

Rain or Shine

by Michael Gordon

I retired on January first, 2010 after 40 years with E.F. Hutton and Morgan Stanley. My company even had a Michael Gordon Day with over a hundred employees wearing buttons with my name and the number 40. After my retirement breakfast, I went home with my daughter and opened up the colorfully wrapped gift I was given. It was a paperweight with the skyline of San Francisco etched into it.

“What’s with the paperweights?” she asked. “They gave you one for 20, 25, 35 and now another one after 40 years?”

“We think someone high up in the firm owns a company that makes paperweights.”

Seriously?”

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In planning my retirement, I had stumbled upon OLLI which was exactly something I wanted to do. Being with interesting people my own age and taking stimulating classes in history, art, writing and politics with terrific professors was a perfect fit for me. And fun too. But I needed more than that. During my working years, I had made presentations to groups and I loved doing that. Sharing information that I believed in and receiving positive feedback were important to me.

Then I discovered San Francisco City Guides, a non-profit organization and a program of the San Francisco Public Library that had been leading historical walking tours since 1978. I inquired and was accepted into their next training class. I loved the training. It continued over several months and was very comprehensive and demanding. Upon graduation, I was assigned the Fort Mason to Aquatic Park tour. I put in many hours preparing and did practice tours alone and with friends until my Tour Coordinator said I was ready to face the public. The night before my first walk I stayed up late reviewing my binder which was bursting with maps, photos and loads of historical information. The weather report for the next day was light rain. City Guides leads tours rain or shine. The tour started at Fort Mason’s northwest gate on the corner of Bay and Van Ness at 1 p.m.

Wearing a raincoat, a waterproof hat and carrying an umbrella, my three-ring binder and an over-the-shoulder bag, I waited for my walkers. And waited. The rain came down harder and then the wind came up. Where were my walkers? Guides always stay for at least fifteen minutes beyond the starting time for late arrivals. The wind and the rain were now coming in at a 45-degree angle. I noticed that my hands were staining from the blue ink that was

running out of my binder. I hadn't put plastic protectors over all the pages. And I was getting soaked. At 1:15 it was time to go home and dry out. As I was leaving, a short person approached me and asked if this was the tour.

"What tour did you have in mind?"

"The City Guides tour," she said. I paused for a moment and told her this was the tour. I could only see part of her face because she was all bundled up with clothing that had logos from Patagonia, Any Mountain, REI, The North Face and Eddie Bauer. She looked prepared to make the final assault of Mount Everest. Then my cell phone rang and it was my friend Chuck who had just finished leading his City Guides Ferry Building Tour.

"Hey, how's it going out there?"

"How's it going? We're drowning. That's how it's going."

"Hang in there. I'll drive over."

My walker and I huddled under a small tree and waited for Chuck. He arrived in his blue Prius and both of us climbed in. I knew we could drive through most of Fort Mason's streets. And that was the plan. However, every time I pointed out an interesting historical site, the windows would fog up and we couldn't see a thing.

Plan number two. We drove over to Starbuck's on Chestnut Street and had hot chocolate and scones as I paged through my dripping binder explaining as much as I could to her about Fort Mason's fascinating history. She was from one of the Scandinavian countries and while her husband attended his conference, she was taking tours. She said the weather reminded her of home.

Chuck and I thought that we had pulled off the coolest tour. However, when I reported the results to our office, I was chided. Probably not a good idea to get into a car with a complete stranger. Maybe so, but we had a great time together.

The WAVE - SAN ONOFRE, 1957

By Richard Chackerian

The first time I saw the waves at San Onofre in Southern California I said, “Oh, shit, I am going to get killed out there.” My friend Bob just laughed, but I could tell from his tight-faced stare that he had similar concerns.

It was 1957. Bob and I had never seen waves as big as these. Our surfing was limited to San Francisco’s Ocean Beach and occasionally Santa Cruz, a town sixty- seven miles south of the City. The San Francisco surf is very rough and choppy, several rows breaking at the same time. Typically, the waves are not very tall, usually no more than five feet.

We learned from our San Francisco surfing experience that waves much smaller than those at San Onofre could do surfer and board quite a lot of damage. More than once after I fell from my board while dropping down a wave face, its force pounded me down until I hit the bottom, limbs jerking around like ragdolls.

