An Interview With
Herman Leon

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KU Retirees' Club
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I’m speaking with Herman Leon in his home in Lawrence, Kansas. He’s a retired professor of Social Welfare. We’re speaking on March 11, 1999. Let’s just begin with the basics. Where were you born and in what year?

I was born in New York City in 1930.

What were your parents’ names and what did they do?

My father’s name was David and my mother’s name was Betty. They ran a candy store.

Every child’s dream. Where in New York did you live?

First in Brooklyn until I was about 11 and then to Queens. Louise and I lived in Manhattan, When I was about 40, we moved out here.

So, you came from New York City to Lawrence, Kansas.

That’s right. That was quite a change.

Yes, that would be a major life change. We’ll get to that in a few minutes. That’s a biggie, that’s a big step. What do you remember about growing up in New York?

Well, I remember many things. But, I think the best way to describe it is, looking back, I think I was part of that generation, perhaps the last generation, where everything was working in America. These were neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens. People worked and hung out on the streets afterwards while the kids played. Men would gather by the candy store at night and argue politics and baseball. So you would say it was typical of the American dream. My parents were both immigrants. We lived in the back of our candy store in Brooklyn and Queens. It was a one-room thing for a while in Brooklyn, and it was kind of a fairy land. There were juke boxes playing, so it was party. My experience as a youth was that, more or less, there was a party going on all the time. We kids were out running around and playing on the streets or in the school yard. I’m not one of those who looks back and says I had a deprived youth. But, in my youth you could also see the seeds of the American dissolution. I was a baseball fan, and the Brooklyn Dodgers were in Brooklyn. I used to work in Ebbets Field as a "style boy" when Jackie Robinson broke in. We were proud. I was a fan and all that kind of stuff. Then, right after we won the World series, new owners took the team out of Brooklyn. That became a kind of metaphor for me. It was part of me becoming socially conscious, I think.

When did your parents come to this country?

In the ’20s. My mother, God bless her, came from Russia. That’s an interesting story. I’ll give you just the immigrant reality – my grandfather in Russia was a
tailor for the military at a naval station near Odessa. He said to his wife and his five children, “I think I want to go to America. There’s more opportunities, and things are better. I’ll go there first and then bring you over.” So, he left for America where he set up shop as a tailor in Brooklyn. The only problem was World War I intervened and then the Russian Revolution. There was about an eight-year hiatus when the family couldn't get out and went through war and famine and civil war. So my mother’s family came to America sort of traumatized. My father, believe it or not, came from Jerusalem.

Q

Really!

A

I’m serious. From an old sephardic community, that’s why my last name is Spanish. There was a culture conflict, in fact, even though we were all Jewish. My mother spoke Yiddish as well as Russian. He spoke Spanish and Arabic and some French because soldiers from various countries were occupying Jerusalem. And, he used to go to school by walking The Mount of Olives. I mean, literally. So, they came from exotic backgrounds. My mother’s brother was able to get out of Russia after the revolution because he was in the Moscow Art Theatre, an actor. When the family came to the United States in 1924, he defected when they toured America. So, that was the background. It was very exciting, there was a great deal of ethnicity, there was a great deal of family. My mother and father came from big families, they all wound up here. Those are the memories that I have.

Q

Did you live in an almost exclusively Jewish neighborhood, or was it mixed?

A

We first lived in a neighborhood called Bedford-Styvesant. We had a candy store right there. At that time, it was great. It was being integrated, there was a black immigration coming in. Everybody did fine with it. There was no trouble. Then, we moved to a place called South Ozone Park in Queens.

Q

When you were growing up you were surrounded by a lot of family. How did your father get into the candy business? Was this just opportunistic or .....

A

You really want me to go into that detail? There was such a thing as the American Great Depression, remember that one? May I ask how old you are.

Q

Fifty-six.

A

Okay, well, you’ve heard of it. When he came to this country, he first lived in Hartford with his brothers. He got a job in what was then a lucrative trade related to the garment industry where there were lots of immigrants and Jews in what was called “ladies hats.” The family story is that my mother and father met when he had this job that paid a lot of money in the ‘20s, they got married and had a great
apartment and a great life. Then, the Depression came, and he was unemployed for a while. My grandfather, the tailor, by then had bought a building in Brooklyn. There was a store. In New York City in those days, there was no traveling out to suburbs. All the stores were right there. Grocery store, candy store, druggist. My father got interested in opening a candy store there and then bought one in Bedford-Stuyvesant. My mother always bemoaned the store life and my father would say, "I'm my own boss." when I asked him why he was doing this. In those days, you were open seven days a week, 14-15 hours a day, and they ran it all themselves. A mom-and-pop business. Which, now, as I look back, I think, "Gee, that must have been the best of worlds," because I grew up in kind of a nest.

