

# The Unionization of the Exploratorium

The Exploratorium, San Francisco

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## *Institutional Trauma*

On April 15, 1993 Goéry Delacôte, the Exploratorium's director, signed a contract that formally unionized the Exploratorium. While most of the Exploratorium's staff celebrated unionization as the successful end of a 40 month struggle, others of us felt a profound uneasiness. Our place, the place Frank Oppenheimer named the Exploratorium, the place that originally couldn't even be described by a conventional term such as museum, had assumed an ordinary organizational structure.

The Exploratorium's modest beginnings gave no indication whatsoever of its future success and worldwide influence. On my first visit, I was struck by the incredible contrast between the pastoral exterior and the dark cluttered interior of the Palace of Fine Arts: the building where the Exploratorium has always been housed. Towering columns, capped by lintels and decorated with frieze work and huge sculptures form a colonnade around a massive rotunda; this structure overlooks a pleasant lake and park. Behind this enormous Greco-Roman look-a-like is the building itself. While large, it remains an undistinguished structure made of steel and concrete--inside it looked to me, in 1972, like a curved airplane hanger.

The early Exploratorium was mostly empty space. Dust, from the constant exhibit fabrication, covered everything. The office consisted of a used construction trailer which had been pulled into the building. Plastic sheeting protected the electronics shop from a leaky roof. Our graphics department amounted to small plywood shacks. A collection of donated power tools, federal surplus junk, battered army desks and a few stacks of purchased materials, all grouped haphazardly in one corner, comprised the exhibit shop. Some space was filled with strange constructs: old trade show exhibits and interesting junk -- this was the exhibit floor. Temporary barriers of tattered woven redwood screens blocked off empty space or cluttered "storage areas." There were a few interesting exhibits, but the only images I can remember distinctly from my earliest visit were the vivid, saturated colors created by Bob Miller's *Sun Painting*.

The staff was no more organized than the place: probably less so. There were 15 or 20 of us. Youth, energy and the immense freedom the place allowed combined with the persistent and powerful vision of our brilliant, mercurial leader held us together.

Nearly 20 years later, why would the staff of the quintessentially creative Exploratorium vote overwhelmingly for unionization? What benefits did they seek in union representation? Why did they want the union? What had we--management--done? How were things going to be different? And looking forward, what could be learned from the experience and would unionization alter the Exploratorium's continuing creativity and growth into the future?

### *The Early Exploratorium*

Before 1975, the Exploratorium's structure centered completely around the founding director Frank Oppenheimer. If an organizational chart of that period ever existed, it might have looked like planets in orbit around a central sun. A large worn rug, dirty old couches and chairs formed the staff meeting area. Weekly meetings at which food was served were well attended. Communications could not have been more direct. Almost every staff member knew, to some degree, what others did. The boundaries between departments were weak. Indeed, the director himself used to build exhibits and even sweep the floors.

There were few titles, no organizational charts and minimal separation between management and staff. Fluid cooperation between most departments was a matter of course. Exploratorium old timers characterized this era by saying:

"People had a lot of personal autonomy and people took a lot of personal responsibility without being assigned..." There were..."Very ill-defined boundaries of one's job..."

"The staff was young and willful...bright and overqualified...there was no formal employee training...certainly in my personal case there has been enormous opportunity for growth and change..."

"Frank was very strongly against rules...he would have as few rules as he could get away with."

"It was anarchy and Frank was 'anarch'. People pretty much did what they saw fit within the purview of what Frank would allow..."

Most staff expected to be consulted, they expected to have influence. This structure, with Oppenheimer in the center and everyone else arrayed around, left a legacy. In many cases staff saw their jobs as extending from minute technical aspects all the way up to helping set museum policy. While museum departments started to develop in the early 1970's and while a flat, but fairly clear, hierarchy also grew up, a family-like tradition persisted until the recent union drive. For example, until 1991 virtually any staff member who felt comfortable could attend meetings of the Exploratorium's board of directors.

Notwithstanding these democratic trappings, the Exploratorium was never without firm management in the early years. Much of this management was effective and proper because it derived from Oppenheimer's vision and leadership.

"It really was an endeavor of love and an expansion of consciousness...he engendered that in people. It was obvious that we were doing a great thing...I learned to trust Frank's intuition..."

"Frank was very good at getting people to share his belief..."

When shared belief was not enough, Oppenheimer was also excellent at maintaining control by persuading his staff that they had really convinced him to do exactly the thing he intended to do at the outset. In retrospect it is easy to see that Frank also usually made good decisions when it really mattered. And if an error was made, Oppenheimer was excellent at justification after the fact and a master at playing one group against the other -- to neutralize all parties involved.

"Frank would kind of pick people and get them to fighting with each other and I think he did that intentionally..."

Despite Oppenheimer's machinations, his breadth, intelligence, charisma and incredible dedication combined with occasional displays of genuine and beguiling charm, kept the Exploratorium's staff churning forward. He was simply unassailable as he struggled to teach the world a new way to educate.

### ***Organic Growth***

Starting with an initial grant of \$50,000<sup>1</sup> from the San Francisco Foundation, the Exploratorium was to grow from an unknown upstart to a major institution in less than 20 years. With growth came changes and many people interviewed for this article, posit growth, with all of its implications, as a underlying cause for the eventual union movement. Communication became more difficult. With specialization, Exploratorium staff slowly lost touch with what others did. However in these early years, growth also represented opportunity. In all interviews with long tenured Exploratorium employees, no one mentioned any formal employee training or development, save the opportunity to tackle any job which seemed remotely related to your position at the time: clerks became accountants and exhibit builders erected large buildings.

Basically, we assumed that we could do anything, and although somehow we knew this wasn't quite true, few core staff failed to try out different jobs. People's jobs evolved; therefore they often saw the institution's workings from different viewpoints. This reinforced their belief that they should have a say and influence on museum wide decisions. To understand this job shifting consider one Exploratorium employee who was hired in May 1974 to do exhibit maintenance. As time progressed he became an exhibit builder, exhibit shop manager, chief designer for the exhibit sales program, an executive council member and now is a unionized exhibit builder again.

This early system, with many generalists and few specialists, had advantages--fewer employees were needed and there was always plenty of work to do. Job responsibilities expanded to match interests. Few people were bored with their work and many employees simply made the Exploratorium the center of their lives.

