

I HAD NO IDEA WHAT MY LIMITS WERE

Harry Stout

In my time as master of Berkeley College I had occasion to attend senior “secret” society dinners and was an “honorary” faculty member of one called Manuscript, whose members included Jodie Foster and Anderson Cooper. I learned that one of the group’s activities is to tell their life story to a receptive audience of fellow members when they meet at the “tomb” on Thursday nights. After reading several volumes of *Intellectual Trajectories*, I think there are similarities between the secret societies and the Koerner Center. Both are grounded in narrative. By the end of writing my trajectory, I realized that the Koerner Center is in effect my senior society, and this is my story.

My mother frequently told me that I was born on the same date (November 13) as Augustine of Hippo. Over the years she would remind me that Augustine, famous for his prayer “Lord make me chaste but not yet,” had gotten into a lot of trouble, but in the end, he was *Saint* Augustine. I’m sure that gave her some measure of consolation, as I seemed destined for trouble. In fact, my mother knew trouble first hand; a negligent mother and the untimely death of her father meant growing up in foster homes. My father enjoyed a more stable upbringing in the home of a small businessman and his homemaker wife. My father survived World War II and the battle of Okinawa, where he served on a destroyer, and came home to marry my mother.

Shortly after their marriage, my parents experienced an event that would shape their lives forever and mine along the way. At an evangelical revival led by the young and charismatic evangelist Billy Graham, they converted to Christian faith and insured that their children would grow up in a household of faith. For me that meant church services three times on Sunday and daily religious instruction at the Willow Grove (PA) Christian Day School. The school’s “mission” (literally) was religious indoctrination in the tenets of Protestant Fundamentalism. Weekly bible memorization and

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classes in bible dominated the curriculum during the week, and rigorous worship occupied Sundays.

Many of my classmates took avidly to the instruction and, to my eyes, were good Christian boys and girls. I wasn't really hostile to Christianity but neither did I ever have a conversion experience that would reportedly save me from the horrors of eternal damnation. Instead of conforming, I rebelled. In fifth grade, my teacher kept me after school to tell me she was concerned that I wasn't saved. Even worse, she told me that I was an "iconoclast," apparently a very bad thing to be. I had no idea what "iconoclast" meant at the time, but I knew it wasn't good. Later I looked it up and realized my teacher was right. I was an iconoclast.

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As I moved from grade school to upper school my behavior didn't improve. Despite my mother's prayers at the family dinner table, the saintly path of Augustine didn't seem to be taking hold. My rebellion led to detentions and suspension and peaked at age fifteen when, together with another rebellious friend, I decided to run away from home. Our destination was Houston, where I thought we might catch a tramp steamer for a life of adventure on the high seas (yes, my iconoclasm was matched by a very active imagination). Our first stop would be Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, which my father visited often as a salesman and praised to the hilt. I packed a small suitcase and my life's savings, something in the neighborhood of \$40, and met my friend at the local train station. There we proceeded by train into the Greyhound bus terminal in center city Philadelphia. After a sixteen-hour ride, we arrived in Myrtle Beach, obviously with little money, no jobs, and no place to stay. My religious training led me to think we could get "sanctuary" at a church, so we slept in the back yard of a Catholic church. Soon enough we were discovered, arrested, and put in jail for vagrancy. My father then drove 600 miles and bailed me out of jail. That summer he put me to work tarring the steaming roof of his warehouse to pay for my \$200 fine.

Beyond that, my parents were at a loss what to do with me. My more secular grandmother firmly believed that the parochial school was the problem and offered to send me to a private Quaker school in Philadelphia. My parents accepted gratefully. I was ecstatic. That fall I enrolled in the William Penn Charter School and entered a brave new world. The year was 1963, and the Vietnam War was heating up. My old school was brimming with patriotism and ready to battle "atheistic communism." What a change it was to enter a Friends school and absorb its philosophy of nonviolence and pacifism. There were more Jews and Catholics in my class than Friends, but the school's philosophy affected all of us to one degree or another. Although poorly prepared in standard subject matters, I managed to make it through and graduate with mediocre grades. Along the way I absorbed a love of liberal education and the way of peace represented by the best of Friends education.

