

Codependence and Recovery

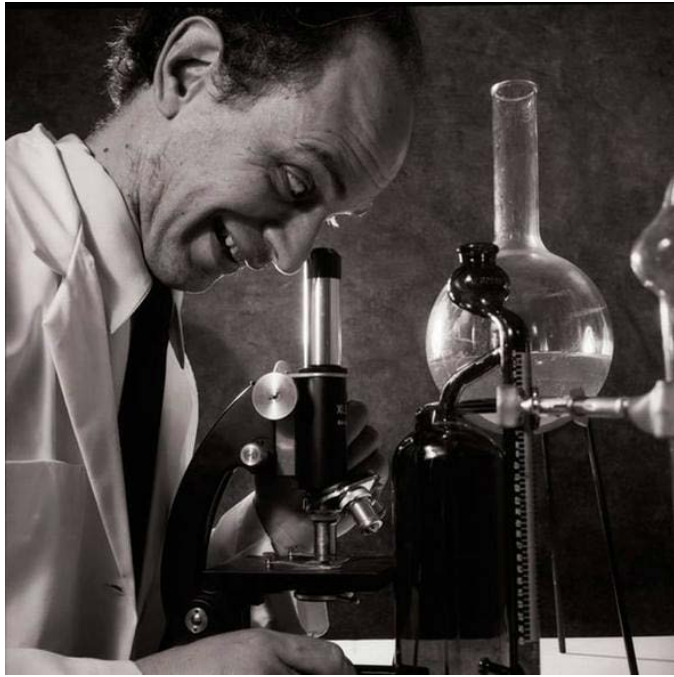


Figure 75 - "Steve Mass, the owner of the Mudd Club, 1978,"
photographic portrait with permission by William Coupon

I don't recall ever getting a birthday, graduation or any other gift from my brother, or vice versa. It's not something we did in our family. Both parents, especially my mother, came from levels of poverty where unnecessary expenses could mean not having food for the table.

My mother had the same psychology of deprivation as the mother of Hansel and Gretel. Mom's father was an alcoholic Hungarian-Jewish shoe cobbler and her mother was an ultra-religious Romanian Jew. Poverty menaced and haunted their daily lives. In the fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm, however, other villains lurk in the thornbush—witches, sorcerers. These horrifying tales of evil enchanters and enchantresses also inspired Wagner protegee Englebert Humperdinck, who helped Wagner prepare *Parsifal*. *Parsifal* also features witches and sorcerers from the depths and soul

of German lore. And who were these phantoms? Jews, homosexuals, child-molesters, cannibals, serial killers. Take your pick

So deeply instilled was this mentality of poverty that my mother could destroy a family gathering if one of her children, even when adult, ordered a coffee not included in the price of the meal. She would be similarly upset about wasting money if we gave her a gift for Mother's Day. Birthday gifts to us tended to be thrift shop items, more notable for their cheapness than any thoughtfulness. Paradoxically, however, when it came to our needs—for schooling, travel and housing, our parents were often generous beyond their means.

The discomfort of unnecessary expense from such a background is understandable and arouses compassion. But relegating celebration altogether was neurotic and had unintended consequences. Beyond a rare informational or list-serve email, there was never any correspondence to communicate milestones among any of the siblings. While this situation fitfully and painstakingly changed with my sister, it persisted with Steve. We never exchanged cards or even well wishes. It seemed sad and awkward not to be able to acknowledge and celebrate Steve's 75th Birthday at the 2015 Mudd Club Rummage Sale benefit.

Actually, I can recall 3 offerings from Steve over the course of our lives. Though I don't recall comparable gestures from me, they may be forgotten, too painful to remember. Though it has been challenging to acknowledge, I played my own role in our dynamic.

The first of these items was a bongo drum when I was 10 or so. It was from South America, where precocious, late-teenage Steve did some kind of apprenticeship with the Diplomatic Corps. The instrument was large and made wonderful sounds. Despite having no more inclination for beating a drum than playing piano, I loved it.

The second item he brought to a dinner I co-hosted with Arnie at our home in New York in late 1981. The guests included our friend Rosa von Praunheim, the German gay activist and underground filmmaker who lives in Berlin (and who adopted the name "Rosa" in homage to the Polish-German-Jewish socialist hero and martyr Rosa Luxemburg), and writer Martin Duberman, another illustrious figure of the gay left who was a close friend and mentor in those years. What Steve brought was neither wrapped nor inscribed. It was one of those hardcover used books with faded covers and discolored page corners that lotus-positioned street peddlers sell on blankets.

The book was a memoir by television news commentator and personality Shana Alexander, who kept using the phrase “Jabberwocky time” in this chatty tome about her life in media and the arts. From the moment I got this oddity, I sensed that it was intended as camp. For Steve, people like Shana Alexander may have inhabited the same planet but had no more in common with him and fellow hipsters than the trans street tarts and druggies who star in Sean Baker’s film *Tangerine* had with the family-traditionalist Armenian mother-in-law of one of their regular hookups.

This was one of those times when I couldn’t help but wonder if Steve saw me as this uptown opera type, in sync with his and his club’s legendary snobbery about anyone not certifiable as authentic downtown counter-cultural, though I have no recollection of him ever demeaning my interest in opera or my Wagnerism. On the basis of his own study of philosophy, so much of it German, he must have been intrigued by my preoccupation with Wagner. Meanwhile, that’s not something we ever talked much about. Whether Steve ever consciously considered the issue of internalized antisemitism that shaded both our lives is not something I was ever consciously aware of.

Apart from people dressing up and down and appearing in often retro guises, satirically pretending to be other than who they were, nor was any such sensibility sentient at 77 White Street. But the Mudd Club did become a singular venue for the intersection of the worlds of serious music and cutting-edge culture. Though I don’t recall Wagner or opera being sent up, put down or being otherwise discernible in any of the club’s happenings, several events there were produced by Pulitzer-prize winning music critic Tim Page. They combined contemporary classical with rock and pop. I got to know Page a bit in those years via my own writing about music, which was mostly about homosexuality, music and the closet.

The third offering from Steve was one I continue to ponder. In the heyday of the Mudd Club I was experiencing my own descent into alcoholism, with which I finally hit my bottom as an alcoholic in late 1983. The Mudd Club closed not long after, two years into the first press reports, many of them my own, of the AIDS epidemic. Though I had already stopped drinking for some weeks—and for that matter eating, sleeping and having sex, I was hospitalized for major depression in the psych ward at St. Vincent’s Hospital. St. V’s, as we

referred to it, is also the hospital where our mother died nearly 20 years later from metastatic cancer. It's now a luxury condo complex that faces an AIDS memorial park with a single, circular, quote from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

The park's serenity and the power of Whitman's words obfuscate the reality that the hospital's ministry to the gay people of Greenwich Village, the charitable ideal of Mother Theresa notwithstanding, was often discernibly and distressingly homophobic, especially in the early period of the epidemic. This was in contrast to Beth Israel, widely known for a pioneering, embracing outreach to underserved communities, especially drug addicts and persons with AIDS. One reason Beth Israel became such a beacon of hope for the dispossessed and underserved is because of the vision of its most illustrious director, Dr. Robert Newman. Newman, who died in 2018, tirelessly championed the trailblazing efforts of Drs. Vincent Dole, Marie Nyswander and Mary Jean Creek in establishing Methadone Maintenance treatment, which quickly became the standard of treatment for opioid dependence. Thus did Beth Israel become one of the world's largest and most distinguished centers of addiction research and treatment services.

The AIDS memorial park obfuscates the harsher reality that the conversion of this precious community resource into luxury condos left Greenwich Village with no hospital. In fact, with the similar loss of Beth Israel years later, most of lower Manhattan is now without full-service hospitals. It seems a sad but telling coincidence that the loss of Dr. Newman, a voice of conscience and advocate of minority concern, coincides with the loss of such advocacy by the country's political leadership.



Figure 76 - The NYC AIDS Memorial, opposite the site of St. Vincent's Hospital, now a luxury condo complex, public domain

Larry Kramer wrote his version of my “nervous breakdown” and hospitalization at St. V’s in his composite character of “Mickey Marcus” (named after an Israeli general) in *The Normal Heart*. My own experience of it was very different. I hadn’t yet admitted that I was alcoholic, which took me years of detours in denialism. I’d begun attending recovery meetings, of flirting with recovery, but never taking the full leap to admit that I was alcoholic, powerless over this compulsion, and that my life had become unmanageable.

The main source of this breakdown for me, as I saw it, was the pain I felt in not being able to give myself more fully to my writing at this key moment of the unfolding of the AIDS epidemic, with its life-and-death importance to the gay community as well as to drug addicts. My writing about the epidemic soon to be known as AIDS was mostly for the gay press, all of it unpaid.

But I also understood at a deep visceral level that telling my own story as well as writing about AIDS, gay health, arts and culture, was of vital importance to me personally and in my emergence as a writer. Not unlike many of the writers as well as artists and musicians Steve gave sanctuary to at the Mudd Club, when I couldn’t find ways of being my authentic creative self, of being the writer I most wanted to be, I became ever more prone to hedonistic and self-destructive behaviors, behaviors which can stoke the embers of creativity as they render them more dangerous for causing fires and burning out.

