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I’ve been fortunate enough to have spent over half my life in the libertarian movement, and I am very grateful to have received so much in the way of friendship, insight, intellectual stimulation, emotional support, and material assistance from its members over the years.

I owe my libertarianism to two women: my mother, and Ayn Rand.

My mother, Jorie Blair Long, comes from a family of individualists and independent thinkers, and I absorbed those values early on. From her I learned that people should rely on their own judgment, seek out their own destiny, and not dictate one another’s goals or poke their noses into one another’s business.

My mother’s political convictions were individualist as well – her family were all staunch Roosevelt-despisers of the “Old Right” tradition – but it was initially at the personal rather than at the political level that I was influenced by these values. Indeed, as a child I was thoroughly apolitical. Admittedly, I do recall being shocked and incredulous when, at the age of eleven or so, I discovered that the federal government considers a privately built or bought mailbox to be federal property. (My first episode of libertarian outrage!) But for the most part I was utterly ignorant of and indifferent to politics, and barely even knew who the President was; the political leaders who interested me were Agamemnon, and King Arthur, and Aragorn son of Arathorn.

The result of this indifference was that despite having fairly stern moral principles, I had really no political principles whatsoever. I recall, for example, writing essays for my high school social studies class in which I maintained that moral constraints do not apply in war, that a profession’s right to strike is inversely proportional to its social usefulness, and other

such drivel. In my defense, I can say only that I at least held these views with no particular strength of conviction: I had given the questions little thought, because I found social studies an unbearably boring subject to think about. I had enjoyed reading books like *1984*, *Animal Farm*, and *Brave New World*, but I hadn't seen them as calling into question the political institutions of our country.

Although I had never been interested in exploring the political application of my personal values, the seed had been sown by my upbringing. The harvest came in 1979, when, at the age of 15, I read an article in *Starlog* magazine called, I think, "The Science Fiction of Ayn Rand." (Incredibly, this now virtually unknown article was illustrated by the famous fantasy artist Boris Vallejo.) Its descriptions of *Anthem* and *Atlas Shrugged* were intriguing, and as an avid science-fiction reader I decided to give them a look.

For me, as for so many 15-year-olds before me, *Atlas Shrugged* was a turning point. Rand's vision hit me like a magnesium flare dispelling murky vagueness; she converted me not just to libertarianism but to philosophy as such. I quickly moved on to reading all of Rand's other books, both fiction and nonfiction (several of which my mother turned out to own already), then to reading authors Rand recommended, and authors those authors recommended, and so on. My libertarian education had begun.

I entered Harvard in 1981, certainly planning to study a bit of philosophy, but still entertaining thoughts of majoring in French or theatre or creative writing instead. In my senior year of high school I had taken a course at Dartmouth on continental philosophy, which I found to be an intellectual emetic; in light of Rand's grim view of contemporary academia, I had little reason to expect any better of analytic philosophy. But after my first analytic course at Harvard – it was Roderick Firth's "Types of Ethical Theory" – I was hooked. I soon realized that no other subject had any chance of luring me away, and I became a philosophy major. Though I was still a quasi-Randian, I had never brought my mind entirely into captivity to Rand (I reckon I would have lasted in her Collective just about as long as Rothbard did), and I soon began integrating the insights I had gained from Rand with the new ideas I was learning from mainstream philosophy. My foremost interests were ethics, philosophy of science, and Greek philosophy – especially Aristotle, who was beginning to displace Rand as my chief philosophical muse.

But my libertarian education continued as well; in the library stacks I was hunting down works by John Locke, Adam Smith, the Founding Fathers, Frederic Bastiat, Herbert Spencer, Ludwig von Mises, Henry Hazlitt, Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, Murray Rothbard, Robert Heinlein, Tibor Machan, Milton Friedman, David Friedman, George Reisman, and Robert Nozick. (No Hayek, for some reason – my introduction to spontaneous-order theory came instead via the physical sciences, through courses on "Space, Time, and Motion" and "Chance, Necessity, and Order" by astrophysics professor David Layzer.) I also learned a great deal by writing for Harvard's libertarian and conservative student newspapers, as

well as for the M.I.T.-based Objectivist periodical ERGO. And nearly everything I know about constitutional law I learned from my libertarian/conservative roommate Mark DePasquale. (I never took a course from Nozick; his “Best Things in Life” course, focusing on love, sex, and – I am not making this up – ice cream, sounded too touchy-feely to me. Nozick’s worst book, *The Examined Life*, was a product of that course, so I probably chose wisely.)

It was through an ad in the *Harvard Libertarian* that I discovered the Institute for Humane Studies. In 1986, my first year of graduate study at Cornell, I attended my first IHS conference. The lineup of lecturers was, for me, a fantastic feast of brain candy: Randy Barnett, Walter Grinder, Israel Kirzner, Don Lavoie, Leonard Liggio, Ralph Raico, and George Smith. (I remember Ralph asking me “Are you a Randroid?” To this I replied “I don’t think of myself as a Randroid” – which, as he quite reasonably pointed out, did not answer his question. But then again, since neither a Randroid nor a non-Randroid would admit to being a Randroid, it surely follows that Ralph’s very question was some sort of violation of conceptual grammar.) The IHS was to be an enormous influence in my life; I am grateful in particular to the loyal support of Walter Grinder, the Institute’s academic director at the time.