Q  So, they worked together in the store all of the time that you were growing up.
A  Right. My mother was only there for a couple of hours.
Q  Did you help out, too?
A  When I got to be a teenager, I tried to avoid it as much as possible, but I would pitch in and help.
Q  Did you have siblings?
A  I'm an only.
Q  You're an only.
A  I'm an only.
Q  So, you had all of the candy to yourself.
A  I was surrounded by candy and ice cream.
Q  When you started elementary school, were you living in......
A  In Brooklyn.
Q  What do you remember about elementary school?
A  Again, I went to a public school that was interracial that worked perfectly. I mean, I am a very contented product of the educational system that the city of New York, in its wisdom, provided. I pulled some stuff like a curriculum vitae in case you want it.
Q  I do want it.
A  I ran across a picture of my kindergarten class. Do you want to see? That's in 1936 or 1937, in the middle of the Depression. Everybody there is neatly dressed, everybody was well taken care of. I don't think it got much poorer anywhere in New York.
Q  Which one is you?
A  This little guy here.
Q  There are five black children, and everybody didn’t think anything about it.
A  We played at each other’s houses.
Q  What other ethnic backgrounds would be represented here?
A  It was, again, the cities of America. In fact, I remember the names. There was Larry Antanelli, there was Ryan somebody or other, this is James Bridges. This guy, Raymond Devera, when we moved away from the neighborhood, we lost contact, but we ran into each other 20 years later. He was a social worker, a very successful guy.
Q  Did you recognize the name?
A  We recognized each other. It was unbelievable. So, there was Irish, Italian, Jewish, it was the melting pot. This was New York City, the working melting pot.
Q  It all worked at that point.
A  I tell you, it worked. We would go out at night. Everybody was hanging out on the streets, the crime fear never crossed anybody’s mind.
Q  What about religion? Catholic, Jewish…..
A  There was a little of that. Kids stuff. Nothing among the adult world. Our home, the store, was kind of a neighborhood community center. In Brooklyn, when everybody was unemployed, they’d all hang out there. It was good. If you’re interested in the race issue, I remember when Joe Lewis was fighting for the championship, and the many customers in the store who were black coming in and talking about Joe. I said to my father, “How come they’re all interested in …?” He said something very supportive, “Well, they’ve been put down so long that when somebody achieve something…..” Brooklyn was known as the borough of churches, instead of “white churches”, “black churches”. It worked.
Q  How old were you when you went to Queens?
A  Eleven.
Q  Was this a big wrench to you?
A  It wasn’t a wrench. I kind of enjoyed everything as a kid. Queens was a move. Have you ever heard of the book “A Tree Grows in Brooklyn”?
Q  I’ve read it.
A  Great. I vouch for it. There were no trees. Cement was the natural state when I grew up. No, there were trees to the side, but everything was cement. When I moved out to Queens, it was like we were moving out to the country. In fact, that’s how we wound up coming out to Kansas. It was like I was moving into a botanical garden. It was just beautiful.
Q: Totally different. What grade would you have been in at that point?
A: About sixth grade.
Q: So, you were still in elementary school?
A: I was still in elementary school.
Q: Did you go through elementary school all the way through grade eight, or did you have middle schools?
A: There was what they called “junior high schools” in those days. They had a rapid advance program where you would do three years in two-and-a-half. This was the first journey out of the neighborhood, a couple of miles away to Shimer Junior High School. That was in 1942. The war was on. We all wanted to win the war. There was a spirit among us all. I was a boy scout and we would collect things. This junior high school was in an all black neighborhood. Famous musicians lived there. Fats Waller.... There was some race trouble, some, but everybody got along. Then, I went to John Adams High School. The high schools in New York at that time, most of them, were named after presidents. And, John Adams was a high school that was working. It was during the war and there was a real feeling that together, we’re all in this, our brothers, sisters, fathers are over there, and it worked. Imagine my surprise when I found out later that we were about the last decades that really worked that way.

Q: Were you a studious kid? I mean, were you academically inclined at that point?
A: I enjoyed school. I wouldn’t call myself studious. I did pretty well. I enjoyed sports, I enjoyed hanging out with the guys, and I enjoyed doing well in school. One year, I got the highest average in the high school during my seventh term. But, there was a guy in the same class who went on to win the Nobel Prize, and he was my idea of what smart was. I didn’t see me in those terms primarily.

Q: Was your household, was it a reading household?
A: No, no books. That’s a funny one because my mother, God bless her, there wasn’t a lot of money to buy things, so books were, you know. But, there was one of these newspaper ads for the Book of Knowledge, and if you clip a certain number you get it. Well, she got up to the letter “d”. Also, because there was the candy store, I had access to every comic book. I was around when “Superman” started. That was my reader. In fact, when I met my dear lady Louise and I would come up with scattered bits of information, like she’s from Canada, she’s from Winnipeg, I said, “Oh, that’s in Manitoba,” she said, “How do you know that?” I said, “I read it in comic books.” So, my main education is from the streets and from the comic books.
Q: Apparently, you did okay by that. Once you got through high school, what did you think you were going to do with yourself?

A: In those days there was no doubt that the only way to advance was to go and get a college education. No one in my family had ever gone to college. As my mother's dear son, that was the way if you wanted to do anything but swing a pick in your hand. So, I always wanted to go to college. For some reason, I always assumed that I would go, and, again, in its wisdom, that's why I am a great believer in communities, the city of New York had set up free colleges. Queens College, which was the newest of them, was a jewel with 4,000 students. They were able to get faculty from Europe because you remember…. Garcia Lorca's brother was on the faculty. I was taught Spanish by somebody who had to flee from Franco, Spain. He had been a principal. There was a famous Broadway critic. It was very cosmopolitan. The student body included returning vets, about half of them. They were very socially conscious, as you can imagine. Since a lot of them didn't come back, they wanted to see things be good in America. The fee was $5 a year for four years.

Q: Five dollars?

A: Five dollars. I would take my bus every day. It was two bus rides away. Do my homework on the bus for an hour.

Q: So, you lived at home the whole time you went to college?

A: I lived at home. Never left home. Lived in back of the candy store.

Q: Was that okay with you? It must have been.

A: Oh, sure. I had the feeling that everybody had a kind of security that you were going to do what you needed to do and the time to do it. It wasn't so much future planning as it is now. We have a grandchild who's two and a half years old. The poor kid put a piece of puzzle in the wrong way, and his mother worried that he would fail the SATs. I said, "Don't worry, he's not failing." Parents today are tormented. Anyhow, what living at home allowed me to do was maintain my personal life from high school and my sports world into my college days.

Q: Now, when you went to college, did most of the people that you hung out with in high school, were they also planning to go to college, or were you stepping outside the….

A: I think I was stepping outside a bit. I was about the only one in my immediate neighborhood who went to college.

Q: Any ideas about why that would be?
Well, Jews in general. Education is next to religion in my family. I had a dear uncle who became a lieutenant in the police force who liked to talk about intellectual matters with me. As I said, another uncle had been in the Moscow Art Theatre. He also was an operatic singer, believe it or not. And, with my uncle who was the policeman, in the European tradition they would sing opera in my house for hours. My mother, her sisters my aunts would, too. So, there was that kind of emphasis, I think, on things intellectual, philosophical, cultural, artistic. Even though we were in the back of this candy store. My mother was ashamed about that. My mother saw herself as declassed by life.

Did she let that filter down to you at all. Or, do you think she kept that to herself?

She kept it mostly to herself. Every family has its family myth. Over the years, I kind of have seen it in different lights.

Did you feel a sense of responsibility knowing that your family wanted this for you? Did you feel like it was important to go to college and do well?

Yes. My family was important to me, what they expected of me, who they thought I was, what I wanted to be. Since they were immigrants, it wasn’t “do well in school”, it was “make it in this world.” They were always foreigners. For a long time they spoke foreign languages at home. Fortunately, they were from different countries. They couldn’t understand each other in their native languages. I remember when the family was together, first they would be talking English, then, as they got in to talking, they would be talking Yiddish, and then as it got more intense, they’d be talking Russian.

