

The 1989 Earthquake

October 17 1989, a Tuesday

I was working with Brian that morning on a house in the Orinda hills and we got in a fierce row, probably over something insignificant, but bad enough that I left the work site early, storming off to BART on foot by noon. Unusual for me, and not a good start to the day. I usually work until about 3:30, then off to the Academy. This time I arrived a few hours early, determined to paint my anger away. So far so good.

Painting away on my "*Future Look At The Past*" painting, I thought was developing interestingly. [written about in with the series posted here :

<https://dean-gustafson.com/artwork-essays/Gravitortional%20Equanimetry%20+%202%20.pdf>]

By around 4:30 I hear that familiar sound from behind of my fellow Academy student friend Mike DeMeyer's heavy boots clomping in slow-mo, like a Frankenstein monster. Ha, it's time for ale on the roof! A short lived tradition we started on nice weather days, and that was a perfectly balmy Bay area October day. So we grab a couple of Anchor Porters from the store next door, and settled on the rooftop on the chairs conveniently there by 5pm, ales open and in hand, involved with our customary good conversation style.

5:04pm on the roof of the Academy of Art, downtown San Francisco

Then the building suddenly shook, we stood up but couldn't stand straight [and barely had a chance to the ales yet] we were yelping like coyotes while the shaking downtown was noisy unlike anything I've ever heard. Sheer chaos. I saw the adjacent buildings buckling against this one, spitting dust, as everything swayed with motion. It seemed to go on for an awful long time [15 seconds I later read] When it stopped we had no idea what the extent was below, but the sound of every building alarm downtown was ringing! I didn't yet know if this was a big earthquake or localized temblor. Mike descended while I decided to linger up there for another 10 minutes, and was moved somehow by my artist instinct to complete the labyrinth maze of accumulated rooftop trash, rapidly, before descending to clean my brushes and be evacuated from the ringing building. Ach, I thought, there goes my progress for the evening.

Sidewalk gathering, people in shock

Unforgettable hours followed; most everyone who was inside gathered on the

sidewalk out front. Those who were inside reported traumatized experiences, crawling under tables with things falling all around. Faculty and students alike. A party formed with faculty and students on the sidewalk with 25 cent beers from the **White Horse** pub. (no power, no refrigeration = need for clearance sales) while every downtown alarm was continuously ringing, that week I had the big recent painting on display in the one of the front Academy windows where we congregated for the few hours following. I see Samantha from Australia there. An adorable sweetheart of a young lady who I had a crush on — I just didn't realize it yet. I asked her if she wants to go up on the roof before the building is closed, but too late. (rather forward of me to ask)

The skies darkened as a few dozen of us are taking advantage of the cheapest beer prices ever in our lifetime! a sidewalk street party formed, swapping our earthquake accounts. *"Where were you when it hit?"* etc. Meanwhile I found myself gravitating towards Samantha, holding hands from behind as we spoke to others. Magnetized without thinking about it. Then she turns to me saying she has to go, back to her apartment on Potrero Hill and I can join if I want. She was going with teacher Jack Scott and more students. Suddenly leaning towards each other, we're kissing passionately for a few minutes! Wow, I'm totally immersed in this attraction very realized! She then says *"I've been waiting for that for a long time."* followed by *"haven't you too?"*

I'm backing off in a stagger, tipsy, but I couldn't seem to respond, shell-shocked? She asked again more forcefully *"well, you too??"*

Silent, I couldn't seem to speak! I just kiss her more, then departure time. She seems a bit annoyed by my lack of response. Then they depart. That was it, but what an Earth shattering time, when my world *really* did spin!

Bad news arrives

A few hours and too many beers, sitting on the sidewalk with a few remaining students, with the cute, fun Carrie R, and her quiet bf, and a few students, singing Beatles songs, buzzed on ales and the excitement of this weird earthquake experience with power outage and alarm systems and sirens blazing for hours. By around 9:30 the bad news of deaths and damage that happened across town and Oakland rolled in our circles. The party was over and now dread sombered everyone. Time to get home.

Dark skies bike ride, to the Mission flat

Now to ride my bicycle home in darkness as it was a citywide power outage. I

bicycled to the Mission with no city lights and no bike light (I wasn't being bright back then, stupidly). Firemen on the road warning me to be careful. Very surreal. The stars were countryside quality, the Milky Way visible in downtown San Francisco only that night. Such a unique experience. It's too bad I was buzzed from too many inexpensive ales. The experience would have been richer by far sober. The waning recently full moon stood out above the darkened streets with no lights as I arrived to my flat on 25th & Bryant, neighbors were out front on their stoops. I enter the dark apartment, stumbling, crossing over fallen artworks. Roommates Jim and Joe were not there. I find a flashlight and candles to see fallen books, dishes, drumset, broken plaster, setting me to clean up work. The phone line was dead. Then suddenly the power went on! Looking out the window, it appeared to be only this block.

