

**WHAT I HAVE LEARNED—XIII**

# How to Live with a Chair You Hate

The resident sage of Charlotte, North Carolina, offers a wry distillation of wisdom about youth, writing, marriage, eggplant, and other elements of the furniture of life.

By HARRY GOLDEN

**H**AVING recently undergone a serious gall bladder operation coupled with a respiratory failure, I know what I *should* have learned: Keep your weight down and your medical insurance up. The gall bladder, at least, puts me in distinguished political company. And the recuperation gives me plenty of time to mull over anything else I may have learned.

I am glad SR wrote me when it did. For ordinarily, I would be quick to leap to my typewriter and divest myself to interested readers of the sum of my learning. I think this is true of all journalists. Used to daily writing, most of us come to feel no topic is hard, or intractable, or delicate. One who constantly editorializes deals with the world practically, and with every event therein as a self-completed unit. He lives in the world at its basic linear and chronological levels; or, as I once expressed it more metaphorically, writing a story one day and another the next makes it difficult sometimes to realize we are all on the same ball of yarn.

Let us take an example. In North Carolina, the State Supreme Court ruled that brown-bagging was illegal. Brown-bagging is the genteel disguise adopted by a patron to furnish his own liquor when he dines at the local restaurant. In all the years I've lived in Charlotte I never saw the bare whiskey bottle exposed anywhere. Liquor was always sheathed in an obvious if opaque brown bag, as though there were some minister on the CIA payroll eating nearby. The Court ruled this practice was illegal: that the law specifically allowed a man could drink in North Carolina, but he could drink only at home.

Every newspaperman in the state rejoiced. Not because any of us are prohibitionists. Indeed, the contrary is probably true. We rejoiced because we had a ready-made story not only for today and tomorrow but for weeks and months to come: for as long as the state legislature—once divided into Republicans and Democrats, now into “wets” and “drys”—haggled about what the Bible said about drinking and what the constituency wanted.

In my columns I was able to point

out the terrible damage the Carolina Supreme Court had done the average digestive system. Many a pal of mine by-lined a story about the economic deprivation Charlotte was sure to suffer as the conventions cancelled.

The Court ruling came just before the state election. We Tarheels listened to candidates haranguing the public pro and con. In one of our eastern counties, always dry, on election day the churchbells rang every hour on the hour just to remind the folks, in the words of the local editor, “there was a candidate amongst us who would change the law like the Supreme Court was doing, distressing our way of life.” One brown-bagger down the drain.

**D**ESPITE the gallons of ink devoted to the subject, despite the forests reduced to pulp for newsprint, despite the sermons, I doubt anyone *learned* anything. No one who read my stuff learned anything about the nature of alcoholic addiction or about the nature of the judicial and legislative process. All anyone learned really was that there was a new excitement throughout the state and the excitement was there because, literally, people feel one way or another about liquor. That's human interest. Human interest is hardly learning. A man can spend money without the least knowledge of economic principles.

In practical terms, I know that readers will follow a story about whiskey because they know whiskey induces drunkenness. I've learned that people will read about anything that relates to the body—heat, cold, sex, health, beauty, ugliness. The body is an object, an idea, easy to relate to. As I say, however, this knowledge is practical, so basically practical that any cub reporter who doesn't learn it on his first story had better turn in



—Tom Walters.

**The author:** Harry Golden, author of the thirteenth in SR's “What I Have Learned” series, has had one of the most unusual careers of any best-selling contemporary American author. He was born in 1902 on New York's Lower East Side, one of five children of Austro-Hungarian Jewish immigrants. He attended New York City public schools and the City College of New York, but left before completing work for his degree. He held various jobs—among them, teacher, hotel clerk, blocker of women's hats, and reporter for several newspapers—

before starting the witty, erudite monthly, *The Carolina Israelite*, in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1941. His many books include *Only in America*, *For 2¢ Plain*, *Carl Sandburg, You're Entitled*, *Mr. Kennedy and the Negroes*, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, *A Little Girl Is Dead*, and *Ess, Ess, Mein Kindt*.

his Smith-Corona and his press card. When a fire wipes out a family, you write about tears, not antiquated fire laws.

