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Introducing my life

In the digital age when one is supposed to twitter one's virtual associates with the least significant activities of one's last minute of mundane teenage activity, it becomes an anachronistic and strenuous job to reflect on the longer trajectory of one's life from a perspective of unfathomable decades. When I met a high school friend this week after not having had contact with anyone from that era for exactly 40 years, it was a weird and difficult business to catch each other up on our now ripe lives and on the glimpses or more-than-faded memories of people with whom we had collectively endured our formative years.

So I thought—now that possible ties to long-gone friends seem to be popping up through social networking like FaceBook—why not try to reach out and catch up in at least a superficial way with some of the memorable (or remembered) people of the ancient past while they and I are still lucid.

A full-scale memoir would be overkill and would never get written. But, I could, within an afternoon free of pressing tasks, gather together some lists and lots of digital photos (the many faces of Gerry) lying around on my computers and string them together with brief annotations.

Even before me

For the sake of completeness, I will start a full century ago. My grandparents were Eastern European Jews who immigrated to the US in the early 1900s. My father's parents came from somewhere in Romania and settled in Philadelphia, running a mom-and-pop furniture upholstery shop under the El in Kensington. My mother's parents came from the Bialystock region of Poland/Ukraine and shared a small carpet-cleaning factory with their relatives in Chicago. My parents were politically oriented and met in the socialist party. My father was a union organizer and my mother worked on integrated housing.



The early years

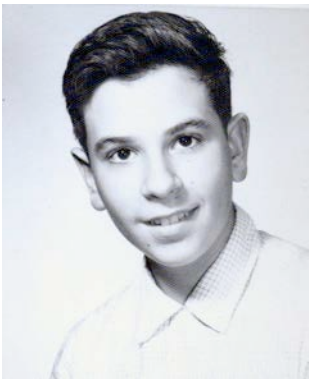
Because of my father's work and my mother's wanderlust, we traveled a good bit. Here is a list of the places I called home over the years: <http://GerryStahl.net/personal/recreation/home.html> As the list documents, I have spent my life trying to get away from Philadelphia, with little long-term success. ;-)

I grew up in Trevese, a working-class suburb of Philadelphia. I went to Trevese Elementary School for most of six years. In the middle, we lived in Ohio. When I came back, my closest buddies had been held back a year, while I had survived inner-city schools that were both rougher and more academically advanced. My school was a six-room schoolhouse that I walked to from a mile away. I received a classic American education there, being the only non-Republican, non-Satan-fearing-Protestant. Among my earliest memories are crying at being left at school by my mother the first day of first grade. However, I also recall being taken by my second grade teacher across the hall to the third grade classroom so I could explain to them how multiplication was just an extended form of addition. I never thought that I was a good student before senior high school, but when it was time for me to graduate, apparently my first grade teacher still remembered me and wondered with some expectation how I was doing.



Junior High School

Seventh grade threw me into a bigger world than I was prepared for. Grades 7 through 12 were all in one building. Before I could quite adjust, my family moved to Kentucky for the middle of the academic year. The building there was even larger and I often got lost, physically and mentally. Fortunately, the library had a large science fiction section, which I read end to end to feel at last at home. After I returned to Bensalem High, they opened a modern junior high building, which by then seemed rinky-dink, with low ceilings and walls that closed in on you with their decorator colors.



Senior High School

Going back to the high school building in 10th grade was almost a liberating experience after that. By then, I knew my classmates and was involved in various school activities. Geometry class was the first course that clicked for me, despite the teacher, who was more interested in sports. I found the method of

axiomatic proofs and demonstrations appealing. I had already been interested in science, but this was probably when I started to read about math on my own.

Bensalem was not an academically distinguished institution, but they did attempt to keep up with the times as best they could. One year, they tried to start teaching algebra earlier. Then, the next year they reversed this decision and we had to take Algebra I again. It turns out that this may have been quite helpful for me. Algebra is a major turning point in math education, where one moves from rote arithmetic to abstract understanding, if one is lucky. By taking it twice, I really nailed the subject. I could understand the details of what was going on and could treat it as a game, in which I trained my skills. My mastery of algebra helped me significantly to score well on standardized tests, to get through several college courses and even now to understand what students are doing in my current research.

Another curriculum experiment was introducing modern physics the year after I took the classical physics course. The new curriculum was beyond the understanding of the physics teacher, but was just my cup of tea. I took the class as a repeat of physics and found it stimulating. The curriculum had been developed at MIT—and that was where I was heading after high school. Academically, I outgrew the high school curriculum and could not wait to move on to a challenging college experience.

During the summer before my sophomore year, my family embarked on a road trip through Canada. Before my junior year, we drove through Mexico. Before my senior year, I attended a summer physics program at the University of Arizona in Tucson, loving the desert and going to the Seattle World's Fair on my way home.

Of course, the important thing in high school is the social life. It is now clearer than ever that interacting with my classmates was my major formative social experience. It was the period in my life when I spent the most time with other people and had the largest set of friends. In later periods, I was either too busy studying, working or raising a family to socialize as much. In addition, because I moved about a lot in my life, I did not maintain contact with many people over extended periods.



