

LETTER OF LIFE

A Digital Memory Preservation Project

The Letter of

Adam Edward Scheetz

Ed Scheetz's Walk Along Life's Beach

For my children, my grandchildren, and the great grandchildren
who will one day be old enough to read this.

“Smile when you think of me.”

WHERE I BEGAN

My full name is Adam Edward Scheetz, although almost nobody has called me Adam. My older sister was about two and a half years old when I was born, and she could not pronounce brother. What came out was “Bruz,” and that stayed with me until I reached high school. Then a friend looked at me and decided I did not look like a Bruz. He said I looked like a Muzz. From then through high school, college, and my fraternity years, I was Muzz or Muzzy. Most people eventually settled on Ed, which has worked out well enough.

I was born on July 23, 1944, at Fitzgerald Mercy Hospital in Darby, Pennsylvania. We lived in Havertown, west of Philadelphia. It was a growing suburban town, and my father had bought our house in 1940. I remember the small celebration when the mortgage was finally paid. He had been paying something like fifty dollars a month. The house had three bedrooms, one and a half baths, and a modest lawn. Most of the neighborhood looked much the same.

When I drove through Havertown again many years later, it still felt familiar. The stores had different names, and the roads had grown wider, yet the bones of the place were still there. West Chester Pike was only two lanes when I was young, with trolley tracks running along it. Then the tracks came out, buses took over, and the road expanded as Broomall and Newtown Square developed. As children, we went almost everywhere by bicycle. We did not spend much time worrying about danger. We rode where we wanted, came home for dinner, and usually stayed out of serious trouble. Usually.

THE SHORE AND THE RASCALS

Some of my earliest memories belong to the Jersey Shore. My mother's parents rented a place in North Wildwood, and the whole extended family took turns using it. My cousin Billy and I were the rascals of the family. That is the polite description.

One day Billy and I were walking along a bulkhead near the bay during low tide. Our grandmother came looking for us. She could see the narrow top of the bulkhead, though she could not see that there was only mud below us. As she approached, we pretended to lose our balance and fall. She came running. When she reached us and realized what we had done, she called us “you little stinkers.” I still hear her saying it. Billy and I thought it was very funny. She may have reached a different conclusion.

After my grandparents died, the family spent summers in Stone Harbor. My uncle Bill and Aunt Sally rented one apartment, and our family took another. My mother and Aunt Sally were the songbirds of the family. Aunt Edna played the piano. My grandfather played the banjo and mandolin, and Uncle Paul could imitate a trombone. At family gatherings, someone was always singing. My mother and Aunt Sally sometimes entered amateur night at a restaurant in Avalon, and they won often enough to earn free dinners. When you are a child, you accept those scenes as ordinary. Years later, you understand how lucky you were to have them.

My father eventually built a house in Avalon from his own drawings. He bought two lots in the early 1960s for about thirty five hundred dollars. A few years later, he sold one lot for roughly the same amount, so in his mind the remaining property was close to free. It was on 25th Street, about a block and a half from the beach and about the same distance from the center of town. There was a church at each end of the block, so depending on your religion, the location was perfect. The shore remained part of my life for decades.

MY MOTHER, MY FATHER, AND THE FAMILY BEFORE THEM

My mother, Betty, nee Shaw, was a homemaker. She loved music, church activities, and the Irish side of her family. She was warm and involved, and she helped make the house a place where people gathered. I remember her mother as a pleasant woman with a good sense of humor. She used to travel by trolley from 69th Street to visit us, usually carrying some kind of treat. Once she knocked on our door, and I opened it

by asking, “What did you bring me?” She answered, “Nothing.” I shut the door. My mother opened it again while my grandmother stood outside laughing. That tells you something about my grandmother and probably more than enough about me.

My father was Albert Edward Scheetz. He was a mechanical engineer who earned his degree from Drexel through the evening program while working. He was also a serious athlete. He captained a high school basketball team that won state championships when final scores could be 22 to 18. He ran in the Penn Relays, and for years he could outrun me on the beach. I finally beat him when I was about sixteen. He was already in his fifties, so I may have celebrated a little more than the victory deserved.

He worked at the Sinclair refinery near Marcus Hook and eventually ran the operation. During the war, he helped load oil tankers on the Delaware River. Some of those ships were later destroyed by German submarines. He had met the crews while the ships were being loaded, and their losses stayed with him.

