

## WHY ATTEND A REUNION, ANYWAY?

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by Harvey Hacker

Attending our class's 20<sup>th</sup> reunion with my first wife, Carol, I was amazed how enjoyable and interesting the event and its aftermath turned out to be. The 40<sup>th</sup>, where I was accompanied by my second wife, Jonee, and far fewer misgivings, was at least as satisfying. Now by experience having overcome caution and skepticism, I look forward to the 50<sup>th</sup>, again with Jonee (who, for all I know, may be sticking with me just for the sake of these reunions) and I hope these notes will encourage anyone who still has reservations to drop them and make plans to show up.

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*CLASSMATES: Since summer 1959, I have maintained, re-established, or established contact with the following classmates (listed alphabetically), largely through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> reunions*

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### Mike Alcalay

Autumn 1962, having been kicked out of Harvard College, I was in LA, about to drive up to Berkeley to grovel for admission to the architecture school. Mike Alcalay, whom I had seen only occasionally since graduation, was headed there and asked if he could ride with me. Unfortunately for him, I said yes, going on to run my pre-seatbelt Buick sedan off a fog-covered embankment near Visalia, giving Mike a neck injury that kept him in a brace for weeks, at least.

Next time I heard his voice was on the car radio in San Francisco, around 1990. "This is Mike Alcalay," he announced, "with *AIDS in Focus*." I left word for him at KPFA, asking "How's your neck?" He called back and left a cheery message from "The Neck," beginning a connection between us that lasted until his death in 2006.

After med school, Mike had served his residency in Hackney, a hardscrabble district of London, and was politicized by the experience. In the years that followed, he founded a free clinic for farm workers in Monterey and became increasingly involved in politically oriented broadcast journalism, also holding down a day job as a Kaiser Permanente pediatrician. Active with broad effectiveness in the medical marijuana movement, he was medical director of an Oakland clinic and a renowned grower and distributor of top quality weed. Mike's journalistic manner extended to personal conversations; he didn't exactly speak to you, it's more as if he interviewed you, especially the first time you met him.

The Neck survived AIDS for nearly 20 years until finally dying from related causes. Before we reconnected, he had become gloriously at home in his gay identity; echoing Don Giovanni's brag song to Leporello, Mike claimed to have enjoyed six- or eight hundred lovers. He was also fortunate to have fathered two splendid sons—Nolen and Aaron Edmonston—who remained close to him until the end. For years he was a fixture at our Thanksgiving, Passover, and New Year celebrations, supplemented by innumerable small encounters and, with the possible exception of my brother Joe (who died about the same time) there is no one I miss more.

### Jody Ames

Generally speaking, the men at our 20<sup>th</sup> reunion were not looking great, already getting a little porky. The women had changed also, not always for the better. As far as I could see, Jody

Ames was the only one who looked just the same as I remembered her from high school and, across the room, I recognized her instantly.

Shortly after the reunion, we met for lunch and got caught up. Jody had managed to exploit her mathematical talent, first revealed to me in Miss Robb's geometry class, and was working as a programmer and financial analyst. An accomplished keyboard player, she was doing her best to amortize the custom-made harpsichord she had acquired. Her fortunes in health and marriage had not been great, but she was enjoying bringing up two daughters, Melanie and Katherine.

Jody and I both reconnected with Mike Alcalay—who had been her prom date—at about the same time and we all kept in reasonably close touch from then on. Of course keeping in touch has become Jody's specialty as originator and maintainer of the Samurai website. Through her, for example, I reconnected with Anselm Brocki, who is now a valued presence in my life.

### **Jean Amos**

I have seen Jean Amos once since graduation, at a club—The Freight and Salvage, I think—in Berkeley. Quite independently, Jonee has run into her at political events in San Francisco.