Those most vulnerable to the epidemic included virtually all of those who went to the Mudd Club. Talk about spoilers and party poopers. What I was reporting was not something any of us wanted to hear or discuss. I can't really indict Steve for an indifference that was common and which I myself could collude with. Not entirely unlike Trump with regard to the Covid pandemic, I didn't want to stoke panic. Steve, like most of those I knew, initially made little effort to deal with the rapidly and increasingly terrifying information. Meanwhile, so far as I was able to glean, few club people were reading my articles. Nor were they being distributed in club venues; nor was I pushing to place them there. Of those few who were reading my articles, fewer wanted to discuss it further. This widespread disinterest, indifference and distancing enabled my low self-esteem and codependence, exacerbated by an increasingly clinical depression, in a matrix of alcoholism, "recreational" marijuana use and 2+ packs-a-day cigarette smoking.

Adding to the mix was my own defensiveness of gay sexual life and liberation. If people didn't want to imagine the worst—that we were on the cusp of one of the greatest epidemics in recorded history, a cataclysm that would force us to rethink all our values and behaviors—I could be right there with them, at least in spirit. Even as a physician who should and did know better, I was their defender. I was one of them. Even as I continued to report on what became "the most important new public health problem in the United States" (the title of one of my early pieces), I remained a standard bearer for gay liberation and the greater sexual revolution. As such, I would find myself speaking out of both sides of my mouth, though the "sexual revolution" that I championed was not the 1960's America playground of Playboy magazine and Plato's Retreat, but the far more sweeping and edifying sea change conjured by Wilhelm Reich in his book, *The Sexual Revolution*. While its concepts of sexual liberation did contain precepts of sexual freedom and liberation and was tolerant of promiscuity and polyamery, it had mostly to do with a bigger picture of expanding sex education, sex research, women's and sexual minority rights, access to contraception, STD treatment, and health care.

Clearly, we were all in this together. More support for my efforts would have been welcome, but I didn't have the self-confidence to push for it more insistently. Meanwhile, it wasn't forthcoming from

Steve or my two closest friends—leading music critics Peter G. Davis and Richard Dyer. Nor from another of my closest friends in that period, historian Martin Duberman. What support there was felt more obligatory and delimited than genuine and helpful. Granted, I'm not and never would be a Martin Duberman and my writing even by my own estimation was too often turgid and tangential. OK. But an early primitive effort to put together a book proposal on the emerging epidemic entitled "Chronicles of The Violaceous Death" was sharply rejected by Marty's agent, Frances Golden, with no follow-up encouragement, neither from her nor Marty. Nor for that matter was there any encouragement to submit the proposal to her in the first place. While I often told brother Steve how impressed I was with what he had achieved with his club, just as I'd often told Marty of my admiration for his work, and my admiration and gratitude for Dick and Peter knew few bounds, there was no reciprocity of affirmation or encouragement of me or my work. A classic circumstance and setup for codependence.

The memories I have of Dick and Peter include many that were personal and based on friendship, but are more primarily of the many concerts, operas, cabarets, restaurants, trips, parties and haunts we attended together, usually with me as their guest. In Boston, I got to meet Dick's close friends—the poet Lloyd Schwartz, who eventually won a Pulitzer for music criticism that mostly appeared in the *Boston Phoenix*. Others in Dick's entourage were Lloyd's partner, the painter Ralph Hamilton, poet Frank Bidart, whose extended monologue about Callas (whose "portrait" Hamilton had painted, I tried to love but didn't), songwriter Tom Lehrer, Randy Fuller (of the Fuller Brush Company), who eventually produced a road-show *Ring* cycle and became Boston's leading opera patron, Michael Steinberg, the music critic and program annotator who was one of Dick's mentors, and Peter McNamara, the unhappy gay son of then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.

And many singers. There was mezzo Carolyn James, who became Dick's good friend; Mary Strebing, whose living-room piano rendering of Doretta's song from *La Rondine*, with its soaring tessitura, was as passionate as her bawdy tales of policemen with big night sticks; Mark Pearson, the fey, fastidious basso profundo and choral director; and David Arnold, the ebony-black bass-baritone

whose struggles with race, career and being gay were poignantly shared by Dick and others who championed him.

Alas, tragedy struck with the suicide of one of our close friends, Joseph R Ruggieri, Jr, who suffered from severe depression, greatly exacerbated by the extreme homophobia of his father. Joe was a connoisseur of Chinese cuisine and had gotten to know Boston-Cambridge cooking celebrity Joyce Chen. Another Cambridge celebrity of cooking, who I'd see on the street, was Julia Child, perhaps history's most famous—and doubtless tallest—female chef. She shopped at Savenor's, an old unassuming neighborhood grocery where she could be seen negotiating with the butcher.

Another notable of Dick's Boston/Harvard/gay and music circle was the composer Daniel Pinkham of the Lynn, Mass family of Lydia Pinkham, who famously marketed alcohol-based home remedies for "female ailments." Several examples grace my collection of antique American medicine bottles, likewise mostly "special" or "home" remedies, alcohol-based and without any medical value. Quackery, that time-honored American tradition behind the ascendancy of history's greatest snake-oil salesman, Donald Trump. Pinkham taught at the Boston Conservatory, Boston University and Harvard.

There was the Boston premiere of crossover success, *Final Alice*, with the resplendent Barbara Hendricks in glittering white and sequins as soloist, with the beaming composer of the piece, David del Tredici, in the audience. Years later in New York, David would become my friend. Many of these composers were gay, David openly and controversially so, rattling the closets of those, including Dick and Peter, but also Ned Rorem, who embraced more respectable professional decorum. Not unlike Warhol and Sontag, it was OK with them if people knew or surmised they were gay, but being publicly, outspoken or confrontationally so, the way David del Tredici could seem so invested in doing—wearing dresses for performances and being otherwise "unnecessarily provocative"—was another matter.

Though they had little sense of it, Dick and Peter were mentors as well for my writing. In contrast to my characteristic turgidity and discursiveness, Dick's writing was as natural and conversational as it was professional. It's Dick who taught me, as a writer, that you could say things like "that that" and that that would be OK. From Dick and Peter I learned values I wanted to be as good as they at applying—objectivity at the expense of subjectivity, and reticence. That less is

often more is a maxim most writers must learn, often and certainly in my case, the hard way.

That Dick and Peter were neither front-line activists for gay liberation nor out may have been regrettable, but their more modest efforts of not bothering with “beards” (female escorts who could help one pass as straight), were brave for their time and contributory to social and political change. Rather than tossing Molotov cocktails, they would drop “hairpins” (pre-gay liberation vernacular for hints of gayness). Dick, for example, occasionally wrote gay-ish book reviews for the *Globe*. (To my knowledge, neither Dick nor Peter ever wrote for the gay press or was ever interviewed therein.) One such review by Dick was of J.R. Ackerly’s *My Father and Myself*, about the closet. I don’t think Peter ever overtly denied who and what he was, even for the *New York Times* under his homophobic bosses Abe Rosenthal and Arthur Gelb, but mentions of gay figures as such or discussions of gay subject matter or implications were scrupulously careful, impersonal, and otherwise rare during the propulsively expanding early period of AIDS and gay liberation.

The role of music critics was also changing. In earlier decades, music critics exerted more influence. They more often wrote big “think pieces,” as Dick and Peter called them, essays with more substance than the pre-event puff pieces of today. Yet even the older, more fulsome music criticism would rarely challenge us to consider information previously off-limits as too personal or extrinsic to sacrosanct art and artistry.

As the role and power of music critics continued to erode, the only critic of renown to have a regular column, to express himself (female critics were few and far between) at greater length on issues of moment was Andrew Porter in the *New Yorker*. Alas, Porter was likewise closeted, reticent and apolitical. Eventually, only Peter G. Davis had a regular column—in *New York*—and even that tenure was summarily halted when *New York* abruptly eliminated its regular music coverage.

Now there are only Alex Ross’s intermittent pieces, again in the *New Yorker*. Ross is openly and sometimes thoughtfully gay, as is senior *New York Times* music critic Anthony Tommasini (who Dick was mentor to in Boston), but both alternate with other music and culture writers and their think pieces are increasingly thin and irregular. Both have written books. Tommasini is the author of a

biography of Virgil Thomson and Ross is the author, most recently, of *Wagnerism*. Inexorably, however, the trajectory of music criticism has been downsized from substantial essays on big topics to perfunctory performance reviews and artist profiles.

The affirming perspective one can have of Dick and Peter is that which is so impressively achieved by Todd Haynes in his 2002 film, *Far From Heaven*. Here, as in Haynes's equally impressive film *Carol*, the protagonists are not soldiers leading charges. In fact, they're not even political. Rather, they are ordinary people who find the courage to take small, unheralded steps toward honesty, happiness and fulfillment in their own lives. Arguably, it's they, more than confrontational activists, who are carrying out the great sweep of social and political changes that became variously referred to as gay liberation and the sexual revolution.



Figure 77 - Maria Callas and Giuseppe di Stefano, Schiphol Airport, Holland, 1973, photograph by Anefo Onbekend, Wikimedia Commons, public domain dedication

For a fellow opera queen, Dick's and Peter's surpassing love for singers and opera was like the discovery of vast and unending hoards of treasure. My most cherished memory of this bounty was Maria Callas, who I so loved and admired, on her farewell tour in Boston. Would she show? It was down to the wire. Finally, she arrived, though without her partner—the legendary but also way-past-prime Italian tenor Giuseppe di Stefano, later revealed to have been Callas's ex-lover.

There she was, flashing that famous from-the-side smile for a throng of fans outside the stage door at Symphony Hall. (We were

watching it all from across the street.) Though Callas's voice was broken beyond measure, there were more than enough magical moments to validate the esteem held for her by a formidable majority of music and opera lovers. From the highest ranks of her colleagues in music, opera and the arts, she was widely regarded to be the greatest operatic artist of our time. I will be forever grateful to Dick for giving me this gift of one of the peak experiences of my opera-going life.

