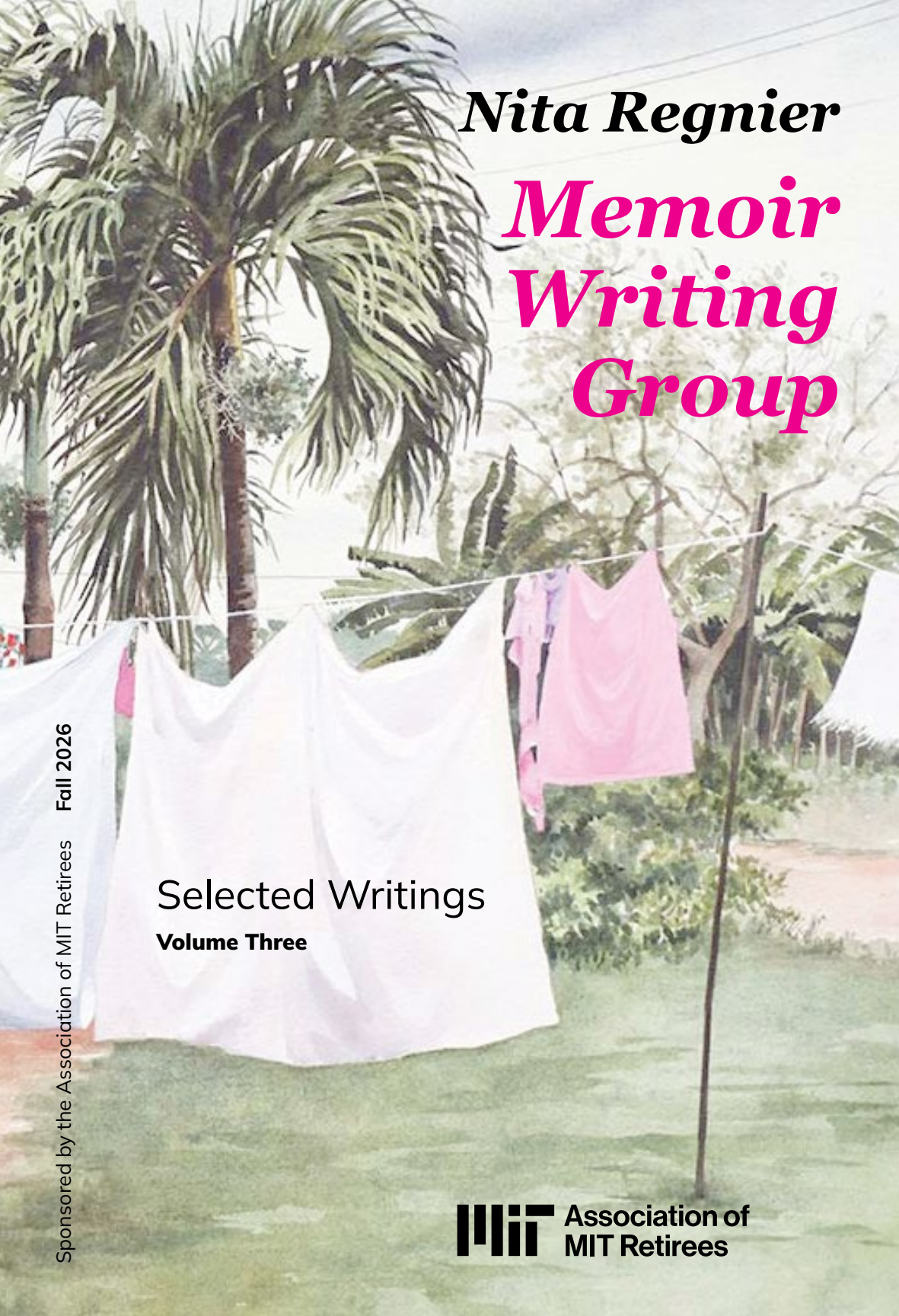


The background of the cover is a watercolor illustration of a tropical scene. In the foreground, a white sheet and a pink shirt are hanging on a clothesline. In the background, there are several palm trees and other tropical foliage under a light sky.

Nita Regnier

***Memoir
Writing
Group***

Selected Writings

Volume Three

Fall 2026

Sponsored by the Association of MIT Retirees



**Association of
MIT Retirees**

Cover Artwork

Impending Rain, Cuba

Carolyn Latanision

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Introduction

Memoir is Writing Your Teenage Diary

*Today, a funny thought occurred to me
That memoir is writing your diary
From years ago—when you thought you were young—
With all the knowledge of the days to come
And which of your missteps has changed your path.
Can you imagine if your notebook read
“Today, I met a silly boy named Fred
And when I’m old and finally own a horse,
I’ll be sure to keep the ranch in our divorce”?
You’d read it back at seventy and laugh.*

When we engage in the practice of memoir—whether we think of it as artistry, use it as a form of meditation, record our family histories for posterity, or eulogize the loved ones we have lost—the writing down of memories that have been juggled through the ages and molded by fondness or disdain creates a kind of secondary source for our own history. After all, we are not the same person today as we were when our past happened to us. Our experiences have changed and shaped who we are. In this class, we have had the privilege of comparing our first drafts with true day-to-day diaries, contemporary correspondences, and long-lost coded messages that change the way we think about what is true and what feels true.

The distance between what truly happened and how we feel about it isn’t a defect of our intellect, though. Rather, we should acknowledge that there are times outside of the realms of mathematics, engineering, and science where what we felt and how we remember the past is more important than the reality of those days gone by. In many cases, who we are is shaped by those feelings much more than the events that inspired them. After all, we live the events only once; we carry the memories—and revisit them from time to time, again and again—for as long as they inspire us or hold us back.

*When I was young, I had a boyfriend leave
Before my dad had cancer surgery
And then a friend took sixty aspirin
At school; I had to take the rest from them
To keep them safe. Then my godmother died.
And at the time, I thought I made it through*

*A little worse for wear, but mostly knew
That I would be okay. But from that day forward,
I made all sorts of excuses for lovers that were bad
so long as they didn't leave me.
Even the ones that constantly deceived me.
I figured that out when I was thirty-five.*

So, when the members of this group chose a theme to explore in this third volume of collected stories, it wasn't so surprising to me that we chose the question "How did I get here?" I think all memoir calls back to this basic question; most works of memoir are an exploration of how the author has made it through a change of one kind or another. For some, it's a very clear change, from reluctant dog avoider to constant companion of one dog in particular. For others, it's a gradual, challenging shift from excited hobbyist to nervous neophyte to confident problem solver.

What surprised me was how easy it can be to recall turning points and important forks in the road when we take the time to look back with intention. It can be easy to leave the lessons of our lived experience in the past when we are so busy looking forward to what we have to do—or even the fun things that we get to do—tomorrow.

*I had a dream that summer that was bad.
I saw my godmother wasting away.
As she was decomposing, Lara said
"Things are not good, but you will be okay,"
Which carried me through every storm since then.
I've shared these words with folks who needed hope
When hopeless circumstance stood in the way.
That twilight mantra always seems to work,
And now, as I revisit it today,
I find it soothes a troubled mind again.*

In this collection, you will find reflections on negative experiences that spur great technological advances, a stolen dance card that led to a lasting marriage, uncles and aunties that inspired a career in medicine, and the typewriter that launched a writing office at MIT. Reminiscing about the past can be soothing, rousing, hair-raising, and awe-inspiring, but doing so with our writers is always rewarding.

As you read these tales that look back at our authors' histories, I encourage you to take time in your day to reflect on your own history. Ask yourself what those turning points have been that altered the course of your life, especially the ones that didn't seem so important at the time. Take a moment, if you can, to write them down.

It doesn't have to be good enough to share with anyone else. Just imagine what you would say if you were writing the diary of your younger self to keep under lock and key. What funny tidbits (or weighty revelations—you never know) would emerge from your understanding of how things will go for the person that you were?

"Dear diary,
Today, I met a man who likes green tea
And isn't very loud or talkative.
And in ten years, that man will marry me
And two years before that, we both will live
In Worcester, where at sixty, we'll retire
And move up to the cabin by the sea,
For countless evenings curled up by the fire.
But, anyway, I think he might like me.
I guess we'll see."

Anthony Hallee-Farrell '13

MIT Community Services Office
apfarr@mit.edu

Foreword by Daphne

As a young man, my grandfather performed graceful swan dives from the dizzying cliff heights of Acapulco, Mexico. This is how he made money. He was also a tailor, a boxer, a saxophone player, and a solfège instructor. My grandmother was one of 12 children, a tomboy by nature, and my great-grandfather's favorite. At ten years old, she would drive him to the cantinas of Laredo, Mexico, and while her father drank, she stayed in the car guarding the earnings from the crops sold that day. Years later, my grandparents Juan and Oralia, from opposite geographies of Mexico, somehow managed to meet, fall in love, and marry. Both were instinctive narrators. Their anecdotes embroidered our daily life as naturally as having breakfast or attending Sunday Mass. Their recollections, told with expansive flair, painted for me a reality of who my grandparents were lifetimes before I showed up on the scene. Their stories allowed me to imagine how I came to be. The randomness of it all is why I carry an almost primal understanding of how I got here, sharing with you how the Nita Regnier Memoir Group became a part of my life.

Now, press fast forward in decades to when I read a Slack message at Grubstreet, where I taught. "A vibrant memoir group at MIT," the message began, wanted someone to work with their group of retiree writers. I wasted no time responding, hoping nobody else beat me to the punch. Memoir is both passion and specialty, and my husband, an MIT alumnus, fondly credits his formative years for how he sees possibility in the world. So when Traci Swartz wrote back and invited me to meet the group, I was thrilled. The group's creator and mentor, Nita, who nurtured the community with such trust and respect, had recently passed, and there was a palpable void I couldn't pretend to fill. During our first meeting, I hoped the writers understood just how much I wanted to preserve that respect and earn their trust; after all, a collaborative writing workshop only works when there is trust.

It never ceases to amaze me how uniquely—and often unexpectedly—we all arrive at similar turning points in life, and in this third publication, our writers share the paths that have brought them to their *here*. For me, a serendipitous buzz of a Slack notification brought me to the group, but it's the writers and their meaningful stories that continue to keep me rooted.



About Daphne Strassmann

Daphne Strassmann is a memoirist who writes about the liminal spaces between her Latino heritage and American life. Currently, she is a visiting lecturer at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and an instructor for GrubStreet, the Center for Creative Writing. Daphne Strassmann founded "Rekindle Your Craft," a community writing project that invites writers of all genres and levels to cultivate imagination through writing. Her teaching encourages students to work from spaces of authenticity to reclaim experiences of aesthetics, cultural expression, and purpose.

