

CHAPTER TWO - FOUNDATIONS & FORMATIVE YEARS.

Introduction. Each of our journeys began with our unique genetic and cultural inheritance shaped and founded by early years of learning from family, friends, educators and environments. Recalling my early experiences reveals likely connection to later pathways taken and avoided.

Who are the Coes? I have always thought of our mob as “edge people”, avoiding the mainstream in everything, always on the move, active and creative. None of my ancestors, going back generations, worked for government (except during wartime and in the US Peace Corps) or large corporations. My paternal ancestors were not stay-at-homes, migrating across the USA in three generations.



Figure 1. Left: my father, Francis M. Coe, in his native habitat, an orchard, about 1984, age 83 years. Right: I am chatting with one of my king parrot neighbors and walking the dogs at the same age.

My father, **Francis Morse Coe** (1901-1986) was born in Bakersfield CA. His father, Edwin Morse Coe, born in Riverside Iowa, moved with his family to California where he married my grandmother, Julia Potts, who had traveled to southern California from Texas by horse and carriage. Edwin moved the family to the Isle of Pines, on the southern side of Cuba. Julia Potts Coe returned with her children to California. Edwin Morse Coe went on to marry again twice, siring a total of fourteen children and dying at age 96 in Miami Florida in 1962.

My mother, Edith Martin Coe (1896-1975), born in Fairmont NB, came from a traditional family. She once described her father, Melville E. Martin as ‘a short bald man’ and a community leader. Edith was a public health nurse with the University of Nebraska, teaching home hygiene to farm wives. They met while my father was studying for his master’s degree in horticulture. This was not a good match. Edith sought a conservative, predictable family life as the wife of a respected university professor. Francis lived an unsettled life, moved from place to place like his mother, with what I call the Coe restlessness. Edith sought seclusion. Francis was the life of the party, enjoying singing and dancing. Edith was self-conscious and camera shy, so sadly I have no photos of her. She never learned to drive and thus was isolated at home. Politically

conservative, Edith never forgave Francis for voting for President Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal during the great depression. We were fortunate children to have both parents, born in 1896 and 1901, with university education. We took our studies seriously and learned to love learning for its own sake. Both parents were deeply religious, gentle, loving, and respectful to others. I am sure I inherited or learned my deep respect and intuitive empathy from my father. He treated everyone respectfully, whether a simple immigrant gardener or the university president. His empathy gave the appearance of a softhearted do-gooder, as likely to give food to the poor as to provide it for the family table. Dad taught more by example than precept and never missed an opportunity to teach me plant Latin names and their uses. He also taught me mistakes to avoid by experiencing his own failings. Living in poverty early in his life gave him a false sense of economy. He believed cheaper food prices were always better, even when the nutritional value was lower. He would bring home a package of chicken backs that were on sale, even though there was little meat on them. Or he would come from the store with a lug box of grapes on sale because they had fallen off the stems and would spoil before we could consume them. Dad was always late. As a result, I am paranoid about being punctual and I arrive at appointments or airports far earlier than needed. These are small matters compared to the life lessons of doing hard work as its own reward, doing good work whether noticed or not and having the courage to explore novel landscapes, cultures and concepts.

I am one of six children. My siblings were David Martin Coe (1927-2007), Emily Ann Diggles (1928-2022), Phillip Hargrave Coe (1928-2003), Paul Francis Coe (1932-2013), and fraternal twin James Robert Coe (1941-2024). We all lived restless, creative edge lives, moving often. Of the six of us, three had long-term marriages, three were or are artistic, four could be considered religious searchers, and four were avid gardeners.

My early story.

Born in mountain foothills in 1941. My fraternal twin brother James Robert Coe and I were born at the base of the Wasatch Mountains in Logan Utah, USA where Jim and I lived our first four years. I have always had a fondness for foothills and mountain landscapes, and I live in a beautiful foothill landscape today. Father taught in the Horticulture Department at Utah State University, and later I also became a horticulturalist and university professor.

Our siblings were more than nine years older than Jim and me, and my mother was forty-five years old when we were born. We were her second family. My earliest memories are of our shaggy sheep dog "Snubs" and picking strawberries with the family on a brisk morning from one of the University's agricultural test fields. University faculty families prospered during the Great Depression and World War Two, being able to feed themselves from test fields and research livestock. Our hands were working in productive soil from an early age, something I find sustaining to this day.

Southern California 1946. At the end of World War II, my father took a leave of absence from Utah State University to teach at the Berlitz University in France. This program provided vocational education to American soldiers serving in Europe. Francis drove the family from Logan Utah to San Bernardino Southern California in a model A Ford (or other incredibly old car) on mountain roads to leave the family with his mother Julia Potts Coe. My grandmother, 'Ma Jewel' as she was called, loved playing her large piano and singing.