Not quite in that league but not so far from it was Beverly Sills in her varied roles for Sarah Caldwell (Rosina in *Barber of Seville*, Giulietta in Bellini's *I Capuletti e I Montecchi*, Norma) in Boston. Caldwell was a forerunner of Peter Sellars, offering deconstructive, creative productions of standard and offbeat works. How much did she influence her Boston contemporary Sellars? Sills, we learned, sang what had to be one of the most "sizzling" (as Peter once described her best singing) of her recorded performances, the great final scene in *Maria Stuarda*, literally on fire with a cold and fever.

Another highlight was Mabel Mercer at Boston's Copley Plaza, a stone's throw from Dick's principal haunt, the Napoleon Club, a piano bar and one of the oldest gay bars in America. The Napoleon Club, which finally closed in 2013 and was said to have been visited by the likes of Judy Garland, Liberace and Elton John, was too frou-frou for me. In those years I preferred scruffier venues. Mercer had to have been in her 80's. Peter was with us that evening and, in his own Capote-esque gay voice and passive-aggressive demeanor—dispositionally, Peter was the Andy Warhol of music critics—drew comparisons between Mercer's singing and Eleanor Roosevelt speaking.

Dick and Peter, but especially Dick, were voice connoisseurs who could revel in being irreverent; they could wax as ecstatic for warblers of low and offbeat talent as for the greatest. It's Peter who introduced me to Olive Middleton and Florence Foster Jenkins, and later to Ira Siff and La Gran Scena Opera. As for Dick, there wasn't a moment of Nadine Connor's career that he didn't cherish. Likewise Dorothy Kirsten. And so many local singers, like Debbie O'Brien, a former runner-up for Miss America. We went to hear her sing with the Boston Pops on the Esplanade conducted by legendary Arthur Fiedler. She was the featured soloist that evening for Mozart's *Exultate Jubilate*. At the climactic moment of her high note in the cantata's conclusion,

a gust of wind blew her dress up, like Marilyn Monroe's in *The Seven Year Itch*. What fun we had!

Such delectable moments also brought into relief another aspect of Dick's character. He was American and a New Englander in the truest and best sense. Dick was not religious but his family belonged to a Christian-American sect with an honorable heritage of liberal openness and outreach. Dick personified values Americans used to cherish. He was the most unself-pitying and loyal person I'd ever met. Even though his wit and criticism could be lacerating, Dick seemed incapable of being gratuitously mean or petty. In this he was like Oscar Wilde, who he otherwise could seem to resemble physically as his portliness, like my own, became more pronounced.

Personal accountability and integrity were givens for Dick. If you have a problem, deal with it. Don't blame, exploit, demean or betray others for your own shortcomings or advancement. When I went on and on about my dilemma in being a physician, activist and writer in the years prior to my first pieces for the gay press, Dick's observation was typically tough-love honest. "I love these people who keep asking, what am I going to do for the rest of my life?," he said with pitiless impatience. "Suddenly you're 65 and you've done it!"

At one point, Dick's friend and protégé David Denby was enlisted to get Dick to replace Alan Rich as music critic of *New York Magazine*. Dick was likewise being sought to become senior music critic of the *New York Times* (replacing Peter). When Dick declined both offers, the positions were filled at the *New York Times* by Dick's protege at the *Boston Globe*, Anthony Tommasini, and at *New York*, by Peter G. Davis (via my introduction of Davis to Denby). After decades as a senior music critic at the *Times*, Peter's position there was eliminated. Some thought Dick was crazy to pass up such spectacular opportunities. But Dick was too loyal to Boston and in his friendships to just drop everyone and everything there and to upstage Peter this way. Career success was one thing. Personal advancement at the cost of one's highest values and loyalties was another.

In his appreciation for singers, Dick was linked with our mutual friend Andrew Karzas in Chicago, whose old records collection was world-renowned and whose WFMT radio show was a feast for connoisseurs. These included his later colleague at WFMT, Andrew Patner, the openly gay music critic who died in 2015 and to whom Ross's *Wagnerism* is dedicated.

Karzas traveled to attend every performance of his most beloved singer, Licia Albanese, to the bitter end of *Traviatas* and *Bohemes* in her 80's in places like Sarasota. He was also devoted to May Higgs, the surviving companion of legendary British Diva Dame Eva Turner. Dick and I never went that distance with Andrew for Licia, but he and I did trek to Providence to hear what may have been Anna Moffo's last *Traviata*, Moffo was visibly nervous; the voice was still there but the singing was smaller. Providence was home of another of our favorite lesser divas—Marguerite Ruffino, who founded the largely Italian opera company there and whose voice could be impressive. Of her stage presence and skills, Dick observed, “every so often she'd remember to add an interpretive touch.” When the book is written on gay sensibility and opera, Dick's would be a shining exemplar.

At the summit or nadir (however you choose to think of it) of our cabaret slumming and at the prodding of their friend, gadfly Henry Edwards, we all showed up to hear Francis Fay in what seemed like somebody's attic in the Times Square area. Fay pretended that she was plucked by surprise from our table to perform.



Figure 78 - Richard Dyer, The Boston Globe, Sendai International Music Competition

Dick and Peter were fabulous figures of sensibility, lore, wit, wisdom, accomplishment, and generosity of spirit. Alas, when it came to the battlefronts of gay activism, which increasingly inspired, challenged and dominated my work, they evinced minimal interest or engagement. From neither Dick nor Peter did I get genuinely supportive feedback about my work. It was not forthcoming for my activism, which could seem to strike them as, well, distasteful, nor for my efforts to report on the disease that was already decimating the worlds of music and opera, art and culture..

It was understandable that they were preoccupied with themselves and their career responsibilities, but it was telling that they were so disconnected from and unsupportive of disease and political crisis developments and efforts to deal with them, however chaotic and scary. When I was with them, the scruffy gay activist I had become felt increasingly disaffected and lonely. My place as a proper opera queen, escort and mascot were being compromised and I was the only one failing to see it.

Although they weren't happy about discrimination in the arts and society and certainly not homophobia, they were like most career homosexuals of their ilk—openly gay in social circles but still closeted professionally and with their readerships in times when being publicly gay could still pose real career risks. As I saw it, the biggest problem with their closetedness and reticence about homosexuality was the damage it did to their integrity as writers and critics whose priorities otherwise were ostensibly to tell the truth. It's not that they were telling overt lies or that they didn't care. It was what wasn't being said, what was omitted or obscured that contributed to misunderstanding and discrimination. As AIDS and activism advanced, their reticence became entrenched, especially around my support for outing, which must have seemed personal and threatening. Alas, in their unwillingness to buck the status quo, they revealed themselves to be counted among its custodians.

In contact that became increasingly rare, and when directly confronted about it by me, Dick acknowledged my memoir, *Confessions of a Jewish Wagnerite*, but I don't think he or Peter actually read or took seriously anything I wrote. Beyond my roles of escort and mascot, they had little genuine in-depth interest in the real me or my writing or the issues I kept talking and writing about. It didn't seem in reaction to me personally so much as that they couldn't

be bothered with anything so marginal as the gay press and messy as gay politics.

It was a less extreme version of the Roy Cohn double-think and cognitive dissonance captured by Tony Kushner in *Angels in America*. Because gay people have no real power, Cohn believed, he couldn't and shouldn't be identified as gay. Like the majority of their contemporary gay colleagues, their negotiable worth, so far as they could measure it, had little to do with being gay. Professionally, being openly gay was still felt to be a liability and risk. It must have been the same with music and arts critics who were gay and Jewish in Nazi Germany. That's the way it was well into the AIDS period even with our most illustrious gay, bisexual and lesbian *culturati*, such as Warhol and Sontag. Their closetedness kept reenforcing the rules of the game. In broader public venues, their minority identities were studiously relegated by them and their standard-bearer protectors (editors, other writers) to the margins, where they remained mostly hidden. While they may not have liked such cultural constraints, they characteristically elected the safer options of the closet—reticence and silence. That such actions wouldn't be noticed or counted was a miscalculation.



Figure 79 - Peter G. Davis (right) with Riccardo Muti, New York Times and New York Magazine music critic, Remembering Peter G. Davis by Lawrence D. Mass on medium.com

I remember a penultimate telephone conversation with Dick, who had developed a friendship with Astrid Varnay. She was the great Wagnerian soprano whose Kundry I saw at Bayreuth with Hans Hotter

as Gurnemanz, and whose Letitia Begbig in the Met's *Mahagonny* was a highlight of our operagoing years. Following the publication of my *Confessions*, amidst discussions of Varnay and others, I remember trying to further explain my transformation around Wagner. I wanted to elicit a greater awareness if not sympathy for what I'd experienced. Yet my memoir was indeed an indictment of the closetedness of the world of music criticism and journalism he, Dick, Dale Harris, John Ardoin, Andrew Porter, Martin Bernheimer and virtually all other gay music critics represented. In the case of Wagner and antisemitism, I wanted them to appreciate that their reticence was of a piece with their being in the closet as gay. I no longer recall what was said so much as what wasn't said. In what was to be among the last of our exchanges voice-to-voice (face to face was never again to be), Dick exhaled deeply and a long silence followed, a silence that spoke volumes.

What that silence was saying is that, yes, they (Dick and Peter) recognized a personally and socially codependent (masochistic was the word we used in those days) component to my Wagnerism, with my 5 pictures of Wagner on my living room wall and my "pilgrimage" to Bayreuth. This silence also revealed how tacitly aware the music world was (and continues to be) of the seriousness of these issues.