Though proud of my "success" in Quaker school, (i.e. graduating), my parents were not through trying to channel me. In exchange for their support, I had to go to a "Christian" college, and this meant a college that insisted on the Fundamentalist

principles that meant so much to my parents. As I explored the very restrictive range of evangelical college possibilities, the most attractive proved to be Calvin College, which didn't require a faith statement and, amazingly, allowed movies, drinking, and smoking. That was all I needed to know. I soon found out that Calvin was Dutch and Calvinist – but tolerant. In a stark departure from my grade school experience, I loved my college experience. Unlike the Christian school, I actually found Calvin challenging and fulfilling. The professors were superb, especially in history and philosophy – the subjects that most drew my interest. Only later did I appreciate the fact that Calvin enjoyed a national reputation for its faculty and graduates, four of whom wound up with me on Yale's faculty.

Loving college did not mean the end of trouble. A prank that misfired sophomore year led to a one-year suspension for me and a friend. If that wasn't bad enough, suspension immediately set in motion my reclassification with the military draft – the nemesis of most males in my generation. Within days of my suspension I was called to Philadelphia to submit to a physical. My only hope to avoid the draft – and the certainty of Vietnam – was to get into another college for the semester. After many unsuccessful inquiries, I was finally admitted with my friend to Muskegon Community College in Michigan. We enrolled immediately and worked weekends in construction to support ourselves. This, too, was an unexpected educational treasure. I quickly lost my elitist disrespect for junior colleges and enjoyed what turned out to be the best philosophy course I ever took. I also thrived in the history course. In fact, I fell in love with history. Almost magically history ignited my imagination so that I experienced the past as if I were there. Coincidental to this transformation came a letter from my Calvin history professor to my parents. Without knowing the cause of my “withdrawal” he told them how sorry he was to see I had dropped his course because he thought I could become an outstanding history major. The Calvin professor's name was Robert P. Swierenga, who soon enjoyed a reputation as one of the finest quantitative historians in the country. Unknown to me, quantitative history and social science theory were just taking the history profession by storm and, in time, would provide my entrée into the profession. Before the letter to my parents, I knew that I always enjoyed – and did well in – history but never thought of it as a career. That letter clarified my ambition. For the first time I seriously entertained the possibility of a career in history. In retrospect, my early decision to become a history professor gave me an enormous advantage over the majority of less decisive students. By junior year after returning to Calvin I was already plotting my career.

As for what kind of history, that too was resolved in my junior year. I took a course in colonial intellectual history with the freshly minted Yale PhD George Marsden. That course gave me a subject – the Puritans – and an avatar, the Harvard intellectual historian Perry Miller, both of which dictated my scholarship over the next twenty years. The vehicle for this was a series of essays by Miller that Marsden assigned entitled *Errand Into the Wilderness*. Like many other early American historians of my generation,

I determined to “rewrite Perry Miller,” and like many others, I didn’t come close. But the chase was exhilarating, and I can still feel its electricity. Although a life-long atheist, Miller contrived early in his career to isolate and identify the “innermost meaning of America.” And the meaning he found lay in the intellectual life of a group of Puritan intellectuals who collectively identified New England’s, later America’s, “errand into the wilderness.”

Junior year in 1968 brought with it not only a return to Calvin College but to a larger world that seemed to be turning itself upside down. Traumatic events tumbled one on top of the other: the Tet Offensive and ensuing escalation of the war in Vietnam, the assassinations of MLK and Bobby Kennedy, the violence of the Democratic Convention, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968 all rendered domestic and foreign policy almost unrecognizable.

In this climate of fear and existential uncertainty I graduated from Calvin in 1969 and began graduate work in history at Princeton Seminary and University. The seminary was my primary appointment and especially useful for it earned me a “ministerial” deferment from the draft. But after exhausting all the church history courses in the program, I could no longer live with the fiction of becoming a minister and prepared to leave the seminary. At the same time, the aforementioned Professor Swierenga, now leading a new program in quantitative history at Kent State University, invited me to transfer into their PhD program in the newly created field of quantitative history, which I eagerly accepted. I saw in that program an avenue into a profession that was highly popular but almost inaccessible – the one exception being “theory and method.”