Damages

I see more damage, the drumset punctured some paintings. there were more dishes destroyed in the pantry. It would have been horrific to have been inside as the temblor shook! I was luckily howling and whooping it up back on the Academy rooftop, safely, since nothing from the taller buildings overhead fell on us. I thought of Samantha and that interlude. My shy nature made any choice a negative, especially after I seemed disappointing to her. Anyway I turned my stereo on, unharmed! I had a **Yardbirds** cassette in, so I crank it up and clean the messes. It seemed that the other flats in the building were vacant that night. I finally crashed late wondering if roommates are okay.

The aftermath

Early the following morning, Jim arrives! Whew, he's okay! Staying overnight in the Marina district with friends Tim and Kristy Nelson, after experiencing the shake at SF State when picking up Kristy for a get together. But where is Joe? Not sure when the phone lines opened, but we found out he's stranded in the east bay after work, safely at a friends place I think?

Meanwhile, Jim and I discovered the hallway carpet is soaked, and the people below us thought we were flooding their apartment! It was the flat above. The water heater tipped on its side and dripping! So before the landlords crew could arrive, we help the upstairs neighbor (who was a woman from Central America), to prop it back up.

Next we find out the unused chimney crumbled apart, sending bricks over the

playgrounds of the neighbor kids, and the roof next door! So Jim and I (stupidly but helpful) climbed up to move enormous clay chimney pipes out of harms way so they don't tumble off and down causing more damage. Bricks were piled on the neighbors roof. They were worried it might collapse their roof. Volunteering, not our responsibility to finish cleanup, that was the landlords. We didn't spend much time up there, but did appreciate the vantage points, there was a unique calm over the city from up there. Relatively quiet. Eventually the landlord crew show up and gets to work.

I don't remember when, but someone was driving to the east bay after the bay bridge opened up. This took some days. I got a ride, I think with Jim in the back of a flatbed truck. Or possibly Brian took a long way around on a separate bridge in a rental truck to haul demolition debris?

Some of that week was a strange fearful blur. The quake caused such apprehensive trauma, especially regarding after shocks, that jolt suddenly in a short bursts.

Strangers stopping strangers

The news of damage was disturbing. Some dead from falling bricks on **Townsend Street, South of Market**. The news warning of objects up above ready to fall at any given time made it frightening to go out. The biggest tragedy hit **Oakland** when the **Cypress freeway bridge** collapsed, killing nearly 70 people, and injured more. Buildings in the Marina collapsed and some on fire. For that week of citywide discombobulation, strangers were friendly to each other, asking each other "*where were you?*", everywhere, in stores, on the street, bus,.. Bay area residents bonded unlike anything I'd ever seen.

What a strange week that was.

Family was okay! Not sure if Contra Costa County had much damage? They certainly felt it!

The Academy was shut down for a week, and it was fortunate that the building inspectors didn't declare it legally off limits. Like several other structures.

Back to life as usual, but unusual

Returning to school, my displayed painting in the window was still up, getting nearly another week, but not lit. I had to take it down anyway for the next exhibitor. Samantha and I passively, shyly avoided each other.

The first day back, a gallery owner wandered in asking those of us around if we wanted to make some instant cash for moving artworks and books, office supplies

etc out of his gallery which had to be evacuated by the end of that day! Sure! A few of us dropped everything to do this. Smart move. We were young, fit, and importantly had respect for art. We made (I think?) around \$200 apiece for around 4 hours of labor. A fine deal for us "starving art students"! This was Don Soker owner of **Don Soker Gallery**, it was just south of Market Street on Howard. He is still active, a nice guy, and he moved the gallery to the Mission around 10 years ago.

Everyone had earthquake stories. It was unavoidable. Mostly of fearful experiences, but not me; rooftop howling was a fun (if naively ignorant) activity! Specifically, Carrie Galbraith reported walking around the city with other Cacophony Society members, like **Sebastian Melmoth, Spaulding** and **Lance**. Reports of completely quiet streets in usually busy North Beach, walking in the center of Columbus & Broadway to no traffic is unheard of! While moonlight was the only light. I think they enjoyed lying down in the intersection, a very Cacophony Society activity! Now that sounds like the best way to appreciate that ultra-rare setting, unique to that night exclusively. During that week, they climbed to the top of the first **Bay Bridge** tower while closed for repairs! I remember Carrie's sketch from up there, a quiet bridge with *zero* traffic. I was envious. [2 years later, J. Spaulding guided a few of us up there!]

-Oh by the way, I took a pint glass from the sidewalk party on Sutter Street, that was my earthquake souvenir, lasting several years.

Dean Gustafson, June 2024

An excerpt from my late 1989 memoir:

https://dean-gustafson.com/autobiographical/1989-Part_Two.pdf