With growth also came, real supervisors, real departments and eventually a real organizational structure. But it was the diagnosis of Oppenheimer's cancer in May 1983 that caused him to create the earliest version of The Exploratorium Staff Organizational Chart. This modest document was backed up by a "Staff Distribution by Function and/or Area" list. Well before Frank's death in February 1985 an executive council was in place that managed all areas of the Exploratorium. Departments grew too. Although there were earlier fundraising officers, Virginia Rubin, the Exploratorium's director of development from August 1976 until the summer of 1986 succeeded in firmly establishing the Exploratorium's fundraising group. Rubin's department was in some sense a prototype for others to come.

Although Oppenheimer had brought on a long string of prospective successors, he was never ready to cede power causing these quite capable people to leave or be dismissed. Since Rubin had assisted in raising funds--the life blood of the place--and because she was decisive, she became acting director shortly before Frank's death and continued on in this role for about two years. While she adapted to the spirit of the place, she also molded it. With the help of the staff, Oppenheimer's executive council, led by Rubin, kept the Exploratorium on track during the transition to new management.

Both the Exploratorium's early structure and organic inbred growth set the stage for a difficult period of conflict that ended in the unionization of the institution. This same structure also produced a prolific out pouring of groundbreaking educational exhibits and programs throughout the 1970's and 1980's.

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<sup>1</sup> Hein, Hilda, The Exploratorium: The Museum as Laboratory, (Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, 1990) p. 18

Hopefully my brief characterization of that time above provides some background for the following. Below are factors that may be seen as underlying causes for the unionization of the Exploratorium.

### ***Problems of Succession***

#### **Death of the Founder**

Clearly Oppenheimer was not an ordinary museum director. He was the founder and the guiding light of the Exploratorium. Just as with any founder, a direct replacement was not a possibility. And anyone who followed would be compared with and judged against Oppenheimer: not an enviable position to assume. Moreover Oppenheimer left to his successor a minimal endowment, unsure revenue streams, a physical plant that was desperately in need of a complete renovation and expansion, quickly multiplying programs and institutional functions, and a very unusual organizational structure.

#### **Multiple Leaders**

In the six years following Frank Oppenheimer's death the Exploratorium had four different leaders: Virginia Rubin, Robert White, Robert Semper and Goéry Delacôte. Two of these, Rubin and Semper were interim directors. Compare this to the preceding sixteen years when Oppenheimer was developing the institution.

#### **Continuity in Leadership**

Continuity in leadership was lost when Virginia Rubin resigned after Robert White's arrival on April 1, 1988. On May 1, 1988 Robert Semper took a one year sabbatical. These departures left Robert White without key executives who might have assisted him in the early month of his administration. The subsequent resignation of Bob Miller, Oppenheimer's senior counselor, some months later, deprived the Exploratorium of a spiritual leader.

#### **Opposition to a New Director**

In interviews many Exploratorium staff cited Robert White's hiring as an extremely difficult time for the Exploratorium; the staff was almost unanimously opposed to his appointment. In the staff's eyes good credentials were insufficient for a new director; the comparison between the quixotic, brilliant Oppenheimer and the staid White was too great. While the Exploratorium's board of directors sought a director to build quietly upon Oppenheimer's success, the staff desired someone with vision and fire. White started work with so little support that his entire administration was difficult for all. In identifying White's hiring as the start of a difficult time, Exploratorium employees faced the fact new people would be running the place. For the first time, many staff felt the sense of ownership which Oppenheimer had inspired slipping away. They sensed the power of the Exploratorium's board of directors. Constant financial pressures made a bad situation even worse.

#### **Staff Turnover**

Three different chief financial officers served in the years from 1985 to 1992, and three different directors of development also served in this time. Not just executives changed, the Exploratorium's development department was weakened by the turnover of five different development associates in this same period. One of these development staffers had written nearly 5 million dollars of federal grants; the loss was felt.

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A feisty, but talented director of operations left. Fourteen people ultimately left in layoffs. And the departures continued when Delacôte came on board. The entire accounting department, save one employee, resigned over spurious allegations of a breach of confidentiality. At least four controllers were hired and left in three years, two budget analysts came and went. Three key employees in the marketing division left and one marketing manager transferred to another division. The teaching programs lost a co-chairman of the Teacher Training Institutes.

The institutional memory of the Exploratorium dimmed, potential mentors had gone and new hires stepped into a very strong institutional culture lacking an understanding of the true nature of the changes the Exploratorium was undergoing.

### **Constant Financial Pressures**

In the winter of 1980 staff at the Exploratorium took a voluntary reduction in work hours and went on partial unemployment. While some employees were unable to accept less pay, the majority of the work force reduced hours dramatically. Members of the Exploratorium's electronics shop performed their jobs and then worked after hours for a local computer firm, "Datapoint," to make ends meet. Other employees simply submitted time sheets reflecting half the hours they actually worked. Several managers, who were aware that we couldn't meet payroll, postponed receiving their paychecks until funds would be available. A substantial grant saved the day and the Exploratorium survived. About this time the Exploratorium's board began discussions concerning an admission charge.

This crisis was perhaps the clearest example of the persistent financial pressures that plagued the Exploratorium. Many non-profit organizations face similar pressures, indeed Thomas W. Leavitt, a former museum director, argues in an article in *Museum News* (May/June 1991) that financial insecurity may be a permanent problem for such institutions: "In the end, recessions may tend to accelerate the search for new sources of capital and operating funds. But the economic problems of museums are permanent and structural. That is the problem. "

Financial pressures in the winter of 1990 were to lead to the first mass layoff in the Exploratorium's history. Without these financial pressures the layoffs may not have occurred all at the same time, or in the same way, if they occurred at all. Without the layoffs it is unlikely the Exploratorium staff would have organized at the time.

### ***Growth in All Elements***

Organic growth fostered the Exploratorium's populist institutional culture, but by the late 1980s the institution simply suffered from expansion in nearly every area. There were more visitors, exhibits, programs and staff. Budgets were higher, more money needed to be earned or raised. Mustering resources and managing staff to both expand and maintain existing operations became increasingly difficult.

