



Five Decades in Review by Scot Fagerland

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Preface

This book is a special 50th birthday project, a gift from me to myself. It is a decade-by-decade summary of my life up to this halfway point. It won't be as interesting to anyone else as to me, but it is family-friendly and approved for everyone to read in my lifetime. Maybe it will help you refresh your memory of past times too.

This memoir is not a dramatic confessional or tell-all. I'd characterize it as a "chronicle," factual and emotionally light. It's a nostalgic review of times gone by and a recollection of how I got from 0 to 50 in five short decades. Since each chapter is a decadal summary, the details are pretty coarse. I only bothered summarizing circumstances that lasted more than three years or turning points that had long-lasting influence. While each chapter spans roughly one decade, the beginning and endpoints are fudged a little to match up with residential moves.

I have told the backstory in different chronicles. My [ancestral history website](#) explains how all of my great grandparents converged in North Dakota around 1900 with farming families. My parents met at North Dakota State University in 1970 and started their family the following year. For further context of my first two decades, I refer you to the "[Family Chronicles](#)" that I created for Mom and Dad's 50th anniversary. It explains the parental decision-making that set my life path as a minor. This journal now portrays my own individual perspective, from my earliest memories to my 50th birthday!

My 1st Decade: 1971 – 1981, Ages 0 – 9

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Emergence

In my first few years, my impressionable mind was imprinted by my environment at that time and place: rural North Dakota in the 1970s. I could not have narrated a coherent worldview at that time. In this section, I will try to be true to my earliest perceptions and memories as they emerged from a void.

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The hospital where I was born! Cavalier, ND. Photographed 2010.

Family

Naturally, the people who go all the way to the roots of my memory are my family. There was never a time in my memory without Mom and Dad, Shad, all four grandparents, or even four of my great-grandparents. All my aunts and uncles are also in the cast of characters that has no beginning. Of course, there were many other people all around us – friends, distant cousins, spouses. It took a long time to understand “who was who”. I thought of the aunts and uncles as close friends who just happened to visit my grandparents regularly.

We had many large gatherings, especially at Grandma & Grandpa Beck’s house or Great Grandma and Grandpa Beck’s. I remember delicious food, adults laughing, and children running around on every occasion. I’m the oldest grandchild, so in those early years some of the children must have been distant cousins.

Shad is two years younger than I. I don’t remember the occasion of his birth, nor do I remember any houses where we lived before him. Therefore, I doubt that any of my surviving memories date back to my first two years.

First impressions of the world

Many of my earliest memories are unanchored to any timeline. They were just a general first impression of the world. “The world” at that time was a flat grid of open fields and long roads. Summers brought heat, humidity, and mosquitoes, while the winters were nearly Arctic. The first home that I remember was the trailer house in Nekoma. I knew the church, the school, the grocery store, town hall, and even the bar (it was right across the street). There were mysteries just beyond town, infrastructure whose purpose was entirely alien to me. On one end of town were grain elevators. On the other end was that cryptic concrete pyramid and a bunch of trailer houses for men who worked there. The air raid sirens sounded twice a day. I seem to remember adults telling us the pleasant lie that the sirens told us when to have dinner and supper.

I clearly remember being young enough for adults to carry me. I remember riding in a child’s seat on the back of Mom and Dad’s bicycles.

I could read before kindergarten, and I remember reading some of my favorite first books. I remember Mom and Dad showing me off to friends by having me read words from a newspaper. I still remember “lightning” as one of the words that really impressed people.

I remember my uncles Nathan and Gary’s high school basketball games, which seemed as grandiose to me as the Olympics at that age.

I remember Grandpa Beck and my uncles, and sometimes Dad, hard at work on the farm. Sometimes I would accompany Mom or Grandma as we took lunch out to the fields for the men.

I remember anthropomorphizing the sun and moon; the moon would get scared and hide when the sun came out. I thought of them as oscillating up and down on opposite ends of the sky; I didn’t realize that they traversed circles.

When I realized that Mom and Dad had once been children, I asked if they’d been boys or girls, and why they’d chosen their adult gender.

I had the upper bunkbed, so I would often lie awake and look at the ceiling just a few feet above me. It had some kind of swirly pattern, which could look like a crowd of faces with just a little imagination. I think I once dreamt that the ceiling did become a crowd of faces. I thought that when I slept and dreamt, dreamland was above the ceiling. I wasn’t clear if the people there were the same as in waking life, or copies. One of my earliest terrible nightmares was accidentally

flushing Mom and Dad down the toilet. Another time, I had a dream about fighting with my parents. The next day, I didn't know if they "remembered" it or if I should apologize.

We went to church regularly. Dad sang in the choir, so Shad and I would often sit alone with Mom. Every week, the choir proceeded in singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy." It was an exciting moment, and I was so proud to see Dad in the procession. Our pastor was a young blonde guy. I had it in my mind that he was God, apparently because Mom and Dad told me that church was God's house. For years, I envisioned God as a 30-year-old clean-shaven blonde guy wearing sky-colored pale blue.

Other parents would drop off their kids for Mom to baby-sit. One of them, Brandy, is the first friend I remember. His mother, Barb, was my first 1st-grade teacher. I remember the time I learned the word "necessary". I was eating cupcakes in the kitchen with one of the boys that Mom was baby-sitting. We were making a mess of it, throwing cupcake crumbs and wrappers into the sink. Mom asked, "Boys, is that really necessary?!" I didn't know what it meant, but it sounded bad.

Shad and I would watch TV and listen to records. We had our favorite toys, teddy bears, and wheeled vehicles. We loved our candy-striped swing set. We also dreamt up role-playing games that always involved being older, wiser, bigger, or stronger than four-year-old wimps.

Early events



Aunt Cindy's wedding, 6/21/1975 (age 3).

This is the earliest photo in my possession of an occasion that I remember.

I still didn't have a sense of chronology in the 1970s. I didn't pin events to months or years back then. However, I now realize that my long-term memories progressed from generalized

people, places, and things to one-time occurrences around 1975, when I was three. Even at that, the few occasions I still remember from my North Dakota years are randomly fragmented.

The picture above depicts the earliest occasion that I can definitively remember. Interestingly, I don't remember Cindy's wedding itself, just the events before and afterward. Her wedding party was something you'd only see in the '70s: white tuxedos with pastel ruffled shirts for the men, and lacy parasols for the ladies. Cindy wanted to dance with me at the reception. I was too shy. She solved that problem by holding me.

I remember my 4th birthday (9/03/1975). We had a book of holiday cakes. I picked out the witch's head, and Mom made that one for me.

I remember trick-or-treating as a "bum" for Halloween one year.

I remember our dog, Lucky, having a litter of seven puppies (1976). Dad named them after the seven dwarves. We gave them away to friends and neighbors.

I remember the 4th of July when everyone kept using the word "bicentennial". We were at a motel somewhere, and we attended a big song and dance production.

I remember Grandma and Grandpa Beck's 25th anniversary (7/25/1976), when their children gave them a grandfather clock.

I remember starting kindergarten (Fall '76) and being nervous about it the summer beforehand. When we lived in the trailer house, the bus would stop out front and Mom would walk me out to board it. I remember the day the bus arrived before Mom was ready to walk me out. She must have been in the back of the house taking care of Shad. I didn't have the initiative to walk out to the bus unsupervised. I don't think I even called out to Mom. I just froze and stared at the bus out the window until it left. After we moved to the brick house, I was able to walk to and from school.

Amy

Life's most exciting early event came in the fall of 1976, when our parents announced to Shad and me that they were expecting another baby. Our oldest cousin Erin had been born just a few months earlier, so we boys knew something about the concepts of pregnancy and birth. We soon moved into a bigger house, "the brick house" just a few blocks away.

We didn't know if it would be a boy or a girl. I rooted for a girl; Shad hoped for a boy. I remember Mom being pregnant, but I don't remember her looking pregnant. She claims that she never did.

Grandma Fagerland and Great Grandma Meyer were baby-sitting us on the evening of April 27, 1977 when Amy was born. Grandma woke us up to make the announcement. "Your mother just had a baby girl!" she told us. I cheered. Shad said, "Oh, it's a girl?". I got the sense that he was disappointed by the gender reveal, but if he was, he quickly got over it. We loved our adorable little baby sister. Mom called her "Butchnert Bean", a baby name possibly derived from "butter bean". (Her mother and grandmother had called their children "beans" because they were tall and skinny like string beans). I picked up on that name and have called Amy "Butchk" ever since.

***Beans******Butter Beans******Butchnert Bean (Butchk)***

Aspirations

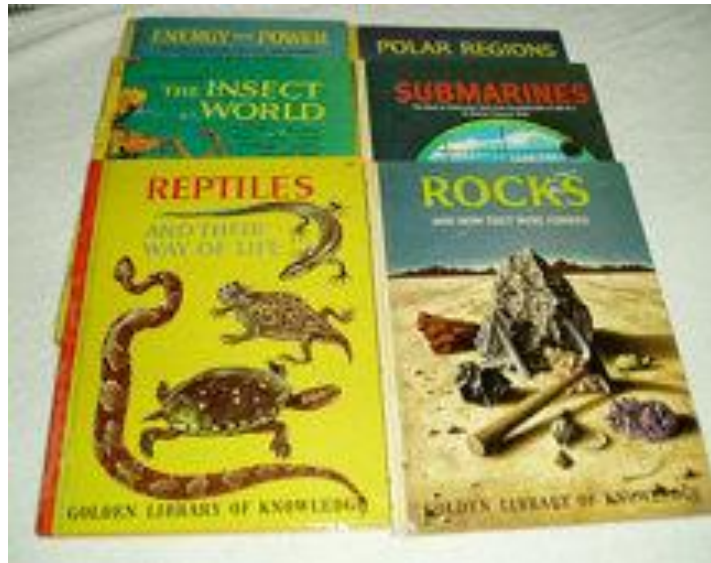
Childhood is full of embarrassment and self-consciousness. It bothered me to be fundamentally clueless about the world. I recall grown-ups always laughing at things I said and did, without knowing why. I watched in awe as grown-ups “just got it.” They understood the things that went over my head – TV shows, church, ball games. They seemed to instinctively know when it was time to go somewhere and when it was time to come back home. Every grown-up seemed “important” to me. I usually felt very unimportant. I starved for attention and purpose.

I was especially fascinated by teenagers. Teenagers have a way of feigning purpose and direction even when they have none, but I was easily fooled when I was younger than they. We spent a lot of time around my teenaged aunts and uncles, Mom’s siblings. They had cool teen friends too, with cool cars and motorcycles and clothes and rock music.

Now I realize that my obsession with growing up was a good sign. I was lucky enough to grow up in a multi-generational community. Life on “the farm” was full of extended family of all ages. Everywhere we went, there were three or four generations of us: parents, grandparents, and an endless supply of child cousins. It was a small community, and I could sense that everyone played a part. I was fascinated and perplexed by that leaderless organization. My role models were mostly ordinary people who made an honest living. My childhood fantasy was simply growing up and contributing something important to the community. I went through a long list of dream jobs: fireman, garbage man, basketball player (that inspiration came from my uncles more than NBA stars).