### **Carl Cheng**

Jody Ames brought Carl Cheng to my attention with an email in March 2008. After I realized he was the author of a sculpture—a kind of giant scale Sumerian seal, made to roll across the Santa Monica beach sand imprinting a complex repetitive image—which I had seen and admired a year or two earlier, I called him and we spoke briefly. Learn what Carl has been up to, and maybe get a new perspective on Van Nuys high school, at <http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=58>.

### **Barry Gertz**

In high school Barry and I were quite close, trading ironic “philosophy” in the manner of detached self-satisfied outcasts. “Well,” one would recite, “you could work hard, get top grades, be admitted to a good college and do well there, graduate and get a high-paying job, save your money, and then go lie on the beach.” “Or,” the other would respond, “you could go lie on the beach.” (At that time, unfortunately, the tag “ba-dum BUMP” had not yet come to our attention; we could have used it.)

Later, while at Stanford, Barry would phone me on the East Coast, having developed some ingenious procedure for free long-distance calling that ultimately brought him into disfavor with Stanford's administration. Imagine my surprise when he turned up at the 40<sup>th</sup> Reunion as a highly respectable and strictly observant Orthodox Jew, even adjusting his travel schedule to accommodate the festival *Shemini Atseret*. As they say in Yiddish: *Chacun a son gout* (ba-dum BUMP).

### **Lowell Lindsay**

My memories of Lowell in high school are imprecise: a lot of classes together; overlapping friendships with Barry Gertz and maybe Bob Mercer; his membership in ROTC which, even at that time, I thought was a little weird.

After the 20<sup>th</sup> reunion—perhaps because of a connection made there—I remember a brunch on our deck in San Francisco with Lowell and some of his family. Every year we receive a detailed Christmas letter from him and Diana, his wife.

### **Alan Mendelsohn**

Alan Mendelsohn died in 2004, his former wife recently informed Jody Ames, who passed the news on to me. Al and Jeff Pearson—dead now also—were my two closest buddies in high school. Al moved to Van Nuys, just as freshman year began, with his parents—a couple of cynical retired New York school teachers. All-knowing and world-wise, with a conspiratorial bent, Al revealed to me a controversy he had raised in his New Rochelle junior high by claiming to be from Mars, which divided the school into rival factions of believers and non-believers, a division strong enough to incite fistfights in the halls. I forgot the story, which had always seemed implausible, until, years later, I was astonished to come across a review of Daniel Pinkwater’s book *Alan Mendelsohn, the Boy from Mars*, which of course I bought, read, and relished (much as I’ve enjoyed Pinkwater’s droll soliloquies on NPR), realizing that Alan and Daniel must have been junior high school classmates and the book was a wildly fictionalized account of incidents that really did occur. Inspired, I decided to find Al. An internet search turned up six or eight Alan Stuart Mendelsohns around the country and I sent each one a postcard bearing the (very cool) three-dimensional image of a flying saucer and a cryptic reference to Al’s self-assigned high school nickname “Sugar Ray Mendelsohn.”

Late in the last afternoon of the Millennium, just as I was about to leave work, the phone rang. It was Al. Over the next hour-and-a-half, I learned that he had known my whereabouts for years, driving by the office each time he visited San Francisco but never stopping or calling, because—he explained—he still bore a grudge for the “shabby treatment” he had received from me in the mid-1960’s, early in the Vietnam War. At that time, Al was an Army psychologist and I was a student, already wrapped up in antiwar feeling and activities. He and his new wife visited me and my new wife and, as he described it, I was cold to them and berated him about the war. Although I did not remember anything of the encounter, his description seemed plausible to me and it still does. Opinions and feelings were strong and our meeting was certainly not that era’s strongest division between friends over questions of the war.

