stories around a theme

This may turn out to be a bit too personal. Yet, I feel the need to speak out. This is not the story of my life, but it is about some very personal experiences. There is no obvious beginning, so will start at one of the many starting points of my life.

January 1950, when I first set foot on American soil, maybe a week before my 28th birthday. Travelled on the first Queen Mary, then the fastest ship across the Atlantic. Four days from Plymouth, England (not called UK yet). The Atlantic was rough, very cold. The decks covered in thick ice; nobody allowed on the decks. I traveled fourth class, also called steerage. At the time, almost five years after the end of WWII, I was allowed $25 to take out of the Netherlands, where I had lived for the five war years and almost five more years after. That was the fortune I brought to the land where the streets are (were) paved with gold. My father had paid for the passage. In the year before, 1949, I spent almost 8 months at the London School of Economics (a university), I had finished a Dutch degree in psychology, and had half a medical education — all but the practical phase as a student (resident) in a hospital, running with "real" doctors. But the medical education was before penicillin which changed medicine to a branch of chemistry. At one time I knew all the bones, the muscles, nerves, in the human body. But back to the Atlantic. fourth class was in the very rear of the boat, which meant that when the boat rode over high waves, as we did almost the whole trip, we went up 40 feet, then down 60-70 feet, the Captain broadcast to us in his most jolly voice. Everybody was sick except one other young man and me. On British ships, at that time anyway, the classes were locked into what you had paid for. As soon as we entered US waters, the doors were unlocked. The other young man and I went exploring through endless hallways, always trying to go up. The stairs were first open aluminum, then solid, then tapestried and wider, finally a softly padded elegantly curved staircase to the top deck, where we found a throng of people standing outside a door to the *sunroom*. We wormed our way closer to the door and saw a "real Hollywood movie star" being interviewed. Apparently she had come on our ship after filming the sequel to Mrs. Miniver -- at that time evidently a famous movie with a famous star. When we finally could hear the answers she gave, I was in shock. She used words that I had heard only in boys' dormitories. And although she looked great with a huge bouquet of red roses in her arm, she kept moving her skirt further up her thighs. Such gestures, such language out of the mouth of a woman who looked every inch the essential upper class British matron.

An announcement boomed through the ship: *back to your own class to meet with officials of the American Government.* Back to fourth class just in time to see a fellow passenger, handcuffed, led away by three men identified as FBI agents. The man was from some Eastern European country, accused of having pushed an American officer off a moving train, escorted to the U.S. by "real FBI agents."

Had not even set foot on land but was met with *Hollywood and the FBI*. I've never been that close again to a real Hollywood star, or the FBI.

Here I have to backtrack. I grew up in Indonesia. My father was a doctor, bacteriologist, but at that time what he did we would now call public health — then it was called hygiene. I often accompanied him when he went, with a native doctor, to an outlying village where they had an outbreak of something.

Our household was my father and mother, my sister and I, and a number of "servants." I have to put those words in quotes; I have hated them all my life. The

people my parents called, and thought of as, "servants," to me were as much family as were my parents and sister. Most of them lived with their wives, husbands, children, "in the back." A small but fair sample of the larger society of the then very small town.

My parents were generous, good people, but I think they didn't understand, or were not interested, in the local culture — very different from, say, western European culture of the early part of the 20th century. Now, lifetimes later, I realize that my mother, true to her generation probably, not infrequently said "if you do so and so, I will love you," or, "if you don't do what I tell you, mother won't love you any more." My family "in the back" never talked about love (there is—was—no word for that) but there was always a lap or a shoulder where I would be comforted. They accepted me as I was, for what or who I was. True unconditional love. I learned much from them. Almost all the kids in my schools were Malay, a few Chinese, "Indian," or mixed this and that; I was often the only white person in class. Yet it never occurred to me to feel different.

I finished high school in mid 1938, wanted desperately to go to the Indonesian university that had a reputation for excellence, studying medicine, but my mother insisted I go to Europe "to get culture." At the time I thought that meant museums and concerts. Now I know that she was afraid I was becoming too "native."

In 1939 there were no commercial planes, we travelled by ship, three weeks to a port in the Mediterranean, four weeks by boat to London or one of the Dutch harbors. I was put on a Danish freighter that was licensed to carry no more than twelve passengers. A great adventure! Disembarked in Genoa, Italy, did not take the boat train to Amsterdam but on the spur of the moment decided that I would do a little side trip of my own choosing. Spent some days in Naples, then Rome. Arrived in Amsterdam almost two weeks later than planned, delayed by my side trip but even more by the fact that France obviously was expecting the Germans to invade "any day now." The trains I had to take were frequently shunted on side tracks so that more important trains could rush to the Maginot Line, then famed as the immensely fortified border with Germany.

