

# REFLECTIONS

THE GRASSHOPPER WAS RIGHT



DAN MABBUTT / MARCH 2023

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## PREAMBLE – MY LIFE AS A GAME OF CHANCE

My birthday was earlier this week. Or, at least, what I *now* assume is my birthday. My life has taught me to not be certain of anything.

For the first seventy-odd years of my life, I thought my birthday was a different day. I had a birth certificate, with my baby footprint in the corner, that told me what my birthday was, and I believed it. Not only me, but various official organizations like the United States State Department and the United States Army believed it. The State Department issued me a passport on the strength of that piece of paper. I drove through East Germany during the Cold War with that passport. I was drafted into the Army.

But when the red State of Utah decided that immigrants from Mexico were passing themselves off as United States citizens because it was too easy to obtain a driver's license, the hammer came down. When I renewed my driver's license a few years ago, they told me, "You have to have proof of citizenship acceptable to Utah!" So, I drove forty miles to retrieve my piece of paper. Then they told me, "That's not acceptable. Get a better one from Utah!" So, I filed an application with the state and paid them fifty dollars to process it. And waited for three weeks. When an impressive document, with a gold seal in the corner instead of my baby footprint, finally arrived, *it had the wrong birthday on it!* This touched off several days of back-and-forth phone calls while I worked my way up the Utah State bureaucracy until I was talking to the head of the department.

"I have an official birth certificate issued by the hospital with my baby footprint in the corner!"

"I've seen your official birth certificate. I'm not impressed. We have records you've never seen."

"Like what?"

"How about a blood test taken the day before the day that you claim is your birthday?"

"Then what is this birth certificate that I've been using for seventy-odd years?"

"It's a souvenir that the hospital gave to your mother. She filled it out with the wrong date."

"Oh. ... Now that you mention it, it does look like her handwriting."

My mother was still alive then. I asked her why she put the wrong date on my "official" birth certificate.

"I don't remember. You have to understand. I wasn't thinking too clearly at the time."

Some weeks after that, my wife and I were talking about this unusual turn of events.

"Wasn't your draft lottery number based on your birthday?"

The realization that I was assigned the wrong draft lottery number hit me like falling tree. Once I realized that most of my life had turned on that one mistake, I looked up the draft lottery for the year I became eligible. The correct date would have put me safely far down the list and I never would have been drafted.

I still have the number that they gave me branded into my brain. In those dark days, when you met someone you hadn't seen in a while, the first thing that you talked about was your draft lottery number.

“What’s your number?”

“122. How about you?”

That number I was assigned was way too low to stay out of the draft. They were going to get me.

I tried hard to stay out of the Army during the Vietnam War. I believed then, and I still believe now, that the United States was on the wrong side in that horrible war. I spent six years getting a BS degree, in part to stretch out my student deferment as much as I could. On several occasions, my local draft board wrote a letter to me essentially asking how my education was coming along. I wrote back, pointing out that my grades were good and that I would be able to graduate soon. I enclosed transcripts to prove it. You have to change your major study area a lot to do that for six years. Finally, “Mother” McKinnon (my affectionate name for the person at the Carbon County draft board who had that discouraging job) sent me a letter that said, “We’re on to you sonny! Report for duty or the next visit you will receive will be a federal marshal.”

I always told the truth to the draft board. I was able to graduate in one more quarter. I had one more delaying tactic that I could use, but I knew it would be my last one. My friendly, neighborhood Army recruiting office had the power to give me the one quarter I needed -- if I signed up then and there.

On the day after graduation with a newly minted engineering degree, I flew to Fort Ord, California to start Basic Training in the United States Army.

Now, I wonder what my life would have been like. *“For want of a nail ....”*

## **DETERMINISM VERSUS FREE WILL**

Determinism is a philosophical view where all events are determined completely by previously existing causes. Most religions completely reject this view. They preach that we control our own lives through human free will because, well, moral responsibility and the need for religion would disappear without it. Free will advocates sneer at determinism by calling it the “butterfly effect”. If “hard determinism” is correct, then a tiny change, like the flap of a butterfly's wings, could lead to enormous changes, like a tornado somewhere.

I don’t pretend to know the answer. At this stage in life, the grounding philosophical principle I have the most confidence in is, “I Don’t Know!” What is outside the relativity light cone that limits what we can know about the universe? “I Don’t Know!” Can God create a mass so large that God cannot move it? “I Don’t Know!” What happens after I die? “I Don’t Know!”

I don’t *know*, but I suspect a lot of things. One of the things I strongly suspect is that most of my life has been a result of blind, meaningless chance, starting with my existence. Why was I born in this time and in this place where the bounty of the Earth could be showered on me out of any reasonable proportion? You might as well ask, “Why did the Chicxulub meteor wipe out the dinosaurs?” Blind, meaningless chance makes more sense to me than anything else. Maybe the Hindu religion is correct, and we all come back to life as something else. If it is, I want to be one of my wife’s cats.



## WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH ROCKS?

After I retired, I moved from Salt Lake City to Springdale, and accomplished a few “bucket list” goals like becoming a programmer again (rather than a manager – a job that is mostly sand in the gears of progress) and writing a few books. I also inherited my dad’s life work: An enormous collection of some of the best rocks in the West.

Let me explain *why* I still have these rocks. I think it explains a *lot* about the stuff you see at Ebay, Etsy, and Amazon. Tell me if you think I’m wrong.

My dad might not have been the best rockhound in Utah during those the glory days of rockhounding in the previous century, but I’ll bet he was a good friend of whoever was. So, growing up, I got to meet a lot of other rockhounds as my dad traveled around. They all had sizable rock collections in their back yard too. And someone like me was in line to inherit those rock piles.



Natural colored BARITE AGATE beads  
from Utah

**\$19.00**

### **Typical Barite Bead Ad**

The question always comes up, “Whatever happened to old So-and-so’s rocks?” The answer often is, “Oh! His kids sold the whole pile. None of them really wanted them or knew what to do with them and somebody came around and offered them a good price for the whole pile.”

There have been a number of cases where there has been a surge of specific types of rocks on Ebay. For example, take Utah agatized barite. I’ve got a pretty good supply of it, but when I do a search to see what other people think it’s worth, I seldom see any chunks of native rock for sale. What I *do* see is barite beads. They’re not quite as plentiful as they were a year ago, but they are still about the only way you can find Utah agatized barite for sale.

And they’re offered by a lot of different sellers. The same is true of Tempskya fern. You can buy lots of beads, but little else. That also happened a little bit with Utah red horn coral. If pictures don’t lie, the beads are pretty good stuff and priced reasonably too.



Tempskya Fern Tree  
Utah Fossil Wood BEADS

**\$37.00**

### **Typical Tempskya Bead Ad**

So, how did that happen? Put two and two together. You can figure it out. The difference with me is that I made this decision early on ... I’m *not* going to sell my dad’s life work to some broker who will ship them to a third world bead factory. It wasn’t easy to get them all down to my home in Springdale, but I did it.

What I didn’t do was answer the question, “What do I do now?” – especially since I have nothing but free time. As I have protested many times, I’m *not* a great rockhound. That was my dad.

I like to think, and write, about history, sociology, politics, science. And I have discovered that just having a dialog with people about whatever they think about is fascinating. But the average Internet forum is a wasteland. It’s like driving to the Grand Canyon, getting out of your car for five minutes, and then saying, “Yup! Seen it. How far is Las Vegas?” I want much more than that.

Enter the “Mission Statement” of KinesavaROCKS: “I’m not really in business. I’m just having fun with my dad’s rocks.” If I was really in business, I’d still be on Etsy selling rocks for much higher prices.