Al was cleaning out his desk as we spoke, having just retired from a 27-year post at the Valley Mental Health System in Salt Lake City (where he had remained after obtaining his PhD at the University of Utah), and was looking forward to quiet days in a cabin on the Pacific shore. Our conversation gradually revealed the outlines of a life and almost everything he said I found unsettling. He was in poor health, overweight, and a heavy smoker. He harbored bitterness toward many people beside me and seemed to have lost completely the gleeful, mischievous, antic qualities of old Sugar Ray. At detail piled on detail, I felt worse and worse, beginning to believe the conversation would never end. When finally it did, I went home profoundly depressed, feeling sick—nausea was followed by repeated vomiting—and began the new Millennium in bed with my head under the covers instead of going out with Jonee to dance, drink Champagne, and enjoy a big midnight kiss. When I wondered later about this sudden-onset illness, she gently suggested that the mind and the body might somehow be connected.

**Bob Mercer**

One afternoon in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I remember going to Bob's house on Hamlin Street with Jeff Pearson, Bob sitting on the edge of his bed, long hair oiled and pompadoured Elvis-like, playing a single snare drum.

After striking up a conversation at the 40<sup>th</sup> Reunion, we have met a few times, sharing interests (American roots music, which he has promoted and produced, and art—his wonderful wife Donna is an art teacher and sometimes Bob and Donna meet Jonee and me at the museum) and, I think, some attitudes about the world.

After a long time away doing other things, Bob is back living in the house on Hamlin Street.

**Dave Novros**

Scant contact in high school, although one of the Annuals I saved has a terrific, biting caricature of me—seen in beaky profile—that he drew over his autograph on an endpaper. Later, maybe in the late 1960's, I saw a poster announcing a show of his paintings in New York and I thought "Oh, Novros is a painter," but never followed up by contacting him—let alone seeking out the show—even though by that time I had become very interested in painting. Then, three or four years ago, I did call and we met in New York, where he and his wife—Joanna Pousette-Dart, a good painter and also daughter of a well-known mid-century abstractionist—share a loft on Broome Street in the SoHo District. Dave showed us paintings and his scale model of an environmental installation, introduced us to Joanna, and we had coffee at Balthazar, an elegant brasserie that, during the morning, serves as a kind of hangout for locals such as him. A good-looking piece of Dave's in a 2004 show at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art—a survey of Minimalism from the late 1950s to the late 1960s—is my latest contact with his work.

**Jeff Pearson**

This is the saddest story. Jeff grew up in Bexley, a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. I met him at the beginning of 10<sup>th</sup> grade, just after his family had moved to Van Nuys, and remember my innocent astonishment—as we grew to be friends—at his attitudes toward race and football, which were much more Midwestern (or even Southern) than those I was used to seeing.

Everything I remember doing with Jeff involved acting badly:

- Completely disassembling, in Jeff's back yard (not mine, because my family lived in a yardless apartment), the engine of a 1935 Dodge given to me by my father's friend Max and failing to reassemble it when we learned how much the necessary parts would cost. Jeff's mother never forgave me for the oil-soaked grass.
- Holding an hours-long BB gun fight in a wild field south of Ventura Boulevard which—who knows how?—did not result in any lost eyes, but which did require me to replace my car's windshield and to spend days in bed with a painfully raging case of poison oak, a consequence of my diving for cover in the underbrush
- Unknown to our parents, taking a Memorial Day drive with Al Mendelsohn to Tijuana in 1957, immediately after Jeff turned 16 and got a car, where we visited a bullfight and a whorehouse (whoreshack, actually), in which grainy, flickering, pornographic movies were viewed, but no actual sex acts were consummated (at least not by me)

Senior year, Jeff's family moved back to Bexley but he and I stayed in touch. As a college freshman, I hitchhiked from Boston to Columbus to visit him during Spring break, bringing a present to celebrate Jeff's marriage to his high school sweetheart but already by that time it was clear we had grown apart and before long we lost contact completely.

Years later, after Bob Mercer told me—probably at our 40<sup>th</sup> reunion—that he spoke to Jeff on a regular basis, I saw the Bexley boy again, this time with our respective second wives, for lunch in San Francisco. He had become wealthy, he did not hesitate to report, by buying cheap houses around Columbus and renting them to low-income tenants. He lived in an impressive mansion and had just purchased adjacent property to build a similar home for his daughter. After that lunch, neither of us was moved to get together again.

