

CHAPTER 11

UPSTAIRS TO WISDOM - OR SOMETHING

It Just So Happened that the Englewood Junior High School and the Englewood High School were in the same building, in those good old days. First floor was Junior High. Second floor was Senior High. There was one other physical difference. The girls rest room downstairs was on one end of the hall, the boys on the other. Up stairs those rooms were reversed. Guess who, just after graduating up stairs, made a mistake.

ONE FLIGHT UP. What happened upstairs? Well, I made a few lifetime friends: Hal Secor, Herb Maddox, Art Ellsworth, Roy Rungden, Hugh Jones. And I encountered that wonderful, horrible experience called adolescent love. Her name was Lynell Munson. She liked me. But there were football heroes and basketball heroes and stuff like that around, and I was nothing but a trumpet player and a kind of skinny one at that. She picked a basketball hero, and I began to write poetry. Oh, well.

Actually she did not stick it out with that basketball character. After graduation she married somebody else who did not even go to Englewood High, and they went off somewhere as evangelical missionaries. Oh, well, such is life.

COUNT GOD OUT. It Just So Happened that during high school years I escaped God. I became a sophomore atheist.¹ This was not just an offhand maneuver. I struggled with it. Questions, questions: Walked on water? Did miracles? Arose from the dead? Ascended into Heaven? A guardian angel watching over my shoulder?

I had always had some trouble with religious belief. I think it might have started with the Sacrament of Confession, when I was 9, 10, 11 years old. Not that I minded confessing my sins. I just could not think up any good sins to confess. You sit there in line waiting to go into the confessional. You know what to say: "Bless me Father for I have sinned. Since my last confession I have..." Have what? It was uncomfortable and didn't make sense even then.

By the time I was 16, 17, 18 years old, the whole thing was falling apart. I struggled with it. I even went to our parish priest and told him of my doubts. He told me to pray about it. I don't remember taking his advice.

I dumped going to confession. I, also, dumped going to Sunday Mass. Now, understand, in the Tremmel house you did not willfully miss mass on Sunday. After all, willfully missing mass on Sunday was a mortal sin--a sin that sent you straight to hell, unless, of course, you confessed that sin and got absolution before you died.² So how did I manage to exit mass? There were

¹A sophomore atheist (my defining) is a person who has kicked over his father's God.

²Post Script: after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) the missing mass sin got dumped and so did a lot of Catholic Sunday morning church attendance.

certain advantages to several masses on Sunday morning--8:00 a.m., 9:30 a.m., 11:a.m. I just checked out which mass my parents were planning to attend, then declared myself to be going at a different hour. And what did I do during that different hour? I went up the hill to Hugh Jones' house and played jazz records on his marvelous record playing equipment. Hugh Jones was endlessly rebuilding his system until it could be heard all over the neighborhood. Eventually he went to work for Muzac and infected not only the neighborhood, but practically every business establishment in America.

Church was under control. But church was a Sunday problem. What about Monday?

THERE ARE TEACHERS AND TEACHERS. The Sunday God problem I managed to maneuver. The Monday teacher problem I, also, usually managed to maneuver. They just came and went. But not all of them--not George Cavender, Frances Sullivan, Herbert Walthers.

A History Teacher. George Cavender was a youngish history teacher. With him (as I now recognize) teaching was not just learning facts about the past. It was asking questions about the present. He once gave an assignment that led me to write a paper on, of all things, prejudice. Not racial prejudice. As kids we were not even aware of racial prejudice. In Englewood High School there were only two or three black kids, and they were treated just like everybody else. No, the prejudice I confronted was ethnic prejudice: the Ku Klux Klan versus St. Joseph's Parish. The Klan was pretty potent in Englewood in those good old days. They burned a cross on the parsonage lawn. They put on jazzy parades down Broadway. The usual. I closed my essay arguing that America would not be grown up until it elected a Catholic president. Mind you, I had already rejected my father's Catholicism, so this was pretty heady intellectualizing.³ Cavender had me read it to the class. A discussion followed in which I defended my "radical" position. Afterward Cavender complimented me for taking a public stand at a time, in a place, not exactly sympathetic to such declaration. He said, "Keep it up." I remembered. I also discovered from Cavender what teaching is all about. It is not so much a matter of memorizing data as it is a matter of raising questions.

An English Teacher. It also Just So Happened that I had an English teacher named Frances Sullivan. Sullivan had us not only memorize the rules, but write down ideas and stories. One day she read one of my stories to the class and said, "You have a talent. Don't disappoint me and waste it." Frances, I am still trying to live up to your expectations.

