

## PART VII SUMMING UP

## Our Lives Today

Avonne and I attend the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley on Sundays and we both have joined one or two groups there. I'm involved with a group of secular humanists I helped form, the Humanist Connection. We meet at the church once a month and have open conversations about what it is to be a human being. I'm able at those meetings to talk about some things that I really cherish in my own work. There's also a splinter group out of The Humanist Connection, consisting of four or five men who also meet once a month. So I've got people with whom I'm able to explore some issues.

I don't see the UUC as a religious institution. A religion is based on revealed word, on dogma. There's no dogma there. There's no revealed word. There's no answer, only inquiry. The Unitarian Church is democratic.

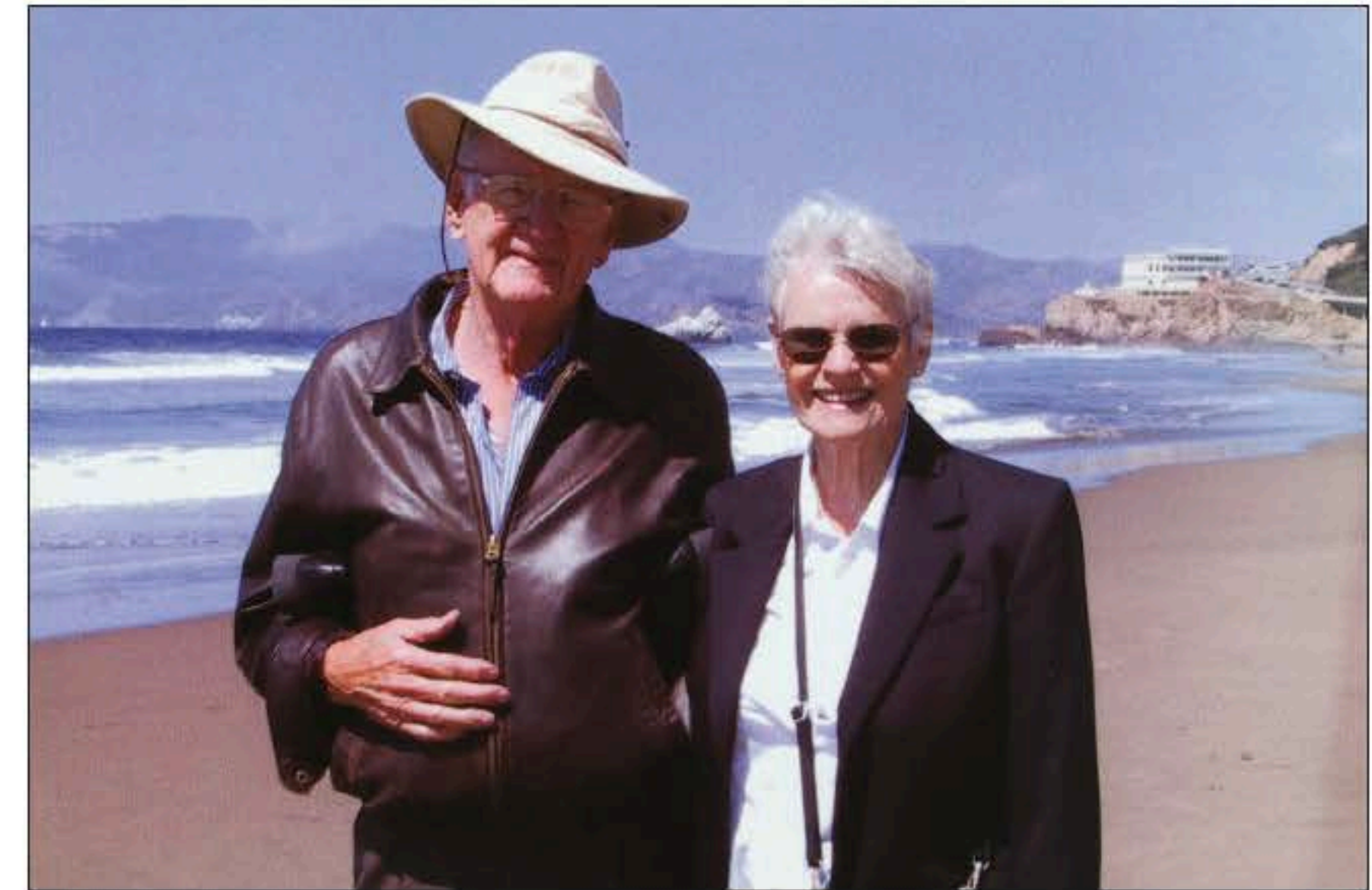
If you read the shared UU values, they're about freedom, justice, and openness. There's no reason we can't understand humanity with a degree of tentativeness and openness that finds its essence in the vibrancy of music and dance, art and drama, poetry and literature, and in the free actions of the person.