What did you decide to major in when you went to college?

Again, in those days, going to college was enough. You didn’t have to know what you wanted to be, for sure. So, I didn’t know exactly. I was interested in social sciences, history, economics, etc. I wound up being interested in economics, and I was an economics major. I also took a major in English literature. Shakespeare drove me crazy. It was like the mysteries of the world. There was no television. I was getting my first look into the real world of mankind, so to speak. College was the gateway for this.

Did you start going to the theatre?

Oh, yeah. In fact, Queens College, as it was when I went there was literally a jewel. It had 4,000 students; now it’s a mammoth, 24,000 students. One of the things they had was a chorus that every year put on a performance of "Messiah." Everybody had to take two years of liberal arts, and that included that you had to
take music. If you took music, you had to go to the performance of "Messiah." I'm Jewish. So, I went to this tedious performance. Things being what they were at Queens College, the next year I was dating somebody and she had to go to hear "Messiah." I saw the Messiah four times. But, then I began to like it. When Louise and I went out on our first date --we met when I was in social work school -- I took her bike riding to City Island. We came back to my apartment. I had a scholarship so I was living in Manhattan. There was a check from the Internal Revenue Service of a magnificent $14. I said, "Gee, what should we do with this money?" There was a place called Sam Goody, so, we went to this record store, and I bought the Messiah.

Q Did you?
A Yes. On our first date, Louise and I listened to it. So, that's sort of the way the thread of life over time begins to unfold. Also, I became politically involved. Those were the days, 1947, I got to college right after the war. I don't know if you remember Henry Wallace?

Q I do.
A I was one of those who believed in Henry Wallace. I became a socialist.

Q What did your family think?
A They had just fled from Russia. There was an entertaining family argument for about eight years, with my Uncle Louie, the cop, threatening to arrest me. My plan had been to become an economist for the government. In the New Deal tradition, I figured I'd work for the Labor Department. I wanted to do something socially valid. But, when the Red scare hit, it was not something I could see myself doing. So, I thought, "What exactly do I want to do?" Social work came into mind because I had been a camp counselor with kids. That was my idea of social work in those days. Recreational stuff. When I was working in the candy store, the customers, since everybody knew each other, always would insist on knowing what was it I was going to do with life. And, I finally boiled it down to "I like to help people." So, I started to talk about going into social work. They said, "Well, you work with poor people." I said, "Well, they need it." So, I graduated from Queens College, and I went to the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Welfare.

Q At that point in time, I am ignorant about the history of social welfare in this country, how big was it? I mean, in terms of were there a lot of schools that had social welfare programs?
No. In fact, social work education only came into the universities at the turn of the century. The first schools were at Columbia, Chicago and a few other places. At that time, there were only about 10 or 15 schools in the country.

I'm interested when you were thinking in college, you know, you thought, "Well, maybe an economist, well, maybe social welfare." How did that even occur to you?

Social work?

Yes.

New York is a place everything gets put in front of you. Across the street lived a guy who was a social worker. He had graduated from Boston College. His uncle was in the "kitchen" cabinet of Franklin Roosevelt. His wife was also a social worker. They were left-wing types. They were communists. In those days, it was just a continuation of arguing on the street corner. I worked in summer camps that were part of the welfare movement of Jews in New York. It was called the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. They ran community centers like the Educational Alliance. So, my first job in social work was at the Coney Island Day Camp, and since I was a tenderhearted kid at about 19 or 20, I was assigned to six-year olds. They loved me. The parents loved me.

This was a summer job?

A summer job. So, I did that for a couple of summers, and then I went up to the Beritshires for a residential camp. I got the six-year-olds. So, I was always in this, there was something about relationships that I liked. I may have gone into medicine but I didn't think I was good enough to do the chemistry and all that stuff. I had no pull to law, and I didn't want to be a grade school teacher. I didn't know much about social work, to tell you the truth. In fact, I wound up practicing in an area of social work that I hadn't even heard of when I went to social work school. I just felt I wanted to do something socially and personally useful to others, as well as make a living for myself. And, that was about it. After a while, you get to know people from the social work world. Again, this was New York City. You're getting a bit of it now in Lawrence. Lawrence is getting very textured. When we got here in 1971, it wasn't as textured. For Kansas, it's very textured. There were a lot of creative people, people who came back from the war who were going into social work and they became influential to me.

So, you end up at the University of Pennsylvania. Was this the first time you had ever been away from home for a long period of time?
No. I kept living at home – here’s one thing that you ought to know about social work. You’re a psychologist, right?

My husband is.

Your husband is. Are you a social worker?

No.

In the social work education model that was sold to the university, there was a mind-body split. For two days a week you’re in classes and three days a week you’re in some social agency with a mentor or supervisor.

Like field work.

Field work, right. The University of Pennsylvania was then the American seat of the School of Psychology represented by Otto Rank. When he left Europe, he came to Philadelphia. And, believe it or not, he analyzed the entire faculty of the School of Social Welfare. They were very famous women, and they all created what they called "functional social work." To translate what that would mean today, I would call it experiential social work as distinct from analytic delving. It was very here-and-now. And, in that sense, it was very existential. So, it was a world famous social work school in a mansion in Philadelphia. But, they needed us to stay in New York because they didn’t have enough field agencies in Philadelphia to take in all of the New York people that wanted to come there.

You’d drive to Philly?

For two days a week. We’d meet at 4 a.m. at S. Kline’s in Union Square. Somebody had a big car, there were six of us, and we drove out there. This was even before the turnpike was built. Then, we would go to class and spend the night. There was a guy called Father Divine, did you ever hear of him?

Yes.

Well, Philadelphia was his stronghold. Lots of hotels which were run by these Quaker-type people for 75 cents a night. So, we all stayed at Father Divine’s, The "Divine Lorraine" it was called. And, we’d eat at the Automat and then go to the mansion. I was still living in New York except in my second year I got this fellowship, and that’s when I moved into an apartment in Manhattan with a guy who had been a GI.

What kind of field work did you do?

Do you know what a residential treatment facility is?

Yes.

One of the component federation agencies called the Jewish Child Care Association had a residential facility up in Westchester County.
Beautiful.