Off to College

MIT was an intellectually exciting time for me. I took a variety of courses, from philosophy and literature to math and physics. I took graduate courses that were way beyond my ability. I took computer and AI courses, as well as courses on social change. I took courses from Nobel laureates and world leaders of their fields.

It was also a politically charged time, with the Vietnam War ramping up. I was active in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), becoming the chair of the MIT chapter. I pursued student issues within MIT as well as war issues. I met Doris, my first wife, on the bus to a demonstration in DC.

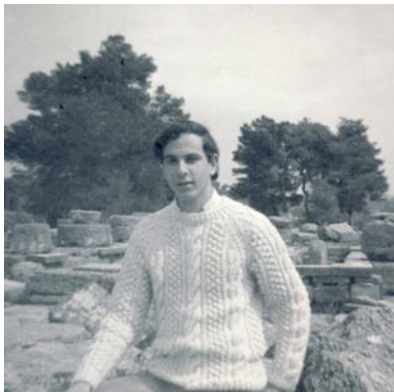
During the summer before my junior year, I helped an Indian graduate student analyze data on politicians in India, working in Penn's computer center across the street from the world's first digital computer. The next summer I worked at an electrical turbine factory in Baden, Switzerland, programming in Fortran.



Starting a Family

Within days of graduation from MIT, I was married and studying German in a farm town in Bavaria, as the start of my exchange fellowship. Doris and I spent the academic year in Heidelberg. That was an exciting time for me. I took courses from Heidegger's assistant, Gadamer, and other German philosophers. I read lots of Hegel, Marx, Heidegger and Habermas. During the semester break, we hitchhiked around Greece and visited Israel. The second semester, the university became a "free university," in solidarity with the general strike in France. This was the closest thing to a revolutionary period during my lifetime. It was exhilarating. I was involved with the German SDS then and read many political tracts.

Doris had been pregnant our whole time in Heidelberg. Zake was born while I was at a lecture on the birth of philosophy with the pre-Socratics. We had an apartment in the quaint town of Neckargemünd, outside of Heidelberg. My mother visited to be present for her first grandson. A week later, we took a boat back to the US, in time to watch the Chicago convention and Woodstock on tv. Driving through New Jersey after a year in Europe would have been culture shock enough without the political upheaval and repression.



I had out-manuevered the draft board while in Germany, but I took a job teaching remedial math at Bartram High in SW Philly to stay out of the military. That was such a repressive environment—with police in the halls—that I did not last until Christmas. I tried driving a taxi and volunteering in a progressive experimental school, but ended up caring for Zake while Doris worked as an art teacher. Eventually, I was hired as a system programmer at Temple University's computer center. I worked on CDC 6400 computers, the most complicated supercomputers in existence then. We lived in a block of Quaker coop housing in North Philly.



Graduate School

I tired of programming after a while and itched to return to philosophy. I went to Northwestern, which had the only department in the US that offered continental philosophy. We lived in the northern-most section of Chicago, a low-income area where we participated in an active hippy community. I worked part-time at Northwestern's computer center, where a co-worker developed the world champion chess program. I wrote a dissertation synthesizing what I considered the major contributions of Marx and Heidegger. To do the research, I returned to Germany



This time we spent two years in Frankfurt, living at first in the village of Kronberg im Taunus and later in a student dorm. We had a VW bus and traveled throughout Europe. During the summer between the two years, we first went down to a nudist colony on the coast of Yugoslavia, so Zake could frolic in the sand and water. Then we drove up through Scandinavia, crossing Norway and Sweden in their beautifully desolate tundra interior.

Frankfurt had been home to the "Frankfurt School" of Western Marxism (Marcuse, Habermas, Adorno, Horkheimer). Although the original members were no longer there, I steeped myself in that tradition. Angela Davis had been the American visitor there a couple years before me. I finally got the sense that I was not only starting to understand the philosophers I was reading, but also developing my own perspective on them.



Back to Phila

After earning a doctorate in a field that was anathema to American academia, I returned to my old position at Temple University. By the time I started to get bored with the programming, I became involved in organizing a union for the computer center employees, one of the few groups at Temple not unionized. This turned into a major battle, climaxing in a strike. I was instrumental in starting the union, was an officer of it, produced a lot of its propaganda and was the deciding voice in calling the strike. We were all fired, but offered jobs with the anti-union subcontractor. A couple years later, the subcontractor was exposed as incompetent and the union was ultimately recognized. It continues today as one of Philadelphia's most progressive unions.

While I was employed at Temple, we had our second son, Rusty. By then, I was in my early thirties and was feeling over the hill. The birth of Rusty rejuvenated me. He has always brought energy into my life.



After the strike, I chose unemployment and even a little welfare, while I volunteered at the Unemployment Project and then as a VISTA Volunteer community organizer. I soon became a supervisor of community organizers and wrote my first grant proposal for a million dollar neighborhood jobs project, including recycling and weatherization. I was assigned to work in the neighborhoods of West Philadelphia. I focused on the little neighborhood where I lived and created a classic block organization with political clout and an urban garden.

