

The Goldman Years: Former Ithaca Activist Isn't Over the Hill, He's on the Other Side of It

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 16 April 2015 14:07 - Last Updated Saturday, 18 April 2015 13:58



under the streetlamp

my shadow hurries ahead —

I'd rather linger

— Jack Goldman, activist, "bookie", poet, humorist

All the Life That's Fit for Print: Jack Goldman Came and Stayed and Ithaca's All the Better for It

ITHACA, NY – Back in the day, as the Baby Boomer euphemism goes, Jack Goldman was a force for American radical activism and education reform right here in his adopted home of

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Ithaca, NY. Goldman, founder and operator of The Bookery I, now finds personal fulfillment in the pleasures of a day's trade, buying and selling rare and antiquarian books, writing off-beat haikus, and laughing at life's often-absurd conditions.

Opened in 1975, The Bookery is a fixture of the DeWitt Mall, a downtown Ithaca landmark of dark red brick. Wild grape vines muscle up from the foundation, scaling the exterior and obscuring remnants from an era past but not forgotten: atomic-yellow fallout shelter signs, assigned boys and girls entrances.

Down the stairs of the boys' side entrance, past Moosewood and into the hallway bazaar, a ukulele lilts from Ithaca Guitar Works. The Cat's Pajama's, a children's store, brightens the corridors with countless colorful promos and tie-dyes and one side; on the other, you might find Joanne Reuning sitting at loom outside her store, or hear the melodious whistling of Adam Perl, Ithaca's crossword puzzle wizard and proprietor of Pastimes Antiques. During breakfast and lunch hours, one is led by the nose toward the DeWitt Cafe, a popular restaurant that hums with activity during rush hours. Just shy of this open space with its tropical aquarium motif (Goldfish is not on the menu), are the hushed and welcoming confines of The Bookery where the ever-modest Jack Goldman wonders exactly why he is being interviewed for a profile. This is not a false humility; Goldman is a man of the moment, and for many years, those moments are devoted to the vagaries of a modern bibliognost.

Goldman originally opened this shop across the hall in what was the DeWitt High School bank vault. Back then, the door was opened by combination lock. That was 1975, when Ithaca boasted of having more bookstores per capita of any similar-sized municipality. The vault proved to be too tight a space and soon Goldman expanded his enterprise and moved it across the corridor, where it continues to thrive today, some four decades later.

According to the Bookery's website: "The store is unique in that it holds a higher percentage of scholarly and rare books than most other bookstores." The collection boasts an impressive 35,000 books on location and online covering a broad range of arts and sciences, humanities, law and social sciences. Goldman attributes the collection's variety and complexity to his numerous local ties, a procession of loyal customers stretching from last century into this, as well as his "long, happy residency in Ithaca."

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my friend recommends

meditation and breathing –

I'll think about it

A native Californian, Goldman has logged significant time as a globetrotter. Back in 1959, he lived and worked on a socialist kibbutz in Israel, a place where he calibrated his political compass, he says: Its needle has a powerful bias to left of center. Goldman moved to Ithaca in 1966 via Switzerland, and took up graduate studies at Cornell University's vaunted German Literature program.

Shortly after enrolling, his moral compass compelled him to join the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in opposition to the Vietnam War. His commitment to the SDS was comprehensive and within a year, Goldman dropped his Cornell studies; in 1967, he co-founded the Glad Day Press where a cadre of like-minded activists published antiwar literature that was distributed both locally and nationally. Goldman added to his Glad Day duties, launching "Dateline Ithaca," a weekly newsletter dedicated to the subverting the dominant paradigm via topics integral to sustaining the antiwar movement. These missives included discussions and guidelines on picketing, civil disobedience, and even how to get the best out of occupying a government, academic or corporate headquarters. Serving as both writer and editor, the newsletter padded Goldman's FBI dossier for another four years. What to government security agencies appeared as subversive was for Goldman an act of duty to his country – and to his immediate community.

"Dateline Ithaca," Goldman says, "was an effort to create a dialogue between the student movement and the grievances that the people in town had, some of them directly, and others indirectly, connected with the war economy."

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Then "one thing led to another," Goldman states matter-of-factly. His next endeavor was "The Big Blue Bus," something of a literary triage unit on wheels. Glad Day staff members remodeled the interior of a school bus, filling it with shelves of books. They followed a route that wended through the county's impoverished rural fringe, areas that differed little from the Big White Ghetto of Appalachia. Their mobile library anticipated later efforts to encourage literacy among the disenfranchised; Glad Day folks also offered counseling on health and health insurance and savvy use of food stamps.

Goldman decided to drop his Cornell studies and devote himself to what looked like "The Greening of America." He earned an opportunity to wed his vocation and advocations when he became something of a protege to Benjamin Nichols, Cornell professor of electrical and computer engineering – and hard-nosed union activist of the Eugene Debs school. Nichols secured a position for Goldman as assistant director to the university's then-Human Affairs Program, an innovative town/gown education project that would become, after many incarnations, the Lehman Alternative High School on West Hill. (Nichols, a member of the Democratic Socialists Party, later served three terms as Mayor of Ithaca, from 1989 to 1995, losing his bid for a fourth term to a feisty pro-development Democratic wheeler-dealer named Alan Cohen).

Goldman's quest to create a better, if not a great society, led him to undertake one of his more ambitious projects: The Ithaca Neighborhood College.

Around 1970, he set to motion one of his more ambitious projects: With his experience in social services, and after discovering that many bright and capable Ithacans had not finished school for a variety of reasons, he established the Ithaca Neighborhood College. Goldman founded the venue for his non-profit program in the DeWitt High School building after coming to an agreement with then-Ithaca City School District Superintendent Roger Bardwell. Bardwell approved Goldman's access to the building to host night classes. The Ithaca Neighborhood College grew so popular that several teachers—often senior Cornell faculty—were offering 15 different courses, from computers to creative arts.