Pleasantville. It was called the Pleasantville Cottage School. There were these not too delinquent kids,... kids whose parents couldn’t handle them. It was very responsible. It was just ideal for kids who needed help. While there I met somebody who became very famous in social work academic circles. Dave Fanshell. He was an ex-GI and was leaving to get his doctorate at Columbia. I said, “Dave, why are you leaving social work.” He said, “Well, I know I can help some people, but I don’t know if I can help enough people this way.” That became kind of symbolic for me. But, there I learned my basic counseling skills. It was set up for students perfectly. I had an experienced supervisor, a gal named Rhoda Fishleder. As part of her commitment to being a supervisor, she went one day a week (and the agency paid her way) to Philadelphia for the seminar for field instructors. That’s how tightly they tried to weave together fieldwork and class work. Just for what it’s worth, I should mention that they were in professional conflict with the School of Social Welfare at Columbia, which was Orthodox Freudian, populated with psychoanalysts. I took courses from these people when I got my doctorate. At one point, they banned each other’s students from "their" field agencies. Things got intense in those days. It was an exciting professional education. I was very happy.

Q Did you go to the School of Social Work with the idea of getting a doctorate?
A No. In those days, there were very few doctorates around in social work. I was just getting a master’s degree. During my second year I worked in the foster care division of the same agency. So, that was my field work. In our class work, people spent their time trying to remember their birth traumas, things like that. What was good about the school and became very important educationally to me, was their approach to teaching made them shy away from textbooks. They used novels. They wanted to illustrate the psychological, family and social issues of living through actual stories about life instead of pathological cases. They thought that what we really needed as social workers was to be educated about life. Even though, at 21, you’re sure you know it all.

Q Of course. So, did you concentrate on American novels?
A No. D. H. Laurence was.....They tended to like introspective novels.
Q That’s an interesting approach.
A And, the people came out and did good jobs.
Q So, how long were you at Pennsylvania?
A Two years.
And, then, what did you do?

I was drafted. See, reality is, social reality, is operating. Something called the Korean War is going on. I had friends who were getting shot at in Korea. Since I was a social worker, the army gave me a scientific and professional classification. So, after my basic training I was assigned to a psychiatry section in the disciplinary barracks at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas; it was a maximum security prison. So, you believe in coincidence. So, in truth, my first experience away from New York City was when I was in the army. Louise and I were married while I was on leave after basic training. I’m shipping out to Kansas; our first apartment is in Leavenworth, Kansas.

What did you do in this psychiatric section?

Well, this was inside the prison. It was the psychiatric section inside the prison. It was my first contact with prisoners. Only army prisoners, of course. The minimum sentences in there were for desertion, five years. It went up from there. Murder, the whole works. There was a death row in those days.

They would have been executed by the military?

Well, the interesting thing is the military would send them over to Lansing and they were executed by hanging. This was before the death penalty was outlawed and then reinstated. In fact, we have a dear friend to this day, he’s 89 years old, who was the first black social worker at the DB. There were these three guys who were going to be hung; it was a terrible case. They invited him to their execution. So, he went. Then he came to our apartment, and I didn’t sleep for six months.

Did you feel in this psychiatric facility, did you feel like you learned about a side of life that you didn’t know before?

Yes. What’s interesting here is in those days, remember, everything was working; the government was working. Like the VA ran the most advanced medical institutions. The people in the psychiatry section with us were psychiatrists who had influence in Washington. They got agreement to start a mandatory group therapy program for all of the prisoners. Fifteen hundred. I wound up participating in what was the first mandatory group therapy program for prisoners. I remember there was somebody from the KU Med Center, a guy named Merrill T. Eaton. He was our consultant on death penalty cases. He would come in and interview the prisoner to see if an insanity defense could be mounted. And, we would ask him questions like, "Well, can they execute this guy?" He would be very ironic and say things like, "Well, unless he’s got that ring
in his throat like he claims he’s got.” I found I had one of the most enriching professional experiences of my life. In fact, it changed the direction of my professional development. When it was time to leave the army, I got the name of the person who had published 20 books on group therapy and who had founded the group therapy movement in America, the International Association of Group Therapy. I wrote him on the strength of what we were doing. I got a job with him. It was my first civilian job out of the army.

Q What was his name?
A S.R. Slauson.
Q Was he an immigrant?
A Yes. He had never been formally trained for mental health work. He was truly intuitive, so the job I got when I worked with him was at what was then called A Child Guidance Clinic, the Madalene Borg Child Guidance Clinic. It was a large operation and had social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists.

Q Where was this?
A In New York City. Just for the irony of life, my entire two years in Kansas I was terribly unhappy about being away from New York. We had a good deal in the army, but, let’s face it, to me it was like my oxygen supply had been cut off. It was hard for me. Just to show you, as we drove back home and got to the Mississippi River, I took my Garrison cap off, threw it into the Mississippi River and I said to Louise, “Well, I’ll never come here again.” I like to tell that story.

Q Right. Just make plans and see how well they go.
A This child guidance clinic turned out to be a very elite operation. So, we’re now up to 1956. Shortly after, I decided I was tired of being a social worker. There’s not going to be enough money in it, not enough prestige, I’m going to be a psychologist. I got a fellowship for a doctoral program in psychology at the University of Pittsburgh. I went to get a final medical checkup because social workers in those days had a great medical plan. The guy looks at me and says, “What are you doing this week?” I said, “I’m going to go to Pittsburgh.” He said, “No, you’re going to the hospital.” I had cancer.

