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MR. F "Mr. Vigor"

I was born May 30, 1954, in Great Falls, Montana, and was raised in the Sun River Valley, a rural district outside Great Falls. My mother spoke 100% English. My grandmother, whose language was primarily formed in Devon, had a lot to do with caring for me for the first couple of years, so Devonshire words were strongly present in the house. Granny had a midwestern twang, which made the Devonshire words sound particularly out of place—on both sides of the Atlantic. The nearest neighbor was 5 miles away, and the school bus took two hours each way. My father's main job was in a lumber company, but he had other businesses like a school bus operation. In February, 1965, he got a very good position as manager of a lumber company, so when I was in the 5th grade we moved to Winslow on Bainbridge Island, near Seattle. I have two younger brothers, one 20 months younger, and one 12 years younger.

My first memory is when I was about 21 or 22 months old (March or April, 1956). It was in the winter (very cold; we had no heating in the bedrooms), and I was in my crib in my parents' room. My parents thought I had swallowed a coin, and they were trying to get me to regurgitate it. The strength of the memory is due to the fact that there was fear all around. It was at night, and there was an orangish glow in the room (my mother later recalled that there was a lamp with a red lampshade). I remember the relation of the crib to the bed; my crib was in a little nook, and I remember that I could see the bed from there.

I was a very active youngster—in today's terms people would say "hyper." In my extended family, that was considered natural and good.

We had a rule that we could do anything we wanted at home—we were encouraged to, there was no TV or passive entertainment. Often there was story telling. My mother could make up stories on the spot, and did as we were playing around her. We were always encouraged to try things and do things. I remember playing with the pots and pans in the kitchen, and I learned to cook early. When I was 7, my brother and I prepared a full dinner for some visiting adult friends, to their surprise. We could be wild at home, but in public we were expected to be conventionally well-behaved, which meant not moving much.

My maternal grandmother was mathematically inclined. She never finished school, and could hardly write. But she was very smart, especially with numbers. She did all sums in her head. My grandmother remembered people not by name but by birthdate. My mother and all her three sisters are excellent mathematicians. All of them remember people's birthdates forever. I inherited some of that math ability. I don't use a calculator, and I love things like figuring out sums and marking tests. In high school one of my best subjects was math. I never understood why others were having difficulty, as I really enjoyed it.

People on my mother's side were great story-tellers and actors, making use of their talents for words and rapport. My father, too, was drawn to perform for others—but his talents lay more on the side of being an MC, a DJ, and a magician. He has unusual mechanical skill, an interest in electronics, patience, and is very artistic. These traits have manifested themselves in his work of painting, house design and construction.

I walked early, and spoke early. My first memory of language is perhaps singing, I'm not really sure. Later, about from junior high on, I began to make up my own words. The idea that you could make up words really appealed to me. I made up a word for something that was fantastic. And I made up "scrunchilious," meaning all wrinkly. The sound of the word is important; making words that fit a feeling, or magnify a feeling.

Our tongues were long. Many members of my mother's family, including my mother, all of my aunts, my youngest brother and I could touch our noses with our tongues. I believe that made it easy for me to do the Spanish flapped /r/ and some Chinese sounds. As children, we did all kinds of tongue exercises, curling our tongues around as a game. I think our practice as children has certainly contributed to 'flexible' speech organs and the ability to produce foreign sounds. We are convinced that the ability is genetically inherited.

I was exposed to Spanish and German simultaneously in the 7th grade. I was about 13. Spanish was compulsory. But there was a teacher who taught cooking and who offered to teach German at 7:30 in the morning when she was cooking. My friend went, so I went with him. Learning German was my first experience at enjoying language learning. I learned very quickly that the motivating factor for me is the teacher. The German teacher had sung with an East German opera company. She wasn't East German, she was Yugoslavian (Mrs. N.). She was a real Brunhilde type, and classes with her were always very, very fascinating. My Spanish teacher, on the other hand, was terrible. I was put into the highest level of the class because of my other academic work, and the

other kids had all had some experience with Spanish. So I was the dunce of the class, and the teacher constantly held me up to public scorn. I hated that. If he did it to me now, I would tell him where to get off. I ended the year almost failing Spanish and feeling that I could say things in German.

After finishing high school in 1973, at the age of 19, I qualified for an international one-year exchange program with Indonesia. It was 3 months training in America, 6 months in Indonesia, and 3 months in America working with Indonesians. Some of the participants were Spanish speakers from New Mexico. Some of us made a concerted effort to speak a lot of Spanish with them. That really helped my Spanish.

After that, I went to college. Because of my Indonesian experience, I majored in Southeast Asian Area Studies at University of Washington. I was the first such major at UW. It was sort of a conglomerate program put together by different departments. I started studying Chinese. When I was living in Seattle, I found that I was more involved than ever in Asian languages. While I was in college, I had a lot of part-time jobs. I worked at a language lab making language tapes. They hired me because I could follow the scripts in Spanish, Chinese, French and Italian. I needed lots of money to pay off loans and so forth, so I also worked in supermarkets and as a janitor at night. I had a job as private tutor in Spanish and English for an Indonesian trade representative's family, consisting of himself, six daughters, a wife and two brothers-in-law. I had to accompany the wife to official functions, interpreting for her, and speaking English, Indonesian, and sometimes Spanish.