My father believed in helping people without making a production out of it. He knew oil heating systems, and neighbors called him when their furnaces failed. I remember him coming home around two in the morning after spending hours getting a family's heat working again. Another time a neighbor called because her child was turning blue. Her husband was away working. My father jumped into the car, wrapped the child in a blanket, and headed for the hospital as fast as he could. A police officer stopped him. Dad showed him the child and received an escort the rest of the way. The child survived.

He was also ahead of his time in ways that mattered. At the refinery, he brought Black workers into apprenticeship positions in the trades. That was rare in the 1950s and 1960s. At his funeral, three black men came to me and thanked him for the opportunities he had given them. That memory has stayed with me because it showed me something about the man I had known mainly as my father. Other people had known him as the person who opened doors.

He had two sayings that I have carried through my life. The first was, “You are what you are because that is exactly what you have done to get there.” The second was, “There is enough hate in the world. Do not contribute to it.” The first one was his way of telling you to get moving. The second was his way of telling you what kind of person to be.

My father's father, my grandfather, was Adam Edward Scheetz, which is where my name came from. He was born in 1877 and worked as a mechanical engineer. The family story is that he worked with Thomas Edison. We had a card from the Smithsonian thanking him for a photograph of Edison at a younger age than the museum already had. His house contained reminders of that period, including an old Victrola and electrical gadgets.

He later worked with Westinghouse and held a number of patents which earned him bonuses. He apparently earned so much that he made more than the plant manager. He invested heavily in the stock market and did well for a while. There was a ticker machine in the middle of his dining room table. He owned several homes and had a chauffeur. Then the market crashed and much of it disappeared. That part of the family story taught me that a fortune can look permanent right up until it does not.

My grandfather was a tinkerer and a very good mathematician. He belonged to a group that mailed out problems and recognized whoever solved them first. His attic was full of tools and machines. At eighty five, he was still climbing onto a steep slate roof to make repairs. My father once told me to drive over and help him. By the time I arrived, my grandfather was already coming down the ladder because he had finished.

He had served in the Spanish American War, and every Fourth of July he put on his old uniform for the neighborhood parade. It still fit. When I was very young I rode my decorated tricycle beside him in the parade. He lived a long, active life and died in 1966. That same year my son Adam was born, and a few months later my father died

at age fifty five. One generation arrived while two others left. I have always felt the weight of that year.

MY SISTERS AND THE HOME WE SHARED

I had two sisters. Betty Anne was older, and Marilyn was younger. Betty Anne was the academic star of the family. She earned excellent grades. She was valedictorian at Villa Maria Academy, then got her nursing certificate at Fitzgerald Mercy Nursing School and her Bachelor's degree at the University of Pennsylvania. She later earned a master's degree. Marilyn followed a similar path. She went to nursing school, moved to California, earned further degrees, and taught emergency medical skills at San Diego State and to Marines at Camp Pendleton during the Vietnam era.

I was proud of both of them, although I did not always say it as clearly as I should have. Betty Anne and I played together when we were young. We climbed a chest of drawers and jumped onto a bed until we broke it. She once painted the inside of a neighbor's car, which my father had to repair. Her perfect grades came later.

Marilyn was five years younger, so we were living different lives when we were young. When my work took me to California, I made a point of seeing her. After she moved back east, we became close. She once called me late at night while I was working on a difficult project in Princeton. She kept me on the phone for hours telling me about a romantic encounter. Eventually I had to remind her that it was one in the morning where I was. I still listened until I could no longer keep my eyes open.

Both of my sisters are gone now. Betty Anne died first, and Marilyn followed. Losing them made me think about how relationships change across a lifetime. Siblings can drift during busy years and return to one another later. The history remains, even when the contact is uneven.

THE BOY I WAS

School did not make much sense to me until college. In grade school I argued with the nuns. During the nuclear bomb scares of the 1950s, we were told to get under our desks. I had seen photographs of Hiroshima and pointed out that there were no desks left. I told them the exercise seemed stupid. They disagreed with my analysis.

I preferred being outside. I played sandlot football and enjoyed the game far more than the training. I liked running, throwing, tackling, and the part where something was happening. I dislocated my shoulder, had several concussions, and once had to block a man who weighed around three hundred pounds. I put my head into his stomach and hoped for the best. My teammates said they could not see my head.