Q How old were you?
A Twenty-six. 1956.
Q What kind of cancer did you have?
A Cancer of the thyroid.
Q And, he could tell just by feeling?
He could tell by feeling. At first he thought it was just a benign growth. That's what they tell you anyway. I woke up from the surgery. Louise happens to be a nurse, and she was my nurse. Which was interesting because the surgeon told her there was a serious problem and it had spread in my lymph nodes. Then a week later I had a second surgery in which they took out my entire thyroid gland. Since then I've been taking a little pill every day. That was an interesting experience because I am a vigorous guy and I recuperated well. But when they take out your thyroid gland they're supposed to give you thyroid replacement right away. They didn't. The VA had a radiation cancer therapy program in New York. So I was hospitalized there after the surgery. I was given radioactive iodine to drink to destroy the thyroid cells running around in my body. That's basically, I think, why I survived. It's a paradox because iodine gets attracted to thyroid tissue and this radioactive iodine will kill it. As part of the research protocol, I wasn't given any replacement thyroid for about two or three months. Meanwhile, I went back to work. My life had considerably changed. It's sort of weird. I began to have long periods of very painful depressed feelings. It wasn't reversible -- If you were to say, "What was it?", although I know a lot about psychiatry now, etc., I think just basically my inner reality had been disrupted; I was transformed into a different person. What they call a breakdown. As a social worker, I know about these things -- my colleagues talked about depression all the time and I'm suddenly experiencing all of this from the inside. So, that became the most formative single experience in my adult life. It was like a monkey on my back. While in this state I'm also trying to master becoming a psychotherapist. After a while, I got promoted at the child guidance clinic. I wound up being director. When the surgeries were over, Louise and I lived in Manhattan. Louise said, "Well, what do you want to do while we're waiting to find out if you're going to live or die?" I said, "I'd like to have some kids." Louise now jokingly says she was stupid enough to agree. So, we have three kids. They're all grown up. Thank God they're all alive. I became a successful social work practitioner. I became affiliated with the Lincoln Institute for Psychotherapy. I got involved with education through supervising students. I was working with Smith College and Columbia. I see myself totally as a practitioner. In fact, I enrolled in social work doctoral program at Columbia because I figured I really wanted to wind up running a community clinic.

Q How old were you at this point?
When I enrolled in Columbia, about 30. I had promised myself that whatever this "thing" was that is afflicting me, I’m going to try to make sure that it doesn’t deprive me of anything that I think I would have done. So, I went ahead. I’m sitting in my office one day and I get a phone call. Somebody at NYU said, “Look, we have been looking for a director of field work here to coordinate our field program. Are you interested in it; there’s also teaching involved.” To that time, I never saw myself in a university setting. That’s the truth. I entered academia in a different way. I was already “professionally established.” I came on as an associate professor and as Director of Field Instruction of what was a very large program. A couple of hundred of students, etc.

Q  At NYU.
A  At NYU, in the School of Social Welfare.
Q  And you already had your doctorate by then.
A  No.
Q  You didn’t have your doctorate.
A  I did not have a doctorate.
Q  But, you were in the program.
A  Yes, I was in the program. Frankly, they didn’t even ask me if I was; it was years before I got the doctorate. I wrote my dissertation based on research having to do with students in field placements and whether you could predict how well anybody would do. I concluded you could not predict. The longer you live the more things happen, and they give you food for thought. While I am at NYU I become friendly with another member of the faculty who had been a dean in the School of Social Welfare at Adelphi out in Long Island. He had left the deanship to become vice chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. He worked with some very famous guys. Anyhow, he wound up back at NYU and we became very friendly. One day he came to me and said, “The University of Kansas has decided to transfer its social work school from an entity within the graduate school to a separate school of social welfare at the graduate level, and they would like me to be the first dean.” I said, “Oh, that’s nice.” He said, “I’d like you to come because I like what you do.” Being grounded in practice I had some different educational ideas than the strictly academic model. I thought education should have more connection with performance in the field. I was developing some ideas that I had been successful with how to teach clinical practice. A digression here; I like to joke about the students at the University of Kansas. Most of my time was with graduate students, but I spent a number of very fun years with
undergraduates. I used to joke and say, “The problem with teaching social work to students at the University of Kansas, is that all students take a vow of silence when they come here.”

Q

That’s good.

A

So, this guy says to me, “I want you to come out to Kansas. It's going to be a new school, and you can introduce these new ideas of yours,”

Q

Did your heart sink?

A

Yes. I had decided academia was too limited in preparing social work professionals. It’s one thing if you’re a student of Economics or English, but if you've got to "deliver" as someone who can stand in front of a human being who is suffering and make a difference, you've got to be changed from within. There was a lot of discontent with social work education in those days. It was the period of the ‘60s, I was at NYU during the uprisings. It was fun. But, the students in the School of Social Welfare were the most discontented in the university. I remember meeting with the chancellors who would ask, “What is it in your shop?” We would say, “They’re very unhappy because all of their clients are very unhappy.” That was basically the way it was. Did you ever hear of Eldridge Cleaver?

Q

Of course.

A

Eldridge Cleaver came in to NYU. Everything that is going to happen in America happens first either in New York or California. So, the black-white issue came up. By this time the government had set up the Headstart program and NYU was designated the northeast regional training center. I was asked to get involved in that by the fellow who had been the dean. He became the first dean of the School of Social Welfare.

Q

Here at KU?

A

Yes. Regarding Headstarts, they tell you today that you can’t solve problems by throwing money at them. That’s a total falsity. The government funded training programs for paraprofessionals who were mostly single women from Harlem. We developed a three-month training program for them at NYU. These were men and women, mostly women who were going back to be human service staff in Headstart centers. We set up a program for them to teach human behavior, to teach child-family dynamics. For four years, I forget how many years, maybe more, I was heavily involved in direct classroom teaching of adults not only from Harlem but from Bedford Stuyvesant. This was just the most incredible thing.

Q

Now, would these women have been poor women?
Poor women. Not necessarily on welfare, but no education. They were thrilled to
be inside of a university. We so take things for granted .... There was no way to
account for how meaningful it was for these men and women to be at a university.
We would have a graduation. Family would come, pictures from all over. Now
that was a first time challenge! How, if you don’t have a college educated student
sitting in front of you -- you have a human being sitting there -- can you transmit
meaningful knowledge? So, what I developed -- and what I used here -- was to
abandon all textbooks. I said to them at the beginning (you know, a teacher has to
win his audience first and this was interesting because I was the only white person
there) “Can anybody describe me?” (This was before black consciousness)
And, they would say, “You’re this.” “You’re that.” I would say, “Well, nobody
mentioned I’m white.” Somebody yelled back, “Well, that’s because you’re
Jewish.” It was an exceptional experience for me. What I hit upon was getting
each person to feel safe enough and to create a climate that was safe enough where,
to put it simply, each one felt free to tell their human story. I conned them into
believing that if they did that, they would be most sensitive to human and family
issues.
That became the way I decided that social work education should also work. So, I
took it back. I had been grading A, B, C, etc. In this new system, no such grade
was possible. Finally, I said to the students, “Look, you tell your story and you
get an A. I’m not going judge whether your story is A, B, C or D or how
frightened you are in telling it.” So, that became very exciting.
At that point, another social work school was being established by the State
University of New York at Stony Brook. Rockefeller had decided that a great
state university system was going to be his legacy. It was funded with enormous
amounts of money. Somebody called and asked me if I wanted to set up the
clinical training program in this new school of social welfare. I said, “Sure, that’s
really what I want to do.” This was it. I was, literally, going to be able to set up a
clinical practice educational program, I wasn’t going to be the dean; somebody else
could front, but I was given the clinical aspect of it. I knew just how to do it, I
thought. The problem was that this was in 1970, and the dean had just got
through being an anti-poverty new dealer in Washington. He pulled for the rest
of his faculty Washington-type people, activists most of whom had gone to
Brandeis, which if you know anything about it, meant they were Marxists. The
funny thing is, I’m a Marxist but from the ’50s. They were Marxists from the
‘70s and didn’t believe in social work. I said, “We’re going to have 200 students
here. Don't we have to prepare them for clinical practice?" They said, "We want them to organize the potato farmers in Suffolk County."

