

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

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Paid for Not Working

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Lest you think these ideas were my only efforts at income, I'll tell you about my pursuit of another source of funds. At the time, I thought it even less plausible than trying to making money from the ideas outlined above. This other potential source was more of an unknown because it was the impenetrable bureaucracy of the Veteran's Administration. It was clear to me my arthritis was much worse than when they surrendered the last increase in 1967. I thought I should be entitled to more money, but that meant making my increased disability clear to the VA. Expecting the usual resistance, I began this process before pursuing other ideas for income--it ended after the pursuits mentioned above. I was right to doubt the swiftness of their response.

Here I was, out of work and no prospects, headed back to Newark to ask the VA for more money. If you've never done it, it's hard to imagine how distasteful it is to deal with the VA. My experiences led me to coin a new phrase: Procedural Abuse. This attempt for an increase was only one more example.

I told them my situation. They scheduled tests and an exam. The exam tested things like range of motion, how far you can raise an arm or twist an elbow. I asked them why, since I had walked into this room under my

own power. That fact, I pointed out, made it a good day for me; and I was trying to make the case for my bad days. How was range of motion on a good day relevant? The doctor ignored my comments.

With the exam over (“You’ll have to wait for the results.”) I rode the elevator down to the first floor while my blood pressure rose. There was no way this inappropriate exam was going to help me. Asking around I found the right desk to make a complaint. I explained my condition: There were days I couldn’t even get out of bed. I protested the uselessness of this exam to judge my condition. I was told I had to wait for the results before I could lodge a formal protest. My anger would have to wait for another day.

That day came a month or so later with a notice stating my request for an increase had been denied. I marked the place on the form to protest the results and mailed it back to the VA. In a few months, I was told I could come for another exam. This exam was required *before* they could schedule a hearing on my complaint. I went back to the Newark VA for another exam, and this time it was more thorough. With this tiny ray of hope, I asked the doctor what he thought my chances were.

“I can’t tell you that,” he snapped.

“I was just curious,” I said, “couldn’t you give me a vague hint.”

He said, “If you persist in asking, I’ll report you.”

Taken aback by his vehemence, visions of the threats of Basic Training resurfaced. Procedural Abuse.

Another month or so and the hearing was scheduled. Another form letter told me to bring details about my situation—and I could bring a witness. I brought my brother Robert, a recent member of the New Jersey Bar. I also brought as much detail as I could reconstruct. And one other thing: my arthritis. There was no way the three

man panel could overlook my shifted shape sitting before them nor my distorted fingers as I shuffled papers. They asked questions. I gave answers. They gave no clues. What I wanted, I said, is whatever I'm entitled to since it's evident this disease is much more severe than when my last increase was granted. They asked more questions. Robert never intervened which I took as a good sign. Possibly they were surprised that I showed up with a lawyer (which is how I introduced him rather than as my brother).

When the hour-long hearing was over, I was told to—guess what?—wait, of course. In another few months another letter came. (By now, more than year had passed.) While I was waiting for this letter, someone suggested I might be eligible for Social Security Disability. I was told this, too, was very difficult to get. I went down to Social Security, in Newark naturally, and told them of my situation. They said they would require an exam but first they would check the VA records. A week before the next VA letter arrived, I was notified by Social Security I would be receiving a monthly check. I wondered what had happened to that promised exam? I figured it out when the VA letter came.

In old movies, the arrival of a telegram is always a great dramatic event. Nowadays, few things change our lives like unexpected phone calls or official letters. This was April 1972 and the last thing I expected had happened. In one stroke—a single letter from the VA—my money problems were gone. It said I had been awarded a one hundred percent disability! What in the world? How did this happen, I wondered aloud to family and friends. All I wanted was an increase from the forty percent granted in 1967. Now I have a hundred percent? The answer was simple. They decided what I already knew: The arthritis made me incapable of holding a regular job.

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What I didn't know: This fact, more than the advanced disability, qualified me as totally disabled—and therefore entitled to a hundred percent.

Now I understood why Social Security had come through quickly. They had seen the VA decision before I had. It was all they needed, no exam necessary. Now I had two sources of income, guaranteed. Together, they were well over a thousand dollars a month. Par for the VA course, it was yet another full month before I saw the first check. But I already made plans to spend some of it. I got this letter in May so I gathered a few friends and my brother Dennis, for a summer house in Belmar, New Jersey.



It was at a dinner out with these summer housemates, that my life changed even more. In the previous letter, without giving away the number, the VA had said I would be paid retroactively from the date of my first request for more money. I had no idea how much when I opened their envelope at dinner. I must have let out a yelp, because I remember immediately having everyone's attention. I explained what this check was, and showed it around the table. It was in excess of four thousand dollars. Not only did I have an income, I had a bank account.