Daphne Strassmann holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing with a concentration in Creative Nonfiction from Lesley University. Her work has appeared in the Creative Nonfiction literary journal, GrubWrites, Tex{t}Mex, and textbooks.

She is delighted to work with the Nita Regnier writers.

Influences

David Kettner '65

The theme of this publication, “How Did I Get Here?”, prompted me to think of several unlikely situations in which I have found myself—in this case, how a self-described “Hick from Montana” ended up at MIT. In my case, the factors involved were numerous, and many came from unlikely and unexpected sources. Final exams are a higher-pressure event for MIT students, and one may wonder why anyone would subject themselves to the opportunity. However, the rewards in personal growth and accomplishment are many—the memories priceless.

It's 8:30 a.m. on a sunny Tuesday morning in May of 1962, almost the end of my freshman year at MIT. I am making my way east along Memorial Drive from Burton House to Walker Memorial. The trees have leaves fully out, the magnolias along Commonwealth Avenue in Boston are well past their blossoming phase, and the rhododendrons along the gray walls of the main buildings at MIT are in full bloom. The skyline across the river in Boston is low. The brick buildings over there are four stories high, and the only tall building is the original John Hancock tower with its weather forecast beacon on the top. Summer is finally arriving in Cambridge, and I think about the trip to Montana that I will be starting in a few days to spend the summer back home with my parents.

I've been to Walker Memorial only once or twice during my freshman year, and as I approach, the façade facing the Charles River is intimidating, with its many steps up to the entrance and the massive columns with their 30- or 40-foot height. The entire building looms over me like a huge stone monolith. I know it only as the cafeteria where the East Campus students dine, and the home of WTBS (now WMBR), the student radio station, in the basement. At the entryway at the top of the steps, I can see the mural covering the far wall, depicting what I find an odd scene. It is as if Mother Technology (a young-ish woman, paradoxically) is presiding over numerous (mostly male) angels in the garb and the poses one might expect to see in a large cathedral painting. The figures are floating in the clouds, too. I don't get it; the imagery doesn't speak to me. Upstairs on the third floor, I enter a large room—large enough to house a basketball game. Small tables, each about two feet by three feet with a single chair, have been arranged in well-separated rows and columns; there are well over 100 of them. Students wander about a little, but quickly select a table and sit down. On each table is a closed booklet; in a few minutes we will begin. Welcome to the 18.02 final exam in first-year calculus.

The test proctors are ready, standing with arms folded and grim looks threatening doom as we freshmen wander in looking for a seat. Both the tension and the worry among the test takers are rising; we know this test is worth about 30 percent of our final mark in the class. The lead proctor announces the time to begin. We will be here for three hours, but I am feeling confident. In my dorm room, there is a three-inch Acco binder filled with problem sets and quizzes that demonstrate I have done the work required this semester to master this subject. There is also the thick textbook *Calculus and Analytic Geometry* by George B. Thomas—well-thumbed, read, re-read, and underlined. There are memories of Prof. Ted Martin in Room 2-190 with his fantastic lectures.



(Purpose of sword is uncertain. Final Exam (1964) | Photo: R. Popadic)

He was so enthusiastic; how could anyone not love calculus? His presentations were clear, concise, and engaging. They taught me how to think about this subject. I'm ready for this exam. This is where and what I want to be—a student at MIT. The exam begins at 9:00 a.m. sharp.

Attending MIT to study electrical engineering was my goal ever since junior high school in Utah, where my family lived until I was in high school. I cannot account for the origin of the idea, and I knew nothing then about MIT, not even its exact location. I knew it was a college, yes, and I knew I wanted to go to college, for both my older sisters had gone. And somehow, I knew I was interested in “electrical engineering,” but regarding what it actually consisted of, I had no real understanding. Neither did I know exactly how to get to MIT; I only knew getting into any college would require very good grades in high school. Now I had been at MIT for a year. What were the influences that accounted for this largely unsophisticated student from the Rocky Mountain West being at this particular exam in this particular room?

Antecedents

My early years growing up occurred in Tooele, Utah, a small town—population about 5,000 or so—southwest of Salt Lake City. Looking back from today, it was probably somewhat culturally isolated. The town did have a small radio station, but it played the rock and roll music of the time. World news came via the daily *Salt Lake Tribune* or the *Deseret News*, and there was a local newspaper printed twice a week. The principal industries were a small smelter, where my Dad worked in a management position, and an Army munitions depot. We had a telephone because Dad's company wanted to be able to reach him at any time. The rotary dial version arrived in about 1950. Television arrived in the mid-1950s. It was a sheltered and safe place to grow up, but somehow, my various interests found their way into this protective bubble.

Perhaps an early influence was a friend of mine in junior high school. Because the town was small, it was easy to bicycle on an impulse to his house across town, where there was always something interesting happening in a workroom he and his father used. I recall on one occasion finding my friend and his dad had built a simple motor which had several electromagnets on a rotating shaft, and two electromagnets on the fixed part of the device. By switching the current on to a particular pair of magnets at the appropriate time, the rotor could be made to turn. I did not know then that this simple machine demonstrated the ideas of Nikolai Tesla and his synchronous motors. To me, magnetism was simply a curious and interesting force. We made other electromagnets for fun.

My friend was interested in science, and we were vaguely aware of the International Geophysical Year, started in 1957, a global effort to acquire new earth science information. When Sputnik was launched as part of that effort, we were both excited, but we were too young to understand the underlying implications of that particular achievement. The steady beep, beep, beep of Sputnik played on the news seemed to suggest it was merely announcing its presence, nothing more. Much later, it became clear why the launch of Sputnik was so important, for it demonstrated the Soviets had the capability to send a weapon a very long distance. It was not Sputnik itself that mattered, but the rocket that got it into space.

My parents were friends with another couple with older children, one of whom had built a crystal radio. I was fascinated that one could put on a pair of earphones and poke around with a wire whisker on what

amounted to a rock (galena, a crystal of lead and silver), and hear a local radio station—no electricity required! That was magical. How did it work? I understood that electricity was required to make the speakers in the headphones work, so how could this simple device snatch enough electricity, seemingly out of the air, to power the headphones?

In addition to electricity, I was interested in mechanical things. My father subscribed to *Popular Mechanics* and *Motor Boating* magazines, and received the American Institute of Mining Engineers journal. He could see I had some interest in mechanical things, so he considered buying *Popular Mechanics* as an investment, contributing to my broader education. Sometimes I brought articles in to show-and-tell in grade school—in one case, an article about a new design for the drill head for an oil rig. The teacher considered my selections to be unusual, to say the least, and frequently off the mark she was shooting for.

The American Institute of Mining Engineers journal related to Dad's profession, and he received it for years as a member. Mostly, I looked at the pictures of mining equipment, and thought about how they worked. There were all sorts of equipment—rock-drilling pneumatic jackhammers, railroad cars, and ore processing equipment like I had seen at the smelter where my dad worked. Mining looked like a dangerous business, and after learning about my Dad's summer job one time in college when he worked in a mine in Tonopah, Nevada, it was clear to me I wasn't going to pursue that path. He had spent two weeks working underground, and said the main thing he learned was how to use a shovel. He spent the rest of the summer working in the chemistry laboratory, above ground.

At home, we had a large console radio set full of large vacuum tubes. They were very hot. During the day, it was possible to receive two or three radio stations from Salt Lake City, over the mountains in the next valley. In the evenings, it was possible to tune in to stations in other parts of the country. A particularly powerful station in Oklahoma City, KOMA, was easy to find on the dial. But we could never receive it in the daytime. Why was that? In fact, we could receive many more stations during the night than during the day. I knew the radio required an antenna; it was a single wire of indeterminate length pushed into the socket with the word "Antenna" over it. Would a different length of wire matter?

The foregoing synopses show a fascination with many things technical that were accessible to a child, especially with regard to larger pieces of

equipment and electricity. At the time, none of the information was organized in my head in any useful arrangement. It was all uniformly interesting.

Moving

My freshman year in high school in Utah was very successful academically—an “A” in all six subjects all year. With regard to getting into college, it boded well. In my sophomore year, my academic success continued to be very good. But in the fall of that year, my father, who was in upper management at the local smelter, was forced to make a choice—to stay where he was and be laid off because the smelter was closing, or move to Montana and take a research position with the Anaconda Company in the town of Anaconda. My father was 56 years old, too early to retire with me still in high school and college on the horizon, so there really was no option other than moving. My parents went to Anaconda in October so Dad could explore the job, and they looked for a place to live. In December, we packed up and arrived in Anaconda the week before Christmas. I was unhappy with having to move, and leaving all my friends and extracurricular activities. Anaconda felt even more remote, insular, and isolated than Tooele. After a short time in the new school, I concluded that the Anaconda high school was not as academically rigorous as the school in Utah. My academic performance did suffer some immediately after moving, but recovered by the end of sophomore year. In my junior and senior years, I was able to get involved in many activities—the high school band, school plays, chorus, participating in music competitions in band and chorus, playing drums in a local rock band, and a job at a local grocery store—all while keeping my grades up. Thinking back on it, homework was never an issue. When it was time to apply to college, I knew my grades were good. In retrospect, however, my SAT scores were terrible—far from the coveted 800 score that I later learned many MIT students had achieved. At the time, I did not know that.

My senior year in high school, I was bored and asked the teacher whether he had any books about calculus. He responded with a book about Boolean algebra, the basis of digital computing that was coming into being. I worked through some of the material moderately successfully and gave it up because, at the time, I didn't see any utility. As pure math, it was okay, but that wasn't my interest.

While in high school in Montana, I became interested in amateur radio and joined the local club. My parents supported this activity, and I built

a transmitter for Morse code and bought a receiver that covered the amateur radio bands. Dad erected an antenna in the front yard that I had designed using information from an amateur radio magazine. In the process of designing the antenna, I learned about concepts relating to resonant antennas—structures that were physically one-quarter and one-half wavelength of the signal to be transmitted or received. I also learned the wind where we lived could take down the antenna if it were not structurally sound.

I rebuilt it several times before capitulating and buying a commercially available antenna. I obtained my Novice license and got on the air, contacting other amateurs from Florida to Alaska. One thing radio amateurs do is exchange so-called QSL cards—postcards giving the date and time of the contact with whom you have communicated. The idea is to get them from as many states as possible. Being in Montana probably helped me make contact with others. They wanted a QSL card from the state.