This was an unfortunate byproduct of the '60s. My argument was we would be failing to meet our professional and educational obligations to our students. Further, the grading system is forcing them to go through hoops that they're willing to go through, but it's not helping them deal with, like, how to take the onslaught of suffering if somebody tells you their daughter committed suicide. My solution was to opt for a humanly meaningful educational process.

On the personal front, back home with Louise, New York had changed and it wasn't working anymore. It was getting dirtier.

Q

It was obvious.

A

It was obvious. Some of my professional work was still in Manhattan and we lived in Queens. So, we'd be out in Manhattan late at night in theatres and restaurants. One day, I remember we were walking on 57th Street; it was only about two in the morning and I heard some footsteps in back of me. I got scared. I said to myself, "I'm 39 years old and I'm getting scared in my own city at 2 o'clock. Time to leave." People we knew were having a rough time. Divorces, family tragedies. Race problems throughout the city. I, of course, was involved on the "other side". I was a consultant to Headstart programs. So, New York was beginning to go downhill. Louise and I started to think about where we wanted to go. Fortunately, when you're in the east, there are lots of possible places. We visited Richmond, Virginia, we went to Baltimore. There was even a private clinical practice opportunity in Princeton with a psycho analyst. But, as we would drive back Louise would invariably throw-up in the Holland Tunnel. I said, "Louise, we're never going to get out of here because you keep throwing up."

Q

So the "throw-up factor" was determining your job.

A

Meanwhile, I was introducing my approach in my own clinical class at Stoneybrook (during the prepatory year to seniors staff). It was going to be a new school and we had a whole year to do nothing but think about how to set it up and tinker with professionals in the community. For one whole year. This class of mine it turned out to be a very productive experimental class. These were career SRS social workers who were out in the real world in Long Island who were hard bitten. They would stay in class three or four hours. This system of teaching took off. It was very rewarding for me. I felt it was doing a lot for the kids. Kids, they were grownups.
I finally said that when this school is set up, it couldn’t be accredited. When this school gets set up, it’s going to start as a failure. I don’t want to be here, and it’s time to get out of New York. That’s when I called in my marker with Arthur Katz, who was the first dean of social welfare at KU. He came here. You know, everything happens here ten years later -- just in time for the student revolt we had already gone through in New York. I got here for that!

Lucky you!

In those days, it was 1971 when we got here, in those days the university was desperate about all of the student dissatisfaction. It wasn’t just the School of Social Welfare; the undergraduates were giving them hell. The women were giving them hell. The blacks were giving them hell. Were you here then in 1971?

We came in 1972.

They were allowing graduate students to develop their own courses that would be exciting to the students. There was this one guy, sort of the pet of the dean; he had started Headquarters. Bryan Bauerle is his name. He set up a course called “Alternate Lifestyles, Drugs and Religion.”

This is how you get into trouble in academia. My first day, Bryan came to me and said, “Bob Shelton has been my faculty advisor, but he’s going to do this for another group, I need a new faculty advisor. Are you willing?” I said, “I’ll have to....” So, I went to the most amazing class I’ve ever gone to in my life. It was the Red Dog Inn; they were dancing. It was the craziest thing. The most cosmopolitan things happened to me here in Kansas. In New York, I was kind of a middle-class, successful professional. The hippie revolution was after my student days. I’m from the ‘50s. Meanwhile, the dean and the school had gone through the student revolution. There had been an attempt to fire one of the new faculty he had brought in. It was a big, ugly mess. Everything was polarized. There was a faculty who was here from the "Old World", and to bring in a new dean from the outside to innovate is dangerous. In the process, the man who was spearheading this kind of thinking in the University was Lawrence Chalmers. He left. He went to the Chicago Art Institute. The thinking that would have encouraged a radical kind of teaching disappeared. The university got very cautious. But, they allowed all this craziness in the undergraduate LAS courses. That introduced me to Kansas. All these were undergraduate students from western Kansas. The crazier you were, the more you were from western Kansas. For me and for Louise, it was a human eye opener. It was like Headstart. New Yorkers. Crazy as we were, they liked us. We got invited all over the state. It
was amazing. I was hanging out with the hippies. I grew a beard. In my own
teaching at the graduate level, I was getting an excellent response. In
psychotherapy research, there used to be a rule that if you asked anybody about
the outcome, they'll say, "Well, one-third get a lot of help, one-third maybe some,
and one-third none." As a teacher, I found if I asked other faculty, "Who do you
think you're reaching," the answer would be similar. Being in Kansas gave me an
opportunity to try to change those statistics. I used to joke when we came here
about a writer in the '20s, Lincoln Steffens; he went to visit the Soviet Union and
when he came back he said, "I've seen the future, and it works." When my New
York friends would ask me about Kansas, I would say, "I've seen the past. And,
it still works." When I got here, Kansas was still working. My wife and I got an
intimate look into Kansas. Bryan lived on somebody's farm, and there was a good
mixture of rural life.

Back in graduate school, what began to happen was that students started to
complain that while they enjoyed in my class, a lot of the rest of the educational
program wasn't too helpful to them in their field practice. I became controversial.
This would only happen in academia. Camps began to form in the school. It was
really terrible. Have you heard enough, or do you want to hear more?