Reading and Early School

Another blessing of childhood was staying home with Mom, all the way to my fifth birthday. I had no pre-school or day care, and for two years I didn't even have siblings to divide her attention. Mom spent plenty of time reading with me. I do not remember a time before sitting in Mom's lap with a book. I picked up the basics of phonics by age 2 or 3. I remember being shown off a little bit, reading snippets of books, greeting cards, and newspapers for visitors. Mom claims that I read my own cards on my 3rd birthday.



The “Golden Library of Knowledge” might be what first got me fascinated in the world at large.

This early head start gave me a huge advantage. I often say that I grew up learning “written English as a first language.” I recognize the difference in people who started reading after age five or six. When I got to kindergarten and went to a K – 1 class, the kindergartners could not read at all. The 1st graders read out loud with funny inflections; I could tell that they weren't really getting it. I grew up being just as fluent with the written word as the spoken word.

Being able to read and tap into written language created a great escape for me. For as long as I can remember, one of my favorite things to do was going off by myself to read. I had my own favorite fun books, but Mom and Dad cleverly planted educational books around the house too. I was fascinated by the discoveries to be made in our “Golden Library” series. There were huge secrets not found in everyday life, like dinosaurs, gems, body parts, and number theory. I learned quite a lot of things from independent reading before my classmates learned them in school.

I think it was evident that I was at the top of my class from the moment I began. I even passed a test to enter kindergarten before my 5th birthday. My teachers regularly described me as exceptional with language, math, and facts. I'm sure that's one of the reasons I liked school. Sometimes I got into disagreements or battles of will with teachers, but otherwise I was excited about school. I went to kindergarten and part of 1st grade while we still lived in Nekoma.

Moving to California

In mid-December 1977, we made the radical change of environment from North Dakota farmland to Los Angeles County, CA! The move to California was highly influential for me. It was a seismic shift in my life, unlike anything I had gone through before age six! When we first moved to California, we talked like Dakotans, and some of the kids made fun of our accents. During our first few months in Canyon Country, I went to a school called Cedar Creek. I never

felt like I belonged there. It was a sad and unsettling feeling for me. I did come to embrace life in Valencia.

In retrospect, one of the biggest changes was increased familial and generational isolation. In California, it was just our nuclear household of five amidst a neighborhood of acquaintances and a few close friends. Each generation did a lot more of our own thing. I would spend time with friends after school, and we'd entertain ourselves with our imaginations. I had less of a sense of adult community or how I'd fit into it when I grew up.

On the other hand, I greatly appreciate this move for the early diversity of experience that it provided me. Society today is sharply divided along urban / rural lines. I am one of the few people who spent my first decade in both environments. Thus, they have both been programmed as "normal" in my sense of reality.

Our move to California coincided with the disco era. Somehow, that seemed like the perfect soundtrack for this exotic new suburban life. I always associated that cool sound of disco music with southern California's perennial summer weather, swimming pools for us kids, and a mysterious urban world of cocktail parties for the adults.

Santa Clarita Elementary School

I completed grades 1 – 4 at Santa Clarita Elementary School in Saugus (now Santa Clarita), CA. The teachers I remember most are Mrs. Adams (2nd grade) and Mrs. Smisko (3rd grade). Mrs. Adams had a box of self-paced math modules in the classroom. We would grab a laminated card, read the lesson, and complete the problems. I proceeded through the set much more quickly than the other students. I think that Mrs. Adams was the first teacher to identify or encourage my strength in math. She also had us write short stories. Mrs. Smisko was the teacher who taught us the art of writing non-fiction, with a "SPARKS" system of paragraph structure. I forgot what that stands for, but I appreciate it as an early strong foundation for writing.

Santa Clarita Elementary held quarterly awards ceremonies. The whole school would assemble in the inner courtyard. Our teachers would call the honorees up to get a certificate. Nobody would know who was going to win; it was as suspenseful as the Academy Awards. Only our parents would know in advance, and if we were lucky, they would be there to receive our awards with us. In fact, they were seated right there next to the teachers. We all tried really hard not to ruin the surprise by looking for our parents. (Now that I realize it, I was too near-sighted to discern faces from that far away anyway). I won several certificates at those assemblies. They were as meaningful to me as Nobel prizes.

Interests and Talents

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Outer Space: Fact and Fancy



Outer space was one of my favorite childhood interests. I recognize now that there were many influences behind this interest. I was born in the Apollo era, when men were walking on the moon. Culture was abuzz with space exploration. In fact, “The Moon” was one of our Golden Knowledge books. *Star Trek* reruns were regularly on Dad’s TV. I think that my science-fiction romanticism really exploded when I saw *Star Wars*. I can’t think of any spectacle that I could compare it to, with the trumpet fanfare theme, the heroes, villains, and strange creatures. I was only five. It pretty much blew my mind. It wasn’t long afterward that Dad was bringing home color close-ups of Jupiter and its moons.

In Valencia, Mom got into the habit of taking me and Shad to the library every two weeks. I almost religiously picked out space books, many by Isaac Asimov. I hand-copied tables of astronomical data and kept them in “Scot’s Space Binder.” I dabbled with “spaceship design.” With the space race at full throttle, I easily saw myself headed toward a career in rocketry, astronautics, or astronomy.

At Santa Clarita Elementary School, my best friends were Chris and Erik. They were Star Wars fanatics, even more than I. They had a role-playing game of being secret agents from other planets. They talked about interplanetary spaceship battles, and they drew some extraterrestrial creatures. I didn’t want to be left out, so I decided that I was from Venus. Somehow, we got into an Emperor’s New Clothes situation where none of us would be the first to admit that it was all made up. This caused our parents quite a bit of grief for, I don’t know, maybe a year or more!

Basketball

For a nerdy little kid, I was actually not a bad athlete. I was always one of the fastest runners in school. I stayed active at recess with soccer and wall ball. My favorite sport was basketball. I was actually pretty obsessed with it in elementary school. This was surely influenced by my early years in North Dakota. In that region, just about everyone played basketball. Grandpa Beck had played it, and I watched my uncles Nathan and Gary play high school games. They dominated the court and were actually state champions in their class in 1976. In Valencia, we had a basketball court just hundreds of feet from the house. I played in the little leagues for about two seasons. I got familiar with the NBA too. I had a book of famous players. I learned their most famous achievements and fantasized about having star moments like theirs. I liked the Lakers, but my favorite team was the Harlem Globetrotters! Dad took me to one of their games in Los Angeles.



*Little League Basketball
Santa Clarita Valley Cowboys
1979 (age 7)*

Cartoons and Comics

My interest in creative endeavors appeared already in my first decade. My preferred mode of expression was the comic strip. I loved reading comic books like Richie Rich and comic strips, especially *Peanuts*. Already while still in North Dakota, I started to experiment with my own single-panel doodles and cartoons. I remember an awkward one about salt and pepper shakers comparing themselves to white and black people. I have lost these early sketches.

Chris and Erik had similar interests. They created comic casts of characters. Inspired by them, I started sketching a few sit-com type strips featuring characters such as Fat Cat, Big Mama, and Baby Ge-Ga.



The first panel from my oldest surviving comic strip, 1981 (age 9)

Alphabetizing

My alphabetizing talent showed up already within my first decade. As I have explained in other blogs, it came to me swiftly at some point in the Valencia years. I don't think I ever had to practice it. I could take any word, say "basketball," and instantly alphabetize its letters into "aabbekllst." In those days, we would sometimes watch reality shows like "Real People" or "That's Incredible." I secretly aspired to appear on one of those shows. Of course, I had no idea how to arrange that, so I would just show it off whenever I got the chance.

Precociously Nostalgic

By the time we moved to Valencia, I was able to appreciate that life was changing, and there were some things that would never be the same. I thought nostalgically about friends that I realized I'd probably never see again. Mom's family was kind enough to come visit us just months after our move. That helped maintain the connection to them. Even so, I realized that I was now removed from that community and wouldn't be seeing them regularly anymore.

I believe that this early and abrupt life transition was the first powerful lesson about the fleeting nature of the present. My first six years felt eternal until suddenly they were gone. I developed a precocious fascination with photo albums, scrapbooks, memorabilia, and family trees at a young age. I can now recognize the common theme. Even back then, I was doing my best to rediscover, capture, and preserve the past.

My 2nd Decade: 1981 – 1989, Ages 9 – 18

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Hometowns and Schools

Dad's job took us to Santa Maria / Orcutt in Santa Barbara County, CA when I was nine. Grades 5 – 8 flowed continuously from Ralph Dunlap Elementary School to Orcutt Junior High. We made one more major relocation to Rapid City, SD in 1985. I attended two schools there: West Junior High for 9th grade and then Stevens High School with the same classmates for grades 10 – 12. Santa Maria and Rapid City were similar to Santa Clarita. They were all by-and-large conservative working-class small cities.

School Super-Achievement



MATH CONTESTANTS: Tanya Toubbeh, Scot Fagerland, Robbie Paplin, Mike Toubbeh, Mrs. Edna Deming, advisor. Scot tied for second place in the county.

From my Orcutt Junior High 7th grade yearbook, 1983 – '84

through high school. I half-joke that my resume peaked in 12th grade.

Through high school, I was educated at public schools in working-class to middle-class suburbs or small cities. In other words, none of the schools were academically selective. It was easy for me to be a stand-out, because I was one of the few who was highly literate and ambitious about school. By the early 1980s, I was aware that I had never met a student above my level. It

Just like anyone else, this time of life was my only uninterrupted decade as a student. School was my life! Why not do my best, I figured. I became especially conscientious about doing well in school in 5th grade, when I first got straight A's on my report cards. After a year or two of that, it became a matter of stubborn pride for me. Even though I didn't care a whole lot about some classes, I had to keep those straight A's! By high school, I was conscious that college admissions were competitive and grade-dependent too. I took it very seriously and continued to be at the top of my class all the way

was only natural for me to wonder just how rare my talents were. Was I the smartest kid in the world? It was a reasonable hypothesis at that time! That illusion didn't last much longer. I was starting to take 2nd place (or less) in math competitions by 7th grade. High school science fairs were downright humbling. Of course, those were selective environments. I learned that there is a major difference between the top 1% and the top 1% of the top 1%.

My main interests continued to be math, science, and writing. I think that my friends and family thought of me as math-centric, but in actuality my English education was equally strong and prominent. My 8th grade English teacher, Miss O'Brien, gave us a new list of 20 vocabulary words each week, and we had to write a story using all of them. I went overboard and wrote five-page epics. She singled out me and one other student as being her most creative writers. I had an exceptional English teacher in 9th grade, Mrs. Hamblet. She was a grammar taskmaster. I achieved nearly adult-level writing skills in her class. I was not as interested in the social sciences. I took those classes seriously, but the surface-level material that we learned was not meaningful to me. I think that it is much harder for an adolescent to understand history or social studies, as it requires a cycle of experience.

It seems that I continued to learn just as much outside of school as in. I was always reading, just as I still am in adulthood. My greatest educational regret is that, as I watched friends around me get excited about programming computers, I did not catch that fever.