With the grades I had and the extracurricular activities, I was confident, but nervous as well, when my college applications went out. I was ecstatic when I was accepted by MIT. My mother was not so enthused. I believe her view was colored in part because MIT was far away from Montana; also, I was the youngest child, and my two sisters were already married and living in Minnesota and Washington State. She would have preferred I attend Stanford, where I had aunts and uncles, my mother's siblings, living nearby. My mother's view was that if we hadn't moved, it was very possible I would not have been accepted. I have come to understand she was likely correct, for had we stayed in Utah, it would have been more difficult to achieve a near-perfect academic record and participate in all the extracurricular activities.

During the application process, MIT had found a gentleman in Butte, Montana, about 25 miles from Anaconda, to interview me. I came out of the interview feeling he had been rather impressed. At the time, I was working 20 hours a week along with all the extracurricular activities and keeping my grades up. I believe that whatever he reported to MIT about me must have had a strong influence on the decision. So, while moving was upsetting personally at the time, it is arguably an important factor in my being able to attend the Institute. In addition, MIT provided a scholarship worth about one-third the cost of room and board plus tuition (about \$3,000 in 1961). This was a significant help to us financially and helped "turn the tide" on my mother's objections.

First Semester Freshman Year

My parents decided we would drive from Montana to Boston to take me to MIT. This was distinctly different from my two sisters' experiences, both of whom boarded a train in Salt Lake City headed to Chicago and thence to Valparaiso, Indiana. They both traveled alone when leaving for college. This plan to drive suited my mother, who could see where I was going to be, and make her own assessment whether I would survive the transition. In addition, we stopped for a few days to visit my sister and her husband in Minnesota. We arrived in Cambridge several days early, and had time together touring Boston and getting to know the area around the campus. I had been given a temporary room on campus; my parents stayed at the Eliot Hotel across the Charles River in Boston. When we finally parted, my parents walked across the Mass. Ave. bridge to Boston, my dad's arm around my mother. It was a poignant moment; I had never seen them do that before.

I was assigned a single room on the fourth floor of the Conner wing of Burton House. There, I met other freshmen, many of whom were from the New York City area and had attended high schools which offered advanced courses to which I never had access. Many already had a year of calculus; I had heard of it and was curious, but had never studied it. Several were high school valedictorians, and a few had achieved 800 on their SAT tests. It was all rather intimidating, but I was a novelty for being from somewhere beyond the Mississippi River and a bit naïve; friendships began forming. I found the concert band and played as a percussionist, and in the Techtonians, a student-led concert jazz band, I was the drummer. I began to find ways to fit in. My freshman advisor, Prof. Paul Gray, helped this process by inviting me to his house for Thanksgiving.

Academically, however, my first two to three months as a freshman were a disaster. I was not confident with any subject matter, and my quiz and homework grades were terrible. My sense of panic rose to crisis level. The three "hard science" courses required of all freshmen—physics, chemistry, and calculus—had me buffaloed. I had received an "F" on my first paper in humanities; my worst grade in high school had been a "B." My performance in weekly quizzes was poor. When the midterm grades came out, I had three "Ds," a "C," and a "B." I was mortified to see my freshman advisor with these midterm grades. I had first visited him at the beginning of the term, when I was full of enthusiasm and confidence. Now, I was crushed and embarrassed. He tried to be encouraging. There were influences working to get me moving in a good direction.

Foremost was my living situation. My room was in a suite of three rooms in the Conner wing of Burton House. In 1961, Burton House consisted of suites of rooms—two or three rooms behind a single hallway door. There were typically two or three double rooms in a suite, and sometimes a single room. My suitemates were four sophomores; all of them were very bright and serious students (one had graduated high school in New York at age 16), and they had already developed a regular routine for nighttime study. Typically, the dining hall opened at 5:00 p.m. for dinner and students in our wing of the fourth floor went together to eat. By 6:00 p.m., my suitemates were back in their rooms at work, and it was quiet on the entire floor until 10:00 p.m. Then they went to bed, and if anyone needed to study later, they went down to the dining hall to complete their work. Before long, as they adopted me into their “family,” I got into the same routine.

It required some time for me to learn how to actually study, a skill I did not need in high school. This living environment made it easier to learn how to do it. I was more alert to scheduling my time at night to cover the topics and the problem sets needing completion for the next day. The “quiet hours” on the floor in the evening was an informal rule adopted by everyone living on the floor. It is true there were moments of chaos and noise, but these occurred principally on the weekend. The environment helped my reading comprehension improve dramatically.

As a matter of routine, my suitemates and I attended the Lecture Series Committee movie together on Saturday night and went to Elsie’s roast beef shop in Harvard Square for dinner on Sunday. Were it not for these friends—for they became real friends—my life at MIT would have been quite different. Three of the four received doctoral degrees from MIT; two of those went on to teach at other universities. Even though we were all studying different subjects, we were, in effect, all working together toward a common goal—becoming proficient in our selected subjects, graduating, and moving on to graduate school.

A short conversation one evening with another freshman in the hallway of the dormitory pointed me in the right direction to understanding calculus. From then on, my anxiety lessened, and I gradually mastered the material as it was presented. The newly-learned study skills helped in all subjects, and my quiz and homework assignment scores improved. The Acco binders with problem sets and quizzes grew in thickness,

and my grades gradually improved. The final exams that first semester were very intimidating, but my final grade in all subjects was a “B” and I qualified for the Dean’s List. My advisor was very impressed with how things had turned around.



(End of Exams Horseplay (1964). | Photo: R. Popadic)

The End of the Exam

Back in Walker Memorial, it's noon. The proctors have gathered the exam booklets, and we are released. I can head back to the dormitory and relax, and start preparing for tomorrow's test. I've had two final exams; three more to go. This second semester has flown by; the early summer weather has been good for my morale. In a few days, I will get my final grades, pack a suitcase, clear out my dorm room, and get in a Ford Falcon sedan with five other students to start driving west—home for the summer for all of us—me returning to Montana, and the other five students to Portland, Oregon. We plan to drive straight through, taking turns at the wheel. We have a plan to rotate the seating, so everyone gets equal time in the dreaded center seat. In three months, in September, I will declare my major—electrical engineering. I am excited, happy, and sure that I am in the right place.

At the time, I was too excited to reflect on how all this excitement came to be. In hindsight, I can see there have been many quite unrelated and unexpected people, events, and situations that had an influence on my achieving the goal I had set for myself. There have been a great many exciting events since this freshman year, and not everything occurred as I might have wished. I did get into the co-op program offered by the Institute, but I didn't get into the laboratory situation I wanted. As an undergraduate I had decided to try for a doctoral degree, but MIT thought I wasn't ready. At the time of that decision, I was crushed, but in reality it was a blessing in disguise, for I stopped being a student and moved into a fun career at Lincoln Laboratory. MIT has proven to be what I had hoped, full of smart people who enjoyed learning, working, and being together.



About David Kettner '65

I grew up in Utah and Montana, and came to MIT in 1961. I was able to take advantage of two electrical engineering options in Course VI—the Co-op program and the VI-2 program—and graduated with two degrees in 1966. I stayed one more year for the electrical engineering degree, then started working for MIT Lincoln Laboratory in 1968, where I worked for almost 38 years. As a laboratory staff member, the importance of writing clearly and succinctly was drilled into me by all my supervisors, and I have tried to carry those lessons into an entirely different type of writing from the dispassionate technical exposition. Joining the memoir group has been a significant help to me, and I've enjoyed meeting and learning about the group members.

Steven Strang

Our dear friend and lifetime writer extraordinaire, Steven Strang, passed away on December 29th, 2024 as the writing for this collection was under way. We have missed Steven's gentle critiques at our monthly classes and his laughter at our funny anecdotes. Steven was a powerhouse at MIT, coaching numerous generations of scientists and engineers toward effective communication through his work founding and directing MIT's Writing and Communication Center.

We will cherish his stories about early days in the newsroom at the *Bangor Daily News* and his first published textbook, precious insights into the early days of a budding writer and a wonderful companion. We are grateful to Steven's family for this lovely photo that captures his spirit beautifully. We hope you will enjoy one of the first pieces that Steven shared with us – and one of our favorites!



(Untitled | Photo: A. Strang)

The Writing Life, Part I - The Best Gift

Steven Strang

As one of Steven's first stories that he shared with the group, and a favorite of his friends and his family, this piece offers an answer to the question "What makes a writer?" It takes you from the first piece of writing equipment Steven ever received through a whirlwind of first attempts at engaging stories, lifted up by the love and support of his parents. We are proud to present it here, selected posthumously, for our collection exploring the question "How did I get here?"

Because my father decided to take a correspondence course on hotel management, writing became a major part of my life.

I realize that the cause-and-effect relationship implied in that first sentence might not be intuitively obvious.

My father dropped out of high school during the Depression to help earn money for his family. He never talked about the jobs he held (and I never thought to ask), but I do know that in his early married life, he was a salesman in a local department store. When I was old enough to notice and until his retirement, however, his only full-time job was working in Mac's Market, a small mom-and-pop grocery store in South Brewer, Maine. Mildred and her almost totally blind husband, Frank, lived above the store. Mildred and their adult son, Rowland, ran the store. Rowland and Dad were about the same age, and I know that Dad considered Rowland his best friend. Dad was the only employee, and he did everything from cutting meat to making deliveries, from ordering stock to shelving it.

Deciding that he wanted more, Dad signed up for a correspondence course (i.e., the snail-mail equivalent of an online course nowadays) in hotel management. But Dad's handwriting bordered on illegible, and the course required numerous essay answers to questions and prompts. Since we didn't have a typewriter, Dad borrowed one—a portable Royal—from his cousin Gwennie, and he manfully began the lessons.

Of course, Dad was at the store all day, which meant that the beautiful typewriter was sitting idle. So, ten-year-old me cajoled Mom into letting me sit on their bed and “play” with Gwennie's typewriter, but only because I “could be trusted not to break it.”

Since I couldn't shoot anything with the typewriter or toss it in the air, writing something seemed like the only available activity.

I probably came out of the womb reading a book (*How to Succeed After Fetushood*), so not surprisingly, I was an avid fan of what would now be called young adult novels (*Hardy Boys*, *Ken Holt*, even an occasional *Tom Swift* and *Nancy Drew* book). I naturally wanted to do what most writers want to do—write stories like the ones I enjoyed reading. And like many beginning writers, I started by imitating my favorite authors.