In the spring of 1970, universities were virtually highjacked. College campuses, including Princeton, were aflame with protests and demonstrations. By May, they hit a combustion point. On April 30, President Nixon announced that US troops had deployed to Cambodia, thus expanding the war instead of ending it. Campuses nationwide exploded. At Princeton, student members of SDS blew up the ROTC building on campus, leading the college authorities to immediately close down the campus and send the students home. With my admission package to Kent State in hand I decided to visit the campus on May 4. With wife and one-year-old baby in tow we set off for Kent. On the radio, alarming news bulletins sounded of protesting students shot dead on the campus by national guardsmen. I arrived at the campus on May 5 only to encounter tanks at every entrance to the university. I recall meeting with the department chair on a grammar school parking lot adjacent to the campus and wondering what in the world I had gotten into.

No longer a ministerial student, I once again faced the draft. In 1970, the US announced a draft lottery for all males born between 1944 and 1950. This came at a time when morale among army soldiers in Vietnam had tanked and mortality rates had risen to an all-time high. Rather than risk being drafted into the Army, I enlisted in the Marine Corps reserve and on May 30 reported for active duty to Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. As much as any other experience in my life, this decision

transformed me as a person. I was thrown into intense relationships with fellow Marine recruits. We had little in common save the misery of nonstop drill instructors in our face 24/7. I learned that my limits, both physical and psychological, far exceeded my expectations under the duress of basic training and, following that, infantry training at Camp Pendleton. At the conclusion of basic training the majority of my fellow recruits received orders for “WestPac” i.e. Vietnam, while a handful of reservists including me returned to their home units. Following active duty I served five years as an active reservist in the New Haven unit where I was quickly shifted from infantry to administrative duties. There I virtually ran the New Haven office together with my fellow Marine sergeant Richard Blumenthal, later Connecticut Senator Richard Blumenthal.

With Marine Corps behind me, I returned to graduate studies with a vengeance. I learned that in one year’s time the face of scholarship in American history was utterly shifted. Fortunately for me the shift lay in the very direction I was exploring in quantitative history. The year 1970 marked the ascendance of the New Social History in colonial American historiography, built on three demographic studies of colonial New England towns. Coincidentally, new fields of study were proliferating in disciplines such as women’s studies, African American history, immigration, and local history. Collectively, these new fields represented a transformed way of understanding history. In place of concentrating on “elites,” a new generation of historians began exploring “ordinary people,” with the rallying cry of “history from the bottom up.” Though still in love with intellectual history, I knew that I had to shift my fields of expertise, at least temporarily, to accommodate the new trends in scholarship. For me this meant work in quantitative history under the guidance of Robert Swierenga. Together we wrote several articles in immigration history, based on census records. By the summer of 1973 my exposure to quantitative history was immeasurably enhanced when I was invited to participate in a seminar at the Newberry Library, led by Richard Jensen and Daniel Scott Smith, that drew graduate students from around the country and featured advanced training in demographic history and historical statistics. For six weeks we were fed a steady diet of population reconstructions and statistical methodology that I would apply to a dissertation grounded in “prosopography” or collective biography—in my case the collective biography of university graduates in colonial New England.

I completed my PhD in three and a half years. My acquired skills in quantitative history, social history, and “Theory and Method” led to four articles accepted for publication in scholarly journals before completing my degree. In a highly competitive job market, these led to my first academic job, a tenure track appointment in early American history at the University of Connecticut in 1974. My first semester required three courses and classes meeting five days a week, a robust load that I didn’t mind. I soon discovered that in addition to my love for history research and writing, I loved teaching. My fifth-year tenure review in 1979 (standard in public universities) was not the traumatic event it was for many. By then I had published a number of articles, with one especially significant article appearing in the prestigious *William and Mary*

Quarterly, and I was promoted to tenured associate professor, free to return to the Puritans and intellectual history.

While at UConn, I was fortunate to have two consecutive years off with a research fellowship from the NEH and a postdoc year at the University of Pennsylvania. During these years, I attempted to revise Miller by combining an intellectual history of Puritanism grounded in Miller's classic *The New England Mind*, with interpretive themes showcased in the New Social History. My first attempt to revise Miller ended with abject failure. Early on in my research I realized that Miller's *The New England Mind* was really an intellectual history of New England sermons, as they composed roughly ninety percent of the sources cited in his magisterial work. Miller saw in the evolving history of the printed sermons nothing less than the key to "Americanization." Even as Puritan ministers decried the sins of "declension" and failure to live up to the founders, Miller saw in this failure the flip side of declension, which was Americanization. His *The New England Mind* was nothing less than a description of the internal evolution of early American culture from Puritan to Yankee.