It was an OK summer, except for a PBS television incident. They preempted a game of the Fischer-Spassky World Chess Championship for a tennis match. Not even a final, merely a preliminary match in a now forgotten tennis tournament. The chess match was . . . I'm at a loss for superlatives. You have to know the significance of Fischer's reappearance at this level of chess and his overwhelming victory. I gave up more than a few days on the beach to watch this match. And PBS thought this minor tennis match was more important than one of these epic chess games. I vowed never to give them a dime. My anger pales next to Fischer's disintegration as a human being. Some people say genius is akin to insanity. I know extreme obsessive behavior is mental illness, regardless of skill or IQ.

Now that I didn't have to worry about finding work, did every worry vanish? Hardly, but now it was easier to concentrate on my arthritis. After a little research, I decided to try San Diego for its "Mediterranean" climate. Flew out, found an apartment near the ocean (Pacific, the big one), and stayed for three months. I did two things while in San Diego. I researched and wrote notes for a book on organizations, and I researched and tested various health foods. The weather was nice, but even when it was good it was cold. I know this was because of the cold air coming off the Pacific, but what made the people cold? I never found out because an extreme flare-up of my left knee persuaded me to fly back to New Jersey.

In hospital for a brief stay, I now recall an unusual episode. A medical student wanted my picture. He was so impressed by my condition he wanted pictures for possible inclusion in a medical book. It wasn't my arthritis but my psoriasis he wanted to photograph. I mention this because

I haven't mentioned it for many chapters. The arthritis I keep talking about is actually, as I said much earlier, Psoriatic Arthritis. As the visible arthritis advanced so did the psoriasis. When I didn't get the opportunity to perform my nightly treatment, as happened in this hospital because they were only concerned with my knee, the psoriasis worsened. Enough to impress this med student. I gave him permission to take and use the pictures, but I have no idea if they were published and I have no copy. At the time, I was only concerned with my knee. I had forgotten this photographic episode until writing this book about how I appear to the world. For all I know medical students have been studying a picture of my psoriasis, and me, for decades. And perhaps for decades to come.

More on psoriasis and my appearance. Somewhere in the seventies, my psoriasis began to claim more and more territory. Early in the decade, I tried an experimental treatment called PUVA at NYU's Medical School. It provided some improvement but proved to be impractical on a regular basis. A variation used the same medication (Oxpsoralen) combined with judicious use of the sun. While not as effective as the special million-dollar PUVA light box, I could employ it more often. But the relief was temporary; the psoriasis kept gaining ground (or skin). It was this same decade, my clothing also gained—in length. The pants I wore became exclusively full length and every shirt had long sleeves. Today, with few exceptions and fewer psoriasis remissions, they still are. The beach, once central, is no longer part of my life.

My knee improved, but I needed a better plan. I had tried San Diego as a potential home, looking for a climate where I could be more comfortable. Where else? I had an adequate income to live almost anywhere. But where?

After more research and self-examination, I picked Florida. Again. But not Fort Lauderdale. Not because I'd been there, etc. It was because of what I had discovered through the aforementioned self-examination: I preferred to live where I could walk to my needs. More than that, I needed to walk as much as I could (when I could) to exorcise the demon of arthritis. So I'm off to Florida, right? Not yet. It was spring in New Jersey and the weather was good and getting better. Why waste it? I headed to the Jersey Shore, once again.

Another word on that self-examination. I felt one of San Diego's drawbacks was its distance. Without a local support group, I had to return to New Jersey for assistance. Closer, I felt, was better. Jersey, I felt, was within reasonable driving distance from Florida. Unlike an island like Puerto Rico, which I visited in '71. Beautiful, but impractical and I didn't need to take any more risks. Walking around with arthritis was risk enough. And I liked walking. I decided, as I said, I wanted to live somewhere where I wasn't merely an automotive accessory. I also decided—not surprisingly given those summer Jersey Shore houses—I was happiest by the water. Florida was the preeminently logical choice.

This is the house, and its wrap-around porch, on New York Avenue described in *My Life*. That's me, drink in hand, between the pillars. In the shadow to my left is the then-girlfriend. One of the stories not told in *My Life* was about a favorite parlor trick of mine. Well,



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not exactly parlor because I performed it on the beach. This house had a grand total of fourteen housemates, counting full- and part-time. We rarely went to the beach with less than a half dozen. To enhance our beach time, I often prepared a large cooler of punch, concocted of carefully selected elements from our eclectic communal bar. Then we would bake on the beach for hours. While stupefying in the sand, a housemate would nudge me back to full consciousness and ask for the correct time. Eyes still closed, I would think for a few seconds and give an answer that was invariably accurate within five minutes.