In high school, I really put the pedal to the metal with an eye toward college applications. It hardly seems remarkable anymore compared to today's students, but I competed in all the math contests and science fairs. I started winning trips out of town or even out of state, including the International Science and Engineering Fair two years in a row. I joined some school clubs and was elected president of the National Honor Society. I tried my hand at some extra-curricular activities, notably Drama in 11th – 12th grades. I practically aced the SAT, ACT, and PSAT, earning a National Merit Scholarship. I blew through all of Stevens High School's math curriculum by 11th grade, and started taking classes at the nearby college, the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology. By the time I graduated, I had taken three semesters of calculus plus one each of differential equations, linear algebra, and physics at the School of Mines. Yep, all with straight A's!

An overachieving high school kid feels like he is the king of the world because his potential is infinite. Of course, he doesn't actually have any meaningful accomplishments to brag about. I "could have been" an astronaut, concert pianist, theoretical physicist, author, rock star, or millionaire. But I wasn't any of those yet, and I knew I couldn't be all of them. It was time to start making choices.

Later in life, I spent a lot of time tutoring high school students. I have witnessed a real generation gap in our educations. It seems that education is much less literacy-focused these days. Students aren't asked to buckle down and read and write the way I was taught. They watch short instructional videos, do projects, and engage in a ridiculous amount of extra-curricular activities. They can type well, but they have forgotten the art of penmanship. With cell phones practically implanted in their hands, today's teenagers never have a chance to exercise focus, attention span, or imagination. As a child, I learned to be attentive to my environment. I look around now and see everybody glued to their screens and oblivious to their surroundings. Without their cell phones, they get fidgety or bored. I think that the "Attention Deficit Disorder" that kids claim to have now is a product of their environment and training. I suppose that the modern lifestyle has its advantages too, but I count my blessings that I was raised to exercise my literacy and focus.

Friends and Activities

With all the moves, my only decade-scale friendships were those that I formed right away in each location. Orcutt was a working-class town, originally settled by oil miners. Though there were a lot of Vandenberg families there, most of my friends had uneducated parents. I didn't understand that at the time. I just got in with some friends from more unstable households, and I think that Mom and Dad were always a little wary of them. I believe it was literally the first day of 5th grade that I met William. He immediately became my new friend "from outer space." The first words he said to me were, "I'm from Mars, you know." (It turns out he got that line from a popular children's book at the time, *Alan Mendelsohn, Boy from Mars*.) We were good students, but we also enabled each other to completely block out reality and escape in our own little fantasy world. Scott (with two t's) was a fat slob in a smelly house, but he always had computer games, intriguing music, and cool movies. I simply couldn't resist hanging out at his house. There was also the queer guy down the street, Don. He was probably queer in both senses of the word, now that I think of it in retrospect. He was also a bit of a weird loner. He'd stage huge games of *Risk* by himself. He was dungeon master for a small Dungeons and Dragons club at his house, and I got really into that around 6th – 7th grades. He was completely obsessed with Piers Anthony's *Mare Imbrium* series. He adopted Mare Imbrium as an imaginary pet, and almost every day he'd make up a new story about her exploits.

Team sports fell by the wayside in this chapter of life. When I didn't make the junior high basketball team, I joined a Santa Maria bowling league instead. That bowling alley was in the same strip mall as Mira's Needlework where Mom worked. I got pretty serious about bowling, and I continued it in Rapid City and all through high school. I got my own bowling ball in high school.

After the big move to Rapid City, I quickly fell in with two distinct groups of friends. I was originally closer to the "Bill group". Our shared passion was the Dr. Demento Show, which we listened to religiously on the radio every weekend. Bill continued to be my best friend through 10th grade at Stevens High School.

Then there was the "Chad group". I met them right away in 9th grade, and in 11th grade my social orbit re-centered around Chad and his circle, especially after a week-long trip to Disneyworld. They were definitely a faster-moving group, with girls in their social circle and everything! It was a good transition for me, as they were more socially skilled but actually pretty strait-laced. These guys came from good families and didn't do drugs. There was a strong streak of Mormonism in this group. Nevertheless, there were some fast girls and alcohol at a few parties. With this social circle and my participation in high school drama, I finally started to come into contact with some girls. It was pretty limited, though. I didn't have a "high school sweetheart" or any big relationships. My only life-forming moments with girls at the time were lessons that taught me, "This isn't going to be as easy as I'd hoped!" Late high school was the only time I had a tight-knit circle of friends like that; it's not my natural social style.



My high school circle of friends, right around the time of graduation, Rapid City, 1989.

Music and Pop Culture

I can trace some music in my life all the way to the beginning. I liked music class at school, and I played Mom and Dad's cheap little organ by reading numbers on the notes. It started to become more serious after Grandma and Grandpa Fagerland bought us a piano. I remember clearly that we were living in Orcutt, so it must have been right around 1982. We were all really excited when the piano was new, and everybody in the family took lessons for a while. That was the first time I truly learned to read music (second educational regret; I really wish I'd learned to read music in my first decade). I showed some early promise and continued lessons all the way through high school. I liked to think that I could become a concert pianist. In retrospect, I was "pretty good for an amateur," but I did not have what it took to play professionally. Maybe starting a few years earlier could have made a big difference, but ... there's only so much you can pack into your childhood!



Me at the piano, age 14. 2/08/86, Rapid City.

After I got past the rudiments, my piano teachers – Mrs. DeLee and Mrs. Gee in Santa Maria and Mrs. Boysen in Rapid City – gave me a strictly classical education. I was especially partial toward the romantic composers. Chopin was my very favorite, followed by Beethoven. I played a few pieces by Debussy, Ravel, Liszt, Brahms, Mozart, Rachmaninoff, and Gershwin. I memorized almost everything I learned, and I could play two or three hours of repertoire by heart by the time I graduated from high school. My last piano teacher, Mr. Judd, was a jazz pianist, not really a good match for me.

It was probably piano that got me more broadly interested in classical music around the same age. Mom and Dad had a record box set of orchestral hits. Shad and I discovered that together in Orcutt. I recognized that there was an almost unlimited repertoire to discover. I added “composer” to my list of dream jobs. Tinkering around on the piano, I came up with a few simple themes when I was 10 or 12. Those themes stuck with me for years, and I fleshed them out into short compositions early in college. It didn’t come easily to me, and I never found a good teacher to help me develop that skill.

I was getting seriously interested in rock and pop music at the same time. Starting in about 1980, I started paying attention to which songs belonged to which bands on the radio. I started finding favorites that my friends were listening to, rather than my parents. For years, my only source of music was local radio stations. I never had any money to buy my own albums. I did buy plenty of blank tapes. Little did I know that the 1980s would be the one and only decade of cassettes! I think I first started getting serious about recording songs off the radio in 1985, after we moved to Rapid City. I was bored and lonely, feeling pretty emotional about the move. The radio gave me something to do and look forward to. I was also at a very impressionable age. We get most emotionally attached to the music of our teenage years. For me, that was the mid-late 1980s.

Shortly after the move to Rapid City, I discovered the Dr. Demento Show. I bonded with two friends named Bill and Brad, who were apparently the only other Dr. Demento nerds at West Junior High. I followed Casey Kasem’s “Top 40” faithfully in 9th and 10th grades. Later in high school, “glam metal” was all the rage, and my friends and I really got into it. We got a kick out of the over-the-top look, whether the music was good or not. Some of our favorite bands were Van Halen, Ratt, Tesla, Def Leppard, Whitesnake, Guns n Roses, that kind of thing.

When I started working summer jobs, I saved up enough to buy portable stereos. My most treasured possession in high school was the boombox with radio, double deck tape recorder, and even a CD player! The speakers were detachable. I separated them as far apart as possible on the desk over my head. I also had a good set of headphones so I could keep listening at night. The first CD that I ever bought was “Blue Murder”, a Whitesnake spinoff. I still have it three decades later.

I always secretly knew that I could sing. I’d sing along to tapes in the car, and I felt that I could keep up pretty well with the vocalists. I was especially excited by the heavy metal singers, because they could do things that most people couldn’t even sing along to. When I started to be able to scream like Don Dokken or Rob Halford, I felt that I had a chance to be a big-time rock singer someday.

Like most people that age, though, my only realistic option was to try to look like my idols. I started growing my hair long as an impressionable teenager who thought it looked cool on other guys (though it never looked good on me). I was tired of looking like a 1970s nerd, and eager to cast that image. I thought it would revolutionize my social life. I didn’t realize at the time that I only managed to make myself look like a 1980s nerd instead.

Comic Strips

In the 21st century, we exchange “memes”. In the 20th, we had comic strips. My interest in comic strips peaked as a teenager. Not only did I follow them all in the daily newspaper, but I cut them out and kept them in photo albums. I also picked up the pace drawing my own cartoons. In junior high, I drew a few strips in a series I called “Life Itself.” One day, I discovered a new way to draw faces in half-profile. I created a whole new cast of characters in that style and called the series “All Year ‘Round.” That ended up being far and away my most enduring comic strip. By the time I finished high school, I had put together three full compilations of 125 strips each (which I found to be the industry standard). When I go back and read them as an adult, I am still impressed by how those cartoons developed. Some of them were genuinely funny and / or thoughtful and / or compelling (in my biased opinion). I feel that they were looking fairly professional by the time I was 16. In any event, that talent, along with so many others, took a back seat to homework when I got to college.



One of my last and most advanced strips, 2/14/88 (age 16)

Summer Jobs

I started working outside of the home as young as 13, but I didn't go far. My first few summer jobs were at the family businesses in Rapid City. Dad was starting up Powerhouse, and his brother Dan was taking over at Mon-Dak. Grandpa was still shuttling back and forth between the two shops. Mom started at Powerhouse and soon switched over to Mon-Dak. I spent time working in both businesses, including the first and second Powerhouse locations. I was usually assigned to the back warehouse, where I could help with inventory, shipping, putting parts away in bins, and taking the parts back out for shipping. I was especially proud of myself for making a complete overhaul of bins for Mon-Dak one summer. There were bins without parts, parts without bins, bins out of order – it was a mess. I organized it to a tee. Mon-Dak had a larger work crew than Powerhouse. Most of the adults there were the uneducated smoking type. It seems that half of our lunch breaks were to Taco John's.

Sometimes over the summer, I'd do yard work like lawn mowing or weed whacking. I remember starting high school with the worst case of poison oak I've ever had, all over my body, after clearing the weeds around someone's septic tank.

I think it was only after 12th grade that I got my first summer job for an unrelated employer. That summer, some of my friends and I got hired as tour guides at Rushmore Cave near Mt.

Rushmore. We memorized the script and led the way with a flashlight. Between tours, we had to man the snack shop as well.

