CHAPTER 12

Returns and Randomness: Academic Style

Twenty to twenty-five! These are the years! Don't be content with things as they are. "The earth is yours and the fullness thereof." Enter upon your inheritance, accept your responsibilities. Raise the glorious flags again, advance them upon the new enemies, who constantly gather upon the front of the human army, and have only to be assaulted to be overthrown. Don't take no for an answer. Never submit to failure. Do not be fobbed off with mere personal success or acceptance. You will make all kinds of mistakes; but as long as you are generous and true, and also fierce, you cannot hurt the world or even seriously distress her.

Winston Churchill
My Early Years

Five Glorious Years

In the five years from age 20 to 25, I explored the fullness of the academic life as a student at the University of Chicago and as an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley. The enemies I fought against were zealous random walkers stationed at the professorial lines, and bigots who wouldn't let Jews in their clubs. By assaulting their fixed beliefs, I split the flanks of an impregnable defense to grab a Ph.D., and I refused to be shut out of their clubs. Fierceness I had in spades, but I cringe now when I recall how far away from the generous and true ideal I was, and how much distress my youthful mistakes caused.

Inheritance, responsibility, and discipline are the charcoal, sulfur, and saltpeter of success, but it takes a spark of luck to ignite the mixture. In a provocative book on the subject, Mary Batten concludes that, with few exceptions, people who made great chance discoveries prepared themselves by mastering the great tool of inquiry introduced by science—the experimental method.[1] Batten's conclusion rings true for me. The only skill I really developed at Harvard, aside from squash, was the ability to use that

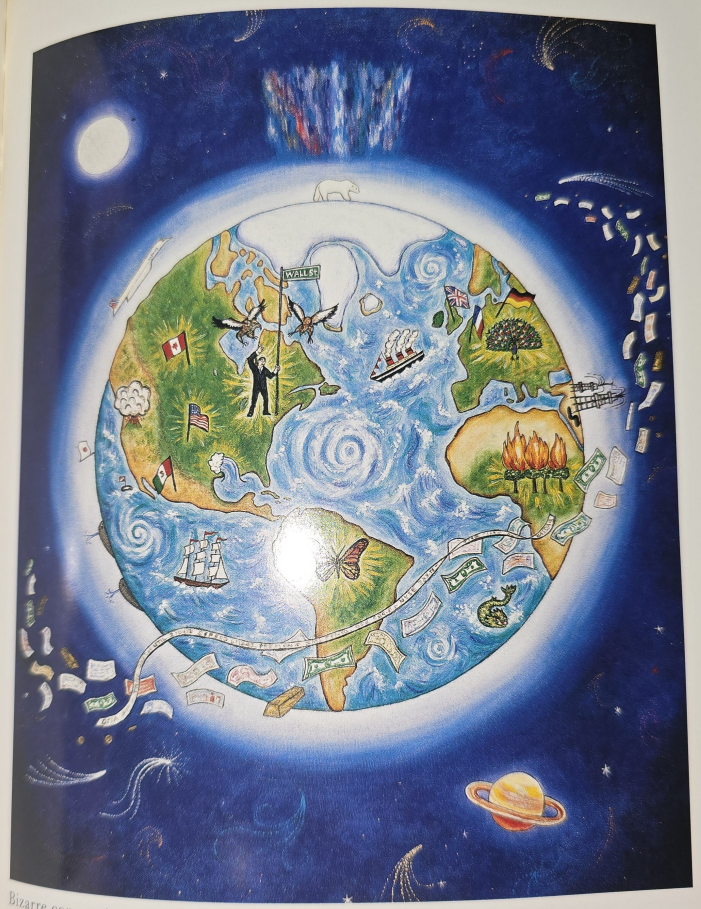
The Education of a SPECULATOR

Victor Niederhoffer

With Appreciation
Victor Niederhoffer

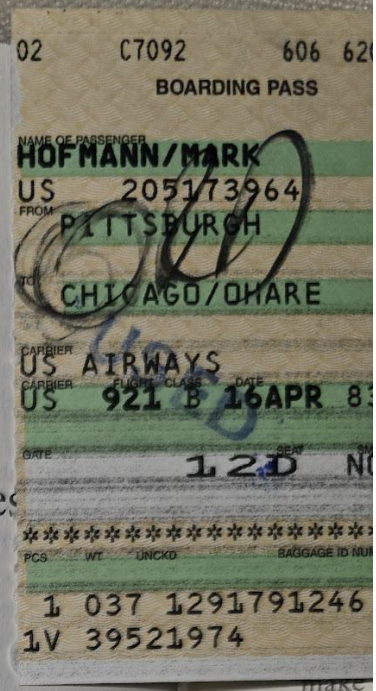


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