Silence and taciturnity. The music world would feign objectivity around what they secretly knew and felt versus what they would say publicly. Their defense of Wagner was standard for our post-war generation—that some of Wagner's close associates were Jews, that the antisemitism isn't explicit in the music or libretti, that Hitler misunderstood and misused Wagner, that Jews continue to be among the most devoted of Wagnerites. But deep down even then they all knew better. Just as the closet was still the easier, softer way, so it was with regard to the reality and toxicity of Wagner's antisemitism.

I don't recall ever thinking that anything Dick or Peter ever said or did was antisemitic. Of course in those days I was still in a lot of denial, As for things Jewish, on the contrary, Dick and Peter seemed if anything to be semitophilic. Many of their best friends were Jews. Dick was very close with poet Lloyd Schwartz and Michael Steinberg, the former music critic of the *Boston Globe* who Dick succeeded there. And Peter was very close with the leading artist agent Cynthia Robbins of Edgar Vincent Associates and her partner Steve Rubin, who became head of Doubleday in the years when Jacqueline Onassis worked there. In the time I knew him, Peter had two lovers, both of

them Jewish. Eventually, he settled into a life partnership with the second of these.

Cynthia represented Beverly Sills, who Peter was so often at odds with. There was an angry late-night call to Peter from Sills herself; she was said to have used epithets in denunciations of his criticism. Of her later administrative efforts (and triumphs), Peter sustained his reputation as a tough critic—once dismissing her style of management and donor outreach as like trying to run a delicatessen. In drawing what could seem persistent criticism from Peter, Sills could seem like another regular target of Peter's disappointment, composer Phillip Glass.

With none of this, however, did I ever have a sense of any element of antisemitism, but which was not something I was inclined to look for or acknowledge in any case. Though Peter's criticism could seem ungenerous, there were legitimate issues with Sills as there are with Glass and for that matter another target of his criticism, Leontyne Price, the latter for not being more adventurous with repertory.

I did, however, occasionally wonder about some things. Why did Peter keep a single framed Wagner-autographed postcard above his bed? And why was Dick so *unenamoured* of Bernstein's "The Unanswered Question," the composer's series of talks on music and culture at Harvard? I no longer recall what Dick wrote, but privately he seemed to feel that the talks were neither centered nor revelatory. Rather, to Dick they came across more as posturing and scattered theorizing.

Nothing heretical or biased there. I myself wasn't the greatest fan of Bernstein in those years. I recoiled from *Mass*, which still divides critics and which struck me as pretentious on initial hearing and even when I saw it again decades later. Apart from *West Side Story*, *Candide*, *A Quiet Place* and some television appearances, I sensed Lenny's "extravagant" persona in much of his work and tended to find the whole cult of "Lenny," to be, well, of questionable taste. So why would I have an inchoate uneasiness years later when Dick had that same sense about "Lenny" and his lectures, which I myself never bothered to listen to or read? In the peak years of my Wagnerism, if, when and where something subtly or indirectly antisemitic might be afoot, it's not only unlikely that I would have recognized it as such. More likely, I would have agreed with and endorsed it.

In one of Peter's last pieces for the *New York Times*, he covered the Bard Festival offerings Leon Botstein assembled in 2009 on "Wagner and His World." As noted by Peter, the season turned the tables on expectations in being more about those who influenced Wagner (Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn) than on Wagner's influence on others. The piece was Peter at his best—scrupulously professional, observant and dispassionate. You got all the information, some of it impressively insightful and detailed, but without any real sense of how Peter himself felt. Except for odd moments such as the *Siegfried* performance we attended together (as recounted in *Confessions of a Jewish Wagnerite*), I still have little sense of Peter's personal feelings about Wagner.

What I'm left with are fragmentary memories—images, moments, comments. There was that autographed postcard of Wagner situated protectively on the wall above Peter's bed, and recollection of Peter's dispassionate awareness that the Nibelungs in the Bayreuth Centennial *Ring* cycle directed by Chéreau were depicted as Jews. As questions about Wagner and Wagnerism began to formulate, I pondered Wagner appreciation in different contexts and cultures. On reading about a planned production of *Lohengrin in Russia*, I wondered why Russians, with their acute sensitivity to what happened in World War 2, would want to do Wagner unless it featured a postmodern approach, a political underpinning that commented on their experience. How do Russians, who fought Germany and the Nazis so bravely and at such horrific cost, feel about Wagner? Peter, who could become impatient with such nontextualist probings, answered sarcastically: "Maybe they think the music is pretty."

For critics of Peter's generation, social and political context and subtext were regarded more with suspicion than open-mindedness. While they could acknowledge and even cautiously praise experimentation and imagination, they did so from their base, their ethos that looked with skepticism at anything extrinsic to the artwork and its appreciation. The resulting silence and taciturnity, however, could also seem myopic and collusive in obfuscating the importance of minority perspectives as well as those of sexuality and politics in the lives and times and works of composers. In too many cases, these perspectives were illuminating and central to greater understanding and appreciation.

So *is* Wagner appreciation in Russia distinctive? Had he been more open-minded and less defensive, Peter, who is not mentioned in Ross's *Wagnerism*, (nor are Dick Dyer, Andrew Porter or me) might have been surprised by how much Ross uncovered about this subject in his book's chapter "Ring of Power: Revolution and Russia."

In 2015 Boris Mezdrich, the director of a postmodern production of *Tannhäuser* in Siberia was sacked by the Russian Culture Minister after being accused of offending the religious sensibilities of Russian Orthodox Christians. Protestors carried pro-Putin banners. So, yes, however pretty Wagner's music, the greater subject of Wagner in Russia turns out to be another window on the past, present and future of Wagnerism.

The question of how Russians might tend to regard Wagner did not seem of critical interest to Peter. Though he might make note of a theme that was clearly key to a director's vision, it's not likely Peter would have had any more inclination to explore social or political subtexts extraneous to the confines of the work itself than questions regarding the homosexuality of Tchaikovsky. Like his colleague Dale Harris, Peter would be more likely to accept without qualification or protest the status quo of Tchaikovsky as a *Russian* composer, with all else of negligible pertinence. Indictments like mine of the silence of the Metropolitan Opera and its Russian stars Anna Netrebko and Valery Gergiev regarding the oppression of LGBTQ people in Russia under Putin would be considered way too personal, political, extraneous. Alas, what Peter and Dick ended up mostly doing were performance reviews, and evermore bloodless ones at that.

But what of my own role in all this? A sense of grievance linked to a failure to relate to others is a classic feature of codependence. The codependent person fails to adequately express his needs to those he needs to express them to. Certainly, I was codependent in those years with Dick and Peter, as I was with my brother, my sister and most everybody else, including artists like Ned Rorem who I thought were good friends but who were not. Most notably, of course, was my codependence evident in my devotion to Wagner. Did those 5 pictures of Wagner on my living room wall mitigate the realities of who Wagner really was? Did it influence the appreciation of Wagner—my own and that of others—for the better?

No matter how determined my denial and rationalizations, I could finally see that I had failed to get commensurate validation from these

sources. Inevitably, those with whom I felt closest turned out not to be there, neither for me personally nor for the community, social and political concerns I took for granted that we shared. When I finally did face the reality of the demise of my friendships with Dick and Peter and better understood the extent of my own codependent role in that failure, the indictment remained that they weren't there as writers and tellers of some of the most difficult and challenging truths of our lives and times. When confronted with the opening up of new frontiers on homosexuality, Wagner's antisemitism and AIDS, they weren't there.

If not for them, however, how would I ever have gotten here? In this question and its answer is one of the promises of recovery: we will not regret the past, nor wish to shut the door on it.

So there I was on the flight deck at St V's in the Spring of '83, now with my own money problems. I had been working furiously on my unpaid writing, mostly on the unfolding of the AIDS epidemic but also with pieces on culture, on opera and gay health, barely managing to stay afloat with part-time work in Methadone Maintenance. With my hospitalization, however, I was no longer working and was unable to pay my rent, which contributed to my depression.

I didn't want to see my mother. I couldn't deal with that. But my brother showed up. Not only did he show up, he agreed to write me a check for what I needed to cover immediate expenses, which was about \$2000. Though he scarcely looked at me and never called back or returned to visit, I vaguely recall him saying something reassuring, that whatever I was going through I would get through it and be OK.

And there was more. Regarding what I saw as the bottom line of my depression—my inability to find a way to earn a living with my writing—he said something encouraging about how you don't really have to do anything you don't want to do; that you can find a way to do what makes you happy. Not only was it a unique instance of Steve showing up and seeming to care, I believe it contributed to my situation not worsening. I was on the verge of getting shock treatments for depression. Steve's visit was a reprieve. Was this the Steve Mass who ministered to the down and out, the outsiders and the misfits?

Several years later, I returned the favor by saying yes to a request for money from Steve, for the same amount, \$2000. Though I repaid him promptly for his loan to me, it wasn't surprising that he never repaid my loan to him. Eventually we deducted it, along with money

he owed my sister, from his portion of my mother's estate, divided among her three children, when she died in the year 2000.

A visit during that hospitalization from my sister Ellen ("Helen" in *Confessions of a Jewish Wagnerite*) went less well. As recounted in *Confessions*, she made the mistake of giving me the manuscript of a book her son had been working on in his progressive school in Cambridge, Mass. His teacher was none other than gay writer and activist Eric Rofes. It was called *The Kids' Book of Death and Dying*. It was a source of progressive pride that her son was working on such a challenging project with a gay teacher and mentor. Her pride was well placed and shared by me. However, just seeing that book's title exacerbated the tensions in my lifelong relationship with my siblings, on top of my clinical depression. Did it not occur to her that someone hospitalized with a major suicidal depression might be uncomfortable with being given a book about death and dying, especially from within a family rife with interpersonal dysfunction?