Berlin Germany 1946-1949. After a year, the Berlitz teaching program closed, and Francis transferred to a program in Berlin. In December 1946 my mother, sister Emily and brothers Philip, Paul, James, and I travelled to Berlin Germany. We crossed the US for several days by train. We then took a harrowing fourteen day crossing of the stormy North Atlantic on the USS General Patch, an old, repurposed hospital ship. Jim and I travelled in a boy's ward sleeping in three-level bunk beds with many other boys. I only recall the excitement of adventure despite being a six-year-old sleeping away from my family for the first time and being surrounded by strangers. Our ward was on the main deck. One night a powerful North Atlantic storm blew the cabin door open, and a wave crashed through our ward, washing all the suitcases stowed under the bunks around the room as the ship tilted and swayed widely. Fortunately, I was on a top bunk.

We arrived in Bremerhaven. Taking a train through the Russian Sector of Cold War occupied Germany with windows blacked out, we finally arrived in Berlin, joining our father just before Christmas. We lived in a stately home confiscated by the US Army from its Nazi owner, the local mayor, Herr Trokstorff, on stylish Vogelgesangstraße (Birds Song Street) in the suburb of Zehlendorf West. I had never seen such a large house nor such luxurious carved wood panelling, mantles and stair rails, and large oil paintings. The city was in ruins from firebombing. Streets were halfway blocked by fallen bricks being collected into piles by women bundled against the cold, surrounded by multistorey charred building walls. We soon moved to a more modest home near our English-speaking school for dependents of American service personnel. My sister Emily, then a young adult, returned to the US. My older brothers entered high school. Jim and I entered first grade. During summers, our older brothers took us on adventures boating on Wannsee Lake and exploring burned-out bunkers in Grunewald Forest. We even visited what remained of the famous Berlin Zoo, watching a zookeeper feeding a valuable loaf of bread to a hungry hippo, my first zoo experience. During this time, my father Francis was providing vocational horticultural and basic literacy training for American servicemen stationed in Berlin, helping them prepare for careers after leaving the army.

We stayed in Berlin as a family during the **Berlin Airlift**, 24 June 1948 –12 May 1949. All the city's western sector needs, from coal to food, were transported by air by the US military. We went to Tempelhof Airport to watch the DC3s come in like an aerial conveyor belt, landing directly behind speeding yellow jeeps with large "Follow Me" signs leading to off-loading ramps. Power outages were random and frequent. These

were extremely difficult times for Berlin people, but in our safe, warm, and comfortable home we entertained ourselves in the dark by placing a flashlight behind our fish tank and watching the large projected images of fish moving on the opposite wall.

As a youngster I picked up German language more easily than adults and became my mother's translator. While my skill in German has long vanished, I was able to understand some spoken German during a visit sixty years later. I believe this early encounter with a different language later predisposed me to pick up Spanish and Portuguese more easily as an adult.

My mother met the wife of General Lucius D. Clay. He was post-World War II Military Governor of Germany who organized the Berlin airlift and had his headquarters there. At his wife's invitation Jim and I, dressed in Halloween costumes, went trick-or-treating with mother past the US Army MP gate guards to receive treats from General Clay and his wife at their official residence.

Near the end of our third year with winter approaching my older brother drove us through Checkpoint Charley into the Russian Zone of East Berlin. This was long before the Berlin Wall was built and the border was more relaxed, but it was a daring adventure. We returned with warm new camel hair coats at an exceptionally low price.

Return to USA 1949-1952. In 1949 my mother, brothers and I returned to the US. This return crossing of the Atlantic took only ten days in a more comfortable ship on smoother seas. I was bunked with my brothers Jim, Paul, and Phil. After a two-week quarantine at Ft. Hamilton in New York City, we flew across the US to return to Southern California. This was my first flight; It took three stops as jet airliners had not yet been introduced. Old propeller powered airlines flew at lower, more turbulent altitudes. My brother Jim and I were air sick for the entire time. We eventually settled in rural Newhall, north of Los Angeles on the edge of the Mojave Desert. Francis continued living in Germany, working in the export-import business to make ends meet. These were trying times for our family, as the monthly support checks from Francis became decreasingly frequent. Mother had to apply to charity for support. Brothers Phillip, joined the Army and Paul joined the Navy during the Korean War, sending their paychecks home to support us. Elder brother David moved in with us for a while, adding his oil field worker income. I remember my mother occasionally went without her meal to ensure Jim and I had enough to eat. Once we had potatoes, cooked in a variety of ways, but little else, for four days until father's check arrived.