More recently—a couple of years ago—Mercer (who dismisses his own history of financial reverses with a philosophic shrug) filled me in on the story's last chapter. Jeff's finances had collapsed. He was greatly overextended, could not meet pressing obligations, and faced imminent financial ruin, expecting to lose all that he had gained and more. Not sharing his situation with anyone, Jeff armed himself with a handgun, drove to the cemetery and, on his parents' grave, blew his brains out.

### **Charles Perry**

Charles and I shared so much alienation from the values of our respective families—his: old California, white, propertied; mine: second generation Jewish immigrant, striving, wary—that I failed to recognize and acknowledge the differences between our origins. We met while working on the Samurai yearbook, where his sly humor enlivened the dry task of inventing page headlines with a skill that—years later—he brought to a new level as Rolling Stone's copy editor (“Cream Separates”).

I did not maintain regular contact with any Samurai classmates other than Charles through college but, during the two years he spent at Princeton before switching to Berkeley, we exchanged long letters comparing our East Coast experiences and occasionally we got together in Princeton, Cambridge, or New York City. Following freshman year, we smoked weed and ate peyote, toward the end of an era when doing so was relatively rare among white kids. In the spring of 1962, having been kicked out of Harvard, I abandoned my then-girlfriend (later, my first wife) Carol and headed back to California. Charles, living in Cambridge that summer, thought ill of me for that and probably still does.

We've seen each other from time to time over the years, first in the company of Carol, then with Jonee, my second wife, and most recently with friends of mine who had, coincidentally, been friends of his at Berkeley, but never alone together. Arcane pursuits have characterized his life:

- Translator of Arabic poetry in high school
- Picker on the “figgle,” a banjo/guitar hybrid that a neighbor made to Charlie's order
- Expert on medieval Arabic cookery and the second-most-cited source in Oxford University Press *Book of Food*
- Cooker of elaborate dishes and connoisseur of wine
- Author/editor of tales (*Smokestack El Ropo's Bedside Reader*) while a Rolling Stone staffer
- Proprietor for years of the Los Angeles Times ethnic restaurant beat

Most recently, I saw Charles as a talking head in the documentary *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr Hunter S Thompson*, where he recalls being the guy tasked with retrieving Thompson's dispatches from the Rolling Stone fax machine and making printable copy of them.

### **Linda Leavitt (Posell)**

I scarcely knew Linda in high school but, following a conversation at the 40<sup>th</sup> reunion, we got together for a visit in Washington, DC, where she has settled with the affable Jerry Schwinn. Linda personifies the theory that a one's disposition is relatively unaffected by the events of his or her life; mood is mostly the expression of inborn personality traits. Spend an hour with her and you will find it all but impossible to imagine a glum Linda.

### **Lucky (Karline) Suerdieck (Lynch)**

Having wondered since 1956, at the 40<sup>th</sup> reunion I asked Lucky why she was named Lucky and it's lucky I asked. What a story.

After trying to carry a child to term several times without success, her mother won the nickname "Lucky" when finally, in the last months before Pearl Harbor, it looked like she was going to succeed. Then somehow, after the successful birth, the nickname slipped from mother to daughter, and everyone in the hospital began calling the newborn child "Lucky." After the then-usual one week post-partum stay, when it was time for mother and child to check out, the nuns would not discharge them until the baby had been given a proper Christian name and no Saint Lucky could be found on the books, hence Lucky's official name: Karline.

### **Alicia Susman (Lewis)**

If not for my late brother Joe, I never would have encountered Alicia, whom I saw last at his funeral in 2006. Joe, three years my junior, attended Grant High School, where he found some of the same teachers we knew at Van Nuys and where one of his friends was Howard Susman, Alicia's younger brother. Keeping up with old friends better than anyone I've ever known, Joe saw Howard regularly over the years and so, although less regularly, I got news of Alicia.