Driving

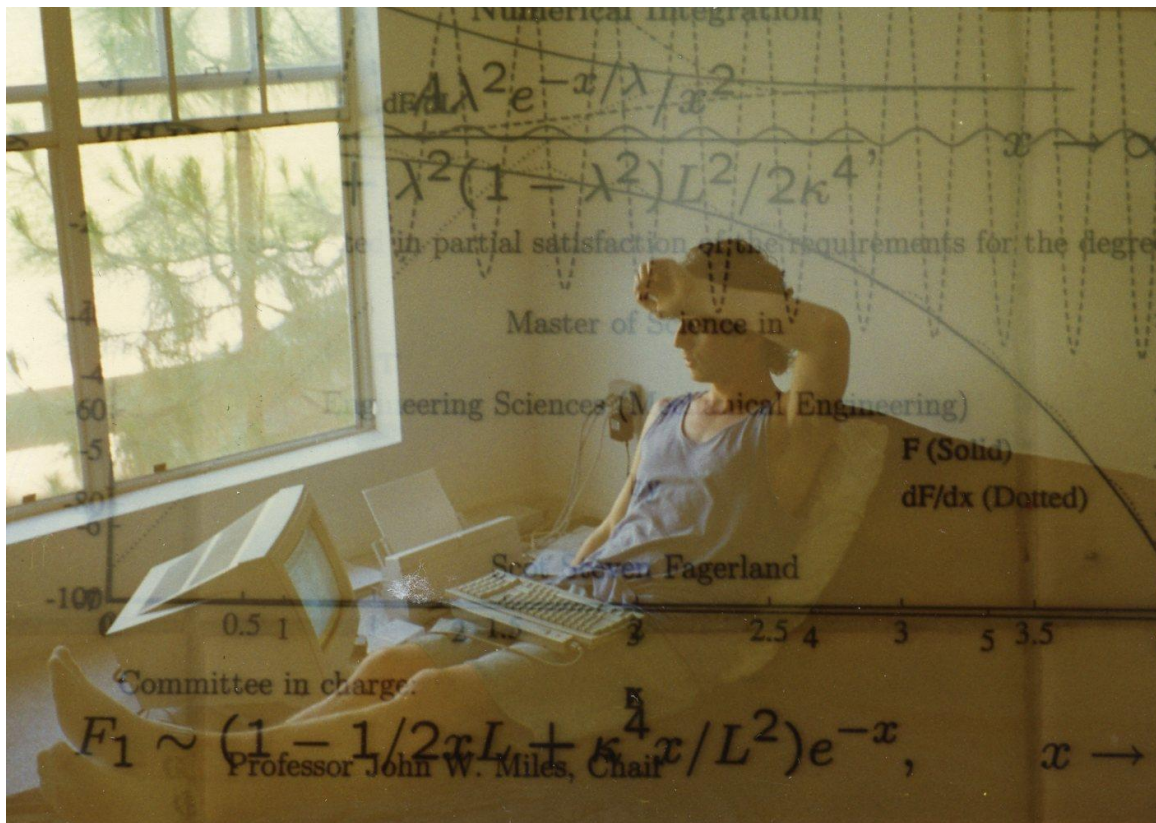
I got my driver's license as early as South Dakota law would allow, as soon as I turned 16. When I was a teenager, getting a driver's license was a big deal. We didn't have social media or smart phones to chat with our friends all day long; we drove to hang out with each other. We did more and more of that as we got closer to graduating. This was the first time that I ever had much autonomy. We spent a lot of time at Aaron's house because his parents had a hot tub and a good video game system.

Driving was about responsibility as well as freedom. Since Mom and Dad both worked, it was helpful for them to allow me to drive so they didn't have to tote me around. I was in charge of shuttling Shad around until he could drive too. I ran errands; I drove to school and work. At least once, I drove all the way across the Dakotas to see Grandma and Grandpa Beck.

My first car was a hand-me-down from my uncle Gary. It was a big blue Mercury Cougar. With a gigantic engine and a bad muffler, it was one of the loudest cars in town. It also gave me a place to be alone so I could practice singing; it was awfully loud inside the car too.

I was a reckless teenaged driver. I got my first and only speeding ticket right away. After that, I never broke the speed limit again, but I liked to accelerate to full speed as quickly as possible. I backed into a brick wall and dented the fender. I backed into a hillside and clogged the tailpipe. I once spun 360 degrees on an icy road. Yet somehow, I'm still here today, and I even got straight A's in driver's ed class.

Solitary Studenthood



I spent most of the '90s immersed in math and engineering studies.

Finally, the big month arrived: September 1989. I turned 18 and headed off for college. It was a huge change, but I was feeling ready for college and young adulthood. I'd become increasingly independent in high school. The summer before college, I spent over a month away from home at science camps without getting homesick. I was also more than ready to find a girlfriend.

College took me right back to Southern California. I enrolled at Caltech in Pasadena, just a few miles from JPL. It was (foolishly) the only college I applied to. I took to college life rapidly, settling into the routine of classwork and homework.

There's a saying at Caltech: "Grades, social life, sleep. Choose two of the three." One of my greatest challenges (which I never overcame) was morning classes. I was always a night person, and my sleep schedule drifted later in college. Sometimes, there was no "schedule" at all to my sleep.

In this environment, I quickly rediscovered my natural social pace – very slow. Being part of an "entourage" in high school had been unnatural for me. Early in college, I tried penetrating similar social circles at Caltech. Soon I felt silly trying to make college friends by acting like my high school friends. By the middle of my sophomore year, I gave up and went back to being myself. I reverted to being alone most of the time – sometimes with a girlfriend – and I've been pretty solitary ever since. I even had single rooms all through college.

Tonight Show Appearance and Aftermath

One of my very first actions in college was alphabetizing at the Frosh Camp talent show, before school even began. That performance garnered a call from Caltech's department of public relations. Just two months later, I was on national TV demonstrating my talent with Johnny Carson! That added all the more craziness to the chaotic first quarter of college. On top of rotations and homework sets, I had newspaper interviews and Tonight Show tryouts. It came and went in a flash the day before Thanksgiving. When I went back to Rapid City that Christmas, everybody was talking about it.



The most publicized moment of my lifetime, on the Tonight Show, 11/22/1989

Though being on the Tonight Show was the most public moment of my life, I can hardly say that it defines me. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event. It did end up becoming a thread through my entire stay at Caltech. Up through the end of college, I was still approached by people who said, “The last time I saw you, you were on TV!” My successful four-minute segment with Johnny Carson got me into a few Caltech publications. I was one of the student speakers at Caltech's centennial banquet in 1991, where I got to do a little dialogue with Walter Cronkite. In my junior year, I was interviewed by CBC radio for a program they aired about the workings of the mind.

By the time I graduated from college, I was ready to be anonymous again. I didn't tell anyone about it for years. I started to become nostalgic about it decades later, especially after Johnny Carson died. I have collected a large amount of alphabetizing memorabilia, from videos to newspaper articles. I posted it online in blog series to commemorate the 25th and 30th anniversaries of this occasion:

<http://scots-spot.blogspot.com/2014/11/tonight-show-silver-anniversary-part-1.html>

<http://scotfagerland.com/30th-tonight-show-anniversary/>

Caltech and UCSD

When we make big changes in life, they are rarely what we expect. I went to Caltech envisioning a future as a theoretical physicist, or as close to that line of work as possible. Math had always been one of my favorite subjects in school, and one of the subjects in which I was the strongest standout. I had developed a burning fascination with theoretical physics in high school, largely due to popular books on the subject such as those by John Gribbin. Since math and physics had been effortless for me in high school, I assumed that the same would be true in college and beyond.

It didn't take very much time at Caltech for me to realize how (understandably) exaggerated my self-perception was. The courses that I had taken in high school had actually been pretty elementary; my peers were simply not as dedicated or interested in academics as I had been. In college, I was thrown into the deep end, so to speak. I took courses that I wasn't prepared to learn, taught by professors who did not know how to teach. More significantly, I found that half of the students around me were learning the material better than I was.

In time, I learned that research is not only stiffly competitive but even a little bit boring and quite underpaid. In high school, I'd had a romantic perception of physicists as philosophers of science who used mathematics as a secret language to make unimaginable discoveries about life and reality. In truth, most researchers that I got to know did not muse about "the meaning of it all" like the authors did. They tackled small parts of narrow problems and spent a lot of their time worrying about computer code and grant money. I soon came to realize that all of the big philosophical questions had already been asked, and that it sounded passé and juvenile to rehash them.

I had come to Caltech naively expecting a social environment something like Starfleet Academy. I knew that it would be different from small-town South Dakota. My expectations for my peers were modeled after the protagonists in science fiction books I'd read in high school – motivated, well-balanced, philosophical, humble, charismatic, and attractive all at the same time. I made many meaningful friendships in college, but, well, we Techers are not all movie heroes. It took me a while to get used to rooms full of tie-dyed sarcastic people doing cryptic things to their computers.

The two most important lessons that Caltech taught me were confidence and humility. That might sound like a paradox. I learned that if you throw a complex problem at me, eventually I'll be resourceful enough to solve it. I also learned that the world is full of people who can do it faster or better. That duality is the unspoken model at elite universities. They don't bother trying to teach students, because they know that the students who can figure it out themselves are the ones who rise to the top. That outlook makes sense in the old-fashioned view of the university as self-perpetuating academic institution. It is not, however, good for training job skills. What it came down to was that I studied a lot of math that I didn't know how to apply to anything, and I was overwhelmed by the homework and exams. I found the math to be pretty interesting when I understood it, but, in all honesty, I'd already learned the really useful math in high school.

As college wrapped up and adulthood approached, I was feeling pragmatic. I realized that all the math classes in the world weren't going to earn me a living unless I applied them to a marketable skill like engineering. I considered teaching to be a consolation prize for those who weren't gifted enough to be researchers. (Many researchers / professors feel that way too!) Graduate school seemed like a necessary next step. I needed to put something besides "math" on my diploma. I also knew enough about the workplace to understand that graduate degrees were

much more valuable than bachelor's degrees. I applied immediately out of college, intending to work my way toward a PhD in engineering. I had taken some interesting courses in applied mechanics as a junior, and I was especially interested in chaos theory at that time (again more from popular books than from coursework), so I applied to graduate programs in that area. I got accepted to Cornell, Northwestern, and UCSD, all with full-ride scholarships plus fellowships. I accepted the invitation to attend UCSD, mostly because I was comfortable in southern California, and also partly because I couldn't bear the thought of leaving the girl I was seeing at the time! If I could go back in time, I'd tell myself to choose Cornell; I've come to believe in attending the biggest-name school that you can attend.



Graduating from Caltech and beginning graduate school at UCSD



When the professor who had accepted me into UCSD showed me around his labs, however, it didn't feel like the right fit to me. He was simulating earthquakes and smashing mineral samples together to observe how they fractured. Sitting around watching rocks crack seemed too practical to interest me. I wanted to make earth-shattering discoveries, not discoveries about shattering earth! Moreover, I felt like an impostor there. It was an experimentalists' lab. I never was good at lab work. I would have felt way over my head trying to be a theorist, the new kid on the block telling these guys how to run their experiments. I still feel guilty about it, but I quickly ditched that advisor and sought out someone more my style. I found an oceanographer named John Miles, a solitary theorist like me. Oceanography was still outside my realm of experience, but I clicked with him much better and felt relieved to work alone, with nobody else relying on me. I talked with Prof. Miles in my first year. He got me started that summer on the project that would end up being my master's thesis. (Sadly, I never did make any earth-shattering discoveries).

Singing

Meanwhile, my academic confusion was being further compounded by a serious distraction – vocals. I had always dreamed of being a musician. I had once entertained the notion that I could become a concert pianist. Again, there were few or no students of my caliber where I'd grown up. But when I got to college, I heard a teen prodigy and a handful of professional accompanists, and I realized that there was an entire class of people who could play better than I. I was feeling the same way about my proficiency for math and science courses. Then, when I found out that I was perhaps uniquely talented as a singer, I saw that as another way out. I don't like staking my future on something unless I'm "the best" at it. Singing became my new hope.