Examples are easy to cite. With the need to charge admission in 1981 an entire admissions department was created. State and Federal grant programs funded a wonderful new program, The

Teacher Training Institutes, but this required more staff, new office and somewhere to conduct additional classes. The number of accounting entries grew at a terrific rate and computer systems, both for general accounting and fundraising purposes, were acquired. Indeed, computers sprouted up everywhere and computer training and maintenance became a necessary function. A small film program began. Video facilities were donated and we began to make short videos. In 20 years the graphics department moved from creating hand written exhibit labels to producing full blown magazines and publications. Exhibits were being produced at the rate of 25 to 40 per year and as these exhibits wore out, exhibit maintenance became a major burden. To make money, the Exploratorium created a sales division and began to reproduce and sell fancy exhibits.

The museum store doubled in size and was rebuilt or relocated three times. Food service expanded. A huge mezzanine was built and exhibit space shrank as huge trailers were dragged into the building to make marketing and development offices for the growing staff.

### ***An Older Staff***

The staff matured along with the institution. In the early years, the Exploratorium was unknown; its staff worked in a place that was "counter-culture" and financially insecure. We knew the Exploratorium could close its doors for any number of reasons in a fairly short time, but the staff were young, marginally paid and not looking for lifelong employment. In my own case, I liked the job because of the near absolute freedom it afforded; we worked when we wanted and as long as we wanted. One year I worked nearly non-stop in the spring, summer and fall, then skied 60 days during the winter. Security was of little concern and money was only important in a relative sense; you wanted to be paid fairly in relation to others.

By the late 1980's the picture was very different. Many staff had children and mortgages. After the high inflation years, living expenses were high and money was generally an issue for staff, as was job security. Although we realized we remained part of an incredibly successful experiment in education, some staff no longer had that sense of infinite possibilities. Moreover long hours coupled with deadlines caused occasional staff burnout. This was surely the case after the creation of our first major exhibit sales project: the IBM show. As I crafted the Exploratorium's first pension plan in 1985, I spent days computing projected costs using detailed staff lists. In doing this I realized that turnover had been low and that the average age of the core staff was rising. Job security was to be a key issue in the unionization drive.

### ***San Francisco's Union Tradition***

In an interview with Joann Jung, a union official, I asked if San Francisco bay area's union tradition had any influence on the Exploratorium's unionization drive. She replied that unionization might not have

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occurred if the Exploratorium had been located elsewhere. Jung noted the fact that unions generally do not arise where no union local exists to provide support.

Exploratorium staff had praise for Joann and others at SEIU Local 790A. Interviews with Exploratorium staff verified that the union organizers were skilled and sensitive. They remained good listeners, built support carefully and slowly and it seems made few mistakes in orchestrating the staff's unionizing efforts. One earlier union drive, around 1980, failed for two reasons: principally there was no ground swell of sentiment and secondarily union organizers failed to successfully build support. Ten years later the Exploratorium's staff would be committed and the union organizers much more effective.

## *Effective Communications*

Immediately after layoffs an internal memo from a staff advisory committee called for increased communications, but more than just communications, they wanted influence.

"Staff, as well as Management, must become part of the dialog. It's all well and good to expect representatives to champion a cause, but Staff must knock on doors and give input and demand answers as part of their job. We can't always expect others to have the solution: we must go to the source and deal with the people directly involved with decisions."<sup>2</sup>

Direct, effective communications with the decision maker, this was what so many Exploratorium staff had in earlier years and still wanted; they saw it as part of their jobs. Another staff member described the early years in this way:

"There was a court of last resort and that was Frank. And you could win the argument if you were right...he would tolerate dissent."

But even before Oppenheimer's death, growth, staff turnover and a ragged organizational structure had begun to undercut informal channels of communication. Fewer Exploratorium staff knew what other staff actually did. As time passed, staff additions and replacements made it difficult to remember names and departments. Despite the proliferation of meetings, committees, memo trails and even e-mail, nothing worked quite right. New people often failed to socialize with the long-tenured staff. New managers arrived with a different view of organizational structure, usually derived from their previous jobs, and they were not always available to lower level staff. One Exploratorium employee, who was to become a prime leader of the union movement, put it this way:

"And the people who were being brought in to run the place, it was very, very clear that these were not people who were going to run things the way that people were used to them being run, which was with some access to decision making...You had a staff that was used to having a voice and there wasn't any place for that voice anymore..."

Ron Hipschman, an employee who opposed unionization, put it this way:

**"Disenfranchisement:** The staff now feels as if it has no way to affect decisions concerning many financial, operational, managerial and philosophical issues even though those decisions directly

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<sup>2</sup> Internal Exploratorium Memo Policy Advisory Committee Response to the Museum Restructuring, D. Barker, J. Bell, K. Finn, C. Greene, R. Meyer, December 10, 1990, pg. 6

affect them. Many decisions are made behind closed doors, in secret, without consultation with the staff.<sup>3</sup>"

In interviews, one Exploratorium first line supervisor simply characterized management communications as "gratuitous." Old-time Exploratorium staff were amazed to discover secrecy used as a management technique. The separation between management and staff widened dramatically. A clash of cultures occurred.

### ***THE PROXIMATE CAUSE***

On November 27, 1990 the Exploratorium laid off 10 employees and reduced the working hours of 9 others. If memory serves, these layoffs were to result in the departure of 14 of the 19 employees effected. Everyone of the thirteen people formally interviewed for this article, including Delacôte and Jung, all cited these layoffs as the proximate cause for the union drive. Other Exploratorium staff confirm this view. As staff saw it the layoffs marked a break in the trust which had developed over the years at the Exploratorium.

Many said it was not so much the fact of the layoffs, it was the way they were done. Process was critical and the legacy of involvement fostered at the Exploratorium magnified the shock of the layoffs. Exploratorium staff characterized the layoffs by saying:

"Certainly the rank and file of the institution had no say whatsoever in that process, I mean zero...I think most people would say that. The process was an entirely top down one. "

"The way the layoffs were orchestrated...they (management) used a strict corporate model...they (the departing) got a few words and an envelope and a pat on the back."

(Speaking of the layoffs and resignations in accounting) "It wasn't necessarily the actual events so much or the actual results of those events, it was more the way that they were done."

"The staff realized that the place was not theirs anymore, that it was rapidly being taken from them... the place will never belong to the staff again."