The summer of '73 ranged from such incidentals all the way up to impeachment as precursed by the Watergate hearings. When not on the beach, I glued myself to the television set, amazed at the degree of foolishness in high places. Each succeeding event was more implausible than the previous. It was, like many things in life, a script so unreal it would be rejected as fiction. Often real life coincidence is too far-fetched for fiction. I was amazed at one particular trivial Nixon coincidence. This was '73 and he was our 37th President. When Nixon resigned the next year, I was 37.

The rest of the year of 1973, I spent on the East Coast of southern Florida. The first few days, I explored towns other than Lauderdale. I settled in Deerfield Beach, not very many miles to the north of Fort Lauderdale. While only a small portion of Deerfield is actually on the beach, I found a small motel there I could afford by the month. Could afford, that is, until the rates began increasing week by week as we approached year's end. The dreaded tourist season inflated prices out of my reach. Perhaps the Florida's East Coast was not my solution. Back to Jersey and the cold of another winter season. It would be my last.

Unexpectedly, it turned out to be a different winter. In the photo at the top of page 219, you can see me having dinner at my friend Paul's apartment in 1977. During the winter of '73-'74, he and his wife had already been on a waiting list for that apartment for many months. When their call came, he called me. Would I be interested in taking over the lease in his old apartment? I had visited there a few times and jumped at the chance to exploit his remaining six months, especially at the low rent of his long-time rent-controlled occupancy. Back in Jersey without a plan until next year's assault on Florida's other coast, I suddenly had a new place to live. Did I mention this was New York? Here I was, back in the City with a guaranteed income and no job. This could be fun.

The apartment was a very large single room with separate kitchen, closet, and bath. How large was it? Larger than my first two New York apartments combined. The floor plan was a rectangle with the small kitchen backed up to a bath on the right of the entrance, and a huge walk-in closet on the left. How huge was it? Eight by eight, large enough for a bed, large enough to rent out as a windowless room. The rest of the space was L-shaped, with an undefined (dining? bed?) alcove at the far end on

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the right. The far wall was a normal height, wall-to-wall window. This window was on the twenty-fifth floor. This side of this thirty-story high-rise, and my full-width window, faced south. The building was on West Sixty-sixth street, part of the Lincoln Towers complex directly northwest of Lincoln Center.

You may not have been to Lincoln Center, but I'm sure you've seen it many times in the movies and on television. From the plaza in Lincoln center, near the famous fountain, if you looked west-northwest you could see my new apartment. You could, that is, if you knew where to look. To help this long-distance view, I placed four small light bulbs, two red, two green, in the window. Even in the daytime, they were visible from the plaza. The plaza, of course, could be seen from the apartment. But that wasn't the best view. In 1974, there were few nearby tall buildings to the south. From this window you could see the whole city to the south, even past the southern tip of Manhattan, the Battery. If I showed you where to look, you could see the Statue of Liberty. After you located this landmark, I would ask you to find the other one. "Other Statue of Liberty?" people would ask. I told them to get close to the window and look a few blocks to the left. There, atop the building of the former Statue of Liberty Moving Company, was a twenty-foot miniature of the lady herself.

The apartment did have one significant drawback; it was unfurnished. I had moved ten times in as many years and had given up enough furniture to furnish this apartment three times over. The lease was only for six months and then I would be heading back to Florida (my eleventh move in ten years). I needed something I could walk away from, and I had an idea. I went to garage sales in New Jersey and found about eight five-dollar mattresses. Then I made a table from legs and a door. A few plastic chairs came from more garage sales. I made a

few large paper sculptures (from used computer greenbar paper) as wall decorations. And one more thing. Inspired by an eight by eight wall in the alcove, I bought thirty-two one foot square mirrors and as many same-sized cork boards. With a few cutout paper figures, the wall became an eight foot square chessboard.

In case you think we're poised for a significant change in this life, you're right. But before I reveal in what new direction I'm headed, let's look back. At this place in time and space, we're looking back at a twelve year period from 1974 to 1962. In a much earlier chapter, I wrote: "The advent of television changed America even more than the cataclysmic events from 1962—Kennedy—to 1974—Nixon." Well, those years were also the years of my greatest changes. (Coincidence?)

While the country was going from the Kennedy assassination to the Nixon resignation, I went from temporarily out of work (after the Army) to permanently out of work (from the arthritis). I went from seeking a career for my life, to seeking a life without a career. Physically, I went from lean, mean fighting machine (or so the Army supposed) to totally and permanently disabled veteran (or so the VA reckoned.) In these dozen years, my weight went from 155 to 175, then down to 145, and then back up to 180, and then back to 150. Even my hair went from Army short to hippy long. I tell you this because I can't show it to you. I have only the one photograph of me from this period. Coincidence?

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