### **Brian Teip**

If not for Mike Alcalay, I would have remained totally out of contact with Brian Teip. As things are, it's close; we spoke briefly at Mike's memorial service in 2006.

**FACULTY:** A handful of Van Nuys teachers were very important to me and, of those, I've had post-graduation contact with just two (actually, only one unless you permit me to count hearsay):

### **Louis Falb (Chemistry)**

Mr Falb was one of the few teachers I experienced—in high school, college, or graduate school—who never talked down to his students, taking it as given that each of us was there to learn to the limits of his or her capacity. I responded to this attitude and worked hard to keep up, having entered the class as a moron, relative to the other students, after a first semester in the "easy" Chem class of Mr Hallahan. Finally, against all expectation, I did OK.

In contrast to this happy memory, each of my younger siblings—Joe in 1960 or '61, Bobby in 1971 or '72—was misfortunate enough to walk into Mister Falb's classroom bearing (you should excuse the expression) the cross of my history. "Ooooooooooooo," he exclaimed in each instance when calling roll the first day of class, decorating his speech with famously flat, nasal vowels, "naaat one of the notorious Haaaaaaaaaaaaacker brothers!"

### **Anselm Brocki (English)**

Al Smith, the presidential candidate who in 1928 lost the election to Herbert Hoover, passed out many cigars, kissed many babies, and shook many hands, including the hand of young Anselm Brocki. 80 years later, Brocki drives a Prius downtown every morning and applies his critical and creative skills as a sought-after editor, tackling technical books, fiction, and whatever else comes his way. Following just a few years as classroom teacher, which he calls "the second hardest job I ever had" (its hazards did not quite equal the flak he received piloting a B-26 over Germany), Brocki has pursued two parallel careers: as editor and as poet. Editing requires immense skill and confidence. "You have to be smarter than the author," he admits matter-of-factly. Poetry adds the requirement that you open your heart to the world. One measure of his success in doing so is publication of over 2,000 poems in more than 400 journals.

Jonee and I have Jody Ames to thank for our present acquaintance with him. She Googled his name, found his work on several poetry websites, and passed the word to me. After a tentative first visit nearly ten years ago, Jonee and I became close to Anselm and his wife Bertie (who has since died). Anselm and Bertie both led extremely busy lives—she as an author with a day job as court stenographer and he as an editor/poet—and together they had perfected an appropriately efficient routine for entertainment. After work, or on a weekend evening, they would go to one of the movie theaters near their house in Santa Monica, see whatever was playing (choice was not an issue since they saw absolutely everything, more than a hundred movies per year), and then go out for a bite to eat and a pitcher of beer at one of the dives (Anselm's word, spoken deliberately, with relish) they knew and frequented. Learning this, wanting to respect a well-worn routine, and liking movies a lot too, Jonee and I would join Anselm and Bertie for such evenings whenever we managed to visit LA and, following Bertie's death, we have continued the practice with Anselm. It is a pleasure to discuss movies with acutely observant and knowledgeable viewers; it is a privilege to sit in a crowded, noisy restaurant debating whether a series of like terms should or should not have a comma before "and" (*bread, butter and cheese* or *bread, butter, and cheese*) only to realize suddenly that, most likely, not one other table in the whole damn dive is talking commas.

Here are some of my favorites among Brocki's poems:

### ***Detailed***

My brain is full  
of surprises about  
petty things which  
it could let slip by

but half remembers—  
 like absentmindedly  
 putting the garage  
 keys on a sawhorse  
 next to a crumpled  
 grease rag, the crazy  
 angle of my bedroom  
 slippers, the toe  
 of one atop the other  
 two nights ago,  
 the sound of my  
 reading glasses mute-  
 thudding onto the blue  
 padded berber carpet  
 during the night—all  
 of which give me  
 an illusion of being  
 continuous, whole,  
 worth listening to,  
 and fully alive.

