

Born Into the Jewish Experience

1936 — Don arrived in the household of George and Sally Schatz as their firstborn son, in Hyde Park, Chicago, Illinois. His sister Penny was born three years later. Don would live on the South Side of Chicago in Hyde Park, Kenwood, and South Shore for the next 42 years.

1945 — Shortly before Don’s ninth birthday, his uncle Norman Schatz came home from World WarII where he had taken part in the liberation of Jewish victims at Buchenwald concentration camp.

I saw horrifying photos of heaped up corpses being shoveled into mass graves. The images burned themselves onto my brain. It could have been me, I suddenly realized, as I listened to family members murmuring in the background and heard my mother crying. From that point on, my life was shadowed by the Holocaust.

Don could no longer be a child. He felt the necessity of being part of a world beyond the playground. Sometimes he and his sister Penny walked by a building at 48th and Ellis that housed German prisoners of war and felt the ominous weight of their existence as Jews.



The World of Music

1950 — He entered Hyde Park High school where he was totally involved in music, using lunchtime, library hours and all his free time practicing trumpet. He attended jazz concerts, and began playing the piano a bit.



Don’s uncle Louis Alport took over the nearby Sutherland Hotel Lounge that became famous for showcasing the best musicians in America. Among others, Don heard Ornette Coleman play free jazz there. One time, Don invited Ornette to his apartment to listen to a recording of a Jewish cantor’s singing. Something about this experience made clear that Don and Ornette realized something important to them both in their creative expression.

But the musicians Don came in contact with would continue in that field, another sign perhaps that Don did not need to continue in the field of music for his own artistic expression.

1954 — He enrolled in University of Illinois at Urbana, but left the following spring. He took a few courses at the Navy Pier branch of the university before drifting over to Roosevelt University, taking courses and working in the library. He returned two decades later, graduating in 1971.

The World of Visual Art

Don took art courses at Roosevelt University, and at the Chicago Art Institute. He joined the Hyde Park Art Center where he taught drawing, and participated in a two-man show there.

Art became a way of working out his feelings on an unconscious level. He got in touch with imagery that catapulted him out of his childhood memories of Holocaust photographs. He covered huge canvases with faces reminiscent of concentration camp victims. Where music had distracted him from those images, painting reattached him and became part of his expression.

Visits to the Chicago Art Institute began to help him see a connection between his own work and that of other artists. Again, once he saw that other painters had done what he was doing, he felt less of a need to continue in this field.



The World of Poetry

1961-1962 — Don’s movement from visual art to poetry took place after an extended trip he took to Europe. In Oslo, he ran into pianist Bud Powell playing at a café, then proceeded through the Netherlands and France to Spain, stopping at museums everywhere he went. Only in Germany did he remain on the train, unable to think of stopping in that country.

Off the coast of Spain, he had a mystical experience that changed him in ways not easily expressed. He had wandered over to a bookshop and was drawn to purchase an edition of the poems of St. John of the Cross. He describes the entire experience in Majorca as being a combination of “dark and light.”

A few weeks later, sitting in a Paris apartment, he began playing with words. First, came the word “tree” – something he knew could be expressed in visual art. Then the word “plastic” came to him. A “plastic tree” could be made. The third word that came made all the difference: “invisible.” “Invisible plastic tree” could be written and thereby conceptualized. From then on, Don turned to writing.

The world of writing is an internal thing to Don. It does not require influence by others who have gone before. He saw no limits to writing poetry, such as those he had come up against in music and painting. He had not yet encountered others who were writing what was bubbling up within him.

“I have my own voice. I have a distance from words, because silence is my first language.”

The Entry into Faith and Work

Don’s father had been depressed for much of Don’s youth, and Don sometimes suffered from a similar despondency. He was referred by a friend to a Catholic priest, who in turn encouraged Don to visit Gethsemani, a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. Don’s mystical experience in Spain had turned him in a new direction that made a monk’s life imaginable.



He visited several times. In December of 1963, he went down again, bringing along his notebooks that included drawings and writings—much of the writing being quotes from his reading, for he was reading now with new interest and intention. Thomas Merton, a monk who is known for his influential writings on the contemplative life and on issues of his day, came to Don’s cell, expressing interest in the writings and drawings Don showed him.

Merton recorded in his diary:

The boy from Chicago—artist, very amiable, not yet a Catholic who visited a few months ago was mixed up in dope – who is trying to get away from Chicago, jazz and marijuana – was doing drawings when he heard of Kennedy’s death and they instantly began to be drawings, in color, with angles and strange forms. His shock. It is easy for everyone but the right ones to declare themselves guilty of Kennedy’s death.

(Dancing in the Water of Life: the Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 5, p. 42)

But the life of a monk was not for Don. He returned to Chicago, and began working for Dr. Eckhart Hess, head of the University of Chicago Psychology department. It was in this post of helping conduct experiments on students that Don met Eunice Russell, who had volunteered as a subject.

1968-1969 — Meeting a person of Christian faith led to finding a community of friends in a local Bible study and biracial church fellowship. The day before his April 1969 wedding, Don chose to be baptized in a church on Chicago’s West Side.

Marriage meant getting a job, and he relied on his art contacts to obtain a position at Frumkin Art Gallery until other interests intervened.

1970 — Founding of the Urban Life Center Soon a circle of friends began gathering at our home to talk about the critical issues of race and civil rights then aboil in the country, and simmering on both the South and West Sides of Chicago. Together with ten other persons, Don and I helped establish the Urban Life Center, a residential program for students from Christian colleges providing an urban immersion in the city for college credit.

Don left the art gallery, and took other part-time jobs in order to be free to participate in the Urban Life Center. He joined me in teaching a course at Roosevelt University that was related to the Urban Life Center. This prompted him to complete his college degree at Roosevelt through their nontraditional degree program.

At the Center, he was responsible for mentoring Art students, and helping to introduce all students to the arts of the city—through his network of contacts in jazz, painting, sculpture, architecture, writing, and theater. The contacts were across racial lines, and included persons prominent in their field in Chicago.

The Center continues in its mission today as the Chicago Center for Urban Life and Culture.



Becoming a Poet

1979 — Don and I left Chicago for Boston, where we have lived ever since. The move away from Chicago meant that he was no longer defined by that milieu and community any more. Being in Boston gave him a chance to reinvent himself. In a new location, and one known for its culture and history, Don could actualize his being as an artist, and now as a poet.



1981 — Founding and Incorporation of Life/Work Direction. Don looked for a way to pursue his calling as a poet, while I found my niche in the world of career counseling. A series of serendipitous encounters resulted in the two of us working with Rev. Richard Faxon to found Life/Work Direction, a ministry devoted to helping others find their calling in life and work

Don and I joined the Episcopal Church, one with a close association to an Episcopal monastery run by the Society of St. John the Evangelist. After several years at the church, we transferred to worshipping at the monastery in Cambridge instead, where we remain today.

Life/Work Direction became a place where Don could speak his truth to other adults, and help stimulate their thinking creatively. It left time for his writing.

2007 — After a quarter century of lively existence, Life/Work Direction was well established and could be led by others. We turned the work over to Scott and Louise Walker, a younger couple, and Don adopted the title of Poet in Residence.

2010 — Don retired from Life/Work Direction, giving full time and energy to his writing.

2016 — Don completed his epic poem, naming it *Grace*.