I'd always somehow known that I'd be a good singer. I hadn't been interested in high school chorus because of the stupid music they performed. But I auditioned for the Glee Club right away in college. I wanted to try out my voice, I wanted to sing in classical choruses, and, yes, I wanted to meet girls! The Glee Club director, Don, told me from the start that I was gifted. He was an important mentor figure in my college years. He gave me my first voice lessons, offered me a few solos as a senior, and provided me with the encouragement to seriously pursue singing when I went off to graduate school. (He also gave me a great house-sitting job for two summers!)

When I got to UCSD, I received more and more encouragement. I was considered one of the top baritones at the school, even among the voice majors. I auditioned for the San Diego Opera Chorus in 1994, and I got into an opera that season. At 23, I was the youngest member of the chorus. I also got a job as a paid church chorister. I thought that was a pretty big deal at the time. I got solos in almost every concert at UCSD. I landed my dream role in 1995, when I played Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I auditioned for rock bands, and they (mostly) loved me. Whichever path it was, I definitely saw myself heading toward a career in singing much more quickly than a career in engineering or the sciences. It seemed much more fun and exciting, too.

I had gone to UCSD with the intent to get a PhD. After two years of drifting further and further from that path, I decided to settle for an MS instead. It took me another slow-paced year to complete my thesis requirements. I often half-jokingly explain that I dropped out of school to become a singer. I did get the master's degree, though, and it proved highly valuable later in life.



A solo in “Jesus Christ Superstar”, 1995

My real dream had been to sing and write music for a rock band. I was inspired by rock stars as well as classical musicians. I wrote some music in 1990, basically to prove to myself that I could do it. I’ve always believed that I have a latent talent for composing music, but I have not exercised it very much – perhaps for lack of performance opportunity or time, or perhaps because I have trouble figuring out how to start. I also came to find that, in order to be in artistic control, I’d have to start my own band.

That means having some equipment of my own, and a rehearsal space and access to studios, which in turn means having money. It also means having the time and patience to manage the band. I’ve never yet had the time and money to start my own band and get my own artistic vision off the ground. The next best thing is to sing in “someone else’s” band. I spent years auditioning and practicing. I tried to look the part by wearing tour shirts and growing my hair long.

My first band was *Paradigm*, a group of UCSD students / alumni that I joined in 1994. They introduced me to progressive rock. My voice was not a great fit for their style. Our one stage performance, a battle of the bands, was a flop. *Jesus Christ Superstar* gave me much more confidence. That role enabled me to express my unique style, and I heard nothing but praise over my vocal performance.

I was well received by my next band as well – *Citizen Myth*. Although we were talented for a garage band, we never had the time, money, and unity to make it work. We rehearsed sporadically for two years (1995 – 1997) and never made it to a stage one single time. We did some recordings, however, which I found rewarding. Jeff, the band leader, remained a good friend of mine for years.

I probably didn’t realize it at the time, but my failed musical career was an important early life lesson in self-employment. It taught me the hard lessons about time, money, and odds that every young adult must learn. I relied too much on others to create a path to success. I encountered many musicians with a head full of dreams but no sense of time / money management or how to formulate a vision and take steps toward it. They remind me of many other failed naïve businessmen later in life.

Teaching

I finished my master's thesis in 1996. Then the moment of reckoning had arrived. After two solid decades of school, it was time to grow up and get a job. I'd always thought this step would be easy. With all that success in school, surely I'd be a prime candidate for the top science or engineering jobs! I was surprised by how quickly the world around me had changed. Without a computer-related degree, I was already too old-fashioned for that job market. At the time, I was okay with that. As a starry-eyed young adult, my primary interest was to support myself as a singer. I needed to make enough money to make ends meet while leaving myself with enough time to write music, rehearse with a band, sing in the opera chorus, work on repertoire for competitions, etc.

All factors considered, teaching or tutoring seemed like the way to go. I considered tutoring first. I found out that working for a tutoring agency would barely put bread on my table. I was not able to teach at a public grade school without a teaching credential, and I could not teach at a university without a PhD. I looked for full-time work teaching at a community college or private grade school, and I couldn't find any immediate openings.

That left me with only one option – teaching part-time at community colleges. By a fluke (a computer error destroyed their applications on file just before I sent mine in), I got a position at the Educational Cultural Complex (ECC), a satellite campus of San Diego City College. I also landed one class at Southwestern Community College in Chula Vista.

I get more credit than I deserve for going into teaching. People make assumptions that it must be a “passion”, a nice way of describing a respectable but low-paying job. The truth is that this was the only line of work that met my lifestyle needs. It was flexible and low stress. I liked teaching much more than an office job. Finally, it is more important to me to live comfortably than luxuriously. I honestly didn't need much money to get by, and I didn't intend to work harder than it took to earn my minimum. With long-term perspective, I am now much more aware of how little choice I had ending up as an adjunct instructor. It's virtually impossible to get full-time work, as it is ultra-competitive even at small colleges. Colleges prefer the fluidity and lower cost of the part-time labor force.

It took me a while to adjust to the community college environment after having studied in elite universities for seven years. I was a little disappointed to teach low-level classes at first. I was capable at the job, and I got positive feedback from students and administrators alike. That provided a sense of job security.

Teaching, in one form or another, eventually became a career for me. It's ironic that I entered it incidentally as a means to support myself as a musician. It was supposed to be just a temporary part-time job! This attitude about work and starving artistry really held me back financially for a long time. It took me decades to accept tutoring as a career choice and to commit to putting my all into it.

Relationship with Jessica



With Jessica in her parents' garden, Chula Vista, CA, 1997

For a good part of this decade, I had a girlfriend named Jessica. This still remains the longest relationship of my lifetime. I met Jessica in San Diego in early 1995. She was a student singer too; we met in a student opera. I moved into Jessica's house in 1996 as I found it hard to keep up with my own rent. For a year or two, we were both paid choristers in the same church choir. With Thursday rehearsals and Sunday services, that was our main activity together outside of the house. We lived with Jessica's dog, Blackie, and her two cats, Alley and Giovanni. Besides music, Jessica liked riding horses and motorcycles. She loved to shop for bargains, whether for food or clothes. She would drive across town to save 35 cents on a pound of tomatoes! She bought

fresh groceries and cooked her own food, which got me back into that habit for years. Jessica introduced me to food products that I'd never eaten before, including mussels, basil, hummus, and olive oil.

Jessica's parents, sister, and maternal grandparents lived nearby. I saw these "in-laws" much more regularly than my own parents. It was an interesting family. They had virtually no income, but they owned houses that had been paid off in decades past. I settled into that slow-paced, low-income / low-stress lifestyle. I joined Jessica's family on camping trips to Anza-Borrego State Park and Catalina Island.

After she graduated, Jessica was accepted to a master's program at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, MA. It was her dream school, so she couldn't pass up the opportunity. We spent a year apart (I kept the cats) and then I followed her there in 1998.

That move marked the end of the road for me as a starving artist. The rent in Boston was much higher, and I had to work every possible hour to make ends meet. In my busiest semester, I was teaching six days a week at four different colleges. When I couldn't book enough classes, I started tutoring on the side. There was no time left for frivolities like singing.

Unfortunately, my relationship with Jessica had been turbulent from the beginning. We were young and foolish and had no business being in such a serious relationship. I tell my younger self that he should have cut things off cleanly when Jessica moved to Boston. As it was, our relationship only lasted a few more months after I followed her there. I then found myself depressed and alone in a strange city. I'd made a dead-end turn, and it was time for a completely new direction in life.

My 4th Decade: 2000 – 2009, Ages 28 – 38

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[“Losing Myself”: Career Confusion](#)

[Augustus, Tigerius, and Venus](#)

Where I Was and What I Was Doing

I returned to southern California for law school in 2000, and I have remained in Los Angeles ever since. I lived in one apartment from August 2000 to May 2009 – the longest I’ve ever lived in one place. Home was 3767 Clarington Ave. # 216 in the Los Angeles community of Palms. After law school, I actually did not find work in the legal field but ironically continued my career as a college instructor and a tutor, an “instructor.”



My Clarington apartment in 2001

Law School

By early 2000, I was alone in Boston with no particular reason to be there anymore. I was still broke. The salary I was living on as a college instructor was a joke. In fact, I knew that it was unsustainable. Why not have a little respect for myself, I thought, and open up a whole new world of possibilities. I still held on somewhat to the dream of being a musician. By that time, I knew that I had better make music a secondary priority. I had not practiced any music since moving to Boston in 1998. That phase of life was fading out. I think that's appropriate pacing. Every young adult deserves a shot at a creative career. If it isn't getting anywhere by age 30, it's time to start looking at other options. I chose to apply to law school.

The economy was in great shape as I applied. Law firm associate salaries were going through the roof. I felt that with a three-year degree I'd be able to find a job paying 3 – 4 times what I was making as a college instructor. Firms were especially hungry for students with a "technical background" who could practice patent law. I thought that my math and engineering degrees would squarely qualify me for that line of work.

One of the lessons I've learned in retrospect is that I was yet again under-educated about the option of returning to school. The only school that accepted me was my "safety pick", the UCLA School of Law. UCLA qualifies as a Top 20 law school. What I know now is that Big Law recruitment is only a sure thing if you're at a Top 10 school. I should have waited another year to increase my LSAT score, as I so often counsel my LSAT students today.

At the time, though, it was a major, incredibly exciting, refreshing change. I flew to Los Angeles a few months ahead of time to visit UCLA and find an apartment. From the moment I stepped off the plane, I felt that I was coming "back home." I'd never lived in the city of LA before, though I'd spent eight years in the county and two decades in the state. I spent a week furiously scouting for apartments. At the very last minute, I found a winner, The Clarington building in Palms. It was the only place I could afford to live alone. * For the second time in two years, I packed up all my stuff into a Penske truck and drove across the country. I picked up Mom and took her with me from South Dakota back to LA. The date of August 14, 2000 sticks in my memory as the day I moved into the Clarington, which would prove to be the longest-term home of my life. I later came to commemorate August 14 as "Singles' Day," the solar opposite of Valentine's Day. That's kind of fitting. This move was a significant by-product of getting single, and I've stayed single ever since.

Law school immediately and starkly reset my life. The specter of my relationship with Jessica was finally behind me. I threw myself into the readings. I was already well-read, but I became even more highly literate at law school. I also expanded my horizons of knowledge quite a lot. As with all my education, it was highly academic and philosophical. I found that law school teaches you what the law used to be and what the law should be. It does not teach what the law is or how to practice it.

It started to become stressful when grades entered the picture. As I've mentioned, a diploma from a school like UCLA is not a ticket to Big Law without a high first-year GPA. My first-year grades came in shockingly heavy with C's. Exactly why I scored so poorly is still one of the most urgent mysteries in my life. It was without a doubt the worst year of my academic career, and this was the most critical year for future career prospects. Grades were based 100%

* When I revisited the Clarington in 2014, I found out that my unit, Apartment 216, is always one of their cheapest units because of its location directly over the Smart 'n' Final grocery store loading door & dumpster. That was definitely the apartment's worst feature!

on the final exams. The finals consisted of bar-exam style essays. Prior to that point, classes had been nothing but reading and discussing cases. It was simply not good practice for the final, and I was caught completely off guard. I don't know why so many other students managed to do so much better (grading was on a curve). Maybe others were more aware of practice tests, I don't know. I never took any.