As a man gets older, he tends to confuse what he has learned with what he has experienced. I have in my time been a son, a husband, and a father. For the life of me I cannot discourse on any of the three. But I tried. I asked my oldest son, "Was I a good father?"

"Sure," he said.

"You didn't waste any time thinking. Just because I'm in the hospital doesn't mean you have to be nice. What makes you so positive?"

He shrugged. "Hell," he said, "I'm forty years old. What difference does it make now?"

"You don't get my meaning," I persevered. "Did I teach you anything? Anything besides chess, that is?"

"Sure," he said.

"What? Precisely what?"

This time he thought. "I guess you taught me what it's like to be the son of a celebrity."

I think of my own father, who wore a Prince Albert coat and a high silk hat, and before we walked out of the house he automatically put his foot up on a chair, and my mother ran with a cloth to polish his shoes. As my mother polished, my father always said, "Oy, *de krizshes*" ("Oh, my aching back"). She was polishing and his back hurt.

I learned early that my father was a failure. I even memorialized his failure in an essay years ago which I called "The Status Wanderer." We have had stories of the Horatio Alger immigrant who went from cloaks operator to peddler to manufacturer and retail merchant. We know, too, the story of the immigrant involved in the class war, the fellow who worked all his life in a sweatshop, contracted tuberculosis, and died, or was killed on a picket line. But only I told the story of the immigrant who failed because he refused to enter the American milieu on its terms—to start accruing status on the basis of money. My father was this status wanderer. He went down with the ship, or I should say, he went down with his high silk hat.

My father came to America in 1900 from the Galician town of Mikulince in

the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was an immigrant when there were Jews who, though poor, still had status. My father was a learned man, and this made him something of a snob. He could never understand how it was that the son of a coal dealer or the son of a tailor could go to City College as an equal with me. He felt that no matter how much money those other fellows made, they did not dare wear a high silk hat. If the peddler made a million dollars he would still wear a cap, or at best he might toy with the idea of a fedora and a derby.

OUT of these two experiences, mine and my son's, I find I can distill one element common to both. I think that element is that the people who are not expendable are fathers and mothers and sons and brothers. It is incorrect to say life goes on without them. It is not a substantive statement. It is much too thin. When fathers and mothers die the world is qualitatively a different world, just as it is a different world because they are in it. It's an old truth. For my money,

it's learning; learning is that which it takes the generations to discover.

One wishes it didn't take the generations. One wishes wisdom or learning were ready-made, immediate.

Communicating this has little practical value. Any writer can tell you of the letters which come across his desk from time to time, the letters pleading for advice. I have come to the conclusion that the Advice to the Lovelorn is not journalistic invention but a deep-rooted emotional institution.

The editors of SR are not the only people who have asked me what I've learned. Perfect strangers ask me because they think what I've learned will help them. Some of these questions I have no objection to but rather a delight in answering. The young people, the college boys and girls, write to ask, "How can I become a writer?" I think they should ask and I think writers should answer because it is only by questions that these young people begin to see there is an answer they might find.

I am aware that many writers turn a



Harry Golden's *Carolina Israelite*—In lieu of advice to people who ask it, he frequently sends a sample copy "in the hopes the pleaders may get a laugh or two out of some of the editorials."

deaf ear to these naïve pleas. There is an apocryphal story about Mozart, of whom a young man asked, "Shall I become a musical prodigy?", to which Mozart replied, "No."

"But you were a prodigy!" the young fellow returned.

"But I didn't ask anyone," Mozart replied.

This is not my way, principally because I'm too old to be clever at youth's expense. I advise everyone who asks about the career of writing to get himself all the books he can carry before he buys a typewriter. Library cards are more important than pencils. Read everything, I say. Good books, bad books, hard books, easy books, underground books, popular books, square books, hip books—never stop reading and you will become *a fortiori* a writer.

