



Phillips Exeter Academy
Class of 1958 50th Reunion Web Site
May 15-18, 2008
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1958 Peadquacs



Jean-Louis Bourgeois

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Spouse/Companion: Carollee Pelos

Business/Profession: Activist

I protest. This is not my 50th high school reunion. Here's why.

A few years ago I was wearing a gigantic, foam cowboy hat. I was also pulling a child-size carry-on bag festooned with Winnie-the-Pooh characters. A seven-year-old girl asked me: "Do you go to kindergarten?"

"Of course I do," I replied, beaming.

And I still do. They kept me back. They won't let me into first grade.

You know when a Jewish fetus achieves life? When s/he graduates from medical school.

Well, I finally sprang to life at 4:30 pm, November 10, 1977, in a Manhattan bookstore, when I first laid eyes on Carollee Pelos (we married in '84).

Carollee was a brilliant photographer. The Smithsonian produced one of her exhibitions, calling it an "evergreen"; it toured for eight years.

Carollee and I were wonderfully close for nineteen years. Together we enjoyed three activities whose pressures, some say, can break up couples. We traveled extensively — three and a half years on the road in remote Afghanistan, India, and West Africa.

We (she, really) built our house — a solar-powered adobe in remote New Mexico.

And we "built" a book together — Carollee's photos and my text — *Spectacular Vernacular: the Adobe Tradition*, based on research during our travels. It had taken me twenty years to get my B.A. at Harvard, (my class is '62/'78). But revenge is sweet. When the Crimson Monster chose our book as an undergraduate course-book on African culture, I was particularly pleased.

Carollee and I shared work, love, and adventure. She grew my heart — for courage and for love. Eleven years ago my darling died of lymphoma. Before the Russians invaded, we spent two and a half months in Afghanistan, and on the southern edge of the Sahara, we visited Timbuctoo twice. But on her gravestone, Carollee wanted the inscription "She never went to Florida."

Why do I consider Harvard a monster?

Because it's a place of snobs, by snobs, and for snobs. The place is cursed by coteries based on four preoccupations — social standing, wealth, brains, and sports. Members compete within their own group and against members of other groups. What a way to introduce adolescents into adulthood. The place is toxic. Jackie Kennedy said, "When Harvard men say they've graduated from Radcliffe, then we've made it." That's the front of a T-shirt I've designed. The back will say "Radcliffe Man."

Harvard angered me in connection with my mother. It chose her to receive an honorary doctorate for her sculpture. But when at the last minute she couldn't attend Commencement, Harvard yanked her degree.

I was so mad I staged a one-person demonstration in front of the statue of John



Harvard. I carried a large portrait of Mom by the controversial photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. In it, smiling impishly, she displays one of her sculptures, at first censored and later purchased by New York's Museum of Modern Art. Let me just say, if I may, that the sculpture, of a huge penis, gave me the opportunity of giving Harvard the finger.

My Mom has recently given me a new home and eventual museum. It is a tiny historic landmark on New York's Greenwich Village waterfront. It seems the woodframe structure was built "prior to 1767," making it one of oldest buildings in Manhattan, hence probably built by slaves.

I've reduced my life to three basics — helping, playing, looking.

In terms of helping I have been to New Orleans on three Katrina-relief trips. I'm planning a fourth.

Also in terms of helping, I have plans for my new home-and-museum. I intend to collect in large batteries four sources of local energy (wind, solar, water, and a muscle-powered "green gym").

Eventually I'll throw a master switch cutting my "umbilical cord" to municipal power. The structure could then become a model of energy-independence. Its motto could be "Help fight global warming one family at a time." Who would throw the master switch? Al Gore? I plan to spend most of my time in New York.

I'm also trying to help in another way. Washington Square Park is under attack. New York University and New York City's Parks Department want to privatize the park, in part by planning to install a tall, spiked fence with a lockable gate. Who would have the key? The fence would circle the park with a psychological and physical impediment against free access. The planned fence is a major assault on the First Amendment, the public's right to "freedom of speech" and "peaceably to assemble." Two suits have been filed against the Reconstruction. I am preparing a third.