Life is a dance. Life is not a formula or a recipe. It's a dance – or maybe a story – or maybe just *living*.



Avonne and I have also done a lot of traveling together, and I've talked about the many trips we took and some of the wonderful things we did – going to China, for example, and the wonderful trips we took with our friends George and Lynn Lutjen. Those adventures were big parts of our family excitement during the last twenty or thirty years. Even though Avonne's activity was limited, she was able to do all of these things. [*chokes up*] I couldn't handle the limitations like she does. It's a miracle and a credit to her Hungarian genes or something. She's a stalwart trouper.

In 1990, Avonne and I signed up for a whale-watching trip to Hawaii sponsored by U.C. Berkeley. A group of twelve of us flew to Hawaii and traveled to the port of Lahaina on the island of Maui. We stayed at the old Inn in Lahaina and every morning for five days we climbed aboard a sixty-foot motor sailboat and sailed out to the area where the humpback whales were cavorting. The University had installed hydro-



phones that picked up the whales' songs and we could hear them in the boat. These magnificent animals sounded, spouted, escorted us closely and spy hopped all around us – most exciting! There were great meals aboard and voluminous libations as we sailed through the Pailolo Channel off Molokai.

A high point was anchoring off the small island of Lanai and diving into the water. I was astounded at hearing the whale sounds with my own ears while diving to ten or twelve feet deep in the bay.

This kind of close encounter is no longer allowed, for good reason; but it seemed to Avonne and me that the whales were having a great time along with us.

For the last few days we explored the sights on Maui, enjoyed the beach, and cooked our dinner outside in the protected courtyard of the Inn.



Shortly after we arrived and made our first home in El Cerrito sometime in 1966, we met a few couples in the neighborhood who joined us in forming a book club. I'm not sure how it started—probably with a social dinner, but four couples agreed to meet once a month and discuss a book we had agreed to read. At first it included going out to dinner, and sometimes a movie. Our gatherings went on for 40 years, but not without some attrition. We lost a couple through divorce, then a couple through



brain cancer and suicide, then a couple whose son murdered his wife and was given 25 to life in prison.

Four of us are left and we meet almost weekly for dinner out. We don't read books anymore, but I recently reviewed a list of the 145 books we read and it is a good sign-of-the-times over a 40-year span. One macabre event was Avonne's diagnosis of cancer just two weeks after we had read *Cancer Ward*.



A number of years ago, on a pre-Christmas excursion on Fourth Street with my son-in-law Mark, we walked into The Glass Garden. I saw some glasswork I admired and offhandedly said, "I'd like to do something like this."

For Christmas, Mark surprised me with a set of glass tools, cutters, instructions on how to use them, and several classes in glasswork. I was very excited and took three classes, in slumping, fusing, and stained glass windows, and successfully made a stained glass window for Mark and Karen's yacht.

Mark and I later went through a salvage yard down by the boat dock and found a crate full of lead came, which goes around stained glass. I ended up buying the whole crate for \$50. The following year, I used the lead came in the glass curtain I created for the retaining wall in our patio. The year after that, Mark bought outdoor lights to shine on my work of art.



Even after sixty-three years of marriage, Avonne and I meet the mornings with good humor and compassion, and every day I return from my work to a warm and welcoming experience. Avonne, an artist with an artist's taste and sense of aesthetic surroundings, has always added small touches of color, design, and music to our many domiciles, pleasant to both eye and heart.

We also have a wonderful dog. I would estimate that a large proportion, if not the major proportion, of Avonne's life revolves around our dog. *[laughs]* We occasionally take dog trips that celebrate the existence of Cavalier King Charles Spaniels.

Avonne's eye for detail and interest in detail are just phenomenal. She pulls up on her computer the pictures of these new Cavalier puppies, hauls me in from wherever I am and says, "Look, this is a new puppy just one day old, and her nose is just – look, her eyes –," and she picks out all of the features. So we're pretty tied up with the dogs.



A typical day for me starts with getting up, fixing coffee and serving Avonne in bed; meanwhile, I'm reading the New York Times. And then I get dressed and decide



which of several things I'm going to do.

I often go to the U.C. Berkeley library to do research; I take my computer there and enter information from the periodicals that I can't subscribe to, or that don't come up so easily on the Internet. Sometimes I go to the plaza bookstore, have a cup of coffee, and peruse periodicals that are important to me, like *Nature* and *Science* and some political magazines, such as the *Nation* and the *Economist*. I look at the table of contents, and if there's an article there, I'll read it, and if I need to, I'll take notes. I check the new book arrivals and sometimes read an entire book that seizes my interest.