In writing this, there are so many memories and echoes. I recall that when Oppenheimer maneuvered me into undertaking some particularly onerous task, I argued with him telling him that the Exploratorium was his place, not my place. He replied that the Exploratorium had been fashioned by so many different people and it was theirs. We were both right. Without him the Exploratorium would never have existed, without us believing it was ours, it would never have grown so. Of course, it was my place.

For many in management it was our place, too. Certainly this was the case for Semper, the acting director, during the layoffs. There was considerable anguish in the many executive council meetings that preceded the layoffs. We had no ill intentions. In retrospect, all we lacked were the right answers. In the late 1980's staff rarely faced the cold reality of finances directly. At the executive level however, it is simply like your own checking account; do you have the money in the account when the bills come due? Are you spending faster than you are earning? We didn't even have all the information we needed, since the accounting systems at the Exploratorium were hard pressed to keep up with the institution's growth and we had a new and inexperienced chief financial officer. We could not be certain of future revenue

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<sup>3</sup> Internal Exploratorium Memo, Proposed Staff Association, R. Hipschman, P. Murphy, November 11, 1991, pg. 6

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and at the time there seemed to be no other option to cutting payroll. The question really came down to layoffs vs. an across the board reduction in salaries.

Early in 1990 a organizational consultant was hired and substantial work was undertaken in long range planning. The Exploratorium's management was trying to prepare for a new executive director; we wanted to provide an understandable starting place for a new administration. This consultant came well recommended, but had no previous experience with non-profit institutions. She argued against across the board salary cuts and felt it was better to take the one time shock of the layoffs. From her viewpoint the people laid off would recover and the institution would be better in the long run. New high level Exploratorium managers who had been hired from the entertainment industry agreed. Moreover the acting director was trying to build the organization; how could he hire new people and then immediately ask them to design their own pay cuts. And finally, if layoffs had to come, we did not want to push the task onto the new director who would arrive in February--the layoffs could taint the first days of his administration.

I managed to convince the executive council to suspend contributions to the Exploratorium's pension plan. This amounted to an across the board 3 percent cut for tenured employees, but would not save all the money needed. The pension plan cut failed miserably in accomplishing a second goal: to convince staff that management cared and was in the same boat with them. No one noticed. After discussion, including some dissent, the decision to proceed with the layoffs was made. Few old time employees on the executive council at the time could have felt comfortable, I surely did not. We were aware that museum wide communications were a growing problem and that one particular committee, The Policy Committee, had never served well as the voice of staff to management. At the same time, we were inundated with work and found it difficult to make the old informal communications work. I can recall trying to be accessible and spending hours listening to opinions and viewpoints; the conversations became exhausting. I could not change the decision to lay off staff. Moreover I agreed that some positions were no longer needed and wasn't free to speak of any particulars. Regardless of the financial squeeze, I believe if we had known the layoffs were to result in unionization, we would not have made them.

The day before the layoffs were to occur staff met off site to discuss the situation. The next morning they posted a memo to the executive council that stated: "As Exploratorium staff we would like to negotiate a decrease in salary to prevent the impending layoffs." The memo had fifty names on it. When the layoffs occurred the following day, staff assumed we had ignored them and this made them feel all the more powerless and bitter. In fact the decision had already been made.

Management attempted to carry out the layoffs properly, both the way the layoffs were done and what was actually done. We received advice about this from our consultant. Each division head discussed the people who might be effected with their department head. Employee performance was obviously a criteria as were the organizational changes that were underway. The actual decisions were made, or at least ratified, at the department level--the only exception being the one department head who was laid off. Warnings about the seriousness of the situation were provided, both in written memos and at meetings. For the first time at the Exploratorium, a fairly generous severance package, which included out placement assistance, was devised. While not every decision was unquestionable and while not every action taken by management was perfect, given the fact layoffs were to occur, management acted well.

Most staff did not generally criticize the actual decisions, rather they attacked their lack of input in the decisions.

What more could we do to inform staff? Should we have let staff decide who would be laid off? Sincere concern for the unfortunate employees dictated that discussions be held in private. No division head felt general discussions about who might go were appropriate or bearable. How could we possibly conduct such meetings? And whose job was this anyway, if not management's. How could any major layoff be other than top down?

### ***The Aftermath of the Layoffs***

Exploratorium employees simply could not accept that management made such decisions alone, even though this practice is routine in the business world. This went against the long established traditions of the place. Management was no longer Oppenheimer. They didn't trust us as they had trusted him and unlike him we were ineffective in explaining our actions. Staff felt profoundly disenfranchised.

After the layoffs, employees who remained feared for their jobs. Much to my astonishment, this fear became apparent as I conducted interviews for this article. It was real, deep and pervasive. And staff bitterly resented new hires made after the layoffs, particularly when these people came in as management at high salaries. Due to high costs for severance and some rehires, the layoffs saved much less than anticipated. This further embittered staff. Union organizing meetings began. These meetings were small at first and slowly grew to include the majority of the rank and file. Security was tight. Some staff felt they would be fired for organizing. This fear became a strong argument for a union contract which would protect workers from arbitrary management action. Management would not have fired workers, nor even chastised them, but few staff felt this way. Only the most perceptive employees understood that there was nothing to fear:

"...and the Exploratorium is a much more benevolent place than most...My general take on it is that management, compared to most institutions, was relatively enlightened... but that's an accent on relatively..."

While such employees existed, we had totally lost the trust of the majority of the staff and in several cases, management had lost the staff's respect as well. They no longer talked to us openly. They talked among themselves.

Still, there was one person which might have changed the outcome: Goéry Delacôte. Dr. Delacôte arrived as executive director enjoying broad support from the staff. He came from a governmental organization, the Centre National des Recherches Scientifiques, where he had managed the dissemination of information concerning French scientific research. Avuncular, talkative and a bit exotic, Delacôte stepped into the Exploratorium's greatest organizational crisis ever.

Upon Delacôte's arrival the expectations of the rank and file varied. At the extreme one staff member expected Delacôte to fire or demote managers who had participated in the layoffs; other staff I interviewed were dramatically less demanding. There was a strong sentiment expressed in early organizing meetings that Delacôte should be given a chance. No one could blame him for the layoffs and absolutely no one interviewed did. The staff was bitter, but they still had hope. This grace period was not to last for long.