For the last eight years I have had a house in the beautiful, adobe town of Djenné, Mali, West Africa. Djenné's splendor includes its mosque, the greatest monument in Africa. Djenné is the capital of the Bourgou, also known as the Inland Delta of the Niger. The Delta is very unusual — a vast wetland in the desert, home to one billion migratory birds.

Life in the Bourgou has changed me in profound ways.

First, I have been welcomed into an African family — the Maigas — and given an African name: Baber Maiga.

Next, I began work against the devastating Talo Dam. I complained to the U.S. Treasury Department, which helped fund the dam through the African Development Bank. The Treasury delayed the start of the dam's construction for six years. My work earned me a five-foot, brass-adorned ebony staff, a West African emblem of leadership called a "tankara."

For several years, my closest African friend was Bakary Soumano, the National Bard of Mali. Bards are the historians of heroes. Because of my work against the Talo Dam Bakary declared me West Africa's first white epic hero. After Bakary

died, I continued to work with Abdoul Karim Soumano, Bakary son and successor.

I've also tried to help in the U.S. Last year I went down to Atlanta to back the campaign of Cynthia McKinney, a progressive Congresswoman prevented from re-election by computer vote-fraud. Vote-fraud is a major problem I continue to work on, supporting the brilliant work of Daniel Barenblatt. (By the way, Dan and I are having preliminary success in pitching my Mom, now 95, as a potential character on the Simpsons).

Last year, tired of doing absolutely nothing about 9/11, I designed and produced 75 T-shirts. On September 11, I gave them away at Ground Zero. The T-shirts displayed leads toward information that the disaster was a "false flag" attack. On this subject, I suggest you watch "Loose Change" on youtube.

In terms of helping and playing together, in West Africa's Mandingo region, humor has a very different function than most laughter in the West. Here, we assume that humor-- because we claim that it usually expresses hostility — separates people. But in West Africa, humor, always gentle, even affectionate, establishes connection.

How?

Members of families, clans, and tribes enjoy reciprocal, good-natured teasing in the Teasing Cousins (Sanankouya) system. Humor is shared. The jokes ping-pong back and forth. People are like Falstaff, who says "I am not only witty in myself but the cause of wit in others."

The basic joke is: "I play at overcoming you. You play at overcoming me." Variations of the joke are told millions of times a day across West Africa.

Shared laughing is the heart of the Sanankouya. The system democratizes laughter, so that we don't have to split humor into performer and audience. In the Teasing Cousins the two fuse, to the delight of all.

Laughing is Africa's greatest social treasure — the peace-keeping system of Teasing Cousins.

Teasing Cousins humor is the wisest joke in the world, a system by which people "play at war so as not to wage it." The Teasing Cousins system maintains peace, one laugh at a time.

Can Teasing Cousins be exported? In Palestine/Israel, could the system transform

shooting cousins into teasing cousins? It's worth a try.

Finally in terms of playing, here's shrewdness from Calvin and Hobbes: "There is not enough time to do all the nothing we want to do." I've founded the group S.L.O.T.H., standing for Slow, Luscious Opportunities Toward Happiness. The most eligible additional members, recovering workaholics like myself (ha!), just don't seem to have the time or energy to join. My interest in rest springs from a deep delight in the Sabbath.

In terms of looking, last year I remarried, and you know my bride. Hint: we got married on the 4th of July, my birthday.

She's the Statue of Liberty! Libby takes medication to shrink down to human size. We're very happy, but we do have two problems, for which we are seeing relevant therapists. One is Libby's terrible taste in music. She loves Heavy Metal (sorry). The other issue she revealed on our wedding night: under all that drapery, she's a mermaid.

Libby and I have come to an understanding.

I'm looking for a human wife.

When I find one, Libby has agreed we'll remain friends.

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