Baseball treated me less kindly. In one game a pop fly hit me on the head. Later a bat hit me in the mouth and knocked out a front tooth. That ended my baseball career until my sons played. My son Adam became a catcher at the same high school Mike Piazza attended. Piazza reached the Hall of Fame. Adam did not.

I always found ways to earn money. I had two newspaper routes, cut lawns, and shoveled snow. My father was willing to lend me equipment as long as our lawn was cut and our driveway was cleared first. In high school I worked for a friend's father, cleaning shopping center parking lots and cutting grass. On hot days we wore goggles and pushed vacuum machines through dust. When we removed the goggles, the skin around our eyes was white and the rest of our faces looked like a raccoon's in reverse.

At the shore, I worked at the A&P in Cape May Court House. I started by gathering carts and bagging groceries, then worked my way up to assistant dairy manager. My cousin Billy and I also qualified as lifeguards. After two days, I calculated that the A&P paid ten dollars more each week. Billy stayed with lifeguarding. I went back to the store and still attended the lifeguard parties. I thought that was a sensible arrangement.

COLLEGE AND FINDING MY WAY

I attended Peirce College in Philadelphia. During my first semester, I enjoyed the freedom more than the schoolwork. My father objected to paying for that level of academic performance. He reminded me that he had paid his own way through school. I told him I would do the same. He laughed and said that would be the day.

From then on, I paid my own expenses. I worked long hours while taking a heavy course load. I am proud that I finished. The disagreement with my father turned out to be useful because it made the education mine. I'm sorry that he did not live to see my graduation but am thankful that my mother did.

I began in accounting. Peirce gave the students an aptitude test, and I received the second highest score in the school. The student with the highest score wanted to stay in accounting, so I accepted a scholarship to the new data processing program. That decision shaped my career. I learned early programming languages, then COBOL, and I began working in computer operations while attending classes.

College was also where I became involved in organizations. I served as president of the student government during the school's centennial year. I was an officer in Sigma Gamma Omega, an accounting fraternity, and later president of its alumni group. When one of our members transferred to Murray State and wanted a chapter there, we learned that we had to become a national fraternity. We organized the work, met in Atlantic City, and succeeded.

Our fraternity welcomed Black students, Jewish students, and anyone else who qualified. Another fraternity on campus had exclusions. One of my fraternity brothers invited me to his Black Baptist church in West Philadelphia. I visited at about nineteen years old and was the only white person in the room. A woman next to me asked what I was doing there. I told her I was enjoying myself. She laughed. It was a good experience, and it reinforced something my father had already shown me. You learn more by entering someone else's world than by standing outside and guessing about it.

In later years, I am proud to say I completed a rigorous course to become a Certified Systems Professional conferred by CSP Certification Board of the Association for Systems Management. This required attending meetings and seminars on business related subjects and reviewing multiple articles on an ongoing basis for recertification.

THE WORK I LIKED

I entered the computer field at the right time. Companies were beginning to use computers for business, and many people feared the machines would replace them. My job was often to understand how a department worked, then build a system that helped people do the work more accurately.

I started in computer operations at a dental supply company. My schedule allowed me to attend classes in the morning and work in the evening. When the company was purchased by PennWalt, my manager recommended me for programming. I received a COBOL manual and went to work. Within 4 years I became a senior programmer analyst. From there I joined CertainTeed where I was hired to teach the programming staff COBOL. Shortly after that I was assigned the position of Acting VP Manager to convert systems from Honeywell to IBM equipment in NJ. While reviewing the sales commission program, I found coding that limited the commissions of certain salesmen regardless of what they sold. The former programming manager agreed to meet with me, then failed to appear. I took the program cards and the printout to the company president and showed him exactly what the code did.

The president asked why anyone would create such a system. I told him I believed the Office Manager (who was also his stepmother) had ordered it. She denied it. I then told her I planned to meet with the salesmen and would suggest they bring a lawyer. She immediately ran into the president's office and confessed. I suggested to the President that he handle this situation privately. He thanked me. I was twenty six. I thought that was pretty clever for a twenty six year old.

Later I worked with a marketing profitability system that gave management information much faster than the old accounting reports. The sales and marketing vice presidents had been ordered to meet with me, and at first they walked into the room, shook my hand, and walked out. The next month I wrote their latest customer and product results on a blackboard, including profit and freight costs. When they came in, I stood beside the board. After they shook my hand, I began erasing it.