My first words to my aunt, who met me in Amsterdam, were, When is this war going to start? She was indignant, Oh no, there is no war coming. Why would they come here, they have nothing to gain from coming here. No, no, war is unthinkable. That was the middle of August 1939. Two weeks later World War Two officially began, September 1, the German invasion of Poland.

I registered at the university, went through the usual hazing (almost died from one of the rituals that included having me drink as much alcohol as I could in as short a time as possible — have never been able to drink any kind of alcohol since). By November of that first year I knew this was not the right place for me. Holland was cold, dreary, I did not know anyone — had family, but barely knew them. I could not get used to fast talking, endless entertainment, movies, parties, drinking. I called my father (who was giving me a very generous monthly allowance) which at that time required going to a post office, making an appointment for an international call, then the next day coming back at a certain time, and after connection had been made by a dozen or so operators, talked to my father. I told him about the threatening war (which by then they knew about), that I wanted to go to America. I remember my frantic mood, wanting to get away, did not know where, but the only thing that came to mind was America. I knew absolutely nothing about this country except that the streets were paved with gold and that it was the country of the future. My father immediately agreed, said I had to make my own arrangements and that he would send the same amount of money to America as soon as I would arrive there. The next day went to the nearest American consulate,

in Rotterdam. There was a line of people waiting to be admitted, at least two blocks long. I joined the line, but soon it was clear that the line did not move. I went to the front door and asked the soldier (now I know it must have been a Marine) whether the line ever moved. Are you German, he asked. No. Oh then come right in. I saw the consul immediately. He was very friendly, animated. Showed me university catalogs, gave me application forms, told me what and how I should answer the questions on the forms I would have to submit. With a flourish he stamped my passport with an immigration visa. Smiling, he said, This way in five years you'll be an American.

The next day went to a shipping company. No, they were booked for, let's see, at least six months, maybe a year. The next shipping company was booked for more than a year. An English company would not even talk to me, all bookings were locked in for a year or more. They put me on waiting lists.

Back to the university. Got through the winter, through early Spring, until the invasion, May 10, 1940. The Germans did not invade France through the Maginot Line, of course, but went around through the Netherlands, Belgium, entering France from the north. I happened to be visiting with friends of my parents who lived in a suburb outside Rotterdam. On the fourth day the Germans bombed the city. We stood on the "widow's walk" of their tall three story house, saw the planes swoop down, dumping bombs and incendiary bombs. The city burned for two weeks, a *fire storm* it was called. The entire inner city destroyed. I believe that was one of the first city bombings from the air in history. Anti-aircraft defense was not invented yet.

While the bombing was going on the telephone rang. Very unusual, the lines had only been working on and off, as had the power. I remember three of the four days since the invasion we had no power in the night. I was nearest to the door into the house, ran down three stairs to the phone. Amazingly, it was for me. One of the shipping companies had space for me on a ship that was going to New York if I could get to Amsterdam the next day before noon.

Not even thinking I said, No thanks. Hung up. Took less than one second to answer, not thinking, just intuition. But as I hung up I knew that it was the right decision. Two days later learned that the ship, as soon as she entered the Channel, had been torpedoed by a German sub; went down in minutes with all aboard.

So, here I was locked into a country occupied by the regular German army and at least two secret and not so secret other German extra-military forces, and a German government. I continued at the University finishing the first part of medical training (all but the "practical" work in hospitals). In 1943 all universities were closed, considered to be "hotbeds of resistance." Which they were, of course.

Fast forward to May 5, 1945: German capitulation. The terms required all Germans to stay in their barracks, keeping their guns, and we, the Resistance (with armbands and air-dropped guns) were in charge. A very confusing time. We were starved after what is now known as the Hunger Winter. I had lost much weight, surviving on little more than sugar beets and tulip bulbs. Almost no protein, very little fat. I had to have a job, found a job as English teacher in one of the most renowned high schools (the royal princesses had gone there). I had a first degree in medicine but no training in teaching English. I did not last long. Woke up in the halls of a clinic strapped to a gurney, where a passing person (maybe a nurse) told me I had been lying "for days." I had no memory of anything. Later they told me I had fainted in class, writing something illegible on the blackboard. Eventually a doctor looked at me, said I might have hepatitis, but they had no food, so if I knew someone living nearby I had better go there. I asked where "here" was. Remembered that I had a friend reasonably close. She was called, she found or

borrowed a contraption that could be attached to her bicycle. They folded me up into the box, and C. cycled me to her house. It took many weeks for me to get upright, while she scrounged enough food for both of us. Shortly after we got ration cards, enough to live on, albeit simply. Other things happened that need not be part of this story.