In addition to the daily *New York Times*, I subscribe to the *Atlantic* and the *New Yorker* and *Harper's* and the *New York Review of Books*, and I read all of those, too; that takes a lot of time at home.

This is a very comfortable time in Barnes & Noble, sitting in the coffee shop with a stack of magazines. Then I'll sometimes just sit in the bookstore and write on my computer.

A high point for Avonne and me is meeting on Fridays with Barry and Judy Phegan for conversation and a walk on Fourth Street in Berkeley. We talk politics, theory, and enjoy each other's company during lunch. The Meridian Group offices were on Fourth Street, just a block away from Bette's Diner, and I often went to Bette's for coffee or for lunch. I can't break that habit; I go down there and enjoy the people.

I have three or four other friends on Fourth Street with whom I also enjoy conversations, and that happens a couple of days a week. Sometimes we get into long, long discussions, which is another way of my trying to replicate the old days at Meridian.



Almost every afternoon I go out to Cesar Chavez Park at the Berkeley Marina, and take a long walk. That's meditative time. I can see the entire Bay Area during my walks, and beyond the Golden Gate Bridge to the Pacific Ocean.

I get home at 2:30 or 3:00 in the afternoon. Avonne and I take a nap and catch up on what she's been doing, and then we have dinner. I do most of the dinners. The kitchen is my job. I keep it clean and do some chores around the house. Later in the afternoon, I sometimes go down to my office in the basement to work on my book and do research on the Internet.

We have a big television, so we often watch television or a movie from Netflix, and argue over the programs or the movie. We often don't like the same movies – Avonne can't understand why I would like movies that have sex and violence – but there are, of course, lots of movies we both like. We saw "Frida" the other night; that's a wonderful movie. We both love the ballroom dancing movies, and sometimes we see movies that we've enjoyed before, like "Tin Cup." As one gets in one's eighties, one doesn't remember the movies one has seen, so it's like seeing them all over again. *[laughs]* We are now both really enjoying a series, "The House of Elliot."

And we look at old classics, like old Cary Grant movies – and Avonne loved "The Aviator." Avonne was born in Los Angeles, right on the edge of Hollywood, and in her young life she identified very strongly with the Hollywood actors and actresses. Jane Withers was in her high school class with her. So she knows about actresses and ac-



tors, and we both like to go out to movies in the theater. Avonne will go to a movie at the drop of a hat.

At any rate, we usually end up having a quiet evening with the dog and the television. And I have a glass of wine or a Scotch, and we usually get to bed about 10:30.



The most fulfilling and stabilizing fabric of my life continues to be our family. It was my wife and daughters who with great patience held resilient the thread and coherence of my life excursions; like glia cells, they held it together until I finally discovered where I needed to be in the world.

Avonne has the strongest sense of family of anyone I have ever known, and our three wonderful daughters provide the strong fibers that now stretch far across the continent and weave the firm sense of family that is so precious.

Like most people our age, we're fascinated with our grandchildren. *[laughs]* Some of the recent highlights have involved traveling to various grandchildren's col-



*Avonne's 80th birthday.*

lege graduations and weddings.

I jokingly said earlier in this memoir that our kids and grandkids are all beautiful and smart and successful. And it's true. *[laughs]* I mean, it's a modern miracle that two of our daughters with children married wonderful men the second time, who took their children on, adopted them, and paid for their private educations. So the marriages and the vicissitudes of their lives and their children's lives occupy a lot of our thinking.

We see our children mostly on holidays or for big family occasions, and occasionally when they come to visit. These are high points in our lives. Alison and her children seem to be settling on the East Coast, in Greenwich, Connecticut, and in New York or Washington, D.C., except for Hilary, who lives in Kansas City. Karen's three children are still with us on the West Coast. We see our youngest granddaughter, the attorney, and her husband once in a while. They come over to our side of the bay for Saturday breakfast. Our two grandsons sometimes come for dinner with their significant others – a real pleasure for us. Renée and David are creating a complex business, living and horse facility in and around Seligman Arizona. Renée works for the National Indian Health Service and helicopters down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon often to serve the Supai Indian reservation there.

## Postscript

It is now December 2008, one month since Barack Obama was elected the next President of the United States. Although the country is at the beginning of what is expected to be a long period of economic recession and there is still much in the world to feel deeply troubled about, this election has been remarkably rejuvenating for me. It is as though a weight has been lifted from my shoulders, and I have a feeling of exuberance about the advent of a new political generation that promises to lead us into the 21st century.

Sadly, since I began work on this book, my old friend George Lutjen passed away. I miss him. The passage of time and the loss of friends reinforce my sense that it is good to have set down these stories for posterity, and to have celebrated the many people who have influenced my life.

May all who delve into this modest memoir find something of interest and inspiration in it.

*Come fill the cup ... the bird is on the wing!*