Three Exploratorium staff interviewed mentioned a difficult staff meeting. Someone had anonymously broadcast an e-mail message correctly informing the staff of a large bonus one manager had recently received. Many felt the bonus was deserved and itself not the issue. However at that time all salaries were public at the Exploratorium and the fact the bonus was secret was an issue. Delacôte decried the anonymous nature of the broadcast and said he would not tolerate an attack on the individual who received the bonus.

The ominous part came when, according to staff interviewed, Delacôte suggested if he discovered who the offending party was, he would ask him or her to leave. The rank and file took this as a threat and it generated fear. Clearly the e-mail was anonymous principally because the sender feared retribution. This one comment fed the staff's fears and underlined their powerlessness.

The "secret bonus" was to figure in the union drive in three ways. Delacôte's comments at the meeting were the first, the fact of the bonus was the second and accounting staff, upon demanding strict documentation before issuing a bonus check, felt themselves implicated as the source of the leak. For this, and other related reasons, these three, long tenured, accounting staff resigned in reaction. I spoke at length with all three at the time. And in trying to put a good light on these resignations, high level managers, including Delacôte, were seen as glossing over the real nature of the departures. None of this was good, for several staff in interviews mentioned both the bonus and the accounting resignations as proximate reasons for unionizing efforts. Further organizational decisions which came down from the top, coupled with the personalities involved on both sides, added to a mounting sense of disillusionment. Delacôte had had his chance.

In fairness, consider Delacôte's position. He faced all of the problems of succession listed earlier and he remained under financial pressures that both limited his ability to move the Exploratorium forward and which still had the potential to force more reductions in staff. He was brand new to the place and knew neither the staff nor the community in which he was working. Upon his arrival, the current head of the Exploratorium's development department resigned.

Nothing was particularly easy for this new director. Even before his hiring, Delacôte had established his plan to double or triple the physical size of the institution. He also wished to build upon a germinal media department and more established teaching programs to create two new centers: The Center for Media and Communication and The Center for Teaching and Learning. So in essence, Delacôte envisioned a publishing/media group and a mini-university as institutions related to the existing exhibition space--which was now called The Center for Public Exhibition. All of this would take money and a smoothly working staff. He had neither. Ironically for those of us who bemoan the passing of the young Exploratorium, yet hopefully, unionization may actually help The Exploratorium to achieve such goals.

### **The Campaign, Election and Contract Negotiations.**

Early in the morning of September 27, 1991 Joann Jung, of SEIU Local 790A called Delacôte to inform him that approximately 85 percent of eligible Exploratorium employees had signed union cards and that SEIU 790A had filed a union petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Jung also asked that management recognize the union without a campaign and election and requested that contract negotiations begin forthwith. Jung characterized Delacôte's reaction as surprised, but cordial. In talking with Jung I sensed that she was a little surprised herself by Delacôte's pleasant demeanor which she further described as "warmer than most." Dr. Delacôte had worked in union organizations, he even worked in a union organizing campaign in 1959. On the phone, the conversation ended with Delacôte suggesting he consult with his staff.

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When Delacôte described the union petition to the executive council on October 1, 1991, he said that at first he thought it a good idea: the Exploratorium had strong leadership, why shouldn't the employees have strong representation. We sat stunned. No one openly supported unionization, although perhaps one or two present had some pro-union sentiments. In that meeting it was decided that at least the employees should vote the union in; they should have a choice and we should have a chance to lobby our position. To management's credit, no hint of retribution was considered; most likely, all of that fear was unjustified. The union was our fault. Management, both new and old, had failed in insuring a smooth transition after Oppenheimer's death. At the end of the meeting Delacôte expressed the feeling that the staff should clearly express their choice in an election and I feel he was right.

After that meeting one newly hired executive naively expressed the sentiment that once the employees discovered what a union could and could not do, they would have nothing to do with the union. My reply was that she had no sense whatsoever for the situation and that unionization was an extremely strong likelihood. The new hires didn't have a clue; they didn't understand that to get this far, a real change had occurred. Yet some of these new people would figure prominently in the contract negotiations that dragged on for months after the election. Honestly, other than to understand the nature of the situation, the old-time executives didn't know what to do either. Few members of management had experience in union drives and none had anything like comprehensive experience. After that first meeting, I felt we would have a union. The organization had outgrown its earlier familial structure, yet the staff's need for direct involvement, which developed over nearly twenty years, had never adequately been addressed and channeled. So many I interviewed said the union was about a balance of power. We had ignored, or taken away, their voice and the union was the only way staff felt they could get it back.

The campaign that preceded the election had two notable occurrences; the NLRB debates and staff attempts to create a staff association.

The Exploratorium hired an attorney to conduct seminars for management and to help us convince employees that a union was not in their best interest. I attended these seminars and received copies of the NLRB regulations that were to constrain our actions during the upcoming campaign: we could not interrogate, threaten, spy on, or make promises to rank and file employees. The lawyer made it clear if we did nothing the union would win the election. He also said that the union would draw a clear line between the rank and file and management; about this he was right.

Owing to charges that the attorney was a union-buster, the staff insisted that he should not continue to advise management. The Exploratorium's regular law firm, Cooper White and Cooper, took his place. A few days after notification Delacôte had already decided that the employees should have the chance to vote and the executive council agreed. The union succeeded in using the fact we hired an experienced labor attorney against us. Amazing. None of this was pleasant; tensions grew. Cooper, White and Cooper held no seminars and I can recall no further advice being offered as to how we could convince staff that a union was not right.

There were two NLRB sanctioned debates and members of the staff who were usually quiet and unassuming, spoke eloquently and from the heart about why unionization was necessary. I was amazed to learn who the leaders of the movement were. Most of them had over ten years at the Exploratorium

and I began to see unionization was not about wages, or even fundamentally about the fear the layoff had engendered, rather it was about power over the place they had helped to create and still wanted to manage. And it was about respect and trust. Management did not do well in the debates.