When I was able to negotiate trains and bicycles found out that, of course, my permanent entry visa was no longer valid. The rules had changed. It was virtually impossible to get any kind of visa from the Netherlands. Half of all Europeans wanted to escape a ruined Europe, There were "quota," and the quota for the Netherlands was less than a dozen a year, I think, at that time.

My parents and my sister had been in Indonesia all through the war. The Japanese surrendered in August of that year; they left Indonesia. No news from my family until some time in September, I think, when the Red Cross found me with a message that my family had all survived. Later, a second message said that my sister would be on the first boat that had been sent out from the Netherlands to bring people to Europe if they wanted. Remembering dates is not my strength but I think it must have been very late October or November (1945) that not only my sister but also my mother arrived. They had been given "European" clothes in the Red Sea, and that was literally all they had. One wool dress, shirt, socks, shoes, and a tooth brush. In Holland everything was rationed, absolutely everything. It took months to find and buy clothes for all of us; I did not have anything any more either. My father stayed for at least a year before coming to Holland.

Universities in the Netherlands were free — perhaps they still are—, but when I inquired about completing my medical education there were too many costs and fees to make that possible. A professor in one of Amsterdam's universities offered to take me on as assistant, and that would cover room and board and other needs. I finished a six year course in psychology in three years. In part because they accepted some subjects I had already had, and in part because I studied 16 hours a day. Every now and then I would approach one or another American Consul, but no chance, although the rules changed monthly it seemed. Earned a scholarship for a special course for European students at the London School of Economics, where a world famous psychologist was the core of the program. London too was demolished, they said, but to me it seemed fabulous. One month I saw sixteen different plays; I've always liked live performances, and almost all of the plays were either avant garde or Shakespeare in the original. Those eight months in London were a first taste of "real life." Met interesting people, had a sizzling relationship that fell apart when I met her parents, high aristocracy. At 26 finally felt a fairly normal young man again. I had been obsessed with the loss of those five war years that had been far from pleasant, dangerous always, having to hide when resisting long before there was a Resistance. The whole time I felt — no, I *knew* — that nothing would happen to me "because there was to be something I had to do after the war." What that was I did not know, but I knew absolutely that nothing could touch me. I was captured by the Gestapo (secret police), and walked out (another story). I was shot at with machine guns, walked —not ran —away (but wet my pants when I finally turned into an alley, safe from bullets). Several other encounters with German armed people. But after the war, and after I had regained some sanity and health, I knew that I had lost five years of growing up. I was forced to be adult without any transition. In London I finally recovered a little of the adventure of being a young man.

When I came back to the Netherlands, again went to see another Consul, and this one worked out a "student exchange visa," which meant I could enter the United States, and stay as long as I was registered at a university, studying something. As soon as I got a

degree, or was no longer registered, I had to "return to my country of origin." And so, I arrived in New York, January 1950, with $25 and a bus ticket to Ann Arbor, University of Michigan. All that a compressed account of the ten years that it took me to get to the United States.

The first few days, weeks, in America left few memories beyond a huge confusion. I had grown up in a very small town in Asia, then ten years in a country swiftly being destroyed by an ugly war, a country that I did not know. In Indonesia I had felt at home, comfortable, feeling myself a part of a loose but warm group of people, easy acceptance of each other as humans, with scars and smiles, hurts and hugs, What I remember most is that it was always calm and never judgmental. The ten years in Europe were never calm and aways threatening. I made friends easily, but there was little chance to do what 19, 20 year-olds do. The occupation soon became a dreadful oppression. Ever stricter laws and rules were solemnly announced daily. I experienced what it is like to be put down for who you are, hated, kicked, forbidden to do anything and everything.

