. This is so even though I know, as a Buddhist, that regrets are a form of attachment and not a productive use of life energy. But they were important in how I thought about my life when I first drafted this chapter. Perhaps this was because I have not only not accomplished anything of any significance (this memoir for future centuries may be the only thing), but I have *failed* to accomplish quite a number of things I had once hoped to do. The satisfactions will come later, to fill in the territory not occupied by regrets. This is not a particularly healthy *schema* for a person to use to sum up his life, and reviewing this memoir as a whole as I revise it is changing my view of this for the better. But I might as well keep the structure of this chapter as originally planned.

Anyway, regrets. The psychologist Erik Erikson wrote that “love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.”² Sadly, those are the very two things that I have got most wrong in my life. I have detailed in Chapter 33 the miscalculations and failures of attitude that have prevented me (or I should say: which I have used to prevent myself)

¹ As Maria Zuckerman, Philip Roth's fictional *alter ego*'s wife, fictionally says about the manuscript of Roth's memoir *The Facts* (1988), “Surely there must come a point where even *he* is bored with his own life's story.” I'm about at that point now.

² In *Childhood and Society* (1986). This saying is often incorrectly attributed to Freud. What Freud said, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), was that “the communal life of human beings had ... a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity, and the power of love.” Not at all the same thing.

from forming a stable and rewarding pair bond. It is a sad chapter. By now, at 65 (and for a number of years before now), I have given up trying to change this, and have genuinely reconciled myself to it. It used to make me unhappy, but it doesn't anymore. Nevertheless I still wince when I think of the destructive way I managed my past relationships. And when I list my regrets in life, the first one to come to mind is my failure to get this part of my life right (although maybe I *did* get it right after all, for me). I have nothing much to add to what I said about this in Chapter 33.

Work is the other thing. I discuss this at some length in Chapters 15, 24 and 27B. In a way I got the work thing well under control – even as a librarian I had highly skilled work that I could do without a lot of effort, part time. Later as a lawyer I got it down to less than half time, on my own schedule at home without even getting dressed, work that paid very well with no overhead or selling pressure. I was therefore way ahead of almost everyone else in the world. Of all the people you see in the course of a day, hardly any have such a good deal. And yet, I had a free education and the opportunity to choose any kind of work, but I ended up spending most of my career in work that meant nothing to me (or really to anyone else), accomplished nothing of any value, and contributed nothing to the world. The best thing I can say about my work is that I was good at it, and didn't have to do very much of it. I regret that I did not do better than that with my opportunities in life.

I can put a positive spin on this, and say that really my Buddhist detachment from the terrestrial games of ordinary life is what kept me uninvolved in my work. And I could say that the desire to create something useful and original and satisfying is just another desire, an attachment to worldly structures and a generator of karma, and I was well out of it. I could say that not having much interest in my work freed me to concentrate on what really did interest me. And there is some truth to all these statements. It was after taking LSD, for example, that I changed from being a work-centered person with ambitions in the world and lost interest in all of that.

But the truth is that I did not accomplish very much with my private interests, either. There is no book, for example, except for this one. All my painstakingly acquired knowledge will die with me. When I leave, I will have left nothing much behind. As I look back on all the ambitions I have had at various points in my life – a career in politics, a career as a trial lawyer, a career as an academic librarian, some books I wanted to write, even enlightenment – I have not come even close to accomplishing any of them. This may change now that I have retired, but I doubt it, and anyway now there is not much time left.

- From an e-mail, 2007: It might have been more fun to be a museum curator, for example, as I think now I would have liked to do, but then again maybe it wouldn't have. Maybe in my 60s I'd be bored with it, still working 60-hour weeks instead of 13-hour weeks. Maybe I would have ended up in Houston, or spending

my time fund-raising rather than digging art, and wishing I'd gone to law school when I had the chance. You pays your money (or in my case my father's money) and you takes your choice. I am placid and relatively content now, which taking the long view was a good outcome. And I learned a lot in law school which still helps me in every aspect of my life. No regrets, when I really think it through.

The other regrets in my life are specific and (except for the first two I will mention) relatively trivial by comparison. Indeed, I can't think of all that many. Here are a few.