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For several years I canvassed the holdings of historical societies and the microfilm Evans index of printed sources, reading all of the printed sermons I could lay my fingers on. To my chagrin I realized that Miller had really captured much of the intellectual dynamic contained in those sermons. Terms he employed, like "jeremiad," "declension," "covenant," "revival," embodied the main themes ministers employed to maintain their dominance over the New England culture. I did manage to find minor issues to quibble with and expanded them into an initial 200-plus-page draft of my "rewriting" of Perry Miller. But I was left deeply unsatisfied. Revising and rewriting were two very different things. And so, after a year of frustrated writing and tortuous revisions, I threw the 200-plus-page manuscript away in a moment of intense frustration and depression. I recall tears. All of my attempts at finding a new key to unlock the mystery of the New England mind and the emergence of Americanization turned out to be little more than paraphrases of themes Miller had already isolated.

As is so often the case with creative discoveries, my moment of deepest darkness became the advent of a glorious dawn. Miller often employed the term "epiphany" to describe his moment of creative realization, and I think that term is not too strong to describe my experience following the first failed draft. The occasion came in the form of a summer fellowship to the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. This is a scholar's paradise, with its rich literary resources and fabulous gardens, and my arrival was marked by wide-eyed, pure delight. The Huntington was — and is — unlike any other scholarly outpost in America. After settling my family in, I met with the reference librarian, Doris Smedes. I began as I always did with a request: "I want to see all of your colonial sermons." Then, the epiphany, as Doris replied, "Do you mean published or unpublished sermons?" Utterly perplexed, I asked: "What do you mean?" She patiently explained to me that in addition to the collection of printed "occasional" sermons like Fast, Thanksgiving, and Election sermons, which all Puritan scholars

relied upon, the Huntington contained vast collections of handwritten sermon notes by Puritan ministers which, for the most part, were not even indexed they were so voluminous.

The next month was an unprecedented moment of sheer discovery. I plunged into the manuscript sermons that ministers composed week after week in their local churches. Eventually I would retrace my steps to all the other research libraries in America, likewise ransacking their collections of unpublished manuscript sermons. As I did this a different picture from Miller's began to emerge, namely a religious culture marked more by continuity than change. Printed sermons responded to changing "occasions" in New England society, addressing wars, new constitutions, religious toleration, and increasing British engagement in colonial affairs. They would culminate with election sermons promoting resistance to Great Britain and, by 1774, revolution. But in all of this political and cultural ferment and transformation, the "regular" weekly Sunday sermon remained pretty much unchanged, organized around the triad of sin, salvation, and good works. There was, in other words, no "declension" from founding ideals.

If printed occasional sermons captured changing circumstances over time that would culminate in the American Revolution, ongoing regular Sunday sermons pointed to a religious transformation within New England culture that was also revolutionary in its own way. It signaled the rise of American evangelicalism. The birthing of evangelicalism lay in the tumultuous series of eighteenth-century revivals led by George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, known as the "Great Awakening." As I was making this discovery, evangelicalism was becoming a major theme in my own contemporary American culture. First with Jimmy Carter and his "born again" Democratic presidency and then more broadly with the surging Republican "religious right," championed by Ronald Regan and Jerry Falwell, "evangelicalism" became a potent cultural and political movement.

During the course of three years I labored over an entirely new synthesis of religion and culture in colonial New England that laid the printed occasional sermons alongside the handwritten Sunday sermons and traced the evolution of continuity in spiritual substance alongside profound changes in politics, mass revivals, and society. In 1984 I sent the manuscript off to Oxford University Press and, in an exhilarating moment of affirmation, received an acceptance along with copies of readers' reports that were unqualified recommendations for immediate publication. Of course "immediate" in the world of scholarly print still meant two years before the book would be published in 1986.