With my paranoia easily triggered, I couldn't help but wonder if some deeper level of sibling rivalry and resentment were operating subconsciously. When we were children I remember Ellen and I playing jump-rope in our living room in Macon, Georgia, in the house on our street, The Prado, where we were born and raised. I was the jumper and she held one end of the rope. The other end was tied to our chandelier, which promptly crashed, leaving my arm gashed and with a scar that is still there. I have no memory of the stitches that must have been involved. I told Arnie and the hospital staff on the psych ward at St. V's that under no circumstances was Ellen to be allowed to re-visit or call me.

Detach with love or with an ax, as we say in codependence recovery. And some years later, with Ellen as my principal qualifier (the main person in relationship with whom one decides to enter recovery), I commenced in earnest the hard, daily, never-ending work of codependence recovery. Eventually Ellen and I reconnected and resumed our often effortful but sometimes very gratifying and loving relationship.

At my urging and like our mother, Ellen herself dabbled with codependence recovery (she's been to a handful of meetings over the years), as has her son. Over the ensuing decades, however, she remained resolute in her refusal to discuss what happened at St. V's. Whenever she might sense criticism, accusation, blame or judgment,

or where she might feel confronted about an absence of critical self-reflection and acknowledgment of mistakes or regarding how others had been affected by her, she would withdraw emotionally.

That same unwillingness re-emerged years later when Ellen casually recalled another childhood incident. She and a friend had stolen and hidden my bicycle, for which I, not knowing better, had to take the blame from our parents. I had no memory of this incident. When I tried to press her for more details about such early sibling dynamics, however, her refusal to further discuss it was characteristically intractable.

On the one hand, I can appreciate that she was careful to avoid disadvantageous subjects and discussions that opened the door to criticism, especially ones where she, as a woman, might encounter the abuses of sexism that were commonplace among men. But why not at least try to be honest about such rivalries, get them out in discussion, try to clear the air, and move on?

Eventually, I began to appreciate that some of Ellen's patterns may be more imprinted and reflexive, more psychiatric than logical, thoughtful or willful, perhaps a kind of PTSD from having been ridiculed or threatened by others such as our father or her brothers in childhood.

A recent recurrence of this reaction was impressive. Ellen was visiting us in New York in 2018 and had arranged to meet me at the New Whitney Museum to see the Grant Wood exhibit (in which Wood's closeted homosexuality comes to life). Though Ellen's punctuality and accountability have improved notably over time, on this occasion she failed to show up. I called her and she was still at her hotel, surprised by my reminding her that we had agreed to meet in front of the museum at 10 am. As we get older, we become more forgetful, a senior human error that's common enough. She quickly got herself together and arrived at the museum a short time later. As in the past, however, there was neither acknowledgment of any mistake, nor any apology. When I confronted her about how her failure to acknowledge what had happened was baffling and hurtful to me, she became silent, but in a way that seemed more clinical than having anything to do with me personally. She looked away and said nothing in response to my questions. What at first seemed bizarre and maddening began to be better appreciated as regressive, the embarrassed withdrawal into silence of a threatened child. In

confronting her, had I transferentially become the menacing, punitive father, brother or other men of childhood fears and abusive experience?

Being an intelligent and sensitive young girl in a patriarchal family and parochial social milieu might seem to explain the impenetrability of Ellen's defenses. But not all women from comparable backgrounds are comparably affected. Yes, our Dad came from Jewish patriarchal systems that expected women to defer to men. And yes he had been corporeally punitive with us in the vein of the ambient Bible-Belt ethic of not sparing the rod to not spoil the child.

One such occasion, when Ellen was a little girl, I still vividly recall. What was most memorable was her unwillingness to yield even in the smallest measure to Dad's anger and frustration at what he perceived to be her stubbornness. She would not verbally respond to Dad's increasingly exasperated demands for her to answer him. It was that same silence I'd encountered with Ellen at the Whitney. "I hate you, I hate you!" she finally shrieked, in tears after unyielding silence in response to being repeatedly slapped by Dad for her belligerence.

Not letting Ellen have her way proved increasingly difficult for our parents, as it has proved for many others who have interacted with her. When she turned 16 and demanded an MG sports car that would render her status the equivalent of wealthier friends, our parents, who could ill afford such an expense, reluctantly acceded.

Years later, when my mother was in her last days at St. V's, Ellen and I both had precious time for closure. We both had made real progress in our relations with our mother. In my case, Mom blessed me on her death bed by affirming that between us there were no unresolved issues, that where we had come in our journey of reconciliation was "perfect." Following Mom's death and on reflection years later, by contrast, Ellen felt that her closure with Mom was incomplete. I couldn't help but ponder how much this feeling of incompleteness was because of absent self-reflection, unacknowledged conflicts, unasked questions, and unexpressed regrets and apologies.

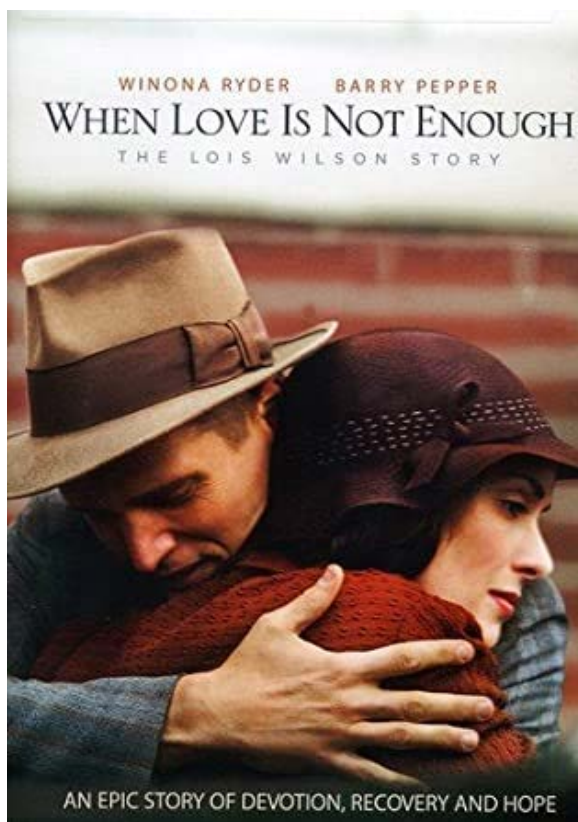


Figure 80 - Bill Pepper as Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, with Winona Ryder as his wife Lois, who co-founded Alanon, Hallmark Hall of Fame premiere 2010, Wikipedia

People who are codependent tend to harbor inchoate anger at those with whom they are codependent because those people seem indifferent to needs that were never adequately expressed or because they were incapable of better responding to those needs or expectations. In my life, nowhere has this been more the case than with my sister, with whom I've managed, however effortfully, to sustain a more functional bond with than my brother.

Central to the dilemma and drama of codependence is that each party feels the other has failed to be there appropriately and coequally. "The human condition," one might observe. There is of course truth to the observation that what is clinically characterized as "codependence" are just issues of the dominance and inequality, of love, which are universal phenomena in relationships. Just as it's true that what we call addiction can also be seen in wider context as a

comparably universal human quest for pleasure and escape. At what point do these phenomena become “clinical”? While there are definitions, there are no incontrovertible answers. What’s codependence or addiction for some may be rationalized as being just the human condition for others. Those of us who self-identify as codependent and/or addictive know that we crossed a line from functional to dysfunctional, even if that line can seem arbitrary. Those of us who end up in recovery for codependence and/or addiction tend to have an intuitive understanding that we belong there.

For my sister, there was acute and chronic sensitivity to sexism in patriarchal family relations. Favoring of male offspring was a notable issue in our Dad’s family, where his sisters were expected to defer their educations and careers in favor of their brothers, as well as in society in general. These issues were as difficult for her and us to conceptualize and articulate growing up as were my feelings of being bullied by my two older siblings as well as my Dad.

Too much of this inchoate anger of codependence got displaced onto Ellen’s son, Max, whose paternity was never clarified. It has been acknowledged by Ellen and Max that Max’s biological father was Middle Eastern, beyond which information only Ellen knows for sure. Max was conceived in Israel, when Ellen’s husband Larry was doing graduate work via a scholarship from Brandeis in Israel and France.

Max, now in midlife, has always been bright, decent, enterprising and athletic. He ran in many marathons and set up his own creative business of online newsletters, personal training, sales and services to runners of all ages. Most people have little idea of the difficulties of independent business life, one of the biggest pitfalls of which is isolation. Eventually, Max found himself increasingly isolated and prone to “recreational drug use,” primarily with alcohol and marijuana. Max also began smoking cigarettes, which was shocking for someone so fit and health-conscious.

Ellen, divorced when Max was a child and a committed socialist, believed that there’s “no such thing as bad students, only bad teachers.” She wanted me to step in as an interim father figure for Max. The need for a role model and mentor for Max was genuine, honorable, acute and chronic. I was ideally situated to help, especially later, given my professional as well as personal experience with addiction and depression.

But it also seemed another instance of being called upon for others who had always seemed to relegate my needs in favor of their own. However legitimate, her needs and wishes for her son could seem more redolent of the leftist politics so many of her generation had so strongly embraced than a reasonable development of genuine, nurtured, earned and trustworthy family relationships. In her case, as with many leftists, dominance and demand kept emerging in an atmospheric context of theoretics, entitlement and expectations.