As an active nine-to-eleven-year-old, life in the desert provided abundant opportunities for outdoor exploration and adventure, often barefoot and wearing nothing but shorts. Summer days often reach 44-50C (114-120 F). Summer mornings I walked bare footed to the local library, lying on the cool linoleum floor in the stacks looking at black and white photos from around the world in National Geographic magazines. I wonder if this was the start of my worldwide travel later in life. At one pm the local swimming pool opened, and I would play and swim there until it closed at 5pm and the day began to

cool. We slept under the stars all summer long, learning the constellations and celebrating meteor displays.

I also became a Boy Scout camping overnight in the desert, digging a deep hole in the sand of a dry streambed which would be half-filled with ground water in the morning. I earned a merit badge by tracking a bobcat up the dry wash for a half mile.

“Imagination is the gift of dyslexia” (Orlando Bloom). While I thrived in nature. I struggled in school. Being raised in a well-educated family with older siblings, I had an advanced vocabulary, understanding of geography, and artistic learnings, but could not spell and was late in learning to read. I dreaded the humiliation of spelling bees! I could later attest to never passing a spelling or math test through high school and community college. While dyslexia was discovered in 1877, it was unknown in any schools I attended during the 1950’s.

During this Newhall period without my father’s presence, my oldest brother David was an important influence, teaching me to use power tools for woodworking, building and flying model airplanes and kites. I recall, at the age of ten years, working all night building a model airplane, looking up in surprise to see the dawn outside. I discovered ‘being in the zone’ or ‘the flow.’ Time became meaningless. David also introduced Jim and me to science fiction. This stimulated my interest in both reading and future thinking.

Dad returns and high school days 1952-1959. When Francis re-joined the family in 1952, Dad, Edith, Jim, and I moved to a trailer park for a year in the eastern suburbs of Los Angeles near the college town of Claremont, with its top-level school system. Here I began seventh grade and soon found I was failing in three subjects. I was bounced between college preparatory classes and remedial classes. My apparent intelligence and vocabulary did not fit classes for slow learners, but my failures in spelling and arithmetic disqualified me from regular classes. I did not fit their prescribed educational boxes. Perhaps this experience set me on a path of non-traditional learning and professional work.

We then purchased a house across the San Bernardino County line in the town of Montclair, and I transferred to Vina Danks Junior High School in the city of Ontario. The contrast to Claremont High School could not have been greater. Here there were youth gangs and insubordinate students who dominated some teachers. In response school discipline was strict. Racist faculty and our school bus driver assumed I was Jewish (although I was not) and singled me out for harsh treatment. In a shop class I received the teacher’s permission to grind down a steel file to make a hunting knife blade. Soon other students were also making knives and throwing them into walls.

Our home was in a rapidly growing “Chicano” (Mexican American) neighborhood. I fit in well enough with my Spanish speaking school mates, treating everyone respectfully and forming friendships with some, but fights between White and Chicano students were a frequent occurrence at school.

In 1955, after one year, Jim and I were able to transfer to the new Upland High School, with new facilities and more motivated faculty. While occasional student fights remained, I became involved in seasonal school athletic programs, especially American football. Teams included both groups, creating personal bonds. I took two years of Latin with a focus on grammar and barely passed. I followed this with two years of Spanish, with a focus on verbal communication. I thrived. Spelling in Spanish is very regular and speaking fluency, within a Spanish speaking student community, was both fun and practical. I did well in geometry, which is visual, but poorly in algebra because I frequently transposed numbers in calculations. I understood the principles but got the wrong answers. Our annual academic achievement tests showed typical dyslexic scores, excellent in subjects like geography and civics and poor in math and spelling. During my four years of high school only one teacher asked me why my scores varied so widely. Dyslexic minds were unknown and thus unsupported. Dyslexic strengths and perfectionism with engineering drawing and art laid foundations for major skills later. I also enjoyed a variety of shop classes in wood and sheet metal working in which I excelled. I was a visual and tactile learner, although these educational classifications were not yet used.

While in junior and senior high school, I helped my father doing commercial garden maintenance and fruit tree pruning on weekends and holidays. For one summer I worked for the Ralph W. Smith Company in Azusa, a large landscape architecture and garden construction firm. My job was weeding and watering their large private nursery and occasionally helping on their construction crew. This experience set me on a career path in the then little-known profession of landscape architecture.

A highlight of this period was a camping visit to Yosemite National Park. The Sierra Nevada mountains are granite country, most visibly expressed in Yosemite and to this day I feel an affinity to granite country, whether in Rio de Janeiro, Hong Kong, Serengeti or here in Australia.

A depressing memory of this period was witnessing the endless orange groves surrounding us gradually dying when irrigation was cut off, and the land eventually converted to housing tracts. Snow-covered Mt Baldy became hidden by smog so thick children were kept indoors during school recess. As I write about this today, the population of Southern California has tripled since my high school days.