- I regret my failure to manage my relationship with my parents more effectively. See Chapters 7 and 8. This I regret more acutely as I grow older and realize how little I really knew them.
- I regret my neglect of my body, which is now catching up with me. I continue this neglect even though I know better. See Chapter 34.
- I regret particular unkindnesses to individuals.
- I regret my failure to pay enough attention to schoolwork in college. I wasted a lot of opportunities there. See Chapter 11. In particular, I regret never having mastered any foreign language, or any musical instrument, or gained any grasp of mathematics, or of science beyond the popular level.
- I regret missing specific opportunities. For example, I could have done what Adam did, and joined the college radio station, and become a radio guy. That would have been more fun than being a lawyer. If I had done that, though, I would have missed out on law school, one of the most interesting and lastingly useful experiences of my life.
- I regret, slightly, that I never got to live in England, which was a long-held ambition. When I left America to become an expatriate I picked the wrong country (see Chapter 22) and was back within a few months. During my time in Truro I made several plans to move to England but never managed to do it – by that time I was already a lawyer, a profession that does not travel well. But if I had the chance to move to England *now*, I would not take it.
- I regret, with all the twists and turns in my life, never having used one of those turns to make some money. Good fortune and a good education have left me modestly OK in that regard, but some serious money would have helped. It would help a lot now that I have retired and my main source of income is gone. If I'd had more money, for example, I could have moved to England (for a few years anyway), and that would not be on my list of regrets. However, of all the regrets on this list, not making money is the one I regret *least*. “How much better is it to

get wisdom than gold! and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver!”
Proverbs 16:16.³

- I regret my failure to maintain a serious meditation practice. I have a Buddhist practice that continues to serve me well, but I neglect meditation, which all the adepts say, and the Big B himself said, is the key to doing that right. I still could, but almost certainly I won't.
- I regret my inability, sometimes, even with all that Buddhism, to avoid being angered by the petty frustrations of life, for example with functionaries on the telephone. I regret my inability to forgive some people. I regret the times I have lost my clarity of viewpoint, and slipped back into terrestrial attitudes.
- I regret not spending every moment remaining to me in the most joyful way possible. I allow hours to dribble away dozing off, or surfing the Internet, or watching edifying documentaries on the Discovery Channel. This I am working on, and I'm getting better at it, especially since retiring. But time is flying.

B. Satisfactions

Whew! That was a bummer! With relief, I turn from regrets to satisfactions. Many of them are the reverse sides of some of the regrets.

For example, while I regret never having found any meaningful work, it is a satisfaction to have ordered the work I ended up doing (and since I needed the money, I had to work) in such a convenient and undemanding way. I got it down to where it was little more than a nuisance, and did not interfere with traveling freely and spending most of my time at leisure. I was paid well; I didn't have to scramble for clients; I had no office conflicts; my work was valued and my opinion respected. I didn't have to go to an office; I didn't have to put in any set hours; I didn't have to take the final responsibility for representing people; I could decline any task I preferred not to do.

- The above paragraph was first written before I retired in April 2008. I have now put it all into the past tense. Indeed, it is in the past tense more than just grammatically. As my work experience fades into history, the satisfactions as well as the regrets associated with it fade too. I hardly ever think about it any more. These were important consolations when I had to work, but mean very little to me now. The next paragraph was written at the same time, and the same is true there.

³ “With thy wisdom and with thine understanding thou hast gotten thee riches, and hast gotten gold and silver into thy treasures.” Ezekiel 28:4.

I was even able, finally, to take some satisfaction in my professional skills, which both in research and writing were highly developed. I made myself into a whiz at both legal and Internet research, and at Microsoft Word (the word processing program I am using to write this memoir). I got to the point where I could write almost anything (except fiction), very fast and very professionally and (if I bothered, which I'm not quite doing here) in a highly polished style. I developed confidence, which I didn't always have, that when someone asked me what the law was, or to analyze a legal problem, with a little preparation I could give a thorough, correct, lucid and disciplined answer. I pretty much mastered my craft, although as discussed in Chapter 27B.5 I remained somewhat conflicted about finding satisfaction in having done so.

- I still take some satisfaction in my facility with Word and with words, and with Internet research. It is convenient to be able to write and edit without difficulty, and to be able (usually) to find whatever information or images I need in a few seconds.

The reverse side of the love regret is that I am mostly free of unwelcome entanglements. Free of welcome ones too, of course, but I have evaded many familiar family and relationship horrors that have afflicted some of my friends.

I have a lot of friends, close friends who have been my close friends for decades. I was speaking to a homeopath once, and he asked me how many close friends I had, and I started counting them up, and when I got to 12 I noticed he was looking at me with some surprise. I asked him: is twelve a lot? He thought it was. So I seem to have a talent for friendship, and I take satisfaction in the friendships I have made and sustained over the years. Most of these friendships are based on conversations in person, on the telephone, and by letter (in the old days, now by e-mail). I have a large stash of letters which I will lodge at Yale as supplementary files.

- The letters drop off sharply in the mid-1990s, when I started using e-mail and making long-distance phone calls without hesitation. This is true for almost everyone, and biographers are complaining that their primary sources for history are drying up. I am trying to figure out how to preserve my e-mail archive, now kept on my firm's server, with my Yale papers.