A couple of hours later, the phone rang. They wanted to know what month the figures represented. I told them it was the month that had just ended. Once they realized the information was current, the system became the most valuable management tool in the company. Sometimes the best way to make people value information is to let them watch it disappear.

I also participated in what Arthur Andersen called a brown paper analysis. Senior executives described what they believed their departments did. Managers added detail. Then the people who performed the actual work explained what truly happened. I learned that the people closest to the work usually understood the process best. That lesson helped me throughout my career. Titles can tell you who has authority. They do not always tell you who has the answer.

When I managed systems for the pipe division, I received a yearly budget and a five year plan. I reviewed the charges from the corporate departments and challenged expenses that did not belong to us. The credits gave me room to complete the five year plan in three years. I enjoyed difficult projects, especially the ones other people avoided. At CertainTeed, Fisher and Porter, and Merrill Lynch, I completed complex work on time and within budget. I took pride in that.

My career also had disappointments. Merrill Lynch downsized Susie and me along with thousands of other people shortly before bonuses were paid. I had planned to use part of the money to buy Apple stock when it was around eight dollars a share. That would have worked out rather well. I also considered General Electric when it was very low and received advice against it. That stock later rose dramatically. Those

missed opportunities make good stories. They also prove that recognizing an opportunity and having the money at the right moment are separate matters.

THE PEOPLE I LOVED

My cousin Billy was one of the longest relationships of my life. We were children together, caused trouble together, and carried the same family stories into adulthood.

My first romantic relationship began in high school, and I married my high school sweetheart. We had our son Adam in 1966 and our daughter Laura in 1969. The marriage lasted about nine or ten years. We wanted different things and were moving in different directions. Leaving the house and leaving my children behind was the hardest thing I ever did. Even when a decision feels necessary, it can still hurt people. That part of my life taught me that being right about a decision does not remove the pain attached to it.

I married again and had another child, Christopher, in 1985. That marriage worked for many years. My second wife later developed pancreatic cancer. Her illness was difficult, and it changed how she reacted to people around her. I came to understand that disease and medication can alter what a person says and feels. You try to remember the whole person rather than one painful period.

Then I met Susie Alpine. We connected because our personalities fit. When Merrill Lynch downsized us, she helped me prepare my resume and even bought me a printer. She was caring for her mother, and I helped with meals and the daily work. That was one of the most wonderful times I've had and I realized how wonderful Susie and her mother were. I asked her to marry me, and her first answer was no. We stayed together. After her mother died, she agreed.

We were married in a bar and restaurant owned by one of my fraternity brothers. Pastor Good performed the ceremony. He was a teetotaler, which made the setting a little funnier. My children and the rest of the family were there, and we had a good

time. Susie has been heaven sent. My family embraced her, and she embraced them. That means more to me than I can explain in one sentence.

BECOMING A FATHER

When Adam was born, I understood parental love for the first time. As a child, your parents hug you and kiss you, and you accept it. When you hold your own child, you finally understand why they did it.

The births of my three children were among the happiest days of my life. One arrived so quickly that we barely made it from the elevator. During another birth, I was across the street having a sandwich and a beer. The last labor had to be induced and I took a nap while there was a great deal of yelling. These details may not make me sound heroic, yet they are the details I remember.

Parenthood is an awakening and a responsibility. You remember the first steps. You remember the first time a child calls you Dad. You remember a small body falling asleep on your chest. You throw a baseball and celebrate when the child catches it. Later the child throws it back and you no longer have to chase it across the yard. Those small moments explain the whole experience better than a speech could.

Watching my children become parents gave me the same feeling again. I could see the love in their eyes, and I knew they understood what I had discovered when they were born. Now I have grandchildren, and as I write this I am waiting for my first great grandchild. My grandson Derrick is the father, and the baby is expected in October. That will make six generations of the family that I can place in my own memory. I hope this letter reaches every one of you, including the youngest when he is old enough to read it.

A LIFE WITH ROOM FOR FUN

I worked hard, though I also made room for things I enjoyed. I played golf for years and managed to make two holes in one. I ran a one hundred yard dash in ten seconds flat. In 1973 I converted a 7 10 split in bowling and received a trophy. A 7 10 split is rarer than a perfect game. I came close to bowling a perfect game too, though close does not get a second trophy.

I organized a fraternity golf tournament that continued for about a decade. I bought a sailboat and spent years sailing the Chesapeake. Some weekends I stayed on the boat, and other weekends I went to the shore. I became a member of University Lodge 51, a Masonic lodge connected with the University of Pennsylvania, and served as an officer for much of my time there.