I grew up in a colony; it was never like the Occupation. Of course I knew some white people who thought themselves more or better. But from the beginning knew utterly that I did not want to be like that, that I belonged with humans who felt a oneness with each other. Being and feeling oppressed by foreigners reinforced my revulsion for the idea that some people think themselves better than other people. I have learned more about what it is to be human from indigenous, even aboriginal ("primitive") people than from the professors in the four universities I attended and two I taught in. I have lived in different countries all over the planet, with different people, and everywhere I've looked for and found friends at the bottom of the heap, on the edges of civilization, so-called. I learned in the war that when I really needed shelter, or other help, I found it from the poor, not from my rich aunt.

I'm not sure what my expectations about America were. Probably a world not as damaged as Europe, but with a similar kind of culture.

Instead it was the greatest culture shock of my life. America was indeed lush and wealthy compared to Europe. I spoke fluent English, but the wrong kind: everyone laughed at my British English. In America everybody has glaringly white teeth that they show all the time, and everybody immediately calls me by my first name (they still do now that I am an old man). In America people eat dogs (hot) and something from Hamburg, Germany. My professor sat me down the second day, telling me what "democracy" is. When I looked surprised and said the Netherlands was a democracy, he angrily brushed that (and me) aside. No! You have a queen, that is not democratic. The next sentence was, And a democracy is a two-party system. Full stop.

Months later, I had a radio show interviewing foreign students. My guests and I usually met for half an hour or so before the show to get to know each other. Once, with a few students from Indonesia, we sat in a circle on the floor and reached out a hand to the next person's arm, or knee, as people do in that part of the world. People touched when they talked with another. I got tears in my eyes when I realized that in America people don't touch. I had missed that without knowing what it was I missed. Americans don't even shake hands, something Europeans do coming and going. That lack of physical touch must have been part of my culture shock. Americans are very good at easy communication that remains superficial; Americans are not open as they are in Asia and avoid talking about feelings or anything deeper than the weather — or politics which has become a battle of cultures, misinformation, and prejudices.

Probably I am exaggerating. Much has changed in this country. And much has stayed the same now gone underground.

Before I came here I had not heard of, nor expected, the sense of superior and inferior that I felt here. In the first year I got to know a dentist who drove a large black Cadillac, had a beautiful wife, and two gorgeous daughters. I was impressed by the Cadillac, and wished the two daughters were not so protected by their parents. Then I heard they had a bad auto accident, the dentist and one of the daughters were taken in two ambulances to three hospitals before one would admit these seriously wounded people. The family was black. When a fellow student stopped me on the street, and, "by the way, have you heard," told me the story. I refused to accept it. No, that was just not possible. Not in a modern country. Was that not what the last war had been about. The Germans made very clear that we were an inferior race and they were better than... There were endless things we were not allowed to do, see, talk about, places that were forbidden. And here in America, they made war on black people? I still cannot believe it.

Not long after that the University clinic contacted me. A friend, fellow student from Africa, was in the clinic; could I visit him. Godwill was mild and modest; my wife thought him "a sweet guy." There was nothing much wrong with him, he was homesick, he said. But two questions later he confessed that he could not find a place to live. At that time students lived with people who rented out rooms. I went looking for somewhere for Godwill to stay. Easily found five homes with a sign saying "Room for Rent." Talked to the ladies, they all said, Yes, they had a room, bring your friend by tomorrow. The next day took Godwill with me to the house I had liked the best. As soon as the lady saw Godwill she slammed the door. The second lady opened the door but barked that the room was no longer available. I tried to argue with the third lady, no more vacancy and she removed the sign from the window. I looked at Godwill, not understanding. He almost whispered, *It is because I am black*. We tried the last house. I asked whether I could talk to the students who lived there, whether they objected to having an African student in the house. Go right up, she said. I talked to three students, none of them had any objections. But I do, the lady said as she pushed us out of the door — no, she pushed *me*, she did not want to touch a black man.

This was the country that was rich and getting richer, high on the conviction that they had saved the world. But landladies refused to rent a room to a black man in Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1951.

Now, sixty years later, we have a black president. Of course, he is only *half* black, but evidently any percentage is too much. It seems to me that there is a great need to somehow deal with the excesses of the last eight or nine years. But I do understand that in this country "a black man" cannot do that. Don't we all know that sicknesses must be dealt with before we can go on and be healthy again? Now, a past is a leaden weight dragging us down, holding back the rebirth many of us had imagined. Mr. President, you should have aspired to be the Head of the United Nations where black is beautiful.