Using some extra-long blue paper that my parents got from somewhere for some unknown reason, I began typing and writing.

I immediately got hooked. While he was at work (6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., six days a week at Mac's) and Mom was busy elsewhere in our apartment, I'd sit on their bed cross-legged (no idea why I didn't sit at the kitchen table), insert the long blue paper, and begin writing stories. They were masterpieces—okay, maybe more like a young boy's "rip-offs" of Franklin W. Dixon's *Hardy Boy* mysteries and Bruce Campbell's *Ken Holt* mysteries that I devoured, which told the story of a kid reporter. Later, I branched out to write stories about superheroes and even drew a few pictures of them (fortunately, not found in my archaeological dig through boxes in our basement last week).

"The Phantom" was a "homage" (okay, a rip-off again) to *Ken Holt*. Whereas Ken Holt was a reporter and his friend Sandy Allen was his photographer for the *Brentwood Advance* newspaper, my Ted was a reporter and his friend Neal was his photographer for the *Town Crier* newspaper. See—totally different.

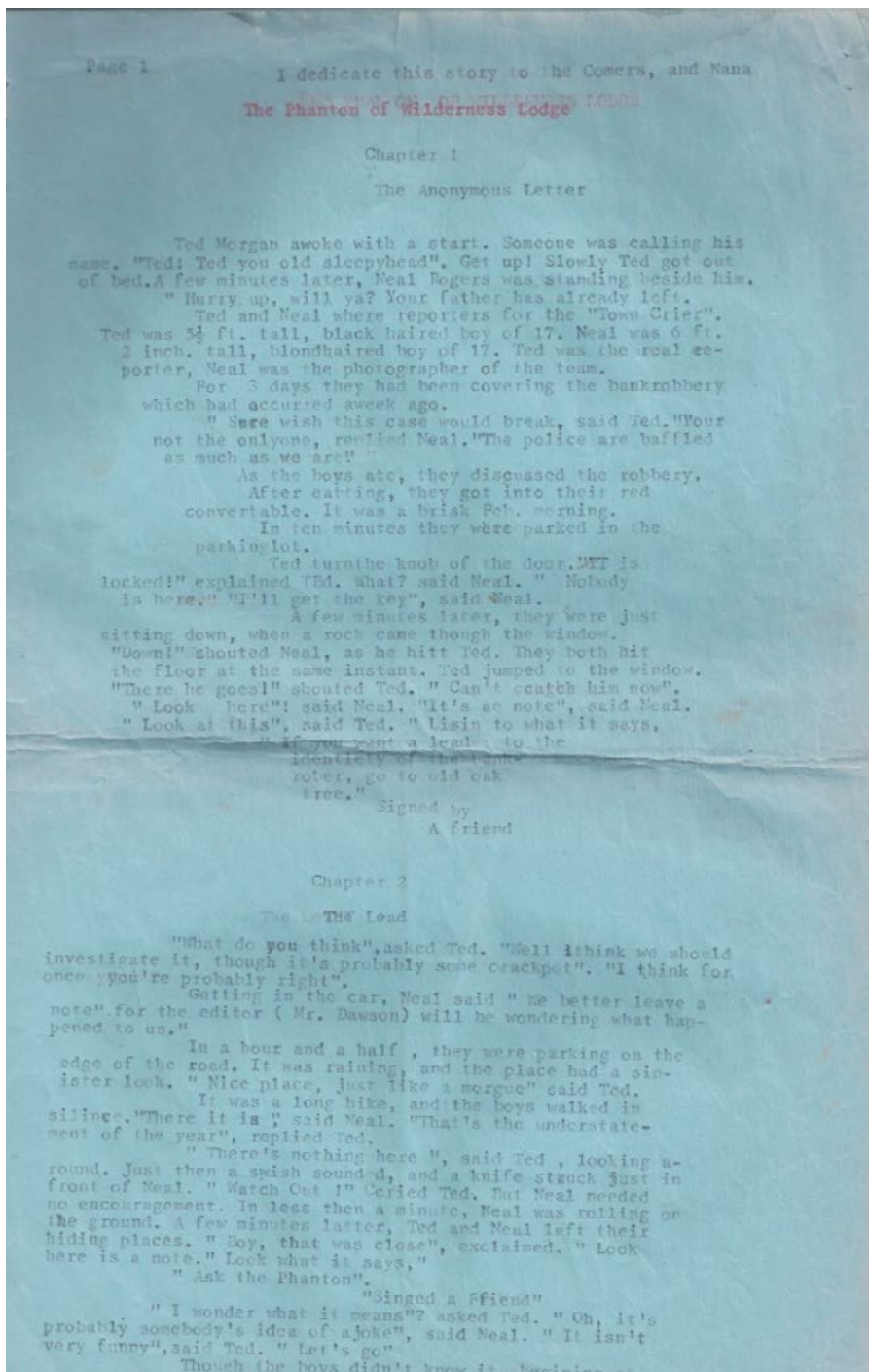
My second story, "The Case of the Missing Detective," was a new departure, not at all like the *Hardy Boys*—Steve Brady was a reporter, and his brother Ted was a detective. (Notice how I shuffled in elements of both *Ken Holt* and *Hardy Boys*—that's called "artistic invention"). The third and final story was "Danger in the Depths," which featured Brad Stevens and Jess MacConnell, two submarine sailors. I'm not sure where that World War II combination spy and wartime plot came from.

I'm sure by now you have more than an adequate idea of the thrills that entranced my audience (Mom). Who knows how long this creative surge would have lasted?

Although Dad probably would have been a fine hotel manager, he had never been a guy for taking courses or writing papers, so the project soon fell by the wayside, and the typewriter was returned to Gwennie.

So much for my writing career.

I seized the only option for a kid—Christmas. I requested a typewriter of my own. I knew money was never plentiful, so although I was hopeful, I realistically assumed that I would be using pen and paper to write my next epic.



(The faded first page (and the first two very short "chapters") of my very first story, *The Phantom of Wilderness Lodge*. Untitled | Photo: Steven Strang)

But that Christmas under the tree, I found the best gift ever—a small portable Smith Corona typewriter in its own brown carry case.

I never stopped writing.

What is the ultimate value of a gift? Is it the financial value of the gift itself? Is it the thought that went into the selection of the gift? Is it some sentimental association the gift will have for the person receiving the gift?

For me, the value of the best gift I ever received was twofold—the surprising depth of understanding in its selection and its ultimate impact on my life.

The first value of the gift was Dad's depth of understanding how important the typewriter and writing were to me. This was surprising, since Dad never read my stories. Dad valued the physical over the artistic; he would have been happier if I'd become a football player rather than a writer and, ultimately, a teacher. In his whole life, he never read any of my pieces, unpublished or published. Moreover, in an attempt to make me appreciate the gift (as though I could appreciate it any more than I already did), Mom—the magazine and book reader... Mom told me that she had opposed Dad's buying the typewriter. "I thought you were too young," she said. "I told Dad to wait a few years." Mom was also no doubt thinking that the fad would pass, and the family could use the money in more logical ways. Dad rarely opposed Mom in such things, but thankfully he overrode her objections that time. Even though he didn't feel the value of my writing, he felt the value of giving me the opportunity to write.

The second value of that gift is probably clear—I never stopped writing, although I like to think I've advanced beyond stealing ideas from *Hardy Boys* and *Ken Holt* mysteries. Now I rip off best sellers (only kidding).

I would probably have ended up doing what I do anyway, but that typewriter was an amazing acknowledgment that Dad wanted me to be able to do my own thing even though it wasn't his thing. I have never stopped writing ever since.



About Steven Strang (1947-2024)

*Steven Strang received a B.A. in English with highest distinction from the University of Maine, and an A.M. and PhD in English at Brown University before embarking on a fulfilling teaching and academic career as founder of the MIT Writing and Communication Center. Steven was the author of the textbook *Writing Exploratory Essays* (Mayfield 1995 and Freeload 2007), a project which paid for the new septic tank at his house (phew!). He joined the Nita Regnier Memoir Writing Group when he retired in 2021 after 41 years at MIT. Steven is survived by a large extended family, including his wife Ayni, their son Elly and their daughter Marta. He is dearly missed by his family, his students throughout the years whom he helped to develop and perfect their craft, and his friends, with whom he has left his immeasurable wisdom and generous support.*

How Did I Get Here?

Nancy DuVergne Smith

So where is here? A location, my professional journey, this life stage? If here is 2024, then I can assure you it felt like one slow step at a time. Unlike people who say their lives have swept by, I have found making a life has required ample energy and some courage, plastered together with persistence. I feel my 73 years have been earned, and I'm a little weary. And I don't take the future for granted; it's a valuable and limited resource. However, now I can take a deep breath and appreciate this moment. If here is Boston, the journey began in a Mississippi childhood where Walter Cronkite explained the civil rights movement to me on television. I began to peek further out of my nest of origin in the fourth grade when I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and several Balzac novels, books I chose myself. For my fourth- and fifth-grade summers, I lived with my mother on a college campus where she was earning a graduate degree. I spent my days in the library, graduate housing, or the pool—so I was reading a lot. *Uncle Tom* put together the tragedy of slavery and the inequality of Black and White lives in the 1950s in the Deep South. Balzac provided a glimpse of France—a wildly attractive alternative. I pledged to leave MS as soon as possible, which finally happened when I enrolled at Tulane University in New Orleans. The summer before my senior year, I asked my professors for contacts that I could approach for a job in New York. I had been working part-time as a proofreader at my hometown newspaper in high school and as a cub reporter for a New Orleans daily, so I had some experience. I got two job offers and I took the one from Joseph Papp's Shakespeare Festival magazine. That summer, I never warmed up to NYC, but I loved visits to Boston—the beautiful woods and beaches, the history, and the smart-people industries of education, medicine, and research. After college, I traveled and worked my way around the Caribbean, Europe, and West Africa for a couple of years, returning to Mississippi to spend time with my dying father. After his death, I moved to Boston at 26, and I have been settled here more than 40 years. I still love Boston.

If here is the MIT Memoir Writers Group, then the trail follows my professional evolution. After working at several small newspapers and magazines, I decided universities were a more reliable place to ply my writing trade. They were more stable than journalism, paid better, included benefits, and offered an intellectual climate in the workplace. After working 12 years at Wellesley College and 20 at MIT, I retired in 2018. To build a healthy transition to my new life, I decided to write a book about the first year of retirement. I wrote eagerly for the first half of the first year... then the flow turned to a trickle. When I found out about the memoir group, I

signed on immediately. Having an audience of contemporaries and regular deadlines was just what I needed. I got support and inspiration from getting regular feedback and hearing about my peers' lives.