By e-mail and telephone I am careful to keep in touch with my friends, and make a point of speaking with them one way or another every so often. Christopher taught me to do this – he says, correctly, that if you never speak to a person, you aren't really that person's friend. As Samuel Johnson said, "A man should keep his friendship in constant repair."

I have become pretty good at conversation, and know how to keep it going and keep it interesting. I can manage a conversation with a stranger, for example at a dinner table, so it stays interesting and involving to him and to others who may be listening. When I try to be amusing, I sometimes succeed. This is very satisfying.

- A friend asked me in an e-mail whether I was “chatty” and whether in a group of three I would be the one doing the most talking.⁴ I replied: *Very chatty. In a group of three I probably would be doing most of the talking if I were not careful to keep the ball rolling and involve everyone in the conversation. Of course in a sense this is still me running the conversation. But if I have to run it (and I don’t always have to) I try to do it in a way that doesn’t let anyone including me hog the floor. I find often that when a group of three includes a couple, the woman tends to get left out. So I make it my business, unobtrusively I hope, to address the woman directly, ask her opinion, etc., so she gets a chance to participate. Otherwise things get kind of patriarchal.*

I have done a lot of traveling, which I continue to do fairly intensively. See Chapter 30. I thought I would have to cut back when I retired, but so far I haven’t had to. I like to travel and I learn a lot from it, and I believe in keeping at it while I still have the health and the money to do it. That’s another satisfaction – planning trips, and taking them, and learning from them, and broadening my experience of the world. I have the satisfaction of having visited most of the places in the world I really wanted to see, some of them (mainly Europe and India and all over the United States) many times.

I have been a reader all my life, and by now I have read an awful lot of books, and learned a lot of things. See Chapters 5 and 31, and the reading list in the Supplement. This is part of my lifelong continuing education. I take some satisfaction in having made myself into a reasonably well-educated person by now – it has taken a lifetime of effort, but what I’m most interested in is understanding things, and decades of deliberate and systematic study have yielded some understanding. “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.” Proverbs 4:7. Using learning to gain knowledge; using knowledge to gain wisdom and understanding; using wisdom and understanding to gain liberation – that’s what I’m after, and I have managed to get *some* of all those things. Not *enough* – there can never be enough – but enough to matter, and that is satisfying.

Speaking of wisdom and understanding, the drug-assisted religious experiences I had in the early 1970s reoriented my whole world view. See Chapters 17.C, 17.E, 17.F, 18.C, 18.E and 19.B. I have held on to those insights, and developed them over the years, and

⁴ Chatty! She didn’t know I would soon write an autobiography more than 900 pages long, which really brings a person to a whole new level of chattiness.

they have done me a lot of good. Buddhism aims at overcoming suffering, and after almost 40 years of Buddhist practice I have reduced my suffering and increased my understanding and equanimity quite considerably, with even a little compassion thrown in.⁵ Although it is contradictory in a way to take satisfaction in this, I can do so in this limited sense – as the regrets sections lists the things I have got wrong, I can include this in the satisfactions section as something I got right, even though it is still very much a work in progress. I should mention Lord Ganesha here, too, to Whom this book is dedicated – see Chapter 18.G. He has provided a dimension of blessing to my life that the Buddha’s cool rationalism cannot account for.

This is from an e-mail I sent in 2004:

I have pretty much figured out why I do what I do, most of it, the destructive part of it anyway, as much of it as is accessible to me anyway. Therapy is not for me for lots of reasons. I guess I now “own” my behavior, if I know what that means – I can’t think who would own it if I don’t. I’m OK too, now, finally – I wouldn’t be OK if I tried to be someone I’m not, scars and all. I tried for quite a while to act in ways which were not natural for me and the results were not successful.⁶ I now accept that I am who I am because of nature and nurture and *craquelure* and fortune and history and karma and a bunch of other stuff; and moreover as the Buddha taught us, this “who I am” business is all illusion anyway, “who I am” is no more than a construct, a viewpoint, a set of habits and rituals and preferences we are so used to that they seem as real as our fingernails, which are of course themselves only whirling fields of atomic particles. May I have some more acid, please?

If you know why you do stuff, sometimes you can stop in time and not do it. At least three quarters of the wisdom of age consists in knowing not to do things. By the time we die we will have acquired enough wisdom to do nothing at all, which will be convenient considering.

There are some less exalted subjects I have learned a lot about, also – these are the occasion of some satisfaction. After decades of studying history, for example, I have got to the point where I have a rough understanding of the subject as a whole. Not, of course, detailed mastery of any of it – but I have filled in enough of the blanks that I can see it

⁵ And maybe some tolerance and humility, too. From an e-mail of 2008: I have gradually come to realize that, incredible as it seems, not everyone sees everything exactly my way EVEN WHEN I EXPLAIN IT! Some people prefer different solutions than the ones that suit me! Amazing, I know, and there is no logical explanation for it. But what can you do? Philosophers not only aren’t kings, they aren’t even plumbers or interior decorators. They’re just, you know, old guys sitting around writing essays on heraldry.