I liked organizing events. I arranged formal dinners, hired bands, managed food, started a bowling league, helped create a credit union, and worked on tuition support for employees. Usually these were the jobs nobody else wanted. I enjoyed taking a pile of details and turning it into an evening people remembered.

WHAT AGE HAS TAUGHT ME

Getting older has surprised me mainly because I do not feel that my life was filled with regrets. I had time at the shore, played golf, sailed, worked on projects that challenged me, and spent years with people I loved. There were periods when I wished for more financial security, especially when I wanted to help my children. There were career choices I might change. I might have finished graduate school or studied organizational management rather than banking and finance. Still, I had a good life.

At eighteen, I wish I had understood the value of education sooner. Young people are asked to decide what they want to do before they know what most jobs are actually like. You may choose a field and later discover it does not fit. That is normal.

Education gives you more room to adjust. It also teaches you how to learn when the world changes.

I want you to listen to other people's opinions. My father used to say that another person's opinion might change yours. I found that useful in business, especially when I entered a department and changed the way its work was done. The people there knew things I did not. Listening made the system better.

Listening does not mean believing every claim. Learn where information comes from. Ask who is speaking, what experience they have, and what interest they may be serving. The world has always had people who sound confident without knowing very much. The internet has made them easier to find.

I once challenged a statistics professor whose tests seemed designed to defeat students rather than teach them. I asked why he took pride in driving people away from the course. He was angry with me, which was understandable. Then he explained how hard he had worked for his doctorate. I told him I respected that achievement, and I was pursuing a bachelor's degree. I promised that if I ever needed a statistical expert, I would hire him. His next test focused on the subject matter and was much fairer. My opinion changed his approach, and his explanation helped me understand him. That is what a real conversation can do.

I also believe that money and power need limits. A person can be brilliant in one area and still misunderstand how decisions affect ordinary people. Saving money on paper can create a larger cost somewhere else. When people become wealthy enough to control public choices, democracy can bend around them. You may reach a different conclusion. I ask only that you examine the evidence and think for yourself.

THE BIBLE AND THE FAMILY STORY

There is an old German Bible in our family. It was printed sometime in the 1500s, around the period when Martin Luther was challenging the Catholic Church. I do not

know exactly how it entered the family. It may have arrived with earlier generations, or my grandfather may have purchased it when he had money. I first became aware of it while helping with my grandfather's estate after his death in 1966. My sister later kept it because she was deeply religious. After she died, it came to me.

I cannot give you a perfect history of the Bible. Its importance comes from the fact that our family kept it and passed it along. A book can outlive the people who held it, even when some of its story becomes unclear. I want it to remain in the family. Let it remind you that you belong to something that began before you and will continue after you.

WHAT I WANT YOU TO CARRY

Be serious about your education. Work for what you want, and remember that your choices build the person you become. Help people when you have the chance. Listen before deciding that you already understand someone.

There is enough hate in the world. Do not add to it.

Family deserves your time. Careers can consume every available hour, and sometimes I allowed work to take more than it should have. The people you love will remember whether you were present. Make the call. Visit when you can. Repair a relationship before too much time passes.

Have some fun along the way. Go to the shore. Play the game even if you dislike practice. Organize the dinner. Buy the boat if you can afford it. When a story goes badly, give it time. It may become funny later.

I am proud of my children and the families they created. I am proud that I paid my way through college after my father said I could not. I am proud of the difficult projects I completed and the moments when I used my position to correct something

unfair. I am grateful for my parents, my sisters, my grandparents, and Billy. I am grateful that Susie came into my life.

You are what you are because that is exactly what you have done to get there. That sentence can sound hard, yet it also gives you hope. What you do next still matters.

When you tell my story, you do not need to make me perfect. I was argumentative. I could be stubborn. I worked too much at times. I made decisions that hurt. I missed opportunities. I also tried my best and had fun along the way.

Spread my ashes in the ocean and wave goodbye. I'll be waving back to you with every future breaking wave.



So when my name comes up years from now, smile when you think of me. Remember the beach, the family gatherings, the old stories, and the people who helped one another. Remember that a life is made from ordinary days more than grand occasions. Mine was a good walk along the beach, and I am glad I had all of you beside me for part of it.

With love,

Ed

Adam Edward Scheetz