Does here mean in a family? That certainly shapes my life—and the lives of many people. When I arrived in Boston, I had honed a definition of the type of mate I wanted: a creative intellectual whose heart I could trust. I had enjoyed a fair sample of men in my life and travels. Long- and short-term relationships were stacked up in my memory. Some quite good, but not good enough. I met my husband, Mark, through my first friend in Boston. I understood they were occasionally dating, so I didn't think of him as available—although she offered him to me “once she was done with him.” However, when a few of us were at a downtown bar one evening, Mark staged a coup and we danced all night. That connected us and ended his relationship with my friend. It also pretty much ended my friendship with her. It wasn't a pretty beginning, but the subsequent 40+ years have been lovely.

We spent years trying to have a family—first the old-fashioned way and then six years using all manner of modern procedures. No luck. Then we went through a year or so of mourning our childlessness. Then adoption—an idea that had seemed the very definition of failure—became a dazzling option. We decided to adopt, and within a year we were on an airplane to China to claim our baby girl. When our daughter was delivered to our hotel room in Changsha, I hadn't even practiced making formula. A lot of things happened quickly, but the fastest thing was our attachment to our daughter, Mei. Right away, we were a family. That first night, both of us sprang out of bed when she made the least movement or noise. The next day, we were wandering the hotel like veteran parents—bleary-eyed, yet smiling. There have been significant challenges that we all learned to overcome. Now our daughter is 31—enterprising and engaged in nonprofit work—and our family lives together still.

And finally, does here mean some moment of truth about my life? My writing, at times, seems a bit boastful to me, skimming the glossy bits of my life. I guess the times I pulled myself out of a conventional mode and adventured forth seem distinctive to me, but it wasn't that I was so brave. Rather, it was that I couldn't stand being confined in a traditional role any longer. My mother showed me what self-confidence looked like, and I liked it. And I think my daughter has learned that from me. My growth and

adventures have been their own reward but also led to the next step in my life. At least I won't be one of those people who regret never taking chances.



About Nancy DuVergne Smith

Nancy DuVergne Smith is a watercolor artist and writer. As a writer, she worked for newspapers, magazines, and universities before retiring from MIT in 2018. On the arts side, she has exhibited regularly in Boston's Galatea Fine Arts gallery and other regional arts organizations.

Creating a Life as a Physician

Elaine Li Shiang, MD

When you're a teenager, you start wondering about life as an adult. Both mundane and existential questions come to mind such as "what kind of career, how to raise a family, how to make a living," etc. This essay describes the journey of how a girl in the 1960s decided to become a "lady doctor." She tells us who inspired and influenced her, and how that profession and her patients molded and altered her life.

When I was around 14 years old, I started thinking about becoming a physician. I was in the ninth grade. My mother always encouraged my sister and me to have careers, saying “You can’t depend on your husband.” I realized that being a physician might combine my love of learning, my curiosity about the world, and the desire to help people. I was also aware that good physicians made a steady salary, and I did not want to be poor when I grew up. I came from a family of five children, and we struggled at times to make ends meet. I wanted to work hard to avoid that struggle. I had no idea how much I’d have to study to get into medical school or how many years I’d have to train to become a wise physician. I knew there were physicians who had poor reputations and were not trustworthy, as in any field. I’d need to learn what it meant to be a trusted physician. In retrospect, this task required lifelong learning.

There were no physicians in my family to guide me. Maybe it really didn’t matter, however, because once I was committed to the process of continuous hard work, the trajectory was almost automatic. I had to be willing to sacrifice my time for my long-term goals. A lot of people told me they could never be physicians because they can’t stand the sight of blood. When we were young, however, I recall my father telling us stories of death and deprivation during the Sino-Japanese War. He implied that death and dying were a part of life’s journey. This attitude stuck with me. I became good at not getting overly upset during difficult situations and I thought I’d be able to control my emotions and maintain my composure in times of crisis. I discovered later that, in times of crisis, split second decisions and action in addition to composure were both essential. Although we had no relatives in the United States, my family had many friends in the Boston area. In the 1950s, Chinese immigrants often socialized with others who spoke their dialect. My parents and their friends spoke Mandarin, in contrast to the Cantonese dialect often spoken in Chinatowns across the US.

We called my parents’ friends Auntie and Uncle. Addressing them in this form was a sign of respect across generations. While growing up in the Boston suburbs, I had at least 20 to 30 aunts and uncles from cultural clubs, church groups, and fraternal organizations. Since many of these friends, both male and female, had come to the US from China to study, work, and teach, we five siblings had an amazing and extensive acquired family. Most of them had at least one or even two higher education degrees before they came to America. It was rare to encounter an underachiever in this group.

One of my uncles was a general surgeon and another a neurosurgeon. I have memories of their being on call when they came to parties at our house. I realized they had special responsibilities. My Uncle Lee, the general surgeon, told me how he had left a sponge in a patient and had to take the patient back to the operating room to retrieve it. It was a startling admission of a serious mistake, but even more importantly, affirmed his humility and honesty. The neurosurgeon uncle always seemed to be on call for emergencies in the evening. He was also soft-spoken and thoughtful. However, when I was asked during my surgical training if I wanted to become a neurosurgeon (they were impressed with my steady hands), the thought of brain injuries and emergency call duty with traumatic cases was not appealing to me. Fortunately, I already knew the answer was no. I had two aunts who were trained in China as physicians but couldn't practice in the US. Their husbands practiced medicine, and they did not. Licensure was not easy to transfer from China to America with the requirements of further training and examinations. Added family responsibilities, and maybe sexism and language difficulties, played a role in their never becoming practicing physicians. One aunt did lab research, and the other became an epidemiologist who did population research, both at academic institutions in Boston. The epidemiologist urged me to apply to medical school, and I was grateful that she encouraged me. Through these connections, even though my father was a chemical engineer and my mother a musician and elementary school teacher, there was a path forward outside of their chosen professions. I could contemplate becoming a physician.

At Wellesley College, I majored in biology and psychology. I also became interested in East Asian studies, in part because I thought Chinese history was fascinating. There was much to learn, and I also wanted to better understand my heritage. I studied four years of Chinese language with Professor Helen Lin. However, during a telephone conversation, my mother bluntly told me that I was deficient in Chinese language requirements which also required the study of ancient Chinese texts. She said I'd never get a job competing with Caucasians who also spoke Chinese. As usual, my mother was correct. I abandoned the idea of majoring in Asian studies and returned to my premed studies and the basement biology laboratory where I researched the behavior of pigeons performing peculiar courtship dances.

When I admitted to a few friends that I was applying to medical school, I recall one fellow asking, "So you want to be a lady doctor?" "No," I

answered, “I just want to be a doctor.” In the 60s, becoming a physician was still an unusual career choice for women. Fortunately, this type of attitude was not prevalent at Wellesley. There were at least 50 premedical students in my Class of 1972. At Wellesley, you could try anything.

I spent most weekends studying at the library—but not at Wellesley. The libraries closed on Friday evening and did not open again until Monday morning. Luckily for me, there was an hourly bus into MIT for cross-registered students. The MIT Student Center library was open 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Students slept overnight at the Student Center library, and the ventilation was poor. The vast but crowded rooms smelled of body odor, but it didn’t matter to me. The library was open, and I could always find an empty study carrel.

Despite my intensive studying, my college social life was active and, importantly, offered welcome distraction. My friends at MIT could drive the Mass Pike from Cambridge to Wellesley in 17 minutes, getting me back to the dormitory just before curfew. My sister and I, having learned Chinese folk dances when we lived in Taiwan, were often asked to perform the chopstick, teacup, and ribbon folk dances for college holiday events and special occasions. Our dancing routines became quite sought after. One of our gregarious uncles at MIT acted as our informal booking agent. We performed so often that we finally asked him to find us blind dates on the evening of our performances, a sort of social honorarium. Fifty years later, I meet people who, after hearing my name, still remember our signature chopstick dance, and ask, “Are you Elaine, one of the dancing Shiang sisters?”

I met my future husband Fred Li in 1969 when I was a sophomore in college. He was a Hematology Fellow at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital, but worked once a week volunteering at the Tufts-New England Medical Center’s (T-NEMC) newly established Chinatown Evening Clinic for new immigrants. A friend of mine at Radcliffe had shown me an article in the *Boston Globe* which described how Fred had helped establish the clinic for Cantonese speaking patients. “You have to meet him,” she said. I called him and set up a meeting in the Brigham Hospital lobby. I learned that he spoke perfect Cantonese and passable Mandarin; he was also recruiting other young physicians to volunteer at the clinic. It didn’t matter that his physician friends spoke only Mandarin when many of the patients spoke the Cantonese dialect. It was more important that they encounter a

familiar-appearing face, which goes a long way to establish trust. I also learned that there was considerable long-standing animosity between Tufts-New England Medical Center and the adjacent Chinatown community. T-NEMC was on a mission to buy up residential land, displacing entire neighborhood blocks. This had already been happening for decades as the state appropriated land and demolished Chinatown's housing for the new Central Artery. Also, rumors circulated about how the T-NEMC Emergency Medical staff did not provide good care. At that time, there was no system for formal medical interpreters. Understandably, there were many problems with patient–doctor communication.

As I had just obtained a summer internship from Boston City Councilman Tom Atkins to work as a community organizer in Chinatown, I found myself in the middle of this town–gown turmoil. However, when I got to T-NEMC for my summer job, tall, handsome Fred was waiting for me in the office wearing a long white coat. He was a knight in shining white cotton armor. We fell in love as we talked and walked around the city, listened to the Boston Pops on the Esplanade, and ate at all the Chinese restaurants near my office. Town–gown turmoil was far from my mind.

During our early years together, we both volunteered for a weekly Chinatown Health Task Force. Evening meetings lasted for hours and continued for years. Eventually, we helped establish the South Cove Community Health Center (SCCHC). It was part of a large network of Boston's thriving neighborhood health centers located from East Boston to Roxbury. SCCHC is now over 50 years old and has both medical and mental health facilities that still serve mostly Asian residents in the communities of Boston, Quincy, and Malden.