Sometimes these kids balk. "Writers are supposed to live! To live with a vengeance! To tell the world about their living!"

Nonsense. Nonsense. Writing is a sedentary and lonely profession, hardly adventurous in any physical sense. And journalism is worse because journalists are writers who have no education and disdain looking up words in dictionaries or subjects in encyclopedias, relying on their memories. Certainly none of it is romantic. If it were, policemen and nurses and cab drivers would compose all the novels. A writer is supposed to read and write. I remind the would-be writers that Pascal said every man carries around his own precipice, and Melville believed no one had to sail in whaleboats to find sharks.

But what advice can I offer the woman who writes of her fear that her children want to institutionalize her? What advice can I offer the young girl who asks, "Shall I marry out of my re-

ligion?"; the young boy who wants to change his name? What advice can I give to the retired teacher who wants to know how to live with a terminal cancer?

By nature, I am physically and emotionally unable to succumb to the temptations which lure on the would-be and the real saints. But sainthood is perennially one of the underpopulated professions.

WHAT shocks me is why I receive the questions at all. I don't deny these are pleas for help but why should the afflicted suspect that a celebrity can offer better answers than someone else, especially a celebrity who is totally unknowing of the situation and its prospects?

I suspect that a celebrity, even if only a modest celebrity, who makes his living as a journalist, is associated with money, and money is associated with wisdom; anyone with money is supposed to have vanquished the frenzy of modern life. But celebrities have their own problem, which is keeping up their image, refurbishing it daily. I rather doubt that the powerful receive these pleas—the Lyndon Johnsons, the Robert Kennedys, the George Romneys, but I will bet that on occasion the Norman Mailers and Norman Podhoretzes get them.

Do not think I spend my morning in profound depression. I do not. I send these petitioners a sample copy of my newspaper, the *Carolina Israelite*, and I send it not in the hopes they will become subscribers, nor in the hopes the paper will provide the way and the light, as we say down heah, but in the hopes the pleaders may get a laugh or two out of some of the editorials.

It is much easier to answer the hate mail, which continues unabated, lo!

these twenty-five years. Some of it is anonymous, in which case it goes straight into the wastebasket. Curiously, a lot of the folks sign their willfully malicious missiles.

Our station in life, our education, our religion, our upbringing often proves insufficient in subduing our basic arrogance. People vent their spleen on me, feeling perfectly justified in their violence because I am a "Jew nigger-lover."

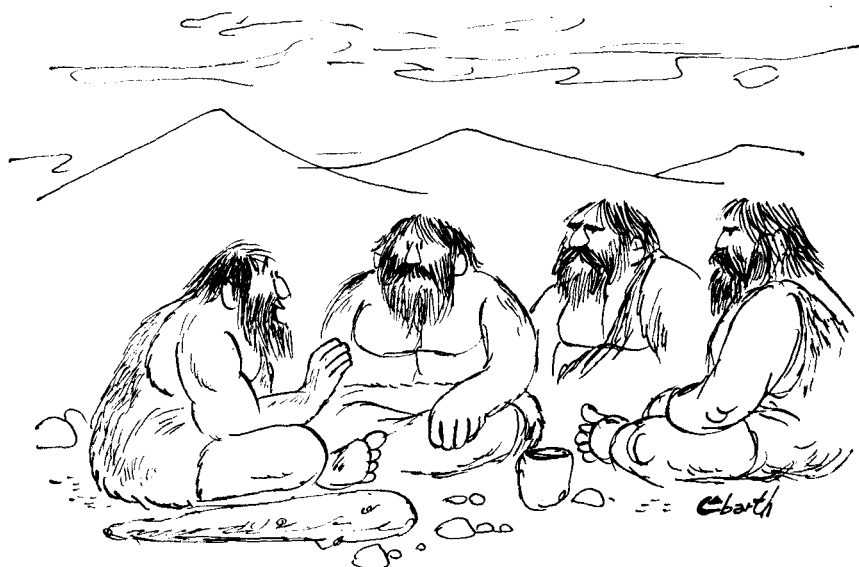
I used to answer these with the simple statement, "Your last letter has been referred to the postal authorities." After a while I felt the postal authorities had all they could do to deliver first-class mail for a nickel, so now I write, "Thank you for your last letter which we have referred to our hate file." Or sometimes I say, "Thank you for your hate letter." No sample copies of the *Carolina Israelite*, either.