In the meantime I received word that Yale was looking for an American religious historian to replace the legendary Sydney Ahlstrom, who had died prematurely in 1984. Ahlstrom had simultaneously enjoyed appointments in divinity, American studies, history, and religious studies, so Yale decided to break his appointment into two. The first part was filled in 1985 by Jon Butler, appointed to religious studies and American

studies. A year later I was asked to interview for a second position in divinity and religious studies, with secondary appointments in American studies and history. By then Jon and I enjoyed some notoriety for our completely opposite interpretations of the Great Awakening. Jon likened it to an historiographical “Donation of Constantine” – a non-event – while I saw it as the key to Americanization and the Revolution.

I agreed to the interview at Yale with little hope of success. By this point I had a substantial number of published articles and a book in process. However, I was competing with fellow scholars and friends who had long enjoyed books in print. Jon Butler also posed a challenge. Not only were Jon and I on opposite sides of the Great Awakening debate, but we were both early Americanists. Logically, Yale would have complemented Jon with an appointment in modern American religious history. And so I went into the interview with nothing to lose. Throwing caution to the winds I announced that my interview lecture would be on the topic “What Made the Great Awakening Great.” The lecture went surprisingly well, and I was especially gratified to receive Jon’s hearty congratulations. Maybe the long shot wasn’t so long after all. Four months later I got my answer when a call from Yale’s dean came, offering me the position as full professor with tenure. I later learned the primary reason for this offer. Neither Religious Studies nor the Divinity School had a senior scholar in the field of religious history to judge my manuscript, and Jon stayed deliberately out of the process. The search committee turned to the history department and asked Yale’s preeminent American historians Edmund S. Morgan and David Brion Davis to read the book and render an opinion. Both read the book and, as summarized by one dean, gave rave reviews. In what was obviously music to my ears, the dean noted that one of the two readers rated it the “best intellectual history of the Puritans since Perry Miller.” I could not possibly have written a better script.

My arrival at Yale was every bit as exciting and portentous as I hoped. The book came out that fall to strong reviews. My teaching experience was equally surprising. After the first semester, word spread of my initial survey course in American religious history, and by my second semester I found myself lecturing in the auditorium of the Art Gallery to a couple of hundred students. The only problem was that I had not yet written one lecture for the modern half of the survey so I had a semester filled with writing lecture notes nonstop, even while adjusting to the frenetic pace of teaching at Yale in three departments and the Divinity School. The stress was more than compensated for by the sheer delight I found in the undergraduates. Like so many of you I discovered one of Yale’s greatest fringe benefits was its students. And so they have remained right down to the present.

Four years after arriving at Yale, I was asked to be a candidate for the position of master of Berkeley College, a position recently vacated by Robin Winks. I agreed, and soon after I received a call from President Benno Schmidt offering me the position. When the call came in my office I was meeting with a graduate student who overheard me say words to the effect that “I have always loved Berkeley and would be happy to

accept the appointment.” At that point the graduate student blanched – only later did I learn that she thought I was accepting a position at UC Berkeley!

I didn’t know it at the time, but mastering a college was the perfect position for me. I had been in enough trouble to understand the hijinks of undergraduates and enough time in teaching to appreciate their surpassing qualities. As master of the college, I soon discovered that the teacher-student roles had been reversed, and I was on the students’ turf. I came to treasure the relationships not only with students but also with fellow masters and my then dean, Richard Brodhead.

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My experience with graduate students was no less rewarding. From the vantage point of 2021 I can look back to former graduate students who now occupy major positions at colleges and universities across the country. Whatever influence my books might have over the years will, I’m confident, be eclipsed by the influence that these graduate students enjoy over the course of their careers. While mentoring graduate students I took as many opportunities as possible to engage joint research projects that issued in co-authored articles or book chapters. I found that experience to be personally rewarding, and helpful to further graduate students along in their scholarly career. Today, I’m pleased to note that I am co-authoring an article and a book with two former graduate students now enjoying careers at Yale and Harvard.