In February 1972, I learned that I had been accepted to Harvard Medical School with a full scholarship. That June, the week after graduation, Fred and I were married. Generously, he offered me half of his monthly paycheck. Then, when my medical school tuition bills arrived, he decided to pay my tuition, even though he had only a fellow's training salary. I returned my entire scholarship to the medical school, believing that other students needed it more than I did. I recently donated a sum of money to the medical school for a plaque to be placed on a chair in one of the school's new auditoriums. I dedicated the chair to Fred with words including "Pay it forward." He deserves a lot more than that for his generosity, but in academic medicine, chairs have symbolic importance.

Four years of medical school flew by quickly. I learned a tremendous amount, made new friends, and had memorable adventures. Fred often met me in the medical school library after his work so we could be together. I studied my school curriculum, and he did his research. Then, I underwent five years of internal medicine residency training and fellowship in Boston. If I was on call late at night, Fred would cook dinner and bring it into the hospital for me. His specialty was medium-rare steaks with lemon-pepper marinade.

In 1981, after finishing my training, I started looking for jobs. I was pregnant with Andrew; fortunately, it didn't seem to matter to those who interviewed me. We also bought a parcel of land with a small vacation home on a lake in New Hampshire, knowing that we needed a place to escape from our hectic lives. Eventually, I chose to work at MIT's Medical Department. I had interviewed at many places, but I liked the directness of MIT's senior medical staff and the flexibility of teaching students and having research opportunities in addition to taking care of patients. MIT offered me a full-time job, and I accepted. Fred always recommended I work full-time. Otherwise, he said, I wouldn't get the respect I deserved. I figured he knew best, so I agreed.

After Andrew was born, Fred and I spent three months at our vacation home learning how to care for a newborn. But soon, Fred was already asking "Shall we start looking for full-time child care?" I reluctantly agreed, as I needed to start making both a physical and emotional transition. I had only six weeks before starting my new position at MIT, and I felt ambivalent about leaving our newborn in the hands of a stranger.

However, allowing trusted non-family members to take care of children had historical precedent in Fred's family. His father had been a four-star general in the Chinese army, and his mother had organized schools, housing, and employment for thousands of war orphans and widows during the Sino-Japanese War. She always had plenty of loving and responsible women to help care for her children. For Chinese families of means, this was the norm. Fred was brought up by Chinese nannies, and this strategy was not only very familiar to him but it also made a lot of sense to both of us. I was willing to hire full-time live-in help. This became our child care strategy for our three children in addition to the saying, "Adults must always outnumber children." So when Irene was born, we gave students free board in exchange for weekend child care.

Fortunately, my new MIT work schedule included only one week of night call every 12 weeks, so different from my resident training when I lived in the hospital every third night for three years. I felt that working a predetermined schedule was very civilized in comparison to having a new baby who did not follow an on-call schedule and woke you every night. We continued hiring live-in help for years, following Fred's very personal and unusual work recommendations for his trainees: "You can never have enough child care." Following his advice, nine of his fellows went on to become tenured Professors of Medicine, seven at Harvard Medical School.

Although it was challenging having both a family and a full-time job, our method of child care allowed us both flexibility and structure. Our live-in help came from Minnesota, Ohio, France, Spain, Vietnam, and Boston. Eventually, after the US relaxed its immigration policy, more Mandarin speaking Chinese citizens came to the US. We hired women from China who were originally trained in medicine, engineering, and physics who fortuitously became our full-time live-in babysitters.

Working at MIT provided me with variety. In addition to treating patients, I supervised residents in our affiliated hospitals, taught in the Harvard-MIT Health Sciences and Technology Program, was Assistant Director of the MIT Clinical Research Center, and established an acupuncture clinic. As a practitioner of internal medicine and primary care at MIT, my patients ranged from the 16-year-old student to my oldest patient, a 101-year-old woman who was a retired Navy psychologist. I liked seeing students, faculty, retirees, and staff from MIT's main campus, the many off-campus labs, Draper, Lincoln Laboratory, Haystack, Whitehead, the Broad Institute, the Bates Linear Accelerator Center, and even Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands whose residents came to visit us in Cambridge at regular intervals.

Working at MIT's Medical Department meant you needed to be both smart and humble. Many patients had already consulted the internet before seeing me, even in the 1980s. They thought they knew what their symptoms meant; in other words, they had already established a diagnosis for themselves and had decided what specialist or surgeon they wanted to see for a consultation. This type of patient was not unusual.

For example, I remember a graduate student who showed me an enlarged lump near her collarbone. She said it was a lymph node due to thyroid cancer and wanted to see the chief of surgery at the Beth Israel Hospital. I had trained at the BI in surgery, so I knew that at least her choice of

a surgeon was excellent. Her biopsy indeed revealed thyroid cancer, which was successfully removed. Twenty years later, as a professor at a university on the west coast, she returned to MIT to thank me for helping her get the care she needed.

MIT patients in general are very intelligent. However, some students were quite naive, as far as their health was concerned, and needed to learn the basics of how to take care of themselves. It also took me some time to understand the mind of an MIT patient; why did they ask so many questions and want to know all the possible options and answers even before a diagnosis was made? I had to learn how to understand patients.

For example, after performing a physical exam on a graduate student from Korea, I told him that he was in overall good health except for being about 40 pounds overweight. Most patients disliked hearing me talk about losing weight since it often meant being more diligent about diet and exercise. Nevertheless, I gave him very specific suggestions about reducing his carbohydrate intake to about 70% of his usual amount and perhaps starting a moderate exercise program. Six months later, a young man jogging on the street abruptly stopped me on the sidewalk. He had a big smile and wanted to say hello. I didn't recognize him as my patient because he had lost 40 pounds! He had actually followed my recommendations, treating them as a problem set to be solved. Once I understood his mindset, I gave other patients recommendations in the form of problem sets. Many patients, especially engineers of all ages, were very successful with this type of approach to their medical care.

People often ask me if it was difficult taking care of some of the famous professors, Nobel laureates, or their spouses at MIT. Certainly, I was aware of their special knowledge in their fields, but if they had a medical problem, they usually had the same questions and concerns as any other patient. After all, they were human just like the rest of us, trying to make sense of a problem and figuring out how to find a cure.

One of my patients was an older woman who had developed metastatic abdominal cancer and was recuperating from surgery at our MIT hospital. Without curative treatment available in America, her husband decided to fly her to Germany for an experimental cancer vaccine. Seeking additional alternatives, her daughter used our hospital kitchen to boil Japanese medicinal mushrooms. Regrettably, neither treatment was successful. The family was reluctant to take her home for hospice care, and she stayed at our MIT hospital for over 14 months until she passed away.

It is rare for any hospital to offer free prolonged medical and nursing care, the equivalent of hospice care. Fortunately, the Medical Department was not beholden to Medicare's Length of Stay requirements, as we had rejected Medicare reimbursement many years previously. The family was very fortunate that MIT relied on other financial methods to pay for patient care. Regrettably, MIT eventually closed its nationally accredited hospital.

In the mid-90s, a timid and soft-spoken female undergraduate student came in complaining of shortness of breath and chest pain. Tests indicated she had a mass in the right upper chamber of her heart which had migrated from her right adrenal gland. She underwent emergency open heart surgery. Immediately after her surgery, I went to see her in the cardiac intensive care unit of the hospital where I had trained as a resident and was an attending physician for several years. The operating room nurses were frantic because they could not reach the surgical resident who was busy in the operating room with another patient. He had prescribed ibuprofen for her postoperative pain. I was aghast as ibuprofen is ineffective for severe pain control. Without hesitation, I wrote an order for intravenous morphine in the medication book. The nurses immediately sent it to the pharmacy. Although I no longer had formal privileges at the hospital, no pharmacist or review board ever admonished me over the impromptu order. Doctors' handwriting is indeed undecipherable. I found out later that this previously timid student went on to become CEO of a billion-dollar company and credited MIT with her success.

Not all patients were emergencies who needed immediate diagnosis and treatment. At MIT, I was privileged to form long-term relationships with patients. One patient who came to see me when I started practicing medicine in 1981 remained under my care for over 35 years. She loved to learn and always brought me new articles about her diseases. When obtaining her family history, I found that her older brother had died from pancreatic cancer and his daughter had survived bilateral breast cancer. The patient's younger sister and the first of her sister's three daughters had also survived breast cancer. Another family member had lung cancer. Having learned from my husband's work in cancer genetics, I suggested she consider having blood tests to check for gene mutations which can cause cancer. This type of testing was just in the beginning stages. My patient, however, was hesitant because of privacy and insurance issues. Nevertheless, I brought up the subject of testing every year.

After 17 years as my patient, she finally agreed to have a blood test after she found out that her sister's second daughter had developed breast cancer. According to Betty (she agreed I could mention her name), I pounded my hand on the table and said "Now's the time!" She tested positive for the BRCA1 gene, which means the patient is likely at high risk for breast, ovarian, and pancreatic cancer. Betty's screening X-rays and MRI studies detected small masses in two separate sites: her fallopian tubes and pancreas. Biopsies of these two masses revealed precancerous lesions. Fortunately, early surgery was curative. She has been cancer-free for decades and just turned 95 years old.

I met her recently in Cambridge for a social visit. She calls me "Dr. Shiang, the physician who saved me twice." She revealed that her sister's third daughter recently underwent a prophylactic bilateral mastectomy because of a positive BRCA1 gene, proving that early information and detection can truly save people from getting cancer. Prevention of disease can be even more powerful than cure.

Not all of my patients had uplifting stories. A longtime patient of mine was in her 90s when she developed a bacterial infection in her bloodstream and went into shock. I visited her in the hospital on the third day of her stay in the intensive care unit. She was unresponsive and hooked up to a breathing machine. Her prognosis was poor, and she wasn't expected to survive. Her husband was pacing by her bedside. I asked him how she would have wanted to live the last days of her life. He said, "I know she wouldn't want this." Together, we decided to take her off the ventilator and move her out of the intensive care unit to a private room on the floor. Thirty-six hours later, she quietly died. Sometimes, a physician is there to help you die as well as live. That role is a privilege which I will never underestimate.

These are just a few of my many cases at MIT. The patients mentioned above are among my most memorable. Indeed, over the more than three decades I worked at MIT, I learned that it was difficult taking care of and curing everyone. I believe this happens in any physician's career. In some of the cases where patients did not have ideal outcomes, I look back and think what I might have done differently. Indeed, some patients decided to move on to other doctors as they felt we were not the best fit for each other. However, a few of these patients who left my practice changed their

minds and returned to see me again. This gave me a second chance to be their physician.

