

Life is not made of the likely, Part 1

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At the end of *The Sipsev Swamp Stories*, one of the characters—an old hermit—tells me, “Life is not made of the likely.” He quotes Mark Twain's famous saying, “Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to probabilities. Truth isn't.”

I put that exchange in the book because the force that Mark Twain was focusing on has been a central shaping influence in my life. I give two examples to illustrate.

As I worked through my Senior year in college, the Vietnam war was swelling into a major inferno. Young American males were subject to the draft, so I couldn't plan my future without considering that I could be drafted into the army on any day as soon as I graduated. Rather than wait until Uncle Sam called, I approached the Navy to go through Officers Candidate School and serve out my time as a Naval officer rather than slog through the jungles with a rifle. The Navy welcomed me and set a date shortly after graduation by which I must irreversibly commit to serving or I'd go back into the draft pool.

I'd done well in Math and Physics as I exhausted the selection of courses offered by The University of Alabama. Most of what I took the last year was at the graduate level. But doing well in the backwoods of Alabama didn't seem to me to mean much. I didn't even bother to apply to graduate school at any of the universities well known for physics because I didn't think they would even consider me.

One afternoon in the Spring of my Senior year, I sat at a desk in the hallway outside Professor Carlson's office doing my part-time job to earn spending money. He passed by and casually asked, “Where are you going to graduate school?” I was surprised by the question, but naively blurted out, “Nowhere. I don't want to be drafted, so I'm going into the Navy.”

He looked at me quizzically for part of a minute as though I must have something else to say. I didn't know what else to add. Finally he spoke again. “The draft allows a deferment for students even in graduate school. You have to go to graduate school. You have to. Haven't you applied anywhere?”

I said something about maybe sticking around Alabama to get a Master's degree and how I couldn't afford it.

Professor Carlson formed an irritated twist of his face. I didn't know what came next.

“Okay. I can call Michigan State and Johns Hopkins. That's the two places I studied. It might not be too late. There's certainly no time to waste.”

Following Professor Carlson's directions and urgings, I applied to Michigan State and Johns Hopkins. They both accepted me, but because all the financial aid had already been committed to earlier applicants, I would have to pay full tuition and provide money to live on.

That both schools found my credentials acceptable boosted my ego enormously, but in fact, they might as well not have replied. While my parents had willingly paid all my essential expenses for a bachelor's degree, a graduate education was a foreign idea to them, and they didn't see why it might be

useful. I was broke.

But one possibility remained. If one of the applicants who had been granted financial aid were to choose another school and I were at the top of the list to receive uncommitted aid, I still might be able to attend.

The Navy's deadline was at 12 noon on a Friday. I must send a telegram by then saying yes or no. I was at home for the summer working in my father's grocery store, awaiting the determination of my future. I assumed that it would definitely be the Navy. Even though these prestigious schools had accepted me, there was no way that I could be at the top of a long list of worthy candidates. Nonetheless, I waited for the deadline.

I'd never sent or received a telegram, but I inquired how I should do it. I had to call the telegraph office by 11.50 and dictate the telegram. They would read it back to verify the message, and then send it.

I told my father that I had to leave work for lunch a bit early so I could send the telegram before noon. I went home at 11:30 and flopped on the sofa not too far from the hallway phone and waited. I'd already written out my response in what I thought was good, terse, professional, military prose. "Offer of OCS position accepted. Will appear for induction per instructions." I mentally reviewed all the concerns I had about Officer's Candidate School. The one that worried me most was the physical training. I'd never been very athletic. Would I be able to get through the rigorous Marine Corp training? The very thought made me tense up. Maybe I could get through on perseverance instead of performance. I don't know why I didn't go ahead and send the telegram. What difference did a few minutes of waiting matter? I suppose I liked the suspense.

And then, at 11:45 the phone rang. It was Professor Gerhard Dieke, the Chairman of the Physics Department of The Johns Hopkins University. He introduced himself quickly in his residual German accent, offered a few polite comments about my application, and then matter-of-factly announced that he was offering me a NASA graduate fellowship that paid all my tuition and expenses and moreover provided a stipend of \$200 per month for living expenses. "Do you want it?" he asked.

So, indeed, life is not made of the likely. It's sometimes made of the nearly impossible. Why is that? I think I know the answer, but first, I have one more example to give.