I am homosexual. I have known since I was 5 years old that I was attracted to males. I didn't know what was going on at the time. I went through a very difficult period when we went to Indonesia. I had a girlfriend whom I slept with, but I had known for several years that I preferred men. Being gay, you learn to subvert, to adapt to things. So I really don't clutch on to my own culture when, for example, I'm in a village in Thailand. Maybe there is an adaptive flexibility that comes from being gay.

There is a game called Trivial Pursuit, and I am excellent at that. I seem to remember a lot of details, maybe because I catalog information efficiently. I played that with my family once, and my brother got angry, he said you've played this game before, you have memorized the cards. But I hadn't. It was the first time. I just have a good memory for facts. As a child, one of my favorite pastimes was reading the encyclopedia at my aunt's house. My aunt said there was no trouble taking care of me; she always knew where I would be and what I was doing. I especially loved Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology and would later imagine the stories while playing (e.g., act them out with myself or with toys).

There are psychic episodes. Basically with my mother. If I am studying late, my mother calls me up and says you are studying late, are you OK? I have premonitions in dreams. Now I have taken to writing them down so I can demonstrate their accuracy (and check on it myself).

In the 5th grade, the teacher was fooling around, talking about telepathy. She was joking, and she asked, "Who knows what is going on in my mind?" And it seemed very clear to me, so I said "You are thinking about going out with your boyfriend tonight, wondering if he is going to

take you to dinner at The Rendezvous." Her jaw dropped, and she stopped the exercise immediately, and she came up to me accusingly, and asked me, "How did you know that?" And I told her--and myself--that my good guess was coincidental. But the other kids looked at me strangely, and it was obvious to the other kids that I knew what she was thinking. I felt shunned, and learned never to do that again.

I am described by everyone I know as compulsive. I try to be structured and orderly. Making lists. Sorting things by color. Even laundry, I hang pairs of socks together. Maybe that's one reason I like Japan. What would be considered a mental problem in the West is considered normal here. I enjoy tiny and meticulous things. It takes me years to do some of the things I do in beads. I am very good at jobs that are tedious and repetitive. The thing about the tiny activity is that it is mindless. I like Pachinko. I use only a small part of my mind. It is kind of restful. My mind seems to be constantly working in overdrive. There are three or four things going on at once. I can be cooking something, washing the laundry, listening to something on the radio while thinking what I will do tomorrow with my classes while playing with the dog with my feet. To me a vacation of sitting on a beach all day would be pure hell. I could do that for 5 minutes. I had a horrible holiday once, on a small island in Thailand. There were only grass huts on the beach, no village or anything. No electricity. I couldn't read. There were no clocks.

[Mr. F gave a detailed account of the circumstances of his learning each of 15 languages. Excerpts from his descriptions of Dayak, Haida, and Czech are included below.]

In Indonesia, the last location I was sent to was two days upriver in a Sea Dayak community. The Sea Dayak are located in Kalimantan. My introduction to the Dayak was through a missionary, Father G., who had studied the language extensively and who, later, was quite impressed with my progress in it. The living was completely primitive by Western standards. For example, the "outhouse" was a pair of parallel logs over a swamp. For privacy, you held a metal sheet in front of you while you squatted. With my rural upbringing, I could adjust. I was not dead weight; I was helping with things like getting wood. I was especially impressed with their artistic productions, for instance their paintings of birds and animals on mats. I asked a lot of questions and tried hard to learn the language.

I absolutely fell in love with the Dayak--the place (near Pontianak) and the people. When they came to get me after two weeks, the government officials were quite put out that I wanted to stay among these "savages." The medicine man in the longhouse was very powerful, more powerful than the chief. If he sees an evil omen, he can close the longhouse down for a couple of weeks, or close the river down with nets and bamboo spikes. Father G. told them I wanted to stay longer, but the Indonesian officials were going to take me back to Pontianak when the medicine man--a striking old fellow with white hair--said something to the Indonesian officials that made them back off. Father G. said later that the medicine man had told them he was getting intimations that the longhouse should be closed down. That would have meant that no one, including the officials, could leave for an indefinite period. I stayed for several more weeks.

I learned Haida for 2 months in the summer of 1974. I went with a group of Indonesians to a small island off the West Coast. I lived with the hereditary chief's family, the A's. The community was going through turmoil. The older generation spoke only the old language, the middle agers were bilingual, and the young people had lost the old language and were angry about that. One young man had gone to university, and was engaged in bringing the old language back. It was the middle-aged people who were ambivalent about this. The old women taught me beadwork, and of course taught me a lot of phrases into the bargain. I can still count, and use basic phrases about colors and things. One day I said something in Haida, and an old woman turned to me with a sad look on her face, and said that I spoke Haida better than her grandchildren.

I didn't even know where Czechoslovakia was until I went to the University of Reading. On my first day of classes, all the students assembled together in the cafeteria. There was a very quiet woman who put a rather crass student in his place, quite sharply, when he foolishly said that Prague is in Hungary. That drew me to her, and J. has been my introduction and stimulus for learning Czech. It is as though the Czech Republic is now the center of the world. Some of the best times I've had were in Prague. I have been back to the Czech Republic 6 or 7 times, from one day to two weeks at a shot. I would like to retire there for part of each year, and have a place in the country to enjoy the fall weather. My dream is to study Czech in Vienna. Because I would be learning Czech and German. That would be a real pleasure. A wonderful place to learn both languages. Unlike the Germans, Austrians seem more accepting of broken German.