Coming out of UCLA, my chance with big firms depended entirely on my GPA, which wasn't good. I also found out that "technical background" has a very narrow meaning. Patent law firms are only looking for associates with degrees in computer science / electrical engineering or biotechnology. My math and "engineering sciences (mechanical engineering)" degrees did not impress recruiters at all.

From the moment I got my report card at Christmastime 2000, I knew that I'd been dealt a blow. My first-year GPA came out to 2.6 or something ridiculous like that. I made intense, laudable efforts to impress law firms at interviews, but it was in vain. The economic environment didn't help, either. The high-tech bubble of the late '90s had burst, and I was interviewing in times of recession, when firms were downsizing. This doesn't really have any significance, but I often think of it as an appropriate omen that my first day of recruiting interviews was September 11, 2001. That metaphorically represented a bursting of my bubble of opportunity.

I figured out that I could get better grades in non-bar classes, where grades were based more on term papers and participation. My second-year grades were really good, as I took interesting electives such as Comparative Law, Information Law, and Race and the Law.

I refused to be unemployed in that critical 2L – 3L summer of 2002. If there was any hope for impressing firms later on, it would come from a successful summer internship. I sent out my resume to several firms and offered my services without pay. One firm, Selman Breitman, took me up on the offer, and Neil Selman actually wanted to make sure that I got paid \$15 / hr. He made it clear from the beginning, though, that it was only intended to be temporary summer work / experience. That gave me my first and longest taste of law-firm life. It was about what I expected. As a "summer law clerk," I actually got my own little office, albeit an interior space without windows. I was assigned to do some case-based research and writing, which I have never felt confident about. I never saw a sign of a client or a judge, which was fine with me. It was a low-stakes job and largely low-stress for me. It was short-term but full-time. I actually put in more hours of practice that summer than the rest of the decade combined. At that job, I observed the partners curiously from a distance, and I wondered, "What exactly do those guys *do*?!" I felt like I, the lowest rung on the bureaucratic ladder, was the one actually "doing law." If they relegate legal research and writing to their office chimps, then how do they spend their time? This would be a critical question for me to pursue as solo practice became more likely toward the end of the decade.

By my third year, I was becoming more bar-exam conscious. I returned to bar courses, and my grades took a nosedive again (I think I ended law school with a cumulative 3.0 or 3.1 GPA). I graduated with no job offers.



Law School Graduation, May 11, 2003 (Mother's Day). I sang the national anthem.

After graduation, I shifted my attention from the job search to the bar exam. (I also got serious about working out, and I lost 30 pounds for the first time in my life!) Exam prep was difficult, as I had only taken about half of the necessary coursework. I (as most everyone else) took a summer bar-prep class from the Barbri company. Barbri lectures were tailored to exams, and I really wished I'd seen those lectures in law school! (Seriously, the old-school casebook approach is ridiculously antiquated). I studied hard from May to July 2003, took the exam, and found that I failed in November. The good news was that I had come just one multiple-choice question away from passing. I was the highest-scoring failure in the state! The second time around, I learned all the material and memorized the hell out of everything, and passed the exam (handily, I think) in February 2004. I was sworn in that June 1.

I had always seen patent law as a potentially important specialty for me. Though I didn't have the CS / EE degree that Big Law firms were looking for, at least this was a specialty field that I could qualify for and many lawyers would not. It had high monetization potential. The patent bar exam was something of a vague dream of mine going into school. Early in law school, I saw signs for a cheap patent bar course of study. I ordered the material, tried it out, and found it impossibly dense. All they sent was a full copy of the Manual of Patent Examining Procedure, MPEP, plus videotapes of a guy reading it word for word. It was completely intimidating. I put that aside and didn't think about it for years. After becoming a licensed-but-unemployed attorney, though, I figured that the patent bar was the appropriate next step. This time, I found a significantly better study guide (I think it was PLI). It was written at an advanced level, but it was written

smartly. I obtained the materials from an eccentric woman who obviously could not read at that level of literacy, but it helped me enormously. I took that exam in late 2004 and passed it on the first attempt. I then received my patent license certificate in early 2005 (after a scare where I had to go through an equivalency process because my engineering degree was an MS instead of a BS!)

That was it! After a cumulative decade, I was finally done with higher education.

Aaaaannnd ... I was underemployed, broke, and deeply in debt. During law school, I had always banked on that pending \$125,000 salary as I'd borrowed like crazy. I'd taught part-time to pay the rent, but I'd needed student loan money for all my other living expenses. I came out of law school about \$200,000 in debt, which I have learned is pretty common for lawyers and doctors these days. For me, it was a mountainous weight on my shoulders. I defaulted on my loans once. I was disoriented, frustrated, and depressed about the failed career change for years.

“Finding Myself”: Singlehood

The 1990's had been an extremely stormy decade full of explosive relationships. Every time I got involved with a girl, it was fire and ice, thunder and lightning, *sturm und drang*. As early as 1993, I asked myself how many more times I could really stand to go through a break-up. I felt like a wrung-out divorcee by 2000, and frankly it was refreshing to be single. Every time I saw a couple argue, I'd smile and think, “Not me!”

Many people may wonder what it's like to be a life-long bachelor. I even get asked “why” I'm single, as if it were entirely my choice. From my perspective, it's hard to understand how so many people can find mutual attraction and stable relationships.

Another theme that generally goes along with relationships, of course, is parenthood. I've never felt like having kids. If there actually are “reasons” that I'm single, I'm sure that my disinterest in parenthood is the greatest factor. The issue has always been there, since my first serious college girlfriend. It became a big deal with Jessica. After a few more relationships and some more life experience in general, I could see that the vision of child-raising is the fuel that drives the engine of relationship dynamics. I remained open-minded to the possibility of parenthood until I was at least 40, but it was never a drive, and I certainly didn't plan my life around it. More than one potential girlfriend lost interest in me; I watched them peel off to get married and have kids one after another.

It bothered me at first, but eventually I came to feel that I'm “just not a relationship person”. I came to embrace singlehood and to appreciate the independence and time that I had for myself. It works just fine! I think that many more people would be happy with singlehood too if they saw it as a viable lifestyle. Sadly, too many people think of singlehood as failure, or a state that must be only a temporary stage from which to find a mate. All too many of them rush into unworkable marriages. It doesn't make sense to me!

I resumed single life right around the time that social media was invented. It was the perfect resource for me, a means to a social life in cyberspace that I didn't have in face-to-face space. I have been a blogger since before that word was coined. I experimented with staying in touch with people through a website at least as early as 2000. Instant Messaging was my all-time favorite form of communication. I used to keep AOL Instant Messenger and other programs open all evening when they were popular. (I don't like text messaging as much because I never learned to like tiny keyboards or being available on demand). I joined MySpace in the early '00s and

Facebook in 2007, making my profile among the oldest 2% on that site. Now that most of my friends and relatives are on Facebook, I check it daily.

“Losing Myself”: Career Confusion

After law school and exams, I gave myself an honest shot at the legal profession before giving up for years. I recognized that I would have to downgrade my expectations. There was no way to get into major league firms anymore. I found that if you’re not a 2L, your next window of opportunity comes as a “lateral transfer” with about three years of experience. It was time to find that experience. I found a few leads and got spotty work at a firm here and an agency there. I didn’t like any of it. The firms and agencies suffered from terrible management; I was never properly trained to do anything. Some of it involved early morning court appearances at 8:30 throughout the county. I was lucky to get \$30 - \$35 / hr. I finally found a clerkship with a patent lawyer. He could only offer me \$15 / hr, so I told him I could only offer him eight hours / week. That didn’t last long!

Meanwhile, I was still teaching and tutoring the whole time. I found steady part-time work at the UCLA Extension starting in the Winter of 2001. That was a really fun peaceful evening job, one of my favorites. I cherish the memories of leaving class at 9:30 pm and being on the quiet UCLA campus; sometimes I would explore and would seem to have the whole university to myself. I felt important and valued there, and frankly the pay was better than I was making at the odd law jobs. Many endearing and enduring relationships came out of that job. I struck up a close friendship with a former student named Anya, and we still occasionally get together two decades later.



Teaching at the UCLA Extension, 2001



Anya in 2006

My career as a college instructor got deeply entrenched when I found work at Santa Monica College. SMC was the flagship school in my teaching career. I was there for five years from 2004 – 2009. When I found that job in the fall of 2004, I put the legal job search on the back burner.

The tutoring business also continued to be a good supplement and a more rewarding career. I had been tutoring already in Boston. I started up again in LA. Many of my students came from the UCLA Extension. They studied algebra with me and then struggled in their follow-up pre-calc course. Pretty steadily, they came back to me for help with that class. I got to know the course really well (the instructor was like clockwork) so I was able to deliver helpful guidance through it. One day, Anya asked me if I tutored the LSAT. I had not yet, but I started to then. I helped her out quite a bit. She was taking the TestMasters class, and my name started to circulate among students in that class. LSAT and pre-calc tutoring were a big part of my life for a few years. Tutoring TestMasters students came to a crashing halt when I applied to teach there in 2004. The course creator got so upset that I was “using his study materials” with his students that he threatened to sue me and them. Wow.

Anyway, I got increasingly busy making house calls until 2005. Then I decided to open up my own office. That helped somewhat. Students did come to the office on weekends to take advantage of cheaper rates. My first two locations were on Motor Ave. in Palms – first at the short-lived 3611, then at 3760 until 2009.



My first office, 3611 Motor Ave., Los Angeles. 2005

By 2005, I was solidly an “instructor,” half college instructor and half private tutor. The core job at SMC, plus secondary schools and the tutoring practice, kept me fully employed with a pretty solid five-figure income through mid-2009. Yet I was still struggling to meet my cost of living and debts.

Then, in the fallout of the Great Recession, I lost all of my college-teaching assignments. I had taught almost entirely at public schools up to this point. After the recession, I never found employment at a public school again.

Augustus, Tigerius, and Venus

My relationship with Jessica made me a serious cat person. She had two cats, Alley and Giovanni, and I cared for them by myself for the year that we were long-distance. After we broke up and I moved into my own place, I was lonely, and I felt that cats would be the best remedy. My first two cats were a pair of brothers that I named Julius and Augustus. I got them in late 1999 when I lived in Boston, and they made the move to California with me. Julius didn’t live much longer; he died in 2001.

Center Sinai, the veterinary hospital where I took Julius, had a pair of cats in their shelter, and again I couldn't resist taking both of them home. I named the male Tigerius and the female Venus. My Palms apartment was crazy with three cats from 2001 to '09! They added a lot of character to the home. Augustus became permanently more reclusive after Julius died and the new cats took over. Tigerius and Venus were very sociable, and everyone loved them. Oddly, all three of them died in 2009. Venus died early that year. Just a few months later, Augustus and Tigerius both got seriously sick at the same time. I took them back to Center Sinai to be put down on the same day. I had a dream shortly afterward that Augustus, Tigerius, and Venus all came to visit me. I said good-bye, and that helped me feel closure.