Over the next few years, my continuing association with the IHS had several beneficial results (in addition to the welcome financial aid!): it introduced the ideas of Friedrich Hayek into my intellectual evolution; it plugged me into an invaluable network of libertarian academics and institutions; and it radicalized me politically. (Yes, the IHS was radical in those days.) In 1987, thanks to a combination of IHS influence, Jonathan Kwitny’s excellent book *Endless Enemies*, the grotesque GOP primary debates (Bush-Dole-Kemp-Haig-DuPont-Robertson, ugh), and my increasing attraction to the cultural left, I was finally shaken loose from such Randian-style bad habits as hawkish foreign policy and the Republican Party. I joined the Libertarian Party on Thanksgiving Day, 1987.

By 1991, during my first year of teaching at UNC Chapel Hill – and in the face of the insanity surrounding the Gulf War – I had also come to reject the necessity of the state. I had initially resisted anarchism, convinced by Isabel Paterson’s *God of the Machine* that liberty could be secured only through a constitutional structure; after years of wrestling with the idea, I now came to see that market anarchy is such a structure. I had become what might be called a “left-Rothbardian.” (How big a change this was I’m not sure. When told of my conversion to anarchism, my mother and my ex-girlfriend both replied: “Oh? I thought you already were an anarchist.”)

I began to develop a moral and political philosophy that synthesized what I took to be the major insights of the Greek philosophers, the mediaeval Scholastics, Rand, Hayek, Rothbard, mainstream analytic philosophy, and the cultural left. (Admittedly, a stew unlikely to be precisely to anyone’s taste but my own.)

Through the IHS network I had come into contact with Fred Miller and his Social Philosophy and Policy Center. Now Fred invited me to spend the 1991–92 academic year there, on leave from Chapel Hill, to finish up my doctoral dissertation on Aristotle and indeterminism; this enabled me to receive my Ph.D. from Cornell that spring. While in Bowling Green I sat in on Fred’s graduate seminar on rights theory, which sparked new directions in my thinking. (All the seminar participants tried their hands at constructing deductive arguments with numbered steps deriving libertarian rights from Randian self-interest. Mine had the distinction of being the longest and weirdest.) In subsequent years, Fred was to prove an enormous help to my career, generously guiding many conference invitations and other opportunities my way.

In Fred’s seminar I had championed the “flourishing” over the “survival” interpretation of self-interest. One welcome bit of fallout from this was that David Kelley, who had led the exodus of the sane and nice people out of the Randian movement, invited me to his Institute for Objectivist Studies to give several lectures critiquing Rand’s ethics and epistemology from my own post-Randian point of view; these lectures eventually became my book *Reason and Value: Aristotle versus Rand*.

It was during my Chapel Hill years that I met Richard Hammer, a North Carolina engineer who sent me his manifesto *Toward a Free Nation*. Both inspired and frustrated by the history of attempts to found a new libertarian country, Rich had become convinced that such projects had failed, not because of a lack of potential inhabitants or resources, but because of the absence of believable descriptions of the relevant institutions. Impressed by his level-headed approach to what is all too often a half-baked project, I became involved in Rich’s Free Nation Foundation, a small think tank devoted, in effect, to libertarian constitutional design. Writing for FNF and discussing issues with the other members helped me to work out a more fully developed anarcho-capitalist political theory.

In 1997 I was denied tenure at Chapel Hill. Though it certainly didn’t seem so at the time, this was one of the best things that ever happened to me – for in 1998 I came to Auburn, the coolest philosophy department in the world. Here I soon found myself part of two different families of crusading, brass-knuckled rationalists. On the one hand, there were my new colleagues, from whom I would learn more than I’d learned from any philosopher since grad school. On the other hand, there was the Auburn-based Ludwig von Mises Institute, at the forefront of radical libertarian scholarship, in whose programs Lew Rockwell generously invited me to participate.

These two new influences were about to converge in a crucial way. Through Kelly Dean Jolley, one of my departmental colleagues, I became interested in the philosophical approach of Ludwig Wittgenstein (which I had previously dismissed as an obscurantist variant of positivism); through Guido Hülsmann and others at the Mises Institute, I became interested in Mises’ “praxeological” attempt to establish economic law on an *a priori* rather

than an empirical basis. I soon began to see how these two projects connected in interesting ways both to each other and to my standing interest in Aristotelean ethics and moral psychology. This three-way connection is currently the centerpiece of my philosophical research, and serves as the unifying theme of my website, Praxeology.net.

So there's my story: a Randian at 15, an LP member at 23, an anarcho-capitalist at 27, and a praxeologist at 36. (And despite all of the above, tenured at 38!) What the future holds I can't say (kaleidic, you know), but it's a safe bet that whatever I'm working on will have something to do with the Science of Liberty.