The calls at night are something different. They come in spasms. If a Civil Rights Bill is signed into law you can bet that every liberal editor who urged its passage is beset evenings, at midnight, and at dawn with sibilant whispers over the phone. I tried every gambit which came to mind, from explaining my position to stating unequivocally, "Every word you say is being monitored by the FBI and will be used against you." You'd be surprised how little either logic or the FBI frightens most people.

What proved most successful was suffering the inconvenience of turning the telephone off at night. Simple sacrifice to the rescue. I comfort myself with the idea of sacrifice. After all, I haven't suffered the pillory of many of the civil rights workers; nor the contempt suffered by noble Christian men and women like Martin Luther King, Norman Thomas, Roy Wilkins, or Lillian Smith, nor the despair of embattled social workers in Harlem and Watts. Still, I hate giving up the telephone when I can pay the bill on the tenth of the month.

What I like best are the letters of disagreement. The most successful column I ever wrote was a virulent attack on the eggplant, which, I noted, was invariably the main course of the bad cook. I also said the only use I could see for this clumsy vegetable was that it was a handy weapon to throw at Neapolitan tenors who sang flat. I had some other nasty observations to make, like preferring an oleomargarine sandwich on stale white bread to rat-a-tat-touey. I say the eggplant column was successful because the day it saw syndication was the very day John Glenn became the first American to complete an orbit in space.

We have put billions of dollars into the space program, little into the eggplant subsidy. Yet I was inundated by mail. Folks pushed on me recipes for eggplant pizzas, for eggplant foo yong,



"So, gentlemen, these words we have agreed upon will be known hereafter as cuss words."

for baked eggplant, for fried eggplant, for boiled eggplant. Complaints of every size and measure roared from envelopes. Eggplant and Shakespeare were all a man needed to survive on a deserted island; what was I trying to do to the Eggplant Club of downtown Pensacola? One lady said she had tried blintzes, why couldn't I give eggplant a fair shake? My secretary had to establish a separate eggplant file and we had to compose a special eggplant letter. It said, "Don't worry dear, he'll still love you if you can't boil eggs."

Were I not true to my principles, which include a detestation of eggplant, I could publish the Harry Golden Eggplant Cookbook. But I did serve my purpose: haven't had to eat eggplant since. Someone even suggested I grow eggplant in the half-acre lot behind my house. As a matter of fact, I was glad for the suggestion. I thought eggplant just happened, not that it was cultivated.

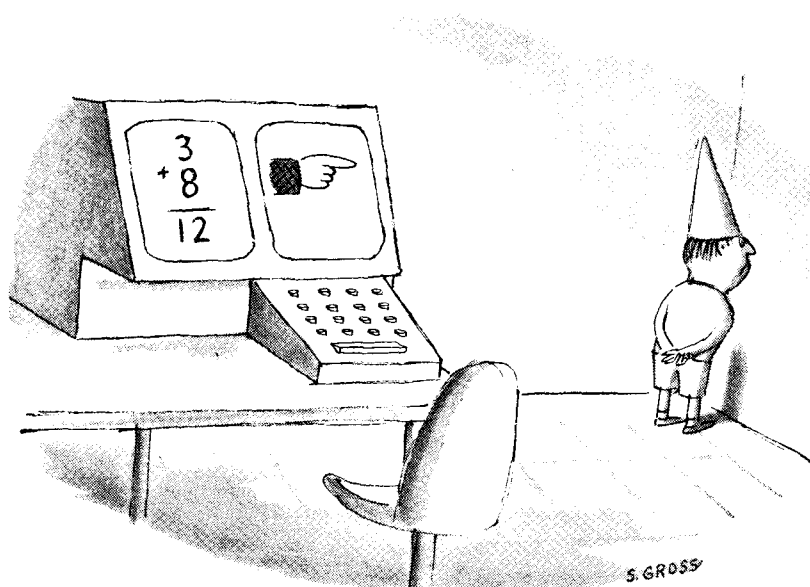
Which returns us to the subject proper: What have I learned? You see, I have no intention of leaving unsettled what learning is that is the property, sole and unmortgaged, of one Harry Golden, editor, publisher, son, father, and celebrity.