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stones stacked up like books

along the turbulent gorge

"Ancient History"

Goldman continued to weave his network of intellectual pals and antiwar campaigners. Among the knot was Cornell Catholic priest, writer, and federally-wanted political radical, Dan Berrigan. In 1970, Goldman and friends organized the America is Hard to Find festival, a weekend-long war protest to be held at Barton Hall in mid-April, named after Berrigan's poem of the same title. A highpoint of the festival, he recalls, was rolling Berrigan—who was on the FBI's wanted list—onto the stage via motorcycle to deliver a talk.

As the crowd had been infiltrated by federal agents visibly disguised in hippy garb and patent leather shoes, Berrigan was quickly spotted. A high speed chase ensued that, with the aid of decoys, and a "very good driver," says Goldman, Berrigan was spirited back into the New York City underground, where he eluded arrest for a time and later turned himself over to authorities.

Where is all that righteous, selfless, political vigor in our country now?

According to Goldman, our political lives have become grimmer, and our power structures monolithic. He finds himself struggling with a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in this regard; a feeling that fuels a certain skepticism, to which he attributes his current absence from the political scene.

He says: "The world has become much more complicated. There's a diminished sense of

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community. People are more atomized and individualistic. The propaganda is much, much more sophisticated, almost seamless. I think it is part of the air we breathe.”

Goldman sees the country's political structure as less of a democracy than a soft dictatorship. A sort of panopticon, as he explains, in full control of its people. He also describes how the current lack of economic mobility cements people to their careers and educational pursuits: “In those days, people didn't think anything about dropping out of school, and figuring, ‘I'll pick up two years later and it won't cost me anything.’ And a lot of people did that.” It's not, he says, that people don't join causes now; it's just not as feasible as it once was, and so fewer people are willing to take the risk.

planting a fall bulb

an annual act of faith ...

two bulbs hedge my bet

After ten years of success with The Bookery, Goldman risked a sequel and opened The Bookery II in 1985. The idea had come to him three years earlier as a Cornell librarian's suggestion, who pleaded to Goldman that there were no area bookstores that dealt in foreign language. And thus, The Bookery II began as a foreign language and travel bookstore, and quickly grew to meet national demands. Shortly after, The Corner Bookstore closed, and due to the onslaught of chain stores, Goldman observed that the town needed another “regular bookstore” to replace it. So he did what was unthinkable for him: He began selling new books.

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That racket was a little too cut-and-dried for him, he says.

“You get the books from publishers; they give you a percentage discount,” says Goldman. “If you can’t sell them, you give them back. It was more of a business-business than I had been operating. I liked the informality and the freedom of selecting my own inventory.”

Goldman eventually found a way to operate that appealed to him, tailoring the inventory in a direction he liked. But the arrival of big-box stores like Borders and Barnes & Noble in Ithaca, along with the Internet, took a hefty toll on his business.

“Amazon is the Darth Vader of the book business,” says Goldman says, who closed The Bookery II in 2005. “They destroyed the book business as I understood it. For one thing, they have devalued books in general. They’re cutthroat. Not good for writers; not good for publishers. They’ve trained a whole generation of consumers to expect fast delivery, rock-bottom prices, and no-questions-asked returns. They do this because they don’t need to make a profit on books. They sell everything in the world now, and books have become an incidental part of what they do.”

Goldman barely mentions another one of his successful publishing ventures, The Bookpress, a monthly newspaper that tackled issues no other local publication could explore to any depth: World and local politics, literature and social issues that fostered the kind of conversation and organic intellectualism more common to urban cognoscenti. It also included works of short fiction and poetry composed by up-and-coming writers as well as established scribes. Like his other publishing ventures, The Bookpress existed outside the rarified climes of academia while maintaining a high editorial and intellectual standards. After twelve years of publishing, The Bookpress was quietly laid to rest and its like remains conspicuously absent in 21st Tiny Town.

It's no mystery that The Bookery remains in business despite signs of the Apocalypse, now: Its formula for success is a proprietary and idiosyncratic blend drawn from qualities singular to Ithaca and specific to Goldman's character and steadfast helmsmanship. Key ingredients can be traced to the shop's downtown landmark status; Goldman's abiding connections within the community; "the wonderful people" he works with; the intrinsic appeal of his stock and trade; and, the work itself – that, especially, keeps him going.

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"Gotta have a love for it, else it doesn't make any sense," he says. "You have to maintain a sense of humor as well.

His own sense of humor is inherently corny, he says, composed of puns and wordplay – and freely enjoying other people who get to his funny bones.

"But most of all, you just have to laugh at life's absurdity," he says.

youth speaks the grammar

of present and future tense –

age speaks past perfect

– Matthew K. Schultz, *special correspondent to tinyowntimes.com*

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Editor's note: *This is Matt's first piece in tinytowntimes.com and we are very happy to have him with us. Matt was born in Rome, NY, and is a senior at Ithaca College.*

We thank Irene Zahava's online "Haiku Journal" where we fetched some of Jack's fetching haiku. Additional thanks to Professor Barbara Adams for editorial assistance – and for steering Matt our way.

If anyone wishes to comment on this piece, please post to our Facebook page of the same name: tinytowntimes.com ... We abandoned the comments box on this site thanks to the corrosive and relentless work of spammers. You can't blame everything on The President.

Photo: *Jack Goldman at his seat of business, The Bookery, in the DeWitt Mall, now in its 40th year of business. Credit: tinytowntimes.com*