The breaks at San Onofre were beautiful, moving steadily from left to right. Standing there on the beach, I was imagining surfing a wave face like those in front of us. Five feet of bluish green water just over my head and six feet of wave under, pushing me just beyond the break.

These waves were moving nearly straight in, not at an angle, allowing a relatively slow-moving wave to push a board nearly *parallel* to the beach while moving *toward* the beach. In addition, these tall waves give a faster ride because the downhill slope is steeper and longer. Such a combination of wave height and direction generates heart-pounding anticipation of breathtaking speed. If I were lucky, there could be six feet of water over my head, but if I weren’t, tons of water would be crashing down on my head.

In the late 1950’s, surfboards didn’t have a leash attached to the surfer’s leg, as contemporary boards do. Consequently, board and surfer often parted company, with the board’s destiny left to the surf. I worried most about a flying board; occasionally a board will fly straight up and come crashing down point first. Being hit by a thirty-pound missile, point first, is not good.

And it didn’t help my confidence that on that day the beach was completely deserted except for us. No sunbathers, no swimmers - nobody. We were completely on our own.

The splash of Bob’s board brought me out of my reverie. It seemed as if I had been standing there on the beach for an eternity, trying to get up the courage to do what we had planned for weeks. We had spent a small fortune on boards and transportation, and also done more than our share of bragging that we were going to surf the “big waves” at San Onofre. We had no choice but to jump in and hope for the best.

The initial paddling out was easy because the waves were breaking a good distance off shore. In addition, since there was very little wind, the water between the beach and the breaking waves was almost glassy. Slowly, as we got closer to the wave break, small wakes from dissipated waves swelled up, creating small hills of water to paddle over.

Our big, heavy boards made it relatively easy to plow through wakes. As the wakes got bigger we would slide on our bellies to the front end of the board, wrap our arms around it, put our heads down and hold on. Most of the time this got us to the other side of even large swells.

Big waves come in sets separated by long pauses. During the pauses we just sat on our boards waiting for “the wave.” We let a couple go by, but then what promised to be the perfect one started humping up on the horizon. When it was about 100 feet behind us, we started paddling toward the beach as fast as we could to generate enough speed to slide down the wave face. If we didn’t go fast enough, the wave would pass us by, or worse, its white water would pound us into the bottom.

Bob and I caught the same wave. For an instant I saw Bob about fifteen feet to my right, sliding down the wave face. In the same moment, I glanced down to the wave base and up to the curl. I was flying down the wave face, hoping that I would be able to make the left turn that would allow me to ride the curl all the way to the beach.

But I didn’t make the left turn. Instead, the speed of the wave drew me up toward the falling crest. As the crest fell I began to fall down the wave face, at times airborne. My board went its own way.

The next thing I remember is being underwater, my arms and legs banging on the bottom, then struggling to get to the surface for air. When I did make it to the surface and to the beach, it took me a few minutes lying there to fully realize what had happened and that all of my body parts were in working order.

As I rolled over onto my back I saw Bob gathering up his board. It was broken cleanly in half, the nose smashed flat.

My board was whole, but my eye was drawn to a dent in the topside center. The dent was about six inches wide and three inches deep. We both realized at the same time that the dent was a perfect fit for the flattened nose of Bob’s board.

“Oh, shit.”

Broken Connection

by Elinor Gale

Driving to work, I listen to a father-daughter interview on the radio. The father lives with a piercing, high-pitched tone penetrating his waking moments. He has no experience of silence. His daughter, born with severe hearing loss, wears aids that enable her to hear most sounds. But she cannot hear a simulation of the sound in her father's head because sounds at that pitch are still inaccessible. She can't imagine what that must be like. He can't imagine life without it.

My son, Mark, calls me to cancel his lunch date with his 94-year-old grandmother. He asks me to apologize. "I would call her myself," he explains, "but she can never hear me."

"Even on her bedroom phone?" I ask, but I know what effort it takes. At dinner, my mother and I sit at the table, quiet, my mother concentrating on her food. Her hand, gnarled by arthritis, tremulously lifts a forkful of spaghetti. She uses her other hand to help lift the long strands into her mouth.

"Mark called. He needs to change your lunch date," I say.

"What?" she asks, looking up from her plate.

"Mark called." I speak more slowly and deliberately. "He's sorry he can't meet you for lunch tomorrow. He wants to make another date."