Ask me directly, and I shall reply that I have learned the things we were told when we were children are really true. First among which is the maxim that there is really only one woman in the world who will do.

**B**Y no means do I insist that that woman will make you happy. She may make you unhappy. But it is also true subsequent women make you no more comfortable. If you can't get along with the first one, you're not going to get along much with her successors—unless at heart you're a compromiser—and you're going to pay a lot of alimony to discover this. No one has yet formulated any substitute for monogamy for the raising of a family. If we all lived in Plato's Republic and the state collected all of the newborn and shuffled them off to a work farm—and we all accepted this as part of the natural order of things—then I think we should all marry one woman when we're twenty, another when we're thirty, still a third at forty, and another at each turn of the decades. Fathers and mothers so far have proved bound and determined that they and not the state will raise their offspring.

It is true that many men and women feel divorce is not so much a selfish as a sanitary matter, that without divorce they will lose their equilibrium. I feel sorry for them. My heart has always welled with pity for Tommy Manville. Tommy never understands the furniture of life.

I remember an easy chair I hated. It was new and it had usurped an older, more comfortable chair. I learned to



live around that chair. I never sat in it, I never commented about how ugly I thought it, how it wrenched my back to read the front page while I was seated there, how it partially blocked passage from the living room to the kitchen and hall. That chair was there! I imagine personal unhappiness much in the shape and substance of that chair: You must learn to live around it, not to sit in it, nor declaim its hideous features; not to notice it. Unhappiness is a cobra which will not strike unless you startle it.

God, insists the Talmud, is a maker of marriages. For every abrasive personality, there's a matching personality. I thought early on I would let Him figure it out and He has. And if I hadn't let Him, I would have wound up just as unhappy as poor Thorstein Veblen, the American thinker who made the singular contribution to economics by outlining the theory of conspicuous consumption. Veblen wound up teaching at a California college with a wife at one end of the campus and a girl friend at the other.

"I'm not happy with your marital situation," the school's president told him.

"Neither am I," sighed poor Veblen.

Truth No. 2 is that hard work and only hard work pays off. Hard work, in fact, is the only thing that *does* pay off.

The social revolution of the American Negro would never have come about had the Negro left it to humanitarian whites. Humanitarian whites had succeeded in abolishing slavery, but then they ran out of gas. When the Negro, sadly reviewing his long empirical history of failure, decided he himself would undertake hard work, that was when he began to make headway. And the revolution is by no means complete. And it will not be complete until more hard work and sweat have been invested.

Those of us who are, for want of a

better word, co-revolutionists see now that the road toward absolute equality is longer and more treacherous than we thought. We cannot traverse it with song and enthusiasm; we have to hack our way through prejudice, distortion, ignorance, and plain intransigence. Hard work and patience are the only blades we have. Millennia are not something which we see happen: They are something we usually just passed.

Sometimes I hear disturbing rumors about youth, that the young folks today cannot bring themselves to terms with this society and with its values; that kids grow long hair and wear beards and dirty clothes as a sign of their revolt. But then, I think there are several boys now contending over which one will be the valedictorian at the Franconia College graduating exercises. One of them will win. And he will probably be the first boy on his block to buy a washer-dryer and a new refrigerator.

Let the long-haired unwashed giggle. That washer-dryer, that new refrigerator is what every Congolese has been contending for by murdering missionaries, nuns, and fellow tribesmen.

Someone has always been smart enough to figure out that hard work pays off. Someone is clever enough to see that there is not all that much luck in the world and most of what there is is bad. No one will dispute me when I say that the only thing which overcomes hard luck is hard work. There's always someone clever enough to understand that the wise guy is the sucker every time. The wise guy is the sucker because there ain't no free lunches anymore.