⁶ Samuel Johnson also said: “Almost all absurdity of conduct arises from the imitation of those whom we cannot resemble.”

almost undivided, and have some familiarity with the background and context of whatever history I'm reading, and how the present got to be that way. This has been hard won and is a satisfaction.

Heraldry is the same way (see Chapter 6). I have been studying in this field since I was five or six years old. I know it pretty well by now, especially after branching out from the English works available to me in former years to material from all over Europe. I have trained myself in *Wappenwesen* (the structure and grammar of heraldry) and in *Wappenkunst* (heraldic art), and have trained my mind and eye to appreciate the most subtle pleasures of both. I continue to take great pleasure and satisfaction in this expertise and associated connoisseurship. The books I have planned about it will, alas, probably never be written, and that goes onto the regret side. But even so, there is a lot of satisfaction left. There are a number of other secular subjects I take satisfaction in having learned enough about to understand and appreciate – art and architecture, and literature and music, and politics and geography, and many minor and auxiliary studies. My work as a professional librarian was satisfying also, in an uncomplicated way, which my work as a lawyer was not.

Sometimes I find myself in a position to teach something to someone else, whether in a formal setting like a law school mock trial (see Chapter 27B.7) or in conversation, and that is satisfying too. People ask my advice, sometimes on legal subjects and sometimes on others, and I enjoy helping whenever I can. And if I can teach a little Dharma along the way, that is always the greatest pleasure.

C. The Present and the Future

So where does this leave me? Sitting right here, in the summer of 2010, in my comfortable book-filled house in San Francisco, listening to the sound of the Pacific surf outside my window, finishing off my memoirs on the computer. I have retired cleanly from a comfortable job, although I never had a vocation or a serious career. I have good friends but no wife or children. I have (so far anyway) enough money to get by in modest comfort, but no real wealth. I have serious health problems but am feeling pretty good so far. I know a lot of things and have had a lot



of varied experiences; I have some insight into people and processes and a good eye for beauty and am expert with words; I have an assortment of skills and read books and newspapers with great diligence. But I am not using any of this for any meaningful purpose. I have a measure of spiritual understanding which has helped me stay out of trouble, but am (almost?) unattainably far from perfecting myself.

It is a comfortable place to be, a calm and peaceful plateau, which is more than most people manage to find, and although I am somewhat disappointed in how little I have made of my opportunities and advantages I am basically satisfied. Not *so* satisfied that I don't keep trying to improve, especially in spiritual skill and worldly knowledge. But satisfied enough that I am a pretty happy person – at least not *unhappy*, and not angry or anxious or frantic or driven or confused or depressed or yearning. I enjoy my days and the ways I spend my time, which is more than many people get to do. Is enjoyment enough? Probably, and also probably not. That's a *koan*.

And the future? I expect, and even hope, to go on more or less like this as long as my health holds out.⁷ Except for my health, which is precarious now and is bound to fail, I don't expect any important changes. Indeed, I hope there aren't any – during a happy time in my life I once got a Chinese fortune cookie that said *Your luck has already changed*. It was a terrible omen.

So I hope for no changes, even though it is the law of the universe that change is inevitable. Things are pretty well balanced now, and I don't plan to initiate any major upheavals, and any that come will probably not be an improvement. I will keep to the same habits – being a solitary bachelor, I can live pretty much how I like, sleeping and working and eating and leaving town whenever I feel like it, and I don't plan to change that. I will keep my same enthusiasms – heraldry and reference books and study and going to the theatre and reading the *New York Times* and collecting new counties and talking with my friends. I will stay on the same spiritual path and maybe get a little better at it, but probably not much better. I will look after my health as much as I can, which will not be enough.

And when my health fails, I will die. Maybe I will survive to the point where stem cell therapy can cure diabetes – I hope so! But if so, then I'll die of something else. “What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field.” Isaiah 40:6. I hope by that time I have enough Buddhist equanimity not to be attached to life, and can let go easily. I'm working on that. I don't mind dying, so much – what I mind is pain and suffering and gasping for breath and all the rest of the somatic endgame.

⁷ When the writer Kenneth Rose asked Lord Mountbatten what he planned to do after he retired from the Royal Navy, Mountbatten answered “I'm going to try not to die.”

Lord Ganesha, hear my prayer! Protect me from pain and from panic! Let me go out suddenly, in my sleep, without even noticing. But as St. Augustine said, praying for chastity: not yet!

FINIS CORONAT OPUS