The community organizing led to a job as neighborhood planner at Philadelphia's most successful community development corporation, the Southwest Germantown CDC. As the grant writer, I brought in federal, state, city, foundation and corporate funding to move from a small sweat-equity program to more extensive housing rehab and economic development. We bought a small factory and several store fronts as incubators for new businesses. We grew the community credit union and started an energy conservation business.

For nine years, we lived on Newhall Street in the neighborhood I worked for, and we gradually rehabbed our Victorian three-story house from top to bottom. I learned how to do carpentry, electrical, plumbing, sheet rocking and a little roofing.

When the first personal computers appeared on the market, I began to explore their potentials. I taught Zake how to program little video games we invented and he even gave a course on Logo to Rusty's first-grade buddies. I used my Atari 800 to do financial projections for a revolving loan fund that capitalized the credit union with federal grant funds. I used my Amiga computer to produce animated fractal graphics for an art video.

I decided that personal computers could be useful for non-profit organizations and started a project to implement that idea at a center city think tank. After a couple years, I spun the project off into my own non-

profit consulting firm, the Community Computerization Project, which worked with a variety of non-profit organizations.



A new life out West

Just as my consulting business was starting up, Doris left. I took care of Zake and Rusty until they moved on—Zake to Penn State and Rusty to live with his mother. I enjoyed being a bachelor and dating for the first time in my life.

One of my consulting jobs was to develop software for head start agencies. While I was marketing this, I met Carol, who lived in Denver. She did not want to live in Philadelphia, so I sold my house and moved to Colorado with her, where we married. I was attracted to the University of Colorado and decided to enroll in computer science there in order to fill in my understanding of computers and artificial intelligence. We lived in an apartment in walking distance of campus and enjoyed the culture in Boulder.



I earned a doctorate in computer science and then began developing software for a number of projects, including education-related and NASA space programs. While working on the software projects, we built a southwestern house outside of Boulder. We traveled a lot in the Colorado area, skiing, camping, hiking, biking, etc. I finally got to know the desert environs much better, especially in Utah. I ran the Boulder 10K most years and biked the 100K. Pawnee Pass was my favorite hike in the Rockies.

When funding dwindled, I returned to the university as a post-doc. I started to get my own funding and became a research professor. I pursued a research agenda in computer support for collaborative learning and taught occasional courses of my choosing.



Back to Europe

I started traveling to academic conferences and finally got back to Europe for a speaking tour, after a 25-year absence. The lab where I spoke near Bonn offered me a position. When I read the proposal for the project they wanted me to staff, I could not resist accepting a year on the project. (As it turned out, the people who had proposed the project stole several ideas from my proposals and writings, which explains why the project struck me as so exciting.)

Meanwhile, my funding in Colorado ran out and a string of my proposals were turned down. Hearing of an opening at Drexel University in Philadelphia, I applied, interviewed and accepted the position. I postponed start-up for a year, while I went to work in the German research lab.

The year in Germany was important for my career. I attended numerous conferences and meetings across Europe and made many contacts there. My field of computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) is primarily established in Europe, so it was helpful for me to be seen as one of the few Americans who respected and worked with Europeans—and even bothered to learn their language. I also organized and chaired the major CSCL conference that year, which was held back in Boulder. In addition, I began to publish more than I had in the past. This year saw major growth in my international travel, see <http://GerryStahl.net/personal/recreation/travels.html>



Philly again

Now I am a professor at Drexel in the College of Information Science and Technology. I teach courses on how to design software that people will actually want to use and be able to use without unnecessary frustration. After six years, I was granted tenure. I spend most of my time on my research. I have gathered an

exciting group of people for the research team that I direct. I raised enough grant funds to buy myself out of half of my teaching load, to pay for travel to conferences, to hire four PhD students, to bring in visiting researchers and to keep the project going smoothly. Most of what I do is to write: conference papers, book chapters, journal articles, etc. I also edit an academic journal for the CSCL field.



Carol and I live in a modest, but comfortable home in a wooded area on the outskirts of Philadelphia. Zake lives outside of San Francisco and works in Silicon Valley. He and his wife, Kimlou, have an amazing eight-year-old daughter, Nastasja.

[Update in 2014:] Rusty and his wife, Sarah, live in Brooklyn, where he directs an organization to build leadership in the non-profit field. My brother, Alan, and his husband, Bill, live in Ossining, NY, and Carol's family lives in New York state.

[Update in 2016:] We now have a second granddaughter, Ruby, who lives with her parents Rusty and Sarah in their new house in Beacon, NY. We have also moved to a house on Cape Cod. We built the house after I retired from Drexel and wrapped up my academic work.



The future

Where we will all go from here on is quite unpredictable. Stay tuned.

Because I am an information scientist, I was an early adopter of the web homepage as a venue for sharing one's life. Although it is heavily oriented toward people in my academic field, it may supplement the description here of some of the more recent events: <http://GerryStahl.net> .