Q  No, keep going.
A  I'll give it to you in an overview. At a certain point, my friend left the deanship.
He stayed on as professor for a while, then he left KU to become president of the
NASW, the National Association of Social Workers. He also became the executive
director of the Council on Social Work Education. The wave of change was over.
I became sort of a source for political conflict...... You can only understand this if
you really know academia. There was a routine accreditation of our school being
conducted by the Council on Social Work Education. As part of this
accreditation, all the course curriculum outlines had to be re-approved within our
own faculty. My curriculum statement, and this is after eight years, was voted by
a committee to not be in conformity with school policy. So, the new dean took
away all of my required practice courses.

Q  Really! The dean of social welfare?
A  The dean of social welfare. They threw me into the undergraduate program and
gave me some graduate electives. I'm reading Thomas Mann now, so I'm reading
about what happened in Germany in the '30s. Everybody's life is a microcosm.
In my little life a lot of very interesting things have happened. Some of my
teaching was at the Med Center. I'm doing this new stuff in a "crisis intervention"
class. Seven students filed a written complaint to the school that my method of giving “A” deprived them of the education they’d been promised, that I didn’t follow the course outline, etc. They filed an official formal grievance against me. There’s a grievance machinery for student grievances. I received notice that I’m going to have a hearing before a faculty committee. Well, as you can imagine.... This began my involvement with the University of Kansas outside the School of Social Welfare. I want to tell you this, thank God for the University of Kansas and its commitment to academic traditions and academic freedom because I’m alive because I got support over all the years from Archie Dykes on down. Bob Cobb. At one point in the struggle, I was literally suspended for one year.

Q
Suspended from doing anything?

A
Absolutely.

Q
Really!

A
I was suspended, I’m proud to say, with pay. I put it to good use. I said, “Hey, it’s good to be in disgrace periodically, I guess.” The danger for a professor is to get complacent. You’ve so much going for you. Although, I didn’t like it at the time. It also helped get me depressed again.

Q
I can imagine.

A
But, there was a state senator at the time here who gave me the name of his lawyer, John Frieden, the fellow who just ran for Congress. He knew the governor. The struggle was, basically, that I was accused of grade inflation because I’m giving all “A’s”. I filed an academic freedom complaint that was heard and tossed out. The guy who was to be my "guy" on the university committee left by the time it got there. Funnily enough, in my student days I had avoided direct confrontation with McCarthyism, but, I felt in some perverse way this was a mirror image of that. One of the things I successfully did when I got here was help put into effect, for the first time, student evaluations of teachers. It was written into the protocol for salary increases that 50 percent of a faculty member’s evaluation should come from teaching. Up until then, it almost didn’t matter. That saved my ass, sort to speak. I would keep getting my salary increases. I was not involved in committees inside the School of Social Welfare. The issue turned out to be did I have a responsible, academically and professionally sound educational rationale to justify these great grading deviations that were causing all of these waves. Freak things happened for the good. In one student-faculty meetings during the chaotic days, one member of the faculty tried to hit another faculty member whom
I knew, a guy named Norman Forer. You probably have heard of him. The kind of social worker I am, I stepped right in the middle. And, we were in the next morning's front page of the UDK, pictures and all. I was told I was going to be sued, but this never happened. Instead, Archie Dykes saw the story. He, it turned out, didn't like this guy. That day we were at a cocktail party and he asked me to tell him about myself and my troubles. So, I explained my crazy background to Archie Dykes, what I was doing, etc. Well, after that the University was always on my side. I got all my practice classes back. Another irony was when they threw me into the undergraduate world, I became eligible for the HOPE Award for the first time. I won a finalist's award. I met all of the leading characters at the University because I was sent to the principal's office. That was the way I saw it. A good middle-class kid all of my life and I was sent to the principal’s office. I also got one of Gene Budig’s teaching awards and $5,000. Norman Forer wrote my case up and my case is on file in the special collection of the Spencer Library. I have never even gone to look at it because it got very dirty and ugly with students sent into my classes to report on what I was saying. It got ugly and dirty. The way I feel about it now? There’s an old Jewish joke about the crucifixion, it only hurts when I laugh.

To bring it all together, I would say none of these good things would have happened to me in New York. I felt I was given the opportunity to do this here in Kansas. There was still enough freedom. The crucial thing that I found at KU was personal connection. You could make a human connection with the main administrative actors at the University. Especially, if you were in trouble. You could always go into the chancellor or the vice chancellor for academic affairs who is now our provost.

Shulenberger.

Q

A

Right. I met him when he was in the School of Business. He was hearing my academic freedom complaint. One day, when I won the HOPE award, he said, "Did you really win the HOPE award?" Looking back on it, the University gave me the opportunity to be a real teacher of clinical social work practice. Now that I'm liberated, so to speak, I think I had an opportunity to develop a very delightful educational format for students in preparing them for helping people who are suffering. How can you help a human social work professional who can use their life wisdom in encountering human suffering in a humanly helpful way. One of the dimensions of social work education is that the students are put into a very painful educational contradiction. On the one hand, they're heavily worked
in most classes with information that is going to last about three years, if it lasts that long, or if it’s even information now. And, then they’re out in their field agencies against situations beyond belief in their tragedy and need.

Okay, we are picking up at a bit of a broken point because I pushed the wrong button. We’ll go on here. I think you were talking about how you thought you had support from the administration, but in the department there was still turmoil. You felt like there were some enemies there.

Yes. Since I myself was a teacher of human behavior, it became an interesting personal exercise. Being in a situation where people don’t like you. Responsible and respectable people don’t like you and are mad at you. But, many miraculous things happened. I don’t know how to say this. You want to hear? Okay, one day Louise and I and a former student of mine are at the Paradise Café, and we’re having martinis. So, I was a little drunk, and my friend is talking to me about my latest bout with the faculty. He says, “Why don’t you give up the circle.” We argued back and forth. I’m making my usual pronouncements about academia, like maybe it would be better if more students were having experiences like this rather than less; maybe that’s why they’re all turned off at the undergraduate level, too. Having had real access to the inside, I knew the level of complete disillusionment. I was seriously concerned. Being a father and a human being... I’m concerned about the kids that come through here. I was raising a general issue about education itself. All of a sudden, up pops a man. Louise, being a nurse, said, “Oh, that’s John Hebert.” He was a member of the Board of Regents. John comes around and said, “I’ve been hearing this whole conversation, and I want you to know that I agree with you.” The next thing I know, John is visiting me in my office, (you know what that means in academia) and we began a productive relationship.