A Math Teacher. I had another teacher named Sullivan--Lillian Sullivan, this time. We called her "Diamond Lil," and not because she wore jewelry, but

³Also, as a footnote to this I must confess that when, years later, America did offer a Catholic for president (John F. Kennedy), my family, wife and kids, had trouble getting me to vote for him.

because she taught math--algebra, geometry, that sort of thing--with a diamond-hard fist. And I passed her courses under that fist, but mostly by memorizing. I never did really catch on. But I remember Diamond Lil and smile to myself when I see a few mathematicians now budding here and there in the family.

The Band Director. But the giant of them all was Herb Walthers. He was not just the band director--he was the mentor. We were his kids. He watched over us. He coaxed us. As a band he made us good enough to win first-place in state-wide band contests. But that wasn't all. He took care of his band kids.

Our first clarinetist was a little black girl. Nobody ever thought about her being black, except Herb Walthers. On one occasion the band was invited to a big shindig in Colorado Springs. Later I learned that Herb Walthers agreed that we could go only after he got an assurance from the biggest, fanciest hotel in Colorado Springs that there would be no question raised about the color of the skin of any of his "kids". We went to Colorado Springs and had a great time, no questions asked.

Our little black clarinetist was not the only one in Herb Walthers' concern. He apparently also pegged a problem in me: a problem related to athletics. I could swim and I was good at it, but that meant nothing in a school that had no swimming pool,⁴ and where, if you were not good at some obvious sport, you were not good. One day Herb Walthers said, "Tremmel, come back to my office and let's talk." It Just So Happened that Herb Walthers was just about as skinny as I was and just about as athletically awkward. Once in the office he said, "Tremmel, think about it. There are two kinds of horses in the world: big strong draft horses that can be hitched to a wagon and haul heavy loads. And there are skinny, long-legged race horses that can outrun those draft horses without even trying. You have to decide what kind of a horse you are." Meeting adjourned.

I heard him! And my life changed rather abruptly. Years later, when I had finished college and graduate school and was teaching, I was back in Denver and Herb and I had lunch. [By this time he was teaching at the University of Denver.] I asked him if he remembered about the time he told me about the horses. He just looked at me without the vaguest recollection. That's what being a great teacher is all about: Ask questions that make your students think, and maybe even change their lives.

GOD KNEW IT ALL THE TIME. Just before that "horses" conference adjourned, Herb Walthers handed me a ticket to a Denver Symphony concert. I had never heard real symphony music. He knew that. He probably also knew that with a free ticket, I would go to that concert. I did.

⁴I learned to swim at the YMCA in Downtown Denver. My parents had gotten it into their heads that I should know how to swim in order to avoid drowning in case I could find any water in Colorado. The YMCA where I learned to swim is still there, close to where Susie works and she uses the facilities regularly as a part of her stay healthy and shapely program.

It was all very impressive. The concert was scheduled to take place in the Denver Auditorium, a great big building, way downtown. I took a streetcar to the place. My seat was high up in the gallery. Up where I was almost all alone. The people who came to the concert were mostly down on first floor. It was fascinating looking down from way up there. The musicians came in, sat down, began to tune up. Eventually the lights dimmed and the conductor came in. Clapping. Bowing. Then he raised his baton and the music started.

I do not know how long it was after the music started, but there came an eternity when I was not there sitting in the gallery listening to music. I was the music. How long it lasted, I have no idea. Perhaps a mini-second. Perhaps a hundred years. But while it lasted, the world became perfect. And so was I. Everything belonged. I did not know it, but I had just met God.

For me it not only happened in music, but years later in a Kansas night time. I would walk out of the door on Bluemont Hill and zit, it might just happen: an overwhelming sense of the perfection of it all, the inner rightness of it all: God is in God's heaven and all is right in God's world.

It was music, and it was the night sky in Kansas, and then, oddly enough, it was small, penetrating poems: haiku. What is haiku? Some would tell you it is a 17 syllable, three line poem, invented and perfected by the Japanese. And that is what haiku is, on the surface. Underneath it is seeing the entire cosmos in a tiny happening right outside your door.

Letting go, a leaf
drifts carefully down. Fragile
autumn afternoon.

Caterpillar at
stem's end keeps reaching about
for just one more step.

He's celebrating
earth and sky on a fencepost.
Kansas meadowlark.

Technically it is called mysticism. It is as ancient as humankind and as recent as right now looking out the window seeing a silly squirrel dancing through the maple tree I planted twenty years ago; or it is as available as the world that gathers at the bird feeder Susan and Russ gave me for Christmas--a world that gathers every day to enjoy my largesse while I stand watching the wondrous mystery of it all. Everybody should have a Herb Walther in his\her life.