Exploratorium staff who opposed the union struggled for an alternative and on November 18, 1991 Ron Hipschman and Pat Murphy issued an 11 page memo proposing a staff association based upon a similar employee group at the California Academy of Sciences--a near-by natural history museum. Members of the California Academy of Sciences Staff Association came and described their association in a well-attended meeting held shortly after the memo was issued. It became clear that the California Academy of Sciences Staff Association was working well indeed and it had one absolutely essential feature a union would lack--it was all inclusive. It would not separate management and the staff. Such an association produced a contract that was binding on the executive director. And finally the Association secured one seat on the board of directors, so staff was directly represented at all meetings. Essentially such a staff association amounts to an all inclusive, self managed union, with a legally binding labor contract, board representation and no union dues. Union organizers opposed this idea--from their point of view a very dangerous idea--saying it came too late and would be subject to manipulation by management. At least one proponent of the staff association was accused of being a pawn of management--which was definitely not true, since management saw the whole business as skirting on unfair labor practices and sanctioned none of it. An opportunity was missed with the staff association. The union won the election overwhelmingly. All that remained was the contract.

Everyone agreed that contract negotiations took too long. Initial talks started in May and the group really got down to business by July, 1992. Gregory Lim, the union's lead negotiator, had immediate praise for members of the Exploratorium's council of stewards and he emphasized their patience. They worked toward an agreement which provided unusual flexibility and which, to the degree possible, maintained the Exploratorium's creativity. I believe everyone was concerned with the Exploratorium's well being, but management seemed less sure of itself in the negotiations. Sherry Rodgers, director of operations and human resources at the Exploratorium, characterized negotiations as immediately very adversarial and very confrontational; it was her first union negotiation.

Eventually both parties wore thin, toward the end of the negotiations one Exploratorium steward described the negotiations as "extremely frustrating--incapacitating." To prod the Exploratorium forward in negotiations the Exploratorium had a "sick-out" and conducted informational leafleting. Strike sanction was also secured from local unions. And although absolutely no one wanted a strike, people began to talk of the possibility. Late in negotiations Rob Semper assumed negotiations for management and began to move the talks forward. Gregory Lim credits Rob Semper with working honestly to a "meeting of the minds" that resulted in an agreement after a 30 hour negotiating session on March 1, 1993. The Exploratorium had a contract.

Two individuals I spoke with about unionization expressed the opinion that all organizations, once they reached a certain size, benefit from unionization. Not surprisingly these views came from a union official and one particularly thoughtful union organizer at the Exploratorium. Their reasons were different. Joann Jung believed that no matter how benevolent management might be, it could change and once it changed workers would eventually be denied the working conditions and benefits which they

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deserved. She also felt "the issues are always there" and a union contract addresses and resolves those issues effectively. The Exploratorium organizer spoke more philosophically of democracy:

“As a general principal I believe in some sort of genuine democratic control by workers, over many of the essential, particularly economic, aspects of work...”

And although Delacôte would have preferred a staff association, he viewed unionization as part and parcel of the normal development of the Exploratorium. Speaking of unionization, he said: “ again, I don't think it is a dramatic evolution, oh no, not at all.”

While democratic management is best, my own belief about unionization, both its desirability and inevitability, is different.

Fundamentally, the union divides the staff between the bargaining unit and management. Union supporters point out that this division arises from labor law provisions, but the fact the law mandates the division does nothing to alter the nature of the division itself. No amount of arguing can obscure the fact the union contract applies only to the bargaining unit, it only protects and represents a percentage of those who work at the Exploratorium. Having split the parties, the union leaves one third of the employees without whatever assistance the union can afford. Many staff expressed sorrow that the union was necessary, thus tacitly, or even explicitly, acknowledging the rift unionization would create.

The fact a third party--the union itself--oversees discussions between these two groups works to define the relationship further. It is a tripartite relationship that easily inclines all parties toward competitive rather than collaborative negotiation; clearly this was the nature of the Exploratorium's contract negotiations, at least until the final stages.

In unionization lies the risk that the Exploratorium's creativity, spontaneity and even efficiency will suffer. Many of the clichés about union shops have some grounding in reality. For example, seniority is probably not be best way to rank and judge employees and while the union exists to protect workers, at times workers may take advantage of this. With the union in place now, staff, management and the union itself must guard against such things.

The union has its own agenda too, it exacts dues from the workers and creates a closed shop. While sitting in SEIU's large, but scruffy offices you do not have the impression that SEIU 790A is looking out for its own interests. The brightly colored mural behind me--created in a Diego Rivera fashion--bespoke of working people's battles. Both union officials I spoke to impressed me with their quiet, sincere dedication to their cause. At the same time, these outsiders were installing an artificial structure on the place that so many others and I had fashioned. The Exploratorium is still relatively small with perhaps 150 full-time equivalents employed. Did we really need their help? How had we abused our workers so?

Wages and benefits at the Exploratorium remain very good and Joann Jung agreed with me when I mentioned this fact. All these benefits, including six weeks paid vacation for long tenured employees, were initiated long before unionizing efforts began. The union's traditional role as guardian of abused workers didn't match the facts. There was no corporate greed at the expense of the workers. Precious few at the Exploratorium could be thought of as ill-paid or economically abused.

The Exploratorium's union drive was about respect, trust and power. Management and staff failed to foster respect and trust. And management failed to create channels of communication which would provide adequate influence and power to employees, many of whom simply loved the institution. I cannot say if the staff expected too much, but only that their need for involvement clearly matched their dedication.

Management, eventually lead by Delacôte, desired a formal organizational structure. In crafting this structure, management failed to accommodate the needs of the Exploratorium's staff. Before unionization certain key managers, often newly hired, expressed views such as "we can't go on like this" or "we are good at creating, but not managing." My reply, on one occasion, was that the Exploratorium had become world famous and immensely successful by being different--not by taking the common route. The new managers had little sense for what had made the place great. The familial structure had worked under Oppenheimer and Rubin's administration had begun a transition to a management structure more suitable for the maturing Exploratorium. A solution which would unify rather than divide staff, would have been the proper way to build on the Exploratorium's tradition.

### **What Can We Learn from the Unionization of the Exploratorium**

My opinions and observations in this section are just that. In learning from the Exploratorium's experience assign no blame; it does no good.

