

My brother is twenty years into the grave. He succumbed to pancreatic cancer, dying a slow death by starvation. His demise was almost certainly due to his lifelong addiction to smoking.

In California our families lived close to each other, and Karl, two years younger than I, enjoyed getting together at my house to cook for everyone. One weekend he prepared Crepes Suzette, which everyone loved. He himself wouldn't partake, saying it was enough to know that people took pleasure in his concoctions. Instead of eating, he smoked.

Two years subsequent to Karl's death I was wrapping up graduate studies at University of California at Davis. Needing a summer to write the required thesis, I jumped at the invitation for writer-in-residence at D-Q University, a year-round, two-year residential college for Native Americans. It meant bare-bones accommodations and no remuneration, but I'd have meals and boarding, plus time to write. I would teach one writing course and spend a specified number of hours coaching students in writing skills.

A warning bell should have sounded when I found myself interviewed in the school's elegant but smoke-filled conference room, the walls of which displayed finely-executed Native American paintings and collages. I cringed at the damage to the exquisite art, likely caused by my interviewees: a cigar-puffing Mexican-American president (who spent most of his time on the road, promoting the school and soliciting funds) and his vice-president, a woman of Greek ancestry and chain smoker who, it was rumored, was the head honcho's paramour. Their smoking should have put me on alert, for when I began my assignment, I found that I was expected to confer with students in a portion of the library designated as "recreational" where students were permitted to smoke.

In 1993, EPA regulations on second-hand smoke were once again derailed by cigarette makers' lawsuits designed to keep the regulations off the books. In the absence of EPA directives, some states had taken matters into their own hands, mandating non-smoking hospitals, museums, schools, and government buildings. Where state measures encountered defeat at the voting booths, municipalities instigated their own regulations. The city of Davis had adopted stringent regulations that included segregated work places for smokers, plus a statute against smoking near the entrance of any government building.

I determined I would refuse to teach while students billowed smoke in my direction. Since students also smoked in hallways and classrooms during recess, I asked several faculty to support my stance. To this day I hear the chemistry teacher's "I can live with it." He needed the salary, he said; he had a family to support. But a loosely-organized group of parents encouraged me, who had unsuccessfully rallied against the school's smoking policy. I decided to take D-Q to task, producing a physician's letter that warned of potential effects on my health.

Next thing I knew, the vice president had terminated my contract. The room that held my clothing and computer was padlocked, guarded by a sheriff. I could retrieve my belongings only in his presence, he said, at a pre-approved date and time. Since D-Q lies outside Davis city limits, my Greek nemesis flaunted its laws with impunity.

Earlier I had pondered a poster in the school's lobby that featured the image of an Indian sitting cross-legged at a campfire, his pipe fumes mingling beatifically with the smoke from his fire. A prominently displayed admonition, "Smoke," was followed by the smaller-lettered, "use it in a sacred way." As I bent down to examine the fine print, I read the name of a cigarette manufacturer, Philip Morris I think.

At UCD I befriended a professor known far and wide for her scholarly and creative writing. She also fought a battle with addiction. Her latest effort was the use of a nicotine patch. "Not a day goes by that I don't crave a cigarette," she said. What neither of us understood: Big Tobacco had long suppressed its own scientists' findings that nicotine is addictive; indeed, it used the knowledge to calibrate dosages to ensure that its customers stayed hooked. The knowledge also informed advertisements aimed at juvenile viewers and readers. Last not least, the industry financed massive campaigns that organized individuals into a fake grassroots movement—James Hoggan calls it an astroturf movement—to rally against "nanny-state" violations of smokers' rights.

As far back as the 1960s, scientists working for tobacco knew their employers were up to no good; nonetheless, they kept "the smoking controversy" alive. Some scientists who were on the payroll of Big Tobacco are now financed by Big Oil and Coal. Their marching orders, starting in the early 1990s? Create confusion and maintain controversy over global warming. This, even though the industry's own scientists have declared that human-induced climate change is undeniable. Sites like deSmogBlog.com and Tobacco.org lay bare their tricks. By 1997, the tobacco industry entered into a huge settlement with the Attorney General, basically admitting that it was killing people by the millions. It wasn't until 2006 that a federal judge found the industry guilty of a criminal pattern of fraud.

My brother began to smoke at fourteen, emulating his dad, who beat him when he found him smoking. Our progenitor took up smoking in his youth, to quiet hunger pangs in a famine-ravaged post-war village. He lived past eighty, smoking most of his life (the quality of his life is another matter) but his son, bringing his addiction with him to the States, died when his youngest was less than two. A son from a prior marriage was in his teens. In California Karl tried est, primal-scream therapy, self-hypnosis. He could not kick his addiction. When his body no longer tolerated food much less cigarettes, his days consisted of moment-by-moment agonies. My brother died smoking.