Around 2012, I started to think about retirement. I also began to notice that I had found it more difficult to take on new patients. Perhaps I was getting worn out from the effects of my husband's chronic illness. Fred had suffered a stroke in 2003, could not walk or talk, and was in the late stages of Alzheimer's disease. He required 24-hour care which I organized, hiring a crew of six full- and part-time caretakers to care for him in our home. After steady deterioration, without any cure available, he died in 2015.

I finally decided to retire from full-time work in 2017, grateful that my colleagues were capable of taking on my patients. Many of my patients were upset, but others graciously understood my need to change direction. I wanted to reinvent the future and focus on all the things I had deferred for years. This is the very advice I had given my patients: retire when you still have energy, ideas, and imagination.

Thinking back on my career at MIT, I was privileged to have a caring and supportive work environment. Our medical staff worked hard caring for patients, most of whom were motivated to get better and return to their studies, work, and research. My physician and nurse colleagues were committed to excellent patient care. If they were on call for my patients, I believed they would do the right thing. I could also count on the many dedicated MIT employees who made up our support staff, human services, and the facilities personnel. I believe that together we formed an exceptional team. And finally, I will always recall that during meetings, both of a medical and administrative nature, whenever there was a difficult question to answer, our first response was always based on "what is best for the patient?"

Being a physician has taught me many things. I have learned how life can change within seconds, get interrupted, and sometimes become lost. There is sadness. I have also learned how one's life can be uplifted and regained. There is joy as well. When I began my medical journey, I had no idea how much my career would help me fulfill my love of learning, curiosity about the world, and desire to help people. Even now, when I meet former patients on the street or at MIT events, I am very gratified when they tell me how I helped them or even changed their lives.

Without hesitation, I still recommend a career in medicine to any young person. And as I am often called upon to be a medical consultant to my family and friends, I am very fortunate I can continue working toward the fulfillment of the very same goals I had as a 14-year-old.

Elaine Li Shiang, MD

December, 2024



About Elaine Li Shiang, MD

Elaine L. Shiang worked for 35 years as a physician, administrator, and teacher at MIT's Medical Department and Clinical Research Center. After she fully retired from MIT in 2019, she started a shiitake mushroom farm in New Hampshire while helping her children start Mei Mei Dumpling Company and Flora's Wine Bar. She currently volunteers as a fundraiser for the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center, the Greater Malden Asian American Community Coalition, and the Phi Lambda Charitable Trust. She has great fun teaching her grandchildren and friends the game of Mah Jong.

How Did I Get Here?

Ron Latanision

When I thought about our theme, “How did I get here?”, my first thought was to consider... where?

As I grow increasingly senior (aka old!), I see subtlety in our theme: “How did I get here?” “Here” has many meanings to me today, probably more than earlier: a geographic place, one that is physical, my emotional sense, an intellectual movement... Geographically, here is Winchester. Physically, here means the evolving aches that come with aging, some of which are more annoying than others. Emotionally, I now look at my grandchildren and the prospect of great-grandchildren. That is high on my list of expectations. And intellectually or spiritually or philosophically... I am going to focus on the last of these options.

I think more and more about how my vision and trust in technology have evolved and, importantly, how the public trust in technology seems now in the balance. All of those who are technologists must consider how to preserve the public’s trust that technology serves social interests and needs.

Earlier this year and in the context of my role as the Neil Armstrong Distinguished Visiting Professor at Purdue, I spoke at the university about a topic of intense interest to me: the Materials Genome Initiative (MGI). MGI is a product of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) during the Obama Administration. MGI was launched in June of 2011 with the goal of deploying advanced materials that meet national priorities and societal needs. Instead of trial and error, materials are being developed using first principles as part of this computational materials science and engineering enterprise—with the aim of reducing the materials development cycle of 10–20 years by more than 50% and reducing the development cost proportionately. MGI is reshaping materials science and engineering in terms of education and practice. It is a demonstrably useful process by which technology serves society; it enables efficient creation of such materials as photoelectrodes for splitting water to produce hydrogen, a source of energy. Sunlight and water are the most abundant resources on our planet, and they are both free. They are available to legacy and non-legacy nations. There are no political or geopolitical boundaries of concern in harnessing power this way.

I began by first telling my audience how honored I was to speak as a Neil Armstrong Professor. I never met Neil, but like millions of people around the world, I watched him step off the Apollo 11 Lunar Module onto the surface of the moon just before 11:00 p.m. EST on July 20th of 1969. I was



(Photo of Ron Latanision | Alli Chaney)

a bit younger then. Most of the audience had not been born yet! I watched Neil and Buzz Aldrin together from our living room in Silver Spring, MD. I was a postdoc at the National Bureau of Standards in Gaithersburg. This is one of those moments that you never forget. I often think about the demonstration of trust in science and technology that Neil and his astronaut colleagues exhibited during this historic event and many others. And I felt a genuine sense of pride as an engineer. Just remarkable!

Though I had not met Neil, I did in fact work with astronauts while I was at MIT as the Director of the Materials Processing Center (MPC). At that time, NASA had a great deal of interest in microgravity processing of materials—large single crystal semiconductors, protein crystals, and many others. My colleagues and I at MPC would visit Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, AL periodically and help prepare and work with SkyLab and later SpaceLab astronauts. Space-grown crystals will probably never be commercially viable, but they are consistently of high quality. Once we understand that fundamental materials science, we can search for a way to reliably reproduce these crystals on Earth, in the presence of gravity.

I did meet and know one of the last men to walk on the moon, Harrison (Jack) Schmitt. He and Gene Cernan landed the Apollo 17 Lunar Module on the moon in December 1972. I met him while I was on sabbatical from MIT from 1982–1983 as an advisor to the U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Science and Technology, and while Jack was a U.S. Senator from New Mexico. He is a geologist and was the lunar module pilot, and while he got off the lunar module first in 1972, he also got back on first... and became the second to last man to walk on the moon!

At this point in history today, having watched the ease with which disinformation and misinformation can be produced and circulated using the Internet and the Web and even more so with the explosive evolution of Generative Artificial Intelligence, I have great concern. A world of alternative reality has been produced using contemporary technology—fake news, fake videos, and more. Public distrust of politicians has been a long-standing concern, but the growing public distrust of science and technology is an even greater concern to me given the technologically intense planet on which we live. In both cases, the distrust has been earned and is the root of many of our social problems today. For example, we technologists have made it possible for fake news to become a regular part of our lives. Some technologists seem wittingly or unwittingly determined to induce total distrust of technology on the part of the public. But, some thoughtful leaders, Senator Chris Murphy (D-Conn) and Governor Spencer Cox (R-Utah), have launched a national conversation with the intent to restore the common good. They look to involving intellectuals and activists in this endeavor. Notably, technologists do not seem to be included in their thinking. I think that we should become part of the conversation.

We technologists developed the Internet and then the World Wide Web. The Web was and is intended to provide a platform that would make information available globally, which is useful. I am certain that the developers had not intended that these otherwise useful technologies would be transformed into sources of misinformation and disinformation, among other distortions that have so affected our lives. In my view, this transformation is driven by fear and greed, not by interest in serving a useful social purpose, and (this is a long way of getting to my point) we technologists have not been a part of a conversation to assign responsibility and accountability to those who are misappropriating these technologies. The attitude seems to be “if it serves a political or geopolitical purpose, do it,” or “if it makes money, do it!” I am not opposed to technologically creative people becoming wealthy. I would just prefer that this wealth be derived from societally beneficial technology. To quote my friend Janusz Tabis: “As we are only bound by the laws of nature, it is crucial that wisdom underlies our decision-making. After all, because we are intelligent and can do something, it doesn’t mean that we should.”

I often think about the public reaction to the introduction of any new technology into the marketplace. GenAI is not any new technology. This one is shattering. But I suppose that to the average thoughtful person, the telephone must have been shattering—just as the Model T was. What is different in the case of AI is that it does not just add a new dimension to our lives; it presents technology as a force beyond nature. It allegedly thinks and feels, though it is not clear on what scale and in what detail it compares to human thinking. On top of that, we don't really understand the particulars of how humans think. I just worry a bit that technology may be heading so far out front of humans that people may begin to distrust science and technology on a level that is unprecedented today. That would be counterproductive beyond reason in my opinion.

I think that it is crucial to medicine, communication, electric generation and storage, food production, air and water quality monitoring, public safety, etc., that above all AI does not diminish that public trust in science and technology.

However, fear and greed have served as human motivators for a very long time; think about Sputnik. Think also about the “profit at the expense of all others” attitude that seems to be typical of the social media giants. Until we get beyond the greed stage—and I think of greed not only in terms of personal fortune, but also personal agendas—technology will continue to appeal to some of society's most creative, but for the wrong reasons.

GenAI has value if used responsibly and with accountability. It has been useful in developing new materials from first principles as in the case of the Materials Genome Initiative, and such data management tools are valuable in other spaces as well. But I am equally confident that it can and is being abused. I had hoped that we might have learned from the experience of the Internet and Web, but I see little evidence that we have. I am concerned that fear (in terms of losing market share) and greed (in terms of losing market share) will prevail in the tech giants, and this will allow abuse by bad actors to overwhelm otherwise useful initiatives. It seems to me that the future of GenAI is all about how people will choose to use it: for good purposes or bad. I am confident that it will be used for both, just as is the case with the Internet and the Web. The simple fact is that there are lots (probably a majority) of people who will choose to use it for bad purposes (scammers, for example), and unless those who develop such technologies also develop a conscience and attach some limits (if that is possible) to what can be done with their technologies, we are in for a very uncomfortable ride.

I am concerned on behalf of my children and grandchildren and generations to come that GenAI is potentially both supremely useful and supremely dangerous. How it evolves into our social fabric is a function of the good or bad sense of those who are developing/presenting this rapidly evolving technology and those who choose to use it...for good or bad purposes.

Looking forward to their future and our collective future on this planet, it seems to me that in terms of both practice and education, corporate culture and engineering education need change. The technologists we produce in our universities must begin to realize that they share responsibility and accountability for the technology they develop and introduce into the marketplace. We have struggled to introduce engineering ethics into the curriculum throughout the educational system. Likewise, the inclusion of social science into the engineering mindset is needed but almost completely absent.

In my judgment, we cannot expect this to occur through government policy changes, since there are not enough people in Congress who know of or are willing to listen to people who understand the impact of technology on people. Nor can we expect corporations to self-police. This never works in practice, but a change in corporate culture that seriously considers both the well-being of their shareholders and their customers would be a move in the right direction. I understand that for-profit businesses do need to profit in order to survive, and I am not opposed to corporate leaders and shareholders sharing in the profits, but I hope that at some point this will all come to benefit the public rather than to knowingly put the public at risk. To do otherwise could irretrievably erode public trust in science and technology.