From top to bottom: Augustus, Venus, Tigerius. 7/28/02

My 5th Decade: 2009 – 2021, Ages 38 – 50

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Where I Lived and What I was Doing

I divided the 2010's almost equally between two residences about eight miles apart in different neighborhoods of Los Angeles. I spent the first half of the decade in Koreatown and the latter half in Rancho Park.

When I lost my teaching assignments in 2009, it threw me into financial desperation. I could no longer afford my apartment in Palms, so I immediately moved into the cheapest apartment I could find. That turned out to be Apt. 108 of the “Superba” building, 335 S. Berendo St., Koreatown. I rented a windowless office half a mile away on Wilshire & Vermont.

I always felt a little forlorn and out of place in Koreatown. Yet at the same time, it was an exhilarating environment, filled with late-night Korean BBQ's, nightclubs, and other hangouts. I got familiar with LA's Metro system for the first time, and the station at Wilshire and Vermont brought a lot of vibrancy and new money to the neighborhood. I got lucky and found an unusually inexpensive apartment and office. From my 15th floor office, it was an easy walk up the stairs to the rooftop. Up there, I had an unbeatable view of the Hollywood Hills to the north and downtown to the east. It was probably the “most urban” place I've ever lived.



My Koreatown studio. I removed the plaster from the back wall to expose the brick.



My Koreatown apartment building: 335 S. Berendo St., LA. The “Superba”, built 1925.



My Koreatown office. Still looking pretty amateurish; I call it my “Romper Room” office.



My Koreatown office building (Wilshire State Bank), 3200 Wilshire, LA

Unexpectedly, my tutoring clientele remained in the Westside where I'd been based in the '00s. I never picked up much new business in Koreatown, probably because the parents with money only spoke Korean. I now had to continue making my Westside house calls while living seven miles away! After five years of that insanity, I finally saved up enough money to return to the Westside where my business was still pulling me.

I made that move in August 2014. I spent the rest of the decade living in 2901 S. Sepulveda Blvd. (Apt. 331) and working in 2931 S. Sepulveda Blvd. (Suite I). It's been so nice to work just 100 steps from home. This neighborhood is less vibrant than Koreatown, but it has what I need. It's actually much more like Palms, the neighborhood just two miles from here where I lived in the '00s. This specific locale, right at the 10 & 405 freeways, is called Rancho Park. It felt like I was "coming back home" when I made this move.

For the first time in my life, I took the trouble to coordinate both home and office with new furniture and matching décor. Both settings look attractive and put-together. I keep the place clutter-free by renting a nearby storage unit. I have a beautiful view of the southern sky and the ecliptic from my apartment balcony, and I get amazing sunsets through the picture windows in the office. Both places are usually pretty quiet. It's still modest, but I feel that I have the home and office that I've dreamed of. Of course, that does come at a price! I'm paying far more for rent at both places than I ever have before. The surfeit of savings that helped me relocate to the Westside is completely gone, and now I'm just making ends meet again.



My Rancho Park office complex (L) and apartment building (R), side by side.



*My Rancho Park office housewarming party, 2014.
Some of my favorite clients and colleagues came to celebrate.*



At home in my “summer room”, Rancho Park, 2016

Self-Employment

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From instructor to instructutorney to tutorney

As I’ve explained, I entered the decade as an instructor. By 2010, I found part-time work again, this time teaching at private schools like Mt. St. Mary’s College. It had two beautiful campuses, one of which was very convenient to my Koreatown home.



My last semester of college classroom students at Mt. St. Mary's College, Fall, 2013

Money was still a concern. The most obvious solution was to keep trying to capitalize on my law degree. I gave up trying to get hired at firms. It was clear that recruitment straight out of law school was the only way to get a foot in that door. After a five-year hiatus, I posted some Craigslist ads in 2009: "Affordable Patent Lawyer Available." I found my first client that way. I still remember his ironic comments in our first phone call: "You sound like you really know what you're talking about." (I didn't). A few cases trickled in each year, though it would be mid-decade before a client's application led to a registered patent. I dabbled in immigration law too. I remained a price leader for years, and almost all of my work was with low-income clients.

The pace started to pick up in late 2012. That was when I got serious about taking my businesses online. I posted www.NthDegreeTutoring.com. The website had an appointment calendar, the first time I'd ever really had one. The calendar made it easy for my clients to book time and pay for it. What a blessing! In fact, I started to get booked up, and my clients got a little competitive over my time! It was early in this decade when a chain of referrals kind of blew up for the first (and last) time – from a former SMC student named Alex to her friend Katie to their friend the Frankels, and then the Fogelmans, Corneliuses, Gees, the Moelises, and a few more. The Moelises are one of the wealthiest families in LA, reaching billionaire status later in the decade.



Running a house call to the Moelises, 2013

Right around then, I set up a Yelp profile for my tutoring business. That started to bring in calls for GRE tutoring. I offer many subjects, and I'm not sure why Yelp works so much more effectively for GRE than for anything else. (I've always wondered if it has to do with the luck of spelling; there's a GRE in Nth DeGREe Tutoring). I'll take it, though, for I had singled out the GRE as my ideal exam to teach. It's for adult students, not high school students, so I can handle large group classes. Compared to the LSAT or GMAT, GRE tutoring seems to have the highest demand-to-supply ratio on the market. Before too long, I consistently had multiple GRE students at the same time. I created a group class with a deep discount to attract them all into the same time slot. Voila, it worked, and by the summer of 2014 I had my tiny little classroom packed to the max with 5 or 6 students.

Going online worked so well for the tutoring business that I followed it up a year later with the law office. I created a Yelp profile for that business too. Again, it turned out that Yelp was the only strategy I tried that brought calls in.

For a chaotic brief period in 2012 – '13, I was an instructutorney: instructor + tutor + attorney! On a typical day, I'd check my phone between classes to find messages from tutoring parents and patent clients. It got to be more than I could handle. I bought a company cell phone and handed it over to a part-time assistant (wow, what a relief).

It felt like the time had come for a big leap of faith. I "retired" from college classrooms after the fall semester of 2013. For the rest of the decade, I survived entirely self-employed!



A patent client playing with his remote-controlled drone in my Koreatown office, 2013.

Back to the Westside

Shortly after making the jump, I took stock of my situation. I was accumulating money, all of my house calls were still in the Westside, and I needed a bigger office to accommodate my GRE classes. The choice seemed clear. I returned to the Westside and rented a larger office.

Over the next few years, my tutoring business gradually shifted from 0% to 100% office lessons. When the students came to me, it made my workdays much more efficient. I could spend my time between the lessons working instead of driving.

The second main reason for the move was to accommodate larger group classes. I managed to book some summer classes of up to ten students. That justified the increased rent, but only seasonally. It's impossible to find the perfect balance of size and rent, but the new office meets a list of criteria that was hard to find. Besides the location, it was big enough but affordable, it has ample free parking, it's accessible 24 / 7, and it's air conditioned.



My classroom packed to the maximum with a 10-student GRE group class, 2017



My Rancho Park inner office or “meeting room”

Business Cycles

The tutoring office and the law practice sometimes cut into each other. There were weeks when I could never get around to my legal case work because students were constantly booking lessons. There were seasons when I considered giving up one practice or the other, but I never really could.

Business peaked around 2016 or '17. There was one summer when my assistant could hardly keep up with GRE class calls. After that, though, as if something clicked in Yelp's search engine, the volume of tutoring calls slowed down.

When I reopened my law office, I left immigration law behind. I set up the new site FagerlandLaw.com. The present-day law practice started with patent law at its core. I then gradually expanded into related fields like trademarks, licenses and contracts, and business setup.

I formed my own corporation, and I learned a lot from setting it up and operating it. I have built up a pretty slick system. I finally have a good bookkeeping system in the form of QuickBooks Online. I know how to do my taxes properly and how to save myself a lot of money on self-employment taxes. When I think back a decade, I realize how far I've come in terms of the business operations. Ten years ago, I would only have dreamed of having online presence, websites with appointment calendars, and payment systems integrated with a bookkeeping system! I guess I have come a long way. It's just been one small step at a time.

Most of my clients are still coming from Yelp. Thankfully, that seems to be diversifying a little bit. While I'm thankful for Yelp, I don't like depending on it. Very lately, some of my clients are starting to say that they're finding my listings on Google Maps. Nobody ever directly finds my website; the search engines always take them to one of my listings.

My revenues would make a good living. Unfortunately, it costs about half of my time and money to run the business. Though I experimented with hiring part-time assistants throughout this decade, in the end I have found that I have to do it all myself. It's a lot of work for one person, but it's not enough for two. I can only afford part-time help, so I can't offer a salary that would entice anyone to stay. I have good time- and money-management skills, and I must exercise them stringently to keep this ship afloat.

For years, I struggled with volatility. There was always a seasonal pattern, which was hard enough to deal with. Then some years were randomly better than others, and that was even harder to deal with because of the sheer unpredictability. With Quickbooks, I could finally count my money and figure out a long-term plan. I now have a system where I pay myself based on average earnings over the last few years. It's a mixed blessing. I pay myself the same amount even in bad months. On the other hand, even if business picks up significantly, I won't notice much difference in my take-home pay for a couple of years.

The coronavirus pandemic forced some structural changes in my business. Tutoring has suffered tremendously. High school families completely stopped calling when their schools went to online format. I still get some adult students for standardized exams, but no longer enough to group them together. I had not a single client in my office from mid-2020 to early '21; I had to conduct all my lessons online and all my consultations by phone. Fortunately, my law office business picked up the slack. 2020 was certainly my most profitable year as an attorney. After people got used to living and working online, my service radius expanded slightly into neighboring counties.

I am now in the midst of a long-term location search. LA has high rent, yet it is a good market and brings in more income than I'd probably find in most locations. Still, the tutoring

house calls that took me to Rancho Park in 2014 no longer exist. There's no compelling reason to live here anymore. I am analyzing neighborhoods throughout the county and the country to see if I can identify the optimal location for next decade.

Decadal clients and colleagues

Clients and colleagues come and go. Just a few were with me for a decade's length scale of time.

As for the tutoring students, I mentioned the families who referred each other to me early in the decade. The Frankels were at the core of that community. I tutored Libby through all of high school. There were also the Corneliuses, Gees and Fogelmans. I would say I worked with all of those families on and off from 2011 or '12 until they graduated in '15. In fact, I worked with five Fogelman students! (Siblings and cousins) so they must have been on my tutoring schedule even longer than that.



Robert was my longest-term co-worker. He was a student of mine at SMC back in the '00s. He was in law school in 2012 when he called me again for patent law tutoring. I found out that he designs websites, so I had him set up my first tutoring and law office sites. While he was still in school, I hired him as my first part-time assistant. He was the best assistant I ever had. He managed my phone calls and scheduling, and it was a great relief for me at the time. When he graduated, he resigned so he could look for work as a lawyer. I continued to use his technology services. After I reopened the law office with FagerlandLaw.com, I started to get more calls related to business formation and

contracts. It turns out that Robert had been acquiring experience in that field (also solo) so I collaborated with him on a few cases that were new to me.