At her most extreme, Ellen wasn't that far afield from the socialist and communist dictatorships she was ardently supportive of in her views of how people should be in society, and therefore in relationship to her. Yet I did show up, and so well and over so long a period that even Ellen acknowledged my efforts and thanked me appropriately, even as she retained her skepticism of my often critical, reluctant and delimited involvement as a kind of recovery evangelism rather than what she believed should have been the more unquestioning and unqualified availability and generosity expected of me as her brother and, well, comrade.

Moments of thanks notwithstanding, the crossing of boundaries kept recurring. Communications devolved into performance evaluations, not so unlike those of corporate America, which she excelled at serving to others but consistently and aggressively disallowed for herself. Not surprisingly, Ellen's earlier tenure as a schoolteacher ended peremptorily in confrontations with staff and administration. Here was a socialist who had a lot of trouble being, as we say in recovery, and as is an imperative of socialism, a worker among workers and a person among persons.

I sensed this exceptionalism in Ellen's relationship with her ex-husband, Larry Lockwood, who must have felt pressured to continue in his role as Max's father, even after the divorce and Ellen's acknowledgment of the long-suspected truth that he was not Max's biological father. Though Larry's bond with Max was not necessarily any less valid emotionally than if their relationship were biological, Larry went on to marry another and raise his own children.

To what extent could Max or Ellen expect him to continue as a father, or expect me to be a substitute? Though the answers to such questions could be challenging, expectation and entitlement continued for Larry Lockwood as for family members like me, with little discernible compassion for his own life and circumstances and little

sense of their own role, of their own expectation and entitlement, in Larry's disaffection. The situation with Larry seemed of a piece with other of Ellen's relationships in its deployment of a kind of emotional hostage-taking. People who might otherwise make the choice to disengage from their relationship with Ellen, especially blood relatives and childhood friends, could find themselves reluctant to do so as a matter of conscience. Short of being unkind, the easier softer way for most of us was to be tolerant, forbearing, caring, sensitive and creative within legitimate efforts to maintain our own boundaries.

The crossing, however, of my often deferentially unexpressed boundaries with Ellen was unyielding and conversations not infrequently terminated in anger. If I people-pleased enough with Ellen and Max (taking his cues from his mother), I might get rewarded with thanks, a dollop of affection, and acknowledgment of milestones with the occasional sign-off of "Love" instead of "Regards," "Best," or "Peace." Meanwhile, such was the incessant barrage of unsolicited and unwelcome emails from her that I had to devise creative, codependence recovery-based strategies for dealing with them.

As I eventually came to see it a lot better, Ellen's pride in being leftist, feminist, progressive, independent, in having a social conscience and being a single mother, was not displaced and not to be disparaged. It can't have been easy to navigate the turbulent seas of sexism, which she did with notable courage and fortitude. Nor is it easy to be leftist in relentlessly middle-brow, exclusionary, materialist, Judeo-Christian America. Consistently sensitive to issues of racism and class, against the grain of the mainstream of Columbus-celebrating America, Ellen authored a book called *Population Target* about the targeting of indigenous, third-world populations—who were offered tokens such as free radios to get them to use birth control—by corporations seeking to profiteer from their lands and resources. Her book was a remarkable and pioneering achievement about levels of corporate, often mass-murderous malevolence that no longer surprise us.



Figure 81 - Ellen Mass with Larry Mass at the Alewife Preserve, Cambridge, Mass, 2018, personal photographs of Lawrence D. Mass

What were the origins of her strength of character and social consciousness? As Jewish and a woman, and like Steve (Jewish) and me (Jewish and gay), Ellen had her share of being the outsider. But for Ellen another big childhood challenge influenced the shape of things to come.

Ellen was literally crippled by a serious spinal scoliosis from congenital polio, unrecognized until her adolescence. The scoliosis was originally thought by our parents to be a willful indifference to the discipline of maintaining good posture. With vintage gay humor, gay men of a certain age still threaten to send real or perceived miscreants to “charm school,” but for young women of Ellen’s time and place, such threats were more real and dreaded than funny. Over several years the scoliosis was repaired in two heroic surgeries by one of the world’s top specialists in California. One of the procedures necessitated a heavy and encumbering body cast that had to be worn for nearly a year. Whatever the fallout in her relations with others, to come through such an ordeal as well as Ellen did—to have endured this huge physical hardship alongside our parents’ and society’s sexist expectations, mostly without complaining or ceding personal integrity and independence—required measures of grit Ellen sustained throughout her life. Consolidating her strengths were traits that were also those of the best of America and New England. Like Dick Dyer she was relentlessly unself-pitying and true to herself.

Crowning her achievements, Ellen has worked with singular leadership and dedication to nurture the Alewife Preserve, an environmental conservation endeavor in Cambridge. For decades she worked tirelessly and independently, enlisting young people to serve and learn about the environment and land preservation and to contribute mural art in the wake of ever-worsening corporate encroachment.

As summarized by Madelyn Holmes, a feminist historian whose books include *American Women Conservationists* and who became Ellen's friend, Ellen's work with Alewife has been notable for its enterprise and commitment to environmental restoration. As cited in Holmes's book and quoting from *The Cambridge Chronicle*, "whether scrambling down a bank overgrown with invasive plant species to confirm a beaver sighting or leading a group of schoolchildren on a nature walk...Mass has come to embody the very spirit of the place."

This trajectory (as portrayed in Robert Redford's 2012 film, *The Company You Keep*) from political activism to environmentalism was followed by most members of the Weathermen Underground Organization of the late 1960's, which developed out of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). Terrorism may never be justified, but what alternatives were there to confront the intolerably racist, sexist, inequitable and murderous society that America was in those years, that America to which Trumpery so rapaciously returned us?



Figure 82 - Mural Art, Friends of Alewife, Cambridge, Mass, Environmental Conservationist and Alewife Projects Coordinator Ellen Mass with unidentified volunteer

Environmentalism activism is certainly laudable, but more global rallying around the targeted, dispossessed and threatened could raise questions. In my own journey of self-awareness as Jewish, it seemed as if Ellen were always pressing pro-Palestinian views. There were Seders at our mother's home with *Haggadahs* (the Jewish texts for the Passover Seder) Ellen supplied that reworked the story of Jewish enslavement and exile from Egypt to be about the Palestinian experience. In and of itself, such repositioning could be appreciated as thoughtful, reasonable and sympathetic—like the Jews of Egypt, Palestinians in Israel were dispossessed—but a lot less so in its relegation of the Jewish meaning and experience of the holiday.

Though our mother could seem cowed by Ellen's propagandism, some of her engagement with Ellen's leftism was genuinely feminist, willing and enlightened. With Ellen's help, Mom was able to better appreciate how much her own considerable native intelligence was relegated by her family, its patriarchal religion and society.

What troubled my mother and me was not Ellen's championing of the Palestinians, which seemed justified, so much as her lack of greater awareness of and sensitivity to antisemitism, especially the casually genocidal antisemitism avowed by Islamic extremists, including many Palestinians explicitly committed to Israel's destruction. As his grandmother, my mother loved Max unconditionally and thereby came to accept his paternity, about which she may have known more truth than I, but my mother had an innate and much stronger experiential sense of her own Jewishness and antisemitism, and was instinctively and reflexively a lot more concerned about antisemitism, terrorism and the security of Israel.

Several years ago, during an Xmas visit in New York, Ellen gave Max a *keffiyeh*, the Arab headdress, which seemed to elicit no interest from him in response. From what he's seen of religion, ethnicity and factionalism, he wants as little to do with any of that as possible. Admirably, in multi-cultural Cambridge where he resumed residence after nearly two decades in Washington D.C., he was raised not to place much stock in religious or denominational specificity. In Max's liberal milieu it makes sense that he would feel compassion for the plight of Palestinians. And it makes sense for him to explore his paternal background. But giving him a *keffiyeh*, with no comparable affirmation of Jewish heritage (no *yarmulke* or *kippah*), seemed an awkward, troubled and even hostile effort at balance. It also begs the question that needs to be asked of all pro-Palestinian leftists, especially the many who are Jewish: Do we really want to encourage respect for and tolerance of Islamism without more explicitly condemning extremist Islam, and without a comparable respect for and tolerance of other religions? Whatever the realities and ubiquities of Islamophobia, does it make more sense to embrace Islamism than any other denominationalism, even when it's coupled with notable poverty and disenfranchisement?

In later years, Ellen has shown a keener appreciation of Jewish culture and traditions and has eased away from leftist orthodoxy, in the heyday of which she would steadfastly refuse to criticize or even acknowledge the problems of socialist governments and countries, most of which were police state dictatorships under authoritarian control —e.g., China, Russia or Cuba. Many of these countries were as anti-gay as their Western counterparts. Because gay people were not always singled out as such for discrimination but were regarded,

rather, as ordinary citizens, it could seem we were seeking special consideration and treatment in a setting of white, privileged capitalism, not unlike the way Jews and others seemed to cling to the sectarianism and subcultural identification that socialism was ostensibly all about transcending.

In the mid-1980's our mother and Max were "delegated," as I derided it at the time, by Ellen to accompany her on a trip to Russia. There, they visited some memorial sites where mass executions of Jews had taken place, including the area from which our grandparents had emigrated. Moscow now has a center of Russian Jewish history and culture. At the time of their trip, however, victims of massacres in Russia were identified only as "Soviet citizens." No questions or concerns about the elimination of Jewish history were being sanctioned in Russia, and none were voiced by Ellen or her son on their return. My mother, who just wanted the family to all get along and be stable and happy, voiced no opinion on any of this. Nor was my own questioning of this experience clear or persistent.