Besides my work as college master and membership in three departments and the Divinity School, I served on numerous university committees, including the Senior Appointments Committee, Budget Committee, and the Faculty Committee on Athletics. All of these committee assignments would serve as prolegomenon to the most demanding and consequential committee I ever served on before or since. In 1988, amidst a financial downturn and dramatic losses to the endowment, President Schmidt and Provost Frank Turner created a university Restructuring Committee, naming Frank Turner as chair and many department chairs including Dick Brodhead (English), Judith Rodin (Psychology), and Richard Levin (Economics) to membership on the committee. The committee was tasked with the draconian assignment of locating where the Arts and Sciences faculty could be reduced by an eye-popping fifteen percent. With what I’m sure was great uneasiness, the committee chose to endorse the administration’s recommended elimination of departments rather than uniform cuts among all the departments. Included on the proposed chopping block were sociology, engineering, linguistics, and several other programs. In retrospect, all of these departments served vital functions, but none more so than engineering whose elimination would come at the very moment that Silicon Valley was embarking on the most far-reaching innovations of the era!

In response, an enraged faculty gathered to protest in what was the largest faculty turnout I had ever seen. The aisles were filled as member after member decried the recommendations of the administration. In response, President Schmidt and Provost Turner bowed to faculty pressure and commissioned a new review committee to examine the conclusions of the Restructuring Committee and judge their prudence.

Soon after the administration's proposal I received another surprise call, this time from Dean Kagan, inviting me to serve on said review committee. Although I had little confidence in my understanding of the ins and outs of university administration, I agreed to serve on the committee. We were tasked with reporting our recommendations at the next scheduled faculty meeting in March 1992.

Like the Restructuring Committee, the Review Committee was stacked with chairs and former administrators—and me. At our first meeting we unanimously selected Professor Thomas Carew, chair of Psychology, as our committee chair. We were assured of blanket access to Yale administrators and any internal documents we chose to see. To my complete and utter surprise, I also learned at the first meeting that, given the tight time constraints, we should be prepared to meet seven days a week until the task was completed! As it turned out, this was not hyperbolic. We did indeed meet every day, morning, noon, and, in some cases, evening. I soon came to refer to this committee as the “committee from hell.” For the next month I would sit in meetings and interviews only interrupted by the times I had to race off to deliver ill-prepared lectures.

As our meetings and interviews continued, it became apparent to all of us that the recommendations of the administration, while well intentioned, were alarmist to a fault. Former economists and provosts who sat on the review committee pointed out areas of savings that would save the departments and still maintain the goal of reducing expenses. On the basis of this evidence we produced a counter-document arguing for the preservation of the departments. At one point in our deliberations, a committee member remarked that our recommendations could lead to “the downfall of the administration.” At the time I considered this remark overblown, little realizing how prophetic it would be.

At the March meeting where our report would be read, I took my seat in the audience. I was soon joined, to my surprise, by President Schmidt, sitting to my right. Knowing what was coming, I was extremely ill at ease. As Chairman Carew read our reports and recommendations President Schmidt was muttering audibly next to me.

With the enthusiastic faculty adoption of the Carew report, the dire warning soon came true. The president, provost, and dean of Yale College all resigned immediately, paving the way for a new administration and a new generation of leadership that drew heavily on the Restructuring Committee. Committee member Richard Levin became president, Alison Richard became provost, Dick Brodhead became dean of Yale College, and Provost Judith Rodin became president of Penn. I returned happily to my position as master of Berkeley and became chair of the Council of Masters.

In the years since my participation on the Carew committee, I have served on many other university committees and learned a lot about the university's inner workings. But those experiences never kindled an interest in assuming a major administrative position. That said, I discovered some administrative abilities that have been channeled in three outlets. First, I happily chaired the Department of Religious Studies

for two terms and added one additional year when the department faced internal problems. Second, I created, with Jon Butler, in 1994 the Program in Religion and American History that funneled over a million dollars in foundation grants to graduate and postgraduate fellows at Yale and around the nation for research to pursue scholarship in American religious history. Third, and to my mind most important, I created the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale Divinity School that published the complete *Works of Jonathan Edwards* begun by the first editor, Perry Miller, in 1952, and established satellite Jonathan Edwards research centers at universities in ten countries to encourage scholarship on Edwards in a global setting.

Finally, I would like to address a note of thanks to my family. I am the proud father of two wonderful children who have followed their father into the teaching profession and brought into the world four grandchildren. Profound thanks also to my wife and my partner, Deborah DeFord, who stands at my side with support and encouragement, making my life a joy in all its trials and pleasures.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.