Windward HS class of 2015: Dylan, Christina, Libby

Anya has also been in the background of my life for the 2nd decade now! Her success as an immigration lawyer inspired me to try my hand at it. Only after I learned the field a little bit did I realize that there are two kinds of immigration lawyers. She works deportation defense and spends all her time in court. It's a very fast-paced, high-stress practice, but I never learned that line of work and I know I'd hate it. For a while, she had a Koreatown office just blocks from mine.

My longest-term clients have been a home inventor named Alina and Soleus Home Comfort, a company that sells fans, air conditioners, and the like. They both came on board in 2013, and they're both still with me! Alina first came to me with an Office action on a patent for a baby product that she calls Swipensnap. She was one of my earliest patent clients, and in fact that one ended up being my first issued patent. Then she started to come up with new products, then a few trademark applications, design patents, and more. She has been on my docket almost continuously, seemingly with more work every year! She moved to Texas shortly after I moved to Rancho Park, and I haven't actually seen her in person for years now. A few Soleus employees came to my Koreatown office with a dehumidifier console. They continued to give me steady work on air conditioners and fans. By 2019, I realized that all the guys who'd actually met me weren't even with the company anymore. I believe in meeting all my clients in person, so I visited their site. It was satisfying to see their product showroom, which included a few products that I recognized from patents I'd helped them secure.



Alina at left, at my office-warming party, 2014 ...



*... and making her successful
Shark Tank pitch in 2021!*



At Soleus headquarters disassembling an air conditioner, 2019

Online Genealogy and the Great Grand Genealogy Tours



Meeting distant cousins on Fagerland Farm, Norway, 2017

My main ongoing personal interest of the decade was genealogy. I have been interested in genealogy for as long as I can remember, with a smattering of projects through the decades. It was the discovery of MyHeritage.com in 2012 that really launched my involvement into a time-consuming passion and a lifelong quest. MyHeritage is a more affordable alternative to Ancestry.com, so I'm able to sustain a monthly subscription. It was the first time that I was ever able to make rapid discoveries by connecting to other family trees online. Family trees are prohibitively unwieldy to manage by hand. The computerized and online format was a revolution!

My research always begins by building on pre-existing knowledge. I spent the early years of this decade growing my family tree explosively, simply by linking to other MyHeritage trees. There are now about 1,000 ancestors in my tree, and I added most of them within the first year or two. I have yet to vet many of those records with documentary corroboration, but it's a safe bet that most of them are accurate.

Besides online family trees, my next source was the memories of the oldest living generation. I made it my priority to gather as many memories and pictures as possible from my grandparents and their siblings. I had fruitful visits with great uncles Wayne Meyer and Orville Fagerland, both of whom died within a year after my visit. I interviewed my great aunt Sister Maris Stella about her fascinating life just before she succumbed to dementia. Grandpa Fagerland contributed some valuable clues too, such as recognizing a picture of his grandmother. Nobody else in the world recognized her face anymore. Before too long, I had collected pictures of all my 2nd-great grandparents except my namesake, Ole Hansen Fagerland. I have pictures of about half of my 3rd-greats too.

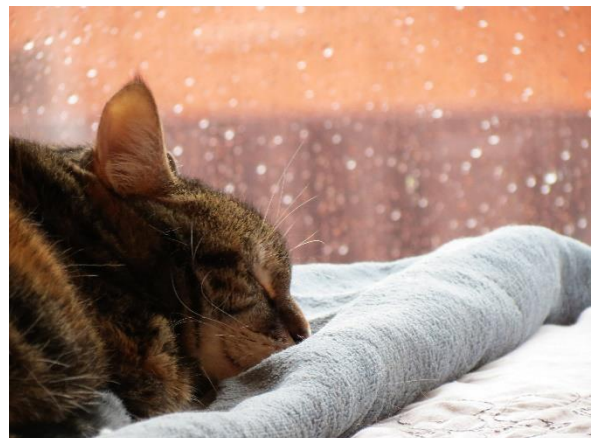
In order to gather that offline information as efficiently as possible, I started to organize “Great Grand Genealogy Tours.” The first one wasn’t even very grand. It was in late 2013 when I visited Wayne Meyer and Great Aunt Pat and got some priceless pictures from them. In 2014, I drove to Washington to visit Orville. I met a few distant cousins there as well, who also had memories and / or pictures of Great Grandparents Fagerland.

By 2015, I had gotten what I could from living memory, and the tours changed character. Since then, I have been engaged on a quest to visit ancestral graves, churches, and farms. The GGGT of the Central Plains States, in 2015, was my largest domestic tour to date. The 2017 trip was my first overseas. Mom, Dad, and Grandpa Fagerland all helped pitch in to pay for a tour of Norway and Sweden, and most of the family joined me on that adventure as well.

Since mid-decade, my research has been focused on one GGGT at a time. I guess I’d call it a shift from quality to quantity. I am currently preparing for the next GGGT, which will be to the Great Lakes States in my early 50s. This trip will involve about 30 ancestors, so I am doing my utmost to confirm their documentation, trace their life paths, find their graves, churches, and land, etc. It’s amazing how much I can find when I dig deeply. It wasn’t long ago that some of my 2nd-great grandparents were completely unknown. Now the greatest mysteries in my tree are where a few 3rd-great grandparents are buried. I have set up webpages for each ancestral couple at www.ScotFagerland.com/genealogy. This site has some advantages over the widely used trees like Ancestry or MyHeritage. First and foremost, it’s free and publicly accessible. Furthermore, it allows me full flexibility to create profiles. I can post plenty of information, pictures, maps, and citations all on one page. It’s also more streamlined than a full family tree, as it doesn’t branch out into my distant uncles, aunts, and cousins.

Vesta and the Mice

Shortly after Augustus, Tigerius, and Venus died, I started over with a new cat named Vesta. She was with me from 2009 until her death in 2020, setting a new record as the pet who’s been with me the longest. When I look back on the 2010s, I will always remember Vesta keeping me company through peaceful times at home. Everyone who met her loved her. She was shy around people until just the last couple of years. I think it was a new cat-sitter who finally got her more comfortable with people.





We then added a new species to the household! In 2010, I got a mouse tank. Mice only live for about a year, so I went through several of them. Vesta and the mice: I called them all my “silly creatures”. I can take mice out of the tank and hold them for a little while. It’s fun to watch them play and run around in their habitat. I had a smaller portable carrier that I would sometimes take with me, for example when I visited Amy or even sometimes on tutoring house calls. Most people found them cute and entertaining, while a few were repulsed by them. What a household! For the second decade in a row, I lived alone, but I never felt lonely.

Productive Free Time

[Blogging](#)
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I have come to spend almost all my free time either in the gym or on my Productive Free Time (PFT) cycle. My PFT list grew out of the monster items on my to-do list, the items that were not tasks but projects. Most of them are years long, if not perpetual. Besides genealogy, here are some of the other categories that commanded most of my time.

Blogging

Occasionally, when I have more to say than I can fit into a Facebook post, I will post blog articles. I blogged about my GGGT’s. I made a few major posts about my Tonight Show appearance for its 25th and 30th anniversaries. I started out on Blogger, a free site with limited capabilities. The posts that I wrote there are now gathered together at

<http://scotfagerland.com/blog-archives-2012-2015/>

In more recent years, I have been using Wordpress.org, which is the platform that Robert used for my professional sites. That page is

<http://scotfagerland.com/blog/>

Photography

This is another lifelong interest that blossomed this decade. My photography hobby was strongly enabled when I got the right camera. It was a Canon Powershot that Mom and Dad gave me for Christmas, 2011. I bought a “proper” DSLR camera early in the decade too, but it never seemed to work well. Even though the Canon is a “point and shoot” without a removable lens, it’s been my favorite lifelong camera. My favorite feature is its zoom power. It is also pretty darn good with its automated settings, so I feel that even after all this time I still haven’t had to learn many advanced techniques. My pictures don’t have the “pop” that professional pictures often do, with their impossibly saturated colors and uniform lighting. I have come to learn that the pros often rely on filters and / or bracketing. To me, their pictures look “fake” anyway. I’ve gotten a little frustrated in recent years that the cameras that come built into smart phones have gotten increasingly sophisticated. Now it seems that any teenaged dimwit who points her phone at her friends will produce images that are so colorful and well-lit that they seem magical. It makes technique pretty redundant after all.



I describe my greatest strength as a photographer as being *attentive*. I think that I have a good eye for finding visually interesting shots that other people might miss even when they’re right next to me. As an example that comes to mind immediately, one of my favorite pictures is from southern California’s “Super Bloom” of 2019. People around me were taking pictures of hillsides with patches of color like the one at left. Spotting a patch of poppies at the top of a cliff above me, I zoomed in for the shot below.



I wanted a venue to post my pictures, something beyond Facebook. Facebook is great for posting low-resolution pictures of everyday life, but it is not a photographic showcase. I did a lot of comparisons and ended up selecting Zenfolio.

www.ScotFagerland.zenfolio.com

This site accepts full-sized images, and it gives a really nice presentation. It even allows viewers to buy the images, though I've only sold a few prints to myself and Mom so far. The downside to the site is that it has no social media elements. Now, when I take good scenic pictures, I post them here and then share the link to the album on Facebook. Facebook is the only social media site where I have managed to make and maintain connections. Instagram is a social site that's almost entirely for pictures, but people don't go there looking for photographers. They go there to see friends' selfies. Instagram is for instantly uploading pictures from a phone camera. I've never had a good phone camera, and it's really awkward for me to post pictures from my good camera that way. So for now, Zenfolio it is!

In the last few years, I've gotten more in the practice of printing my own pictures to have around the home and office, whether as calendars or as framed prints. I have been making calendars every year. I give some of them out to family for Christmas. I make another version for my students and to keep at my office; it also tracks test dates and deadlines.

Preserving media

As technology changes, it's become necessary more than once to "go digital" and update pictures, recordings, and files in new formats. I posted a "[Golden Anniversary Album](#)" for Mom and Dad's 50th. It archives family pictures, audio, and video since 1971, now on the cloud. Meanwhile, my own music CDs used to occupy a miniature jukebox on the floor beneath my desk. Now I have them all stored on my laptop, backed up on an external drive the size of a deck of cards. How the times change!

A Life Half Lived



“Live like you’re going to be 100,” I say, and I believe that I can. Even if I last that long, I’m halfway there. That’s awfully hard to believe. My 50th birthday seems like a good occasion to take stock of where I’ve been and where I’m going.

At age 50, I am well aware of the losses and gains that come with each decade. My idea of happiness comes from accepting the inevitable losses and preventing unnecessary ones, seeking achievable goals and appreciating the gains, and valuing memories. I am finally living a dream of stable self-employment. I am earning a minimal amount of income by sacrificing a minimal amount of time with a minimal amount of stress. I am still not saving for health care or my future, so that’s an important next step. I’m currently considering different locations to find the best surplus of income over rent for the next decade or two.

I intend to stay active until 85, at which time I’ll top off my life story and throw a big farewell party. I plan to take several more GGGT’s before then. I’d still like to record a vocal album someday, believe it or not. I aspire to care for my parents in their last two decades as well as they did for my first two. I would like to complete a book of our ancestors. I might even establish a Fagerland-Beck-Meyer-Korb family museum in North Dakota and hand it over to a nephew, niece, or distant cousin. Many others are keeping the family alive with children. I’ll do my part to keep our history alive for them.