### *Topanga*

Rented pink hillside house  
 Topanga Canyon in full tremble green  
 Huge movie mogul windows  
 on both sides of a waist-high fireplace  
 made of black Hawaiian volcanic rock  
 from the dollar-grinning Buick fifties.  
 No time to look out the window.  
 Art conference on a kids' book  
 against drug and alcohol use.  
 Reddish mahogany table, molded edges,  
 step-curve-step. French lyre-backed chairs.  
 Me in a business suit, soft shoulders.  
 The artist in black jeans, snakeskin boots,  
 outlaw hat in the middle of the table.

“The last page needs a twelve-year-old  
 entering a circled support group.” I say.

“Easy, like all the others,” he says, Canadian  
 accent, “but where do they go on the pages?  
 We do art, not layout. I can get you a quote  
 from a really creative designer.”

“That’s up to the publisher,” I say.  
“I’ll have to let you know tomorrow.”

End of conference. Just time leaving  
to glance out the window and see  
brown naked bodies of Chumash Indians  
in the canyon below, leaf-shade-dappled  
golden arms and backs gathering acorns  
under ancient live oak trees,  
although not the right season yet.

### *Guests*

Even speed hum  
traveling east  
San Bernardino  
Freeway to see  
old friends  
in Yucca Valley.

“Is this Route 66,  
the way we used  
to go to the desert  
when I was little?”  
my wife asks.

“That was Foothill  
Boulevard,” I say,  
“five miles north  
of here.” The cast  
of characters  
and all the plays  
we’ve been in swells—  
in a rumble seat  
at age 10 going  
to Palm Springs  
to stay in a trailer  
with my tap teacher  
who used to sand  
dance and called  
me Cowboy, at 19  
in the back of a  
pickup going  
to Barstow with my

wooden box  
of carpenter tools  
jiggling beside me,  
at 23 after WW II  
driving back to L.A.  
in a 1938 Studebaker  
forever boiling over.

When we arrive,  
all our characters  
and plays squeeze  
through the front  
door with us  
crowding  
the friends' house.

### *Lunch Out*

Though I don't keep a diary  
or such easy hours,  
sleep with the wives of subordinates,  
have a lover on the side,  
or enjoy his rapture in music,  
I am much like Pepys  
in this London of Los Angeles,  
recording daily with my eyes  
headlong staccato pulse and rush,  
eating lunch everywhere—  
King Taco, Philippe The Original,  
Sam's Hof Brau, Renaissance Bar,  
Twin Dragons, the Kettle:  
keeping track of prices  
weekly in bookstores and markets—  
rappini, mustard greens,  
artichokes, red rose potatoes;  
and watching joggers,  
frisky daytime drunks,  
cutpurses, police pursuits,  
and all women walk.

### *Honest Labor*

Every once in a while  
I enjoy the trained tedium

of three or four hours  
in painting two jambs,  
trim, and their panel doors.  
Synthetic bristle sash brush  
precisely angled and flagged,  
dipped one inch into white,  
slid on a strike wire  
stretched across the paint pot  
from bail eye to bail eye,  
turned and lifted deftly  
to prevent sloppy drips,  
laid into the corner flat  
with a soft liquid thunk  
where jamb meets lintel,  
and stroked up and down  
over and over soothing,  
as if my brain was built for  
and remembers picking oakum  
aboard a sea-rolling ship,  
hauling a barge upstream  
from a foot-worn towpath,  
and scrabbling in dark under trees  
for fallen golden acorns  
one by one into a woven basket.

### *Hereafter*

If heaven doesn't happen  
after retirement and death,  
we'll probably move to Monterey  
before the aquarium  
and all the recent building  
because it's forever summer  
with flag-snap ocean air  
and we have never  
had an argument  
in town or on the pier,  
or felt a moment unhappy.  
I'll take my tools,  
build a wooden window house  
on a bluff south  
to avoid the vacationers,  
cook on the lonely beach  
or eat out every night.