Those are the kinds of things I think of as miraculous events. Louise and I joke about the Wizard of Oz a lot, but there’s something mystic about Kansas. I have met world famous people here and had access to them that I wouldn’t have in New York.

More personal contact. Did you ever feel, did things ever get better in the department? Did you feel that by the time you retired that it was a friendlier place?

I thought I was respected. But, generally, I did my own thing. I was the exception that proved the rule. But, that was my argument. I said, “Let me be the exception to the rule.” I became controversial. My friends tried to tell me this.
Once you become publicly controversial, then there’s a whole bunch of other people who begin to look at you in a critical manner. All the novels that you’ve ever read about faculty life, like Strictly Academic, by Stringfellow Barr. They all happen to be true.

Q
Do you feel bitter about it?

A
Being bitter was a stage, but, again, I was somebody who was interested in inner psychology. I wanted to deal with it, I didn’t want to run away from it. I know it’s bad for my health to be bitter. There were a lot of temptations. You get enemies. And, these things get a life of their own. This dean that is there now, I’ve never had trouble with her. She was willing to live and let live. There seemed to be a process so that as I got older I became kind of an elder statesman, but alone. My office door would be open, and the only people that would walk in were students.

Q
During all of this time, did you and your wife build up an active, sort of, life in Lawrence that helped given the fact that you were kind of a loner in the department. Did you feel that you had a nice life?

A
Right. In the first years we were here, we were totally immersed in the department. That fell apart. We started to do independent things. For instance, this is just a personal thing, one of the people I met was Ram Dass. He came here to give a lecture.

Q
Yes. I heard him.

A
You heard him? Louise wasn’t feeling well that day, and I said, “Louise, let’s go to his lecture.” Afterwards, she said to me, “I feel better.” The next night he was going to be at the Menniger Foundation and we went there. That began a long term relationship. We built ourselves a summer house in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Now, Stockbridge is an interesting town. I don’t know if you know the east that well.

Q
I’ve been to New Jersey.

A
Norman Rockwell?

Q
Yes.

A
This is a painting of our little town by Norman Rockwell. Here, I’ll show you. We kept our house in Massachusetts for about 15 years. In Ram Dass’s book, Be Here Now, he mentioned his father’s estate in New Hampshire. So, it’s summer time, and I say to Louise, “Hey, let’s go look up Ram Dass.” Well, that’s what we did. We just got in the car and we went and found him. I’m a social worker, I know how to track people down. We knocked on his door and spent a lot of time
with them. He visited here. We became very interested in what he…….. We have just bought another copy of his series of lectures on The Bhagavad Gita. So, that was a whole line of development that…..

Q
You would have never participated in that.

A
Right. And, it was personal. He was a psychologist. When Louise and I were having some of our marital problems, she was always on the phone with Ram Dass. He’s had a stroke recently.

Q
I didn’t know that.

A
He’s recovered very well. In fact, I’ve got two lectures since his stroke and they’re pretty good. He’s out in California.

Q
I had a tape in my car of him talking about aging. It’s a tape that somebody gave me. Very good.

A
Well, that’s what happens. From the vantage point of my own inner development, all of this at the school and what I was doing in the classroom became to me also a spiritual exercise. Being Jewish and coming out here, I got very interested in Jesus. I decided he was the first Jewish social worker. Think about it. He established the social work profession. That’s why fundamentalist Christians used to love my course……..

Q
Really?

A
Oh, yeah. Those were strong supporters. I got about 90 percent of the students. I began to do a lot of reading in mystical literature about suffering. I began to look back on that group experience I had in the prison. If you stop and think about it, if you’re in the clinical field, you’re always working on yourself, on what is it you can do that will help another person. I came to decide that, when it’s all said and done, what you’re really transmitting as a teacher is an opportunity to access some kind of inner power. That inner power, you can call it spiritual, psychological, you can call it whatever you want, in fact everybody calls it something else, but I decided it was basically a spiritual thing. When you’re in a service profession, you’re supposed to care about other human beings. That’s insane in modern American social reality which tells you you’re supposed to think only about yourself. So, if you want to do social work, you really have to think about becoming sort of like a saint. That’s basically what I was peddling. I know New York has the great honor of being a radical place. But, more radical things happened to me here. That’s the paradox of Kansas for me, including the teaching experience. I don’t think I could have had this experience at a different
university. With students, I'd always spend a little time on the Seal of the University of Kansas. You don't know what the seal is?

Q  No.

A  What Moses is saying in Latin is the translation of what he says in Hebrew when he sees the burning bush. He says, "What is it that burns and is not consumed?" To me, I always thought it was interesting that I wound up at a university with Moses on the seal.

Q  I've never heard that before.

A  Bob Cobb used to say to me, "Herman, you're a radical, you're a Marxist, and from New York. What are you doing here?" I'd say, "Bob, everybody out here is a populist."

Q  That's a good line. I don't think I'll ever hear that again. So, you retired a year ago. What are your plans for retirement?

A  My standard answer is I finally have time to live my life. We've got three kids, one of them lives in Lawrence. He's not married, and he's a lawyer. Two girls live in Kansas City, they each have kids. We've got plans. Louise gave up nursing at the hospital. I might write, but I don't think so. As you can see, I was a practitioner academic. Aside from that, my next door neighbor, until he died, was a retired Colonel. He had run a prison camp in Korea. He would go unarmed into the prison yard all the time and figured as long as he was doing his job right he could walk in and out. I'd say, "Well, maybe if you can do 30 years in the army, I'd give my 30 years in academia, I'm ready to kind of soak in the lessons. You wonder how you're going to do. There are the books I've always wanted to read. Traveling. We went to Europe last Christmas. We were in Amsterdam; we were in the Greek Islands and Hawaii?

Q  You're getting out some. And, your health has stayed good?

A  I've got a touch of arthritis. But, health has been good. I've never had a recurrence of the cancer.

Q  Good for you.

A  I used to joke and say, "What happens if you have cancer and you think you might die young and you don't?"

Q  Exactly, and then what do you do? Well, can you think of anything that we haven't covered? That you think we should have covered?

A  I can't imagine what we haven't covered.
Q I can’t think of anything. I had no idea of what your experience at KU had been, so that was a real eye opener for me. I didn’t know that. That’s a good thing to have on record.

Thank you.