As a psychologist, but also as a human being, I know that as soon as one thinks inferior/superior, the supposedly superior becomes lower than the inferior he imagines. I've tried to understand that need to put others down. It's still a mystery. In psych 101 it would be explained simply enough: the need to feel superior means having a low self esteem, deeply felt uncertainty about one's importance.

Life is not about being important. We, humans, survived the first hundred or more thousand years of our being a species by fitting into the world. Not better, not superior, just part of all that is. We never imagined controlling our world, or other people. That came later, maybe ten thousand years ago when we began to think ourselves different from all other creatures. We began to "own" land, then plants and animals, then people. We got smarter and smarter, learned to blow things up, mountains and cities. Changing the face of the earth while digging out all the resources we need to fuel a mad world of always ***more***.

Thinking in hierarchies is the very opposite of any kind of democracy. We the people cannot mean that some we's are somehow better than other we's. And isn't it all too clear that we who imagine ourselves as the only democracy in the world are no longer much of a democracy according to our own Constitution when the rulers behind the scene are a very few enormous international corporations. We are a society, a culture, broken in artificial hierarchies, Minorities, who, the moment we label them, become less. Minorities of race, religion, education and on and on. Americans like to think that we are a classless society; everybody middle class. We slice along different lines. Too many of us see only difference, unwilling or unable to see a commonness. The land where everyone is armed with lethal automatic assault weapons to hold back the other.

Being fixated on differences is a disease. In Nature there is no better or superior, illegal or inferior. A tree is not better than a plant. Sooner and later the plant and the tree die, get reabsorbed into the planet, grow another plant, another tree. What makes the planetary ecology — any ecology — work is the variety, the many forms and colors and shapes and functions that together form a stable whole. We like to think of predator and prey, but in a healthy ecology they are totally interdependent. You can eliminate all wolves, but the inevitable consequence is that you will have an invasion of deer in the suburbs.

As long as we think we are the best, "the richest and most powerful country on earth," there can be nothing but eternal war. Different faces are not ugly or untouchable but beautiful, interesting. It is variety that makes a healthy ecology. We humans are part of the planetary ecology, not aside of it, or above it. How could we be? Can't we open our eyes and see that differences can never be erased by force, by bombs. Can we be a democracy when there are proportionately many more black than white prisoners in our multiplying prisons?

We are so proud of our science, chemistry, engineering, we can send a man to the moon and bring him back. We can scrape the last bit of coal out of a mountain, we can pump out all the oil — and then what? We assume some scientist will find a way; geo-engineering it is called now. Like everything else we do, we'll try this and that, not worrying about consequences or side effects. Haven't we proof enough that *we* cannot change the planet? Why did we mess with our only home? In the beginning we adapted to what we found around us; that is our unique talent.

But we think we are better than…

In my view, the only way out of division, seeing a group of people in terms of better or worse, higher or lower, more or less powerful, black, white, green, purple — the only way out is to see the *whole* again; not the differences. We're all in this together. We humans, and all the animals, plants, weeds, bacteria, molds, life forms and formless matter, *are* the planet. A whole. There is no captain, no officers, no lowly sailors, certainly no owners. We are part of an organism. Think of a man as an organism. You

can cut off a finger, and the man will live. Cut off an arm, two arms, a leg, and the man may live — but not without a lot of help. When you cut off his head, he's dead. If you damage the flow of blood and lymph and nerves he dies. No, the heart is not more important than the liver; the head is not the boss.

How can we get back to seeing the world as a living organism again. A whole in which we are related to everything. I am related to the trees that give me shade and fruit, to the cat that keeps rats away. And I am also related to melting polar ice caps that effect the weather here. I'm related to the Chinese people who made my telephone, the Taiwanese who put my computer together from parts made all over the world. Is there one part of a computer that is more important than any other? My ancient laptop is being repaired because the thin wires that go through the hinge wore out, and for weeks the screen only worked at a very unnatural angle. That minuscule bundle of wires turned out to be the most important part of that computer for a while.

Native Americans — all indigenous people — knew that "*We Indians think of the earth and the whole universe as a never-ending circle, and in this circle man is just another animal. The buffalo and the coyote are our brothers, the birds, our cousins. Even the tiniest ant, even a louse, even the smallest flower you can find—they are all relatives*."
Jenny Leading Cloud White River Sioux

We, modern Man, stepped out of the circle. Today, the circle may be bent, even broken, but it better not be too late to step back in.

robert wolff, 19 may 2010

"If we have no peace it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other,"
Mother Teresa.