"He wants to wait?"

"No." Now I speak loudly, pausing between words. "He...wants...to...take ...you out...next...Wednesday."

"Next Wednesday? I'll have to look at my calendar." Her calendar is sparsely dotted with medical appointments.

"Why can't he come tomorrow?"

"He has to go to a meeting. Something to do with his promotion."

"What motion? You're talking too fast. I don't know what you're saying."

I want to say, "Read my lips," but that's what she's trying to do. Her hearing aids seem to help less and less.

I sigh, raising my voice, "Mark's ...sorry...he...has ...to ...change... the ...date."

"You don't have to shout," she says. "I can hear you."

I grind my teeth, biting off the smart-ass retort I'm tempted to fling at her. I'm weary and she is, too. My food looks tired and cold. "I'm going to reheat my dinner. Do you want me to heat yours?"

“They’re all too busy,” she declares, “not enough time for what’s important. If you’re heating your food, will you do mine, too?”

In fourth grade, I cheated on the hearing test.

We sat at our desks, rows of undersized phone operators with headsets covering our ears. The tester had explained, “I’ll call a number and then, if you hear a sound, mark your papers with a checkmark next to that number. Sometimes there will be no sound. Then you don’t make a mark. Listen carefully.”

At the first few sounds, we put heads down, pencil to paper, like the nursery rhyme, “Little maids all in a row,” our heads bobbing to the tinkle of the bells. Then no sound—heads and hands still—but then I saw heads bobbing and pencils going down when I heard no sound. When it happened a second time, I felt a cold rush of fear. Why couldn’t I hear the sounds? Should I tell the lady? I heard a sound again and put my pencil to the paper, wanting to cry. After that, I just moved my pencil to the paper when I saw heads bob, terrified I’d be found out.

When the test ended, I ran from the room. I waited to hear about the test results, waited for my parents to be called. I never heard anything and never told my parents what I’d done. Eventually, I forgot the test and my dread.

The awareness of loss seeps in slowly. You find yourself asking, “Could you please repeat that?” You’re surprised so many people swallow their words and mumble. You play voice messages twice. People speak too quickly. You find yourself smiling and nodding your head in response to a flurry of words running together just out of your reach. Lying on your right side, you can’t hear your clock ticking.

I’m sitting in the audiologist’s testing booth. The door is closed. I’m wearing the headphones again, but now I’m 60 years old, alone in this still, small, windowless room.

When the test begins, I travel back to that fourth grade desk. This time I can name the fear. I’m losing my hearing and will eventually lose vital connection with others. Like my mother and her mother, I’ll be shut out and alone.

I strain to hear the sounds, not wanting to miss a tone. I want to be whole and unblemished. This time, no cues or bobbing heads guide me. I press the button when I hear sounds, guess at others and accept some silences, my hand lying still.

Now I wear hearing aids that amplify sound but sometimes distort it so words run together in an alien tongue. I try to lip read to make sense of the garbled sounds. Sometimes, weary, I just let the sounds roll over me. And sometimes, when

the hearing aid squeals, I remember the father on the radio and wonder if this is the sound constantly assaulting him. I remember my mother struggling to capture fading sound and cope with loss of connection, and I wonder how I'll be able to live with that when it's my turn.

I'm sitting in a small, well-lit classroom with my peers. This time, we aren't wearing headphones. Most of us wear graying hair and furrows of concentration as we study the movement of the instructor's mouth. We're in lip reading class at the local senior center, facing the instructor and the captioning on a screen behind her. We're focusing on consonants, trying to do the nearly impossible—differentiate between muh, buh, and puh sounds at the beginning of words. The instructor enunciates the words mat, bat and pat as we look for subtle differences in the shape of her lips.

She comforts us, "Not all consonants are so difficult. And you can use context. And you must practice. Please take out your mirrors. Does anyone need to borrow one?"

Gazing into my mirror, I study the movement of my lips as I form the list of muh, buh and puh words, trying to appreciate the wrinkles and puckers around my mouth as guidelines, helpful tools to lip reading, nothing more. Next, when my partner and I mouth words to each other, I'm encouraged to see the deeper puckering above her upper lip when she forms words that begin with the letter p.

Small triumph, but this is what it's about. At the end of class as I walk out to my car, I am smiling. I wonder what this looks like in my mirror.