And the last of my knowledge consists of the admonition: Never eat in a restaurant not bright enough to enable you to read your paper. The darkened lounge or salon will never pay off in food, service, or comfort.

# A VIEW OF H.H.H.

By ELMO ROPER

SINCE THIS article just might be construed by some as an attack on "liberals"—or at least self-proclaimed liberals—perhaps it would be an act of discretion on my part to present my credentials:

I have been favorable to labor unions since my college days and have several highly esteemed friends—such as Jack Potofsky—in the movement still. I was the first national fund-raiser for the Urban League, was on its board for many years, and have been a member of the NAACP since the days of my Redding friend and neighbor, Walter White. For eighteen years I served as a member of the Connecticut Commission on Civil Rights, and for a time was its chairman. I voted for Al Smith, Norman Thomas, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Adlai Stevenson, in that order. Add to

that, current membership on the board of the Fund for the Republic, Freedom House, and the Population Crisis Committee, and decide for yourself whether that adds up to a generally liberal or a generally conservative position.

I have gone to the trouble of listing this information because I am very unhappy today with a large segment of people who vigorously proclaim themselves liberals and yet scream when some other liberal disagrees with them on *anything*. It seems to me that the ability to tolerate dissent without abusing the dissenter is—or ought to be—the cornerstone of any liberal philosophy.

And yet today a good many of my friends who insist they are liberals are heaping abuse on Hubert Humphrey because he happens to disagree with them on the virtues and vices of the war in Vietnam. I believe everyone has a perfect right in this country to a viewpoint

on Vietnam; all I am insisting is that Hubert Humphrey has that right, too—and that includes the right not to be regarded as "an ex-liberal" or a "traitor to the cause of liberalism" by those who disagree with his viewpoint—however right they may be in opposing that viewpoint.

For twenty-five years Hubert Humphrey has acted as the spearhead of liberal causes and has probably done more to push the liberal cause forward than all of his current detractors put together. But since so many of the self-proclaimed liberals seem to have short memories, let's list here—as a reminder—some things for which Hubert Humphrey was, in large part, responsible:

*Human Rights:* Mr. Humphrey's record in human rights hardly needs recounting. Under his leadership as mayor, Minneapolis adopted the first municipal Fair Employment Practice ordinance in the nation in 1947. At the 1948 Democratic National Convention his work in drafting a strong civil rights plank and his subsequent speech before the convention brought him to national prominence. Once elected to the Senate, Mr. Humphrey began to introduce bills to protect and strengthen the rights of all Americans. In March 1949 he sponsored an anti-lynching bill. In April he introduced a bill to establish a Commission on Civil Rights. In June 1951 he introduced a federal Fair Employment Practices bill to prohibit discrimination in employment because of race, color, religion, or national origin; a bill to outlaw the poll tax in national elections; a bill to provide equal access to and use of public interstate transportation; a bill to protect existing rights guaranteed under the Constitution or federal law; and a bill to protect the right of political participation.

Virtually all of these Humphrey human rights proposals, so "extreme" and "impractical" in the early 1950s, have since been written into law. The passage of the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964 climaxed Hubert Humphrey's sixteen years as chief civil rights spokesman in the Senate.

*Food For Peace:* Mr. Humphrey's concern with utilizing American food stocks to aid hungry people dates back to his earliest Senate days. In 1950 he introduced a bill to send wheat to India and Pakistan. His Food for Peace proposal, which authorizes the use of foreign currencies obtained from sales of surplus U.S. food for promoting local economic development was introduced on February 25, 1954. All subsequent Food for Peace and Food for Freedom programs have been based on Mr. Humphrey's 1954 bill. Senator George McGovern has said "Humphrey was the



—Wide World.

Senators Humphrey and Dirksen with victory smiles for the Civil Rights Act—"Virtually all of [the] Humphrey human rights proposals . . . have been written into law."