Management is not science -- not at all near a science. At times I wonder if it is even a discipline. (Read Neil Postman's "Technopoly" for a different viewpoint on the social sciences.) What we learn, and think we understand, may not apply to a different situation. We can learn from a novel, or a story, or from careful observation of the facts around us, as well as from a textbook. With management this may be the better route, since so many trendy management theories come and go. The Wall Street Journal acknowledged this in a front page story that included the header "The Best Laid Plans: Trendy Management Schemes Very Often Fail; Still Firms Keep Trying Them Out."<sup>4</sup> Plus personalities figure into management, which makes management all the more complex. Nevertheless some general concepts are clear. Management without leadership corresponds to power without guidance. And leadership without wisdom and vision, takes us to the wrong place.

First we can learn that unions may arise in relatively small and highly creative organizations. Who would have expected the Exploratorium's staff to organize? No longer think of unions as appropriate to the manufacturing sector only. There are a number of reasons for this;

1. Service industries are where the workers are and unions know this. According to Joann Jung, unions are actively moving into the service sector: including non-profits.
2. As the Exploratorium shows so well, not all union drives are about bread and butter issues. Simply because an organization pays well is no guarantee that it satisfies all of the essential needs of its workers. Indeed once primary needs are satisfied, secondary needs become important.

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<sup>4</sup> Bleakley, Fred R. [The Best Laid Plans](#) The Wall Street Journal, Western Edition Vol. CXXIX No.3 July 6, 1993 pgs A1, A6

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3. Small, highly creative institutions contain a high percentage of employees who are capable of leading a union drive or carrying it forward. It only takes one person to suggest the idea.

Perception can serve as reality. Delacôte noted that much of the Exploratorium staff's fear was unjustified by the facts. While this point can be argued, the fear was real, justified or not. And it served as a real motivating factor in unionization. Feeding this fear in any way, such as the staff meeting mentioned earlier, was a clear mistake. Ironically, because the fear exists, it takes five positive comments to mitigate one negative comment. For reasons of survival, people who fear are selective in their perception of the facts. Although Oppenheimer allowed staff to have substantial power, he also created the illusion that they had more influence than they actually did. In this he used their perceptions to his own ends. Issues of higher morality aside, at times it worked.

Management's attempts to "move on" or "put the situation in its best light" failed miserably after the layoffs. While we were moving on, the staff was organizing. Glossing over the facts and ignoring past traditions didn't work. Several staff, years after the fact, could describe in fair detail the going away party for the three accounting staff who resigned. In interviews I could taste the bitterness they felt when management suggested at the party that the departing employees were "going back to school." Such memories are like the fear mentioned above, it doesn't matter if they are correct or not, they are real for those who carry them. Address the facts and deal with the facts--nothing else will do. Recognize and attempt to honestly resolve important issues first and then move on.

If you are going to move on, it helps to have means and something to move on to. Both financial pressures and organizational turmoil, coupled with unclear directions for the future, made it nearly impossible for many staff to find new pleasure in their work. Under these situations "moving on" really doesn't work. Due to lack of funds, some simply didn't have much work. For example, the video program--an important element of The Center for Media and Communications--was limping along with little funding. Few mission oriented employees at the Exploratorium enjoyed the expansion of the museum's marketing efforts, notwithstanding the fact they sometimes understood the need. So marketing, which was expanding, was not usually a place the mission oriented people would gravitate. Moreover, while many creative staff expressed pleasure with Delacôte's new general topic of cognition; they found little indication from management as to how to exhibit this topic. Cognition is an internal mental process that does not fit nicely into the Exploratorium's principal exhibition modality: interactive table-top exhibits. Compare this to Oppenheimer who occasionally employed the following highly effective technique to lead a new exhibit program--he would build such a junky prototype exhibit, that skilled staff would rebuild the thing so that it really worked.

Oppenheimer wrote: "In talking about exhibit design, I want to avoid a propensity that frequently plagues discussions about teaching, namely telling people how to teach without any reference to what they are teaching."<sup>5</sup> The underlying principal that Oppenheimer employs in this quote applies to managing as well as teaching. Abandon the myth of generic managers, at least for small or medium sized organizations. While professionalism, new ideas and new input are vital, it helps immensely to know a

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<sup>5</sup>Oppenheimer, Frank *Exhibit Conception and Design*, as excerpted from a speech presented at a joint ASTC/Cimuset meeting in Monterey, Mexico, 1980, reprinted in *Working Prototypes*, The Exploratorium, San Francisco, 1986

great deal about the work of those you manage. I agree with Admiral Rickover, who in a speech at the Columbia School of Engineering stated:

"Many who teach management in our universities do their students and society a disservice. By focusing on the techniques of 'modern management' they promote the idea that by mastering a few simple principles of how to handle people and situations one can become a universal manager: capable of running any job without having to know much about the work being managed."

In an attempt to reinvigorate management we hired people lacking experience in non-profit educational settings. Moreover, due to staff turnover, organizational turmoil and a very weak tradition of internal employee development, there were never effective mentors for these new hires. Understanding their situation and adapting were very real problems for these new hires.

Attend to the communication function and allow for genuine input. The Exploratorium's democratic traditions made providing staff a measure of influence essential. In describing the difficulties of communications Exploratorium staff often refer to a committee that was initially called The Policy Committee. This committee consisted of members elected by the staff as well as members appointed by the director. It was supposed to provide staff input on important issues. Management had neither the time, nor later on the inclination, to make this committee work as intended. Eventually, almost no staff chose to run for positions on the Policy Committee. Changes in the name of the committee reflected its reduced role: The Policy Committee became The Policy Advisory Committee. In the end, the very existence of the committee served as a constant reminder that staff's power was declining. If management fails to share power, the staff might take what power it can.

In meeting after meeting, management admonished its members to inform staff of its decisions. The formulas went something like this:

1. Best was to take input before the decision was made and then to act on that input.
2. Second best was to take input and then do otherwise, but with clear indications staff have been heard.
3. Third best was to take action and explain to the staff after the fact.
4. Unacceptable was to say nothing.

All of this is good, but what usually went unsaid is, when it really matters, the decision must be correct. We made some wrong decisions and we compounded this by not recognizing them and correcting them. Once staff decides a decision is both important and wrong, you either have to convince them that you did the right thing or you must accept that you did not. To do otherwise gives the staff little security that you will decide correctly, when it really matters, in the future. They will no longer trust you to exercise your power well.

