I came to a fateful decision based on this experience. I decided that our social theory was not very useful in helping us think about health matters. I decided to no longer base my research on theory but to collect reasonable seeming data and do fishing expeditions. I taught several generations of students to forget the "theory thing" and just go for it. The result is that we now in social epidemiology have piles and piles of findings and no way to make sense of it or to think about what needs to be done next. This sorry situation is not all my fault of course but I have been a major contributor. And the reason for it is to be found in the wheat fields of North Dakota. Fortunately, better minds than mine are now prevailing and things are getting better. For example, one of my former students, Nancy Krieger, is forcefully demonstrating the power, and importance, of theory in spite of everything I tried to teach her [5]. This part of my work has not been one of my better contributions.

I was prevailed upon by Professor Jeremiah Stamler to present my North Dakota findings at a meeting of the American Heart Association. It was a daunting experience. In the front row sat all of the most eminent cardiovascular epidemiologists in the world and I suggested that above and beyond the usual CHD risk factors was a set of social factors that no one could understand and for which possible disease mechanisms were very difficult to visualize. One eminent epidemiologist cornered me after my presentation and angrily criticized the whole approach. His argument: "What are we supposed to do with findings like this? Tell people not to move or change jobs? All you are doing is distracting people from the real issues which are cholesterol, blood pressure and smoking. You are doing shameful work and you should stop it!"

I did not stop, of course, but these were difficult times. I had other troubles on other fronts. For example, a nutritionist on the staff of the Heart Disease Control Program asked me to help her design a dietary questionnaire. These were the days before we had the well-established instruments we have today. She wanted to do a study of Seventh Day Adventists. There was at that time, 1959, a growing body of evidence, and speculation, that a diet high in fat might be a risk factor for coronary heart disease. Seventh day Adventists were lacto-ovo-vegetarians and it was thought to be interesting to study their lipid levels and other health issues. I agreed to help her design a questionnaire. As we worked, it occurred to me that Adventists might have better lipid levels not only because of their diet but because they were religious. So I convinced her to let me add three questions at the end of the interview about their church attendance and about the importance of religion in their lives.

Since this was a government survey, all forms had to be cleared by a group in the Bureau of the Budget. Two weeks after we submitted our questionnaire, word came that it had been approved but that my three questions on religion had been deleted. I was not very happy. Upon inquiry, I was informed that there is in the U.S. Constitution a policy of separating church and state and that my three questions, on a government form, violated the Constitution. So I handed in my resignation. An Assistant Surgeon General summoned me to his office the next day. "What's all this about quitting?" he asked. I told him that as a sociologist I needed to ask people questions about their lives, including their religious beliefs, and if I wasn't going to be able to do that, there was no point in my working in the government. He told me to calm down. He asked if there was any evidence to support my hypothesis that religious beliefs had anything to do with lipid levels. "Of course there is!" I lied. "That's why I put those questions in!" "OK," he said, "bring me the evidence and then we'll talk". I went to poor suffering Phil Enterline and asked him for 3 weeks off so that I could search for the evidence that I had so confidently said existed.

I worked very hard during those three weeks and I did in fact find quite a bit of evidence. There was information about religion and stress taken from studies of Trappist and Bendictine monks and there was evidence about stress and lipids from studies of medical students at exam time and from tax accountants at tax time. I also did a lot of research about the Seventh-day Adventist religion and its relevance for stress research. As a complete amateur, I concluded that the SDA religion was based on the return of the Lord and that that return will occur soon after we see people warring with one another and when there is much civil strife and, in general, when everything is falling apart. So I argued that Seventh-day Adventists have a very different response than the rest of us when they read the daily newspaper. We moan about the events of the day while they see the bad news as bringing them closer to salvation.

I wrote a 45 page paper about stress and lipids, religion and stress, and about the Seventh-day Adventist religion. It was, I must say, quite elegant. I ended with a paragraph saying that in light of the foregoing, the three questions I wanted to ask were clearly warranted. I handed in my paper and was summoned a few days later to the Assistant Surgeon General's office. He said he was impressed with my paper and that he was satisfied that there was a credible scientific basis for my three questions. "But," he said, "we now have to consider the constitutional issue". I felt betrayed and said I was going to resign. Again, he told me calm down. "Give me a few weeks", he said. Several months later, he announced a change in government policy about such issues. One can now ask about things like