Prior to that time, Ellen had dismissed as "sentimental" our relatives' support of the movement to free Soviet Jewry that saw a million Soviet Jews emigrate to Israel, even as she evinced that socialist sense of entitlement and expectation with those same relatives. As she saw it, they needed to be more inclusive and universal than tribal and concentric in their relations with us and with society at large. Meanwhile, her requests for greater welcoming of Max and herself were often experienced by these relatives as "demands." Perceived expectations from others were contrastingly ill-received by Ellen. As one hears in recovery, expectations are premeditated resentments. At their worst, such demands could seem in the vein of what we think of as communist or socialist "reeducation" or "reprogramming," where people are simply informed of expectations and disciplined for conformity. Meanwhile, none of Ellen's expectations of fealty from Jewish relatives seemed ever to evince any real feeling for being Jewish or concern about antisemitism.

I do recall a singular instance of reaction to repeatedly expressed concerns by me that she seemed lacking in an ability to identify and empathize with being Jewish: "There's more than one way to be Jewish." There it was, finally! An unequivocal acceptance that whatever else she is, however surpassingly a citizen of the world,

she's also Jewish. Past such rare moments of circumspection and personal acknowledgment, however, there were few second thoughts and no apologies for the authoritarian turn taken by most of the movements she had been so supportive of.

As summarized by Bret Stephens in “Mugabe and Other Leftist Heroes” in the *New York Times* (11/17/17) the Robert Mugabes, Fidel Castros, Mao Tse Tungs, Yassir Arafats and Russian autocrats “never lacked for admirers on the left. The result has been decades of moral embarrassment for the left, though it's rarely acknowledged and only occasionally examined. Being progressive, as the conservative saying goes, means never having to say you are sorry.”

“What do you want with these special Jewish pains? I feel as close to the wretched victims of the rubber plantations of Putamayo and the blacks of Africa...I have no special place in my heart for the ghetto: I am at home in the entire world, where there are clouds and birds and human tears.”

- Rosa Luxemburg, Polish-German-Jewish hero and martyr of socialism, executed 1919.



Figure 83 - Rosa Luxemburg, sculpture by Rolf Biebl, Berlin, Creative Commons

Like many Jews of the left, Ellen may have been in denial about the persistence of antisemitism and the challenge of Jewish self-identification, even if socialism among Jews can also be appreciated as an effort to contain antisemitism. Indeed, there are many ways to be Jewish, among the proudest of which are secular humanism, socialism and environmentalism. Ellen joins a proud and distinguished legacy of historical Jewish champions of social justice, from Jesus to Marx, from Rosa Luxemburg and Emma Goldman to Tony Kushner, Sarah Schulman and Bernie Sanders. In the ever-darkening age of Trump, their light shines ever-more brightly. Ellen likewise belongs to that pantheon of strong Jewish women, some of whom are best-known as defenders of Jews and Judaism—from Biblical Judith and Esther to Golda Meir and Phyllis Chesler.

My Manhattan neighbors Daniel and Judith Walkowitz are distinguished professors of history who have contributed notably to progressive literatures and perspectives. Daniel's most recent book is called *The Remembered and Forgotten Jewish World*. Here, as he uncovers and reclaims his own Jewish family history, he documents the vital role played by the Jewish socialist world in workers' rights initiatives. Leftists who in earlier decades might have eschewed their Jewishness are now reclaiming it. In her travels to Russia with our mother and her son, a proper reckoning with our own family's Jewish past was once again evaded, notwithstanding Ellen's sleuthing of some aspects of Dad's *shtetl* background. It's work that neither Ellen, Steve nor I have done very much of.

For Ellen, pride of heritage was of progressivism. For Steve it was art, culture and counterculture. And for me it was opera. Following the assimilative living of so much of our lives in evasion of the specifics and realities of our backgrounds, each of us seems finally more aware of the broader mosaic we are motes within. Too late for all that precious archival work Ellen seemed belatedly inclined towards and Max is inquisitive about but which the Masses were all too otherwise engaged to pursue.



Figure 84 - Nephew Max Lockwood with Uncle Larry at the Alewife Preserve, from the personal photograph collection of Lawrence D. Mass

Strong Jewish women and strong Jewish mothers. The saga with Ellen and Max peaked 30 years later with Max having a midlife crisis comparable to my major depressive episode, but stopping short of hospitalization and eschewing medication; all of which aroused in me a level of paternal concern partly codependent, but also more heartfelt than any of us imagined possible.

Sister Blue Buffalo. A pinnacle of Ellen's life as a single woman, mother, sister and progressive was a voyage of discovery of her own planning in the mid-1990's. It was a bold itinerary that necessitated sleeping in her van in naturalist areas and enclaves ignored by tourists. It was an American odyssey as true and brave as they come.

Years in the making, she headed solo to points south and west in her gear-stocked, dark blue Toyota mini-van. Visiting sparsely populated, little-known and neglected areas such as the Florida panhandle, Indian reservations, and the slums of Appalachia, and including some 45 national parks and environs, she took notes and photographs and made sketches of environments of poverty, of the underserved and dispossessed. In the vein of such American originals as Ansel Adams, Georgia O'Keefe and Alfred Stieglitz, these impressions and images, in black and white as well as color, captured

the beauty, dignity and spirit of heartland America, as well as her own wayfarer's journey and voice, with authenticity and grace.

We celebrated my 75th Birthday at Salam restaurant, with its delectable Syrian cuisine, where we'd celebrated my 50th and her 60th Birthdays, and which has been my special favorite New York restaurant since before owners Joan and Bassam's now grown children were born. Hosted by Arnie, it was a happy evening, attended by Max, Ellen's friend the writer Madelyn Holmes, my friend the writer Jaime Manrique, Attila en route back to Florida from his family visit in Hungary, and our new friend, Aleksander Douglas, whose devotion to gay culture is so animated and inspiring.

Ellen's gift could not have been more loving or cherishable, a photo album pictorial of past family gatherings in New York. With love and art, Ellen had fashioned it all into a forever keepsake. Following on the heels of our last family gathering, when we finally—after years of effort—got tickets to *Hamilton*, we headed out to the Imax premiere of *In The Heights*.

Following my release from the hospital, alcoholism recovery became my primary journey but would take another year to commence in earnest. My hospitalization for MDD (Major Depressive Disorder) was my bottom, as we say in recovery, a truly life-threatening development in the progression of addiction. Steve's visit had seemed a reprieve, a gesture of genuine caring and hope, but so singular as such in terms of our relationship as brothers that I couldn't help but wonder to what extent he had been pressured to do so by my mother, who at that time was giving him shelter and financial support. Would he have shown up at all if she hadn't mandated him to do so? Were his few words of support heartfelt? Were they more wishful thinking than what actually happened? Because of its singularity before and after, it became ever harder to believe that absent my mother's prodding, the one visit to the hospital would ever have happened.

So there you have them, the three instances of receiving something personal from Steve: the bongo drum, the sidewalk-blanket peddler's used book by Shana Alexander, and the \$2000 check hospital visit. The majority of other occasions with Steve had to do with his residing with my mother and her requirement that he attend holiday dinners and do the driving. Once he departed for Germany, and apart for my mother's memorial service, I had no direct contact with him for 15 years. His only efforts to communicate with us—my sister, her son

Max and myself—were several emergency requests for money via Helen Mitsios. Such dissociation and exploitation burned so badly for my sister as well as me that when he phoned on Xmas day from Berlin years later, we declined to take the call, concerned that it would quickly become yet another request for money, shelter or both.

“What is a moment of compassion?” is a question asked in codependence recovery. The answer: “A moment of compassion is a codependence slip.” The slippery slope for someone codependent is relapse via compassion into thinking the perpetrator can or will change because of the codependent’s love and sacrifice. In codependence recovery we talk about the “4 m’s,” characteristics of codependence: mothering, manipulation, management and martyrdom. In the vulnerability of moments of compassion, the boundaries are once again loosened, then tread upon, repeating the cycle of people-pleasing, anger at the failure of the people-pleasing to elicit change, and then guilt that there’s so much anger instead of what our overwrought conscience insists should be compassion.

I could see the strong identification of Steve with the world of artists and musicians. This was his milieu and family, however dysfunctional. I had compassion for how his Jewish upbringing and minority otherness influenced the solitary person he became. I could see and admire his fellowship with outsiders, especially artists. At the inception of the Mudd Club, Steve was their custodian, even if he was also using them in his career as a spin doctor and wheeler-dealer.

But Steve and I have not managed to sustain a genuine, functional relationship. A natural, comfortable primary bond never developed. The work to nurture such a bond was not done. Because of that, I cannot let down my guard around boundaries. I can’t let my appreciation for Steve’s talents and achievements lead to codependently abandoning my own integrity and well-being. I can’t let compassion for Steve as an *enfant terrible* and wandering Jew open the floodgates of enabling. It’s one thing to understand and admire Jackson Pollock and his art. It was another to go joy riding with him. It’s one thing to have an appreciation of Picasso. It was another to be in a relationship with him. It’s one thing to have an appreciation of Wagner’s music. It’s another to sustain that appreciation in the face of a sober awareness that he was one of history’s most consequential antisemites.



Figure 85 - Desecrated Gravesite of Hermann Levi, Partenkirchen, photograph by Ebab, 2018, Creative Commons

Following that call from Helen Mitsios for an ambulance for Steve, I did try to speak to him about recovery. Why not just try some meetings, I suggested during the first year of my own recovery. “Stephen Saban [a well-known chronicler and arbiter of New York night life] goes there,” he said. In other words, he couldn’t go to recovery meetings because gossips would find out truths they could and would then exploit. Sadly, I didn’t have the presence to say to him what was said to me when I expressed similar concerns: “If Elizabeth Taylor can do recovery so can you.”