In developing the institution, foster formal and informal staff development. Staff members at the Exploratorium often had opportunities, but they rarely had mentors or more conventional training. While new people bring new ideas, talent and energies, long-tenured employees will be sensitive to the traditions of their organization and capable of helping the new people fit in. If hiring from without, seek

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employees who understand non-profits and mission oriented organizations. The business world is different and few truly understand both worlds.

Finally, if staff seems to need a voice, if current systems for staff influence are failing, consider a staff association. Although regrettably recent NLRB rulings,<sup>6</sup> outlaw such associations in a union shop, a staff association has several features to recommend it. Both a staff association and a union can produce a contract that constrains management and also defines very clearly the staff's power. There is nothing illusory about such contracts in either case; they are binding on both parties. But the staff association mentioned earlier has advantages over a union. A staff association can:

1. Define itself as a legal entity to negotiate a binding contract.
2. Include all employees except the executive director.
3. Draw no line between management and staff.
4. Introduce no third parties into either contract negotiations or contract administration.
5. Secure representation on the institution's board of directors.
6. Create an elected position, to directly represent the staff in all executive meetings so that the staff is both informed and has a day to day say in the management of the place--at the highest level.
7. Address a much broader set of issues, including issues which would fall completely under management's purview in a union shop.
8. Convene a staff council which would initially negotiate a contract with management and then hold monthly meetings of all the staff to discuss ongoing concerns.
9. Operate within the contract.
10. Represent the staff in binding arbitration, or litigation, with the director should contract terms be violated.
11. Secure a budget from the institution to operate and charge no dues to members.

The advantages are obvious and compelling.

### ***Now that the union is a fact at the Exploratorium, how have things changed?***

Many employees expressed the opinion that the union had little effect on the Exploratorium, that management's actions over the transition years, and Delacôte, had changed the Exploratorium--not the union.

But one thing is clear: the fear is gone. No bargaining unit member I approached had the least compunction about speaking to me. Interestingly enough, this was not the case with management; several managers shied away from comment and one manager spoke to me, but only on the condition of complete anonymity. Managers are aware of the fact they can be disciplined for speaking their views, although most probably simply wanted to forget the whole unionization issue and move on.

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<sup>6</sup> Salwin, Kevin G. [DuPont Is Told It Must Disband Nonunion Panels](#) The Wall Street Journal, Western Edition Vol. CXXVIII No.109 June 7, 1993 pg. A2

People are less engaged at the Exploratorium. Shortly before unionization I was absolutely astonished to hear one newly hired employee describe her job as: "It's just a job, like any other job." Growth, maturation of the staff, employee burnout or even focused job descriptions could all be a cause of such feelings. Yet, I doubt the union or re-structured management will succeed in engendering the very highest levels of commitment from staff. Many staff now feel strictly limited in influence. On the good side, there may be more balance in the employees' lives; those early days of wildly working were a bit self-destructive--exciting as it was.

While it is too early to say if unionization will contribute to the overall happiness of the Exploratorium's employees, there is reason to doubt that this will be the case. A research group, The Center for Value Research (CVR) of Dallas Texas, has conducted studies over the years of unionized and union free organizations. CVR conducted a survey of employee attitudes in 113 companies. The total number of employees polled was 45,498 and legitimate statistical techniques were employed in the study. The results are summarized by the quote below.

"Union leaders have always claimed that joining a union will make employees happier because it will provide them with better pay and benefits, more job security, less favoritism and more consistency. Study data clearly shows that union employees are *not* more satisfied than unionfree employees; they are *less* satisfied. This holds true regardless of age, sex, race, length of service or education."<sup>7</sup>

An immediacy has been lost. Staff now talk of endless budgeting and paperwork. Interdepartmental communications and approvals take time. Some strict work schedules now exist and hours for non-exempt staff are strictly limited. Formal communication channels established in some departments require old friends to communicate through others. Staff meetings are held four times a year instead of four times a month. I am not in a position to attribute such changes solely to the union; much of this may simply be the result of growth. However, at the executive level, the union requires substantial time. Sherry Rodgers, who was responsible for human resources at the Exploratorium, reported that 80 % of her time was consumed by union matters during contract negotiations and that subsequently a great deal of her day remained consumed in union affairs.

On the good side, the Exploratorium continues to adapt and change; it is building an organizational structure that may allow it to undertake substantial work Oppenheimer could never complete. Oppenheimer was interested in creating a new way to educate and he wanted to teach the world what he had learned. In this he succeeded. And to undertake such work Oppenheimer required a particular type of highly flexible, fast-moving organization--the early Exploratorium. The Exploratorium faces new and different challenges now. For example, the physical plant, which Oppenheimer pretty much ignored, remains altogether unsuited to house a major educational institution. A new organizational structure, in part arising from unionization, may well help in undertaking such tasks as the expansion and renovation of the Exploratorium's home: The Palace of Fine Arts.

The union has begun to show potential as a forum for handling all of the various complaints and problems which any active institution encounters; it does represent the staff to management. And this particular union, Service Employees International Union, Local 790A seems particularly sensitive to the

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<sup>7</sup>Hughes, Charles L. [Making Unions Unnecessary](#) Executive Enterprises Publications Co., Inc. , New York, New York, 1990, pg. 4

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Exploratorium's history, traditions and current needs. Moreover, many Exploratorium staff are convinced that the present leaders at SEIU Local 790A operate with an admirable moral sense. In my short interviews with union staff, they seemed to be fine people. This gives me hope, that so much of what I value in the Exploratorium, will survive and prosper.

One staff member asked me not to write this article. Hopefully he errs in worrying that the tone of this chapter is wrong or that it will hurt the Exploratorium. Although I could tell the story of the union drive, he argued, no ending to this story exists and it is too soon to discuss the effect of the union on the Exploratorium. In this I agree. But what really resonated in me, as he spoke, were the words below. They are his words, but I take them as mine to end this chapter.

"It's a place that has had a huge impact on my life personally...and you know, I love the place and I care deeply about it and it's still very important to me. To me it still has a tremendous amount of its original spirit... the reason I am sitting here doing this is because I care about the place."

*Retyped from the author's final draft to roughly correspond to the published version: please excuse any errors reintroduced in transcription. July 17, 1997*

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