About Ron Latanision

Ron Latanision is Professor Emeritus of Materials Science and Engineering at MIT. In 2002, after 28 years at MIT, he joined the science and technology consulting firm Exponent as a Corporate Vice President and subsequently as the firm's first Senior Fellow. He is the Editor in Chief of the National Academy of Engineering Quarterly, The Bridge, and of the De Gruyter journal Corrosion Reviews. He has always loved to write. In his words: "The Writing Group is a real find for me: the feedback from classmates and counsel from the leadership team now make writing almost addictive!"

Toby

Thom Opar

Did you ever wonder how you evolved from one point of your life to another? Often, as I walk side-by-side with my now-trusty companion, I remember a time long ago when such an occurrence would be unthinkable. In days past, I would appreciatively walk alone, unhindered by another's demands. What changed so that I now willingly walk with a partner? My answer is found in the following story of my long, slow evolution from reticence to acceptance of a new friend.

I am not a dog person. I never had a dog and never had a desire to have one. My earliest experiences with this species were adverse and unpleasant. Most that have been permanently etched onto my psyche occurred when I began delivering daily newspapers as a preteen paperboy. The encounters that I suffered along my route reinforced my apprehensions toward sharing a tiny living space with any one of those unruly beasts. Random, unconstrained dogs approached me every day. I would fret whenever one turned in my direction and eyed me with unknowable intentions. Does it think I'm a threat? Is it going to attack? Will it nip and tug my pant legs? Worse yet, is it going to jump up and expect me to pet it? And why all that inane barking?



(Toby | Photo: Thom Opar)

Most of this angst was inflicted by two Dobermans who were locked inside, guarding a warehouse that I passed every weekday afternoon. My attempted stealthy passage would always evoke a fit of fierce, bare-teeth, ferocious snarling. Invariably, the pair would launch themselves toward me. My only protection from a bloody disaster was a terrifyingly fragile glass pane. Even though I walked by every day and consciously made no threatening overtures, the result was always the same fear-inducing frenzy. In their defense, those fearsome dogs successfully did their jobs, since no one ever broke into that building.

A less threatening canine, but one much higher on the annoyance factor, was my neighbors' tiny, fluffy, white, "I-don't-know-what-it-is" dog. Whenever I played in my adjoining yard, it yipped and yapped incessantly while bounding aimlessly in circles around its postage stamp yard. My calming hand, offered cautiously through the wire fence, offered no comfort; it only initiated a chest-pumping display of faux courage—a bold attack that quickly turned into a cowardly retreat, accompanied by sustained squealing.

To be honest, every encounter in those years wasn't a heart-pounding, ear-splitting occurrence. A friend who lived three houses over had a big, brown German Shepherd named Sarge. Sarge was the alpha dog on the block. He paraded through the neighborhood with unmistakable confidence. Unleashed at my friend's side, Sarge was a hyperaware guardian. His stern gaze would squelch any unwanted advances, human or otherwise. Yet, whenever I leapt over the fence into his yard, his reaction to my blatant, unwarned violation was a calm glance. Knowingly, confidently, he offered no challenge to my overt intrusion into his realm. Years later, when I read the Jack London classics, I pictured Sarge. He had become my dog paradigm. He exemplified the symbiosis between animal and human. I could as easily visualize him leaving his wildness behind to be a loyal friend and companion as I could watch him succumb to the yearning to return to his primal roots.

Years after my paperboy days, near the end of my sophomore year in college, my life took a new turn when, on my first visit to the family home of my late wife, Cathy, I shared a living space with a dog. There, in addition to meeting her parents and three siblings, I was introduced to a big black lab named Terry. As soon as I walked through the door, it became obvious that Cathy and Terry had a special relationship. Terry danced and pranced, her tail waving wildly, when Cathy entered the house. Cathy, for her part,

immediately fell to the ground, pulled Terry onto her lap, and lavished the excited dog with a prolonged, vigorous embrace.

The depth of their affection became clear later that evening when Cathy, holding a steel-bristled hairbrush much like the one that she used to control her own thick, curly locks, walked into the family room with Terry anxiously loping behind. Cathy sat down on the sofa. Terry sat on her haunches facing Cathy, while I was relegated to the sidelines. For an interminable time, Cathy stroked Terry until tufts of black hair matted the stiff brush and Terry's coat glowed with a glistening black sheen. Soon, they were both smiling—if that is possible for a dog.

When both were satisfied, Cathy put aside the brush. Terry lay down and contorted herself into a tight ball. I hushed a sigh of relief. My turn to nestle with Cathy had finally arrived. I inched closer, seeking the same attention that she lusciously doled out to the dog at our feet. But instead of receiving Cathy's undivided attention, I was delivered a lesson in interspecies relationships; I watched as Terry became protective, or maybe it was jealousy. As the gap began to close, Terry looked up, unwound from her ball, and forced her muzzle into the narrowing space. With steely determination, she worked at the small space until a wide, dog-sized chasm opened. Cathy's arm dropped from my shoulder; my hope for tenderness was shattered by the fur of a 60-pound, self-satisfied retriever. At that moment, I realized that Terry wasn't just a dog. She was fully a member of the family who knew, and guarded, her place in the hierarchy of affection, setting my place in the pecking order.

Many years later, near the end of my seventh decade, my run of dog-free years ended. In 2019, two years after I moved into the first-floor apartment of my daughter and son-in-law's two-family home, Toby, a tiny, curly-haired Goldendoodle, appeared on the threshold.

Toby arrived in the middle of a snowy winter. A small area in the backyard was kept clear, so his tiny body didn't have to compete with deep snow as he pranced about. As a puppy, he spent much of his time indoors, protected from a particularly cold and snowy New England winter. As springtime arrived and the hold of winter became a memory, I was asked if I could let Toby out into the yard at least twice a day and, if willing, take him on a walk. I was retired; I had plenty of free time. I frequently took long walks along the Charles River. Wanting to be helpful to my kids, I willingly accepted the task.

I never expected that my good-natured offer would plunge me into an earthbound purgatory, as if I was seeking retribution for my sins. I quickly learned that Toby's puppy-mind concept of a "walk" was orthogonal to mine and good-naturedly accepted the reality that I had to suffer if he was to benefit.

On a typical Toby-walk day, I march upstairs and call him. He bounds over. I wrangle his harness, snap on his leash, and then check the status of the green poop-bag holder. With all the boxes checked, I lead him downstairs and out into the sunshine for his walk.

At this point in my life, my canonical walk is long and fast, measured miles with a race-walking pace. A "good" walk means covering five miles in less than an hour. This is not what Toby has in mind. Besides a mandatory poop stop, his walk is an investigation. Every tree, fence post, garbage can along the way must be interrogated. Doggy-Nirvana is reached a few blocks from home as we step onto the neighborhood bike path. In addition to close encounters with others of his species (all of which are too close for me), we come upon a weird-looking, unnamed weed that I discover is his version of the Icelandic sagas. Whenever he arrives at one of these broad-leaved tomes, he stops. His nose scours the surface as he intently uncovers the inscribed history of past visitors. When he is satisfied, he closes the chapter, then adds his signature to the page. The path is riddled with numerous unread opportunities. Suffering through his incessant stops, I picture myself years back as an undergrad at the University of Rochester. There, I would take luxuriant expeditions through library stacks, walking up and down the dingy aisles. Left and right, up and down, I scan the shelves. When I spot a potential treasure, I pull the dusty book from the shelves and randomly leaf through the pages hoping to dig out a shiny nugget of information. Once satisfied with what I found, or didn't, the cycle would repeat—move a few steps forward, scan the books, select another, then scan the pages for an interesting passage. When I feel the tug on Toby's leash, stretching toward a new find, I realize that he is emulating me. I can understand his drive, his inquisitiveness. I indulge him. I slacken his leash, allowing him to expand his explorations.

Eventually, our looping walk returns us home. I refill his water bowl and congratulate him for his accomplishment with a treat. Exhausted from his adventure and what he has learned, he curls up in a golden ball at my feet. He remains at my side, loosening his rein on me as I travel through the world on my computer.

Over time, our daily routine subtly changes. We've trained each other. He still investigates. He poops. He makes frequent stops to enable him to read his favorite Edda pages. He willingly obliges to my gentle nudges as I urge him to pick up the pace. Our mileage increases along with our speed. At the end of the day, when I am asked "How was your day?" I answer: "It was great. Toby and I went on a walk. We walked around Arsenal Park a few times." My emphasis on "we" has changed. I am no longer referencing a furry, four-legged, soulless animal; I am referring to a partner, a fellow traveler.

This was not the first time in my life when a seeming act of benevolence changed my life. My long, slow evolution with Toby, from reluctance to acceptance, mirrors the start of my lifelong relationship with Cathy; my assertion that "I am not a dog person" could be replaced with "I am not a people person." Instances of awkward encounters and social naiveté that were the hallmark of my early years reinforced my tendency toward detachment, limiting human connections. Yet, after reluctantly doing a favor for a college friend by agreeing to walk over to Lovejoy to meet some freshmen girls, I began, as I did with Toby, a multi-year process: miles of campus walks; innumerable shared meals; side-by-side study carrels; hours of gameplay; and quiet nighttime talks that opened my arms to a life-long embrace of a special, wavy-haired, curvy freshman girl.

Finally, as I walk upstairs today to deliver the mail, to raid the pantry, or to simply say "hi" to my grandkids, Toby eagerly greets me. He leaps, placing his front paws on my chest (something that I know should not be encouraged, but he is my grand-dog, and grandparents are expected to spoil their grandkids). As I return his beautiful, brown-eyed, loving gaze, I scratch his head, around his collar, and under his muzzle. I no longer see a dog. I see Toby, my friend.



About Thom Opar

Mere months after I retired from MIT Lincoln Laboratory in 2017, I joined the Nita Regnier Memoir Group. With over 30 years of academic and professional writing behind me, I found my portfolio of personal stories sorely lacking. Having grown up in Upstate New York in the 50s and 60s, coming of age academically, socially, and emotionally in the 70s, living through decades of couplehood and parenthood, followed by a short period of grief eventually to emerge as a grandparent, has provided me with a trove of raw material. Now with the assistance of this group, my stories are finding their way into written form.



Association of MIT Retirees
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Avenue, Bldg. E19-711
Cambridge, MA 02139-4307
617-253-7910
retirees.assoc@mit.edu
retirees.mit.edu