Most recovery programs are based on the practice of 12 steps that begin with admission of unmanageability and powerlessness, move on to the work of self-inventory, making amends and being of service. Resentments are examined, realities are accepted, and one attempts to be accountable for one’s own role in what has happened. We make our best efforts to forgive, live, let live and otherwise move forward with honesty, open-mindedness and willingness (the HOW of recovery).

This work inevitably involves family members and I have made efforts to speak to each member of my immediate family and make amends for regrettable past behaviors as best I could.



Figure 86 - Mass family gathering, Westerly, Rhode Island, 1999: from left, brother Steve Mass, stepdad Bill Thorpe, Larry Mass (me), mother Mignon Thorpe, partner Arnie Kantrowitz, nephew Max Lockwood and sister Ellen Mass, from the personal photographs of Lawrence D. Mass

With Steve, this attempted amends work took place at our last greater family gathering, in Westerly, Rhode Island, the year before my mother developed rapidly metastasizing and fatal cancer. Sadly, the R.I. event turned out to be a family dysfunctional disaster. My sister evinced a primitive sibling-rival jealousy of me and my partner Arnie which she never acknowledged and refused to talk about subsequently. What triggered the jealousy moment and subsequent cascade of reactivities was my mother's giving Arnie, who loves rocks, a rock she found for him on the beach. Ellen was acutely resentful that attention she felt should have been paid to her was being paid to another. It's a childlike behavior she evinced in myriad situations, always with the bottom line scenario of others relating well, which she narcissistically interpreted as unjustly excluding or relegating her.

Taking Steve aside at that gathering, I admitted that I had judged him for choices he'd made that seemed heedless of the concerns, feelings and needs of myself and others. I could admit that I hadn't always given him adequate credit for his own creative vision and work and for the hardships he faced in trying to survive financially and professionally.

Alas, I did something amends work should never do. I sought to explain (and thereby indirectly to “justify”) some of the discomfort between us, in this case on the basis of childhood trauma. I mentioned that early childhood memory of his breaking my favorite toy, that plastic coin dispenser. I wasn’t asking him to apologize, but I did feel the need to mention this imprinted memory of hurt. I was totally unprepared for his reaction. In fact, it was the angriest I’d seen Steve since his enraged German roommate Helmut at Northwestern tried to kick down the door to their shared dormitory room for reasons I was never privy to. Visibly enraged at my bringing up the coin-dispenser incident, which apparently he remembered, Steve remonstrated with startling vehemence: “And you know what? If I had it do over again today, I would!!!”

Steve’s reaction of resentment and spite seemed deeply troubled, more like a child or an addict not in recovery. Yet the failure to make amends was also my fault for sullyng accountability with a “justification.” As we learn in recovery, “justified” anger and resentment are major pitfalls. In this age of Trump, reckoning with justified anger is something many of us must face continuously.

Even when amends work is done perfectly, without discussion of the other person’s role, there is no guarantee that the recipient will respond well, be forgiving or change, especially if that person has never himself been in recovery. The principal beneficiary of the effort to make amends is the amends maker. Making a genuine, serious effort to come to terms with one’s past is indeed liberating. However failed circumstantially, this effort with Steve has freed me of bitterness and resentment. It also facilitated limited future communications and well wishes between us. Enduringly, it has given me the serenity of acceptance of what I can’t change.



On the psych ward, when I came so close to getting shock treatment for my depression, I had to come to grips with the realities of my life. Lower your expectations, I was told. Either I could live for my all-important creativity, my writing, hand to mouth or face the difficult challenges of compromise.

This meant recovery and a greater commitment to my profession of medicine, relegating my writing to the back burner when necessary.

With the help of therapy and later recovery, I made the excruciatingly difficult choice of prioritizing earning a living rather than being dependent on others. Through my own experience as a writer I'd seen that such dependency often comes with contempt for "straight" living and a smug certainty that any resistance to alternative lifestyle choices comes from a place of envy. It's not a mindset I wanted for myself, or to be the object of.

This reaction formation of self-contempt, of thinking that anybody who would like and welcome you must be a sucker and loser, is what we see so floridly in Donald Trump. It's also what's so funny about Groucho Marx's legendary quip that he wouldn't want to be a member of any country club that would admit him. For clubbers like Steve Mass, the showman persona Steve Mass wouldn't want to be a member of a club that would welcome the real, flawed, insecure human being underneath the disguise. For someone emerging from depression and alcoholism and trying to seek the higher ground of recovery, I was going against stereotypes of the artist's way.

In view of this difficult choice I myself had to make, I experience ambivalence in my relationships with artists and writers, especially those who place creative freedom far above personal responsibility to the extent that they become unselfconsciously parasitical and insufferably self-important. I can still be generous with those writers and artists who are friends and my heart can still go out to them for their struggles. If I sense that place of entitlement, self-importance, exploitation and disrespect, however, I recoil.

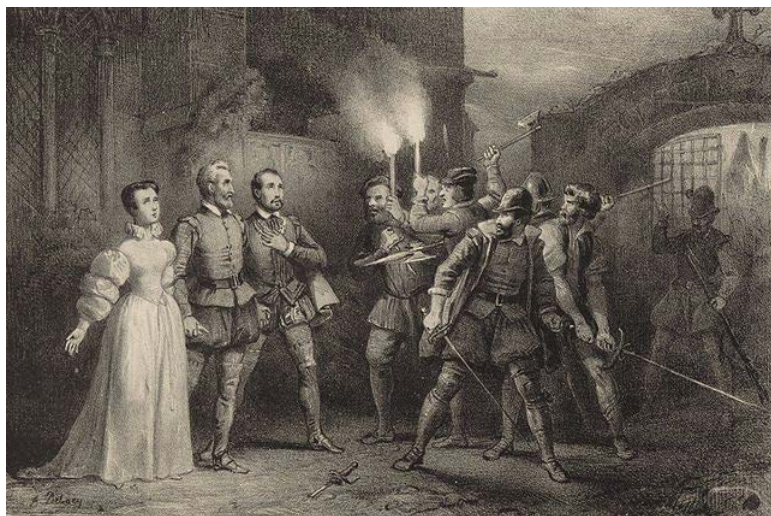


Figure 87 - A scene from Meyerbeer's "*Les Huguenots*," an epochal depiction of one of the most notorious chapters in the exhaustive history of European religious intolerance and genocide; Act 5, scene 2, 1836, Charles Alexandre Debacq, public domain

This is my sense of who Wagner was, an egomaniacal and contemptuous exploiter with pathologically narcissistic levels of self-importance and entitlement. He viciously turned on his Jewish patron, Meyerbeer, who he maligned and bullied with all the bloat, might and gross prejudice of a Donald Trump. And he was famously exploitive of his most ardent admirer and benefactor, King Ludwig. Most would now agree that Ludwig's legendary sponsorship of Wagner was far from regrettable. Despite nearly bankrupting Bavaria, their progeny is a legacy of art widely regarded as incomparable. But what of Wagner's manipulations of Ludwig, whose philosemitism led to confrontations with Wagner over Ludwig's insistence that Hermann Levi conduct the premiere of *Parsifal*? And what of the many Jewish Wagnerites whose regard and devotion Wagner so ruthlessly exploited as he assassinated the aggregate character of the Jewish people and schemed our demise?

I can now see how profoundly I've experienced the alienation of my affection for Wagner—who I counted as my first great love but who was consumed with genocidal hatred of my people—not of *those* people but of *my* people. Rejection and alienation likewise played out in my codependent relationships with family members and other writers and artists, especially those *enfants terribles* who opted for lives of "freedom" from the strictures of society at the expense of the

drudgery of personal accountability. In light of which I can no longer wait, unselfconsciously and devoutly, in the cues of those all too ready to relinquish dignity and integrity in homage to Wagner and other *monstres sacrés* of Art with a capital A.

Yes, I still appreciate art and artists, including Wagner, but that appreciation has become far more cautious, qualified and monitored than when I was so floridly codependent and addicted to alcohol, marijuana, cigarettes, opera, music and Art with a capital A. While *enfants terribles* and *monstres sacrés* may remain standard bearers of art, they can no longer count on more loyalty from me than I have been able to count on from them. Eye for an eye justice? Aversive conditioning? Perhaps, but what it feels like to me is sanity, sobriety and recovery.



Figure 88 - Eduard Hanslick and Richard Wagner, silhouette by Otto Böhlér (1847-1913), public domain

Though I never want to feel so self-righteous in “Art recovery” (Art worshipers Anonymous?) that I find myself a censor, I can no longer genuflect before even the most sacrosanct of art, and certainly one poisoned for me at its core and casting itself the “the artwork of the future.” If that makes me more like Eduard Hanslick, the legendarily pedantic Viennese music critic who as a leading critic of Wagner became the inspiration for Wagner’s vicious, antisemitic caricature Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*, and less like Richard and

Cosima Wagner's *Haus* Jew Hermann Levi, a devout Wagnerite who was a pallbearer at Wagner's funeral, so be it.

I resist the pressure to join in the obligatory, universal affirmation of the sanctity and transcendent importance of Art. I refuse to acquiesce to "*Art Über Alles*." I know full well that this puts me outside the mainstreams of Art appreciation and renders me more like the parents of the girl killed by Jackson Pollock than appreciative of the talent of the artist himself and his paintings; more like the slaves who built the monuments and plantations than aficionados of the architectural achievements themselves; more like those martyred in amphitheaters than those who surpassingly appreciate the ingenuity and power of Roman antiquities; and more like those rare few who still decline to hear Wagner in Israel than Wagnerites everywhere. So be it.