

Life
ON THE CAROUSEL

by Bob Stromberg

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About the Author...

Bob Stromberg is a very funny man. From his home in St Paul, Minnesota, he travels all over the world performing his very unique and perfect blend of story, standup and shtick. He's is the co-author and one of the original stars of the megahit theatrical comedy, *Triple Espresso*, which has been seen by over two million people from San Diego to the West End of London. And... he is the author and star of "That Wonder Boy", winner of the 2015 United Solo Theater Festival in New York City. The Chicago Sun Times called Bob "...a mesmerizing physical comedian". The London Times called him "...a genuinely funny man." Bob is the creator of "Mastering the Craft of Creativity", an online course designed to help every person discover their unique creativity.

Bob dedicates this collection of stories to his parents and sisters who haven't complained about him sharing their family pictures with the world.

Slide 1



The Slide: My mother in the first picture.

The Date: 1963

The Photographer: Mr. Blumenthal

My mother is wearing a soft beige camel hair coat. She's standing in Blumenthal's Camera and Sporting Goods in Olean, NY. She crossed the state line earlier that afternoon and drove twenty-five miles on this winter day to buy a new Argus C3 Range Finder 35 mm camera. It wasn't expensive but it was more than she and dad could afford. Nevertheless my mother came to buy the camera because my baby sister's first year had gone largely unphotographed and this was unacceptable.

My life and that of my older sister were well chronicled in books of yellowed curling snapshots but this would no longer suffice. The baby's life would be forever remembered in carousels of 35 mm slides projected grandly on a retractable screen of shimmering white sand.

My mother has just asked Mr. Blumenthal to show her how to take a picture.

"Oh it's very simple," he said, putting his cigarette in an ashtray. Taking the camera out of the box he turned his head to the side carefully blowing smoke away from my mother. "Argus makes a wonderful camera," he said, peering over top his glasses and turning the Range Finder knob to 6.0. "Once you know what you're doing, you can hardly take a bad shot."

My mother smiled beautifully and Blumenthal snapped the first picture ever taken on our new camera. It would be a couple months before we excitedly and awkwardly put up our screen, placed the projector on a folding TV tray table and viewed our first thirty slides. Most were out of focus. Several were double exposures and one perhaps a triple. My mother's "first" picture

had a band of yellow flames transecting the top third of the photo and burning from her nose through her forehead. Otherwise it was lovely.

To be fair, photography used to be far more difficult. You had to think about what kind of film to use in what kind of light. You had to focus by hand. You had to set your shutter speed, advance your own film, hold your hands steady, breathe softly, avoid caffeine. There was a lot to think about and apparently my parents didn't. And they had no inclination to discard that first slide. Nor did they discard any of the other nineteen hundred and seventy taken with the Argus C3 over the next two decades, thirty percent in which the subject matter was not identifiable. This is not surprising because my parents never discarded anything.

They lived in their little home for fifty years and hoped to be there longer but my mother's increasing immobility made it impossible. Dad fought the move too long but finally resigned himself to the truth and began making plans to move into a retirement center several states away.

Looking a few weeks ahead in my calendar I realized I had some free days and called my dad to tell him I'd love to come and help him clean out his garage.

"That would be great," he said. "How soon can you get here?"

"I can be there the week after next," I said.

"I'm not sure that's soon enough," he said. "The garage seems to have acquired the qualities of a black hole. If I open the doors other people's junk gets sucked from their homes, up the street and into my own."

Arriving a week later I learned that he was barely exaggerating. The piles they'd saved over the years were paralyzing. Needless to say, when I arrived, all that should have been discarded long ago was finally thrown out. There was little to keep. I found a picture of my grandpa Nelson playing steel guitar in his Swedish Gospel Quartet. It's a professional studio shot, an eight by ten probably taken in the early '30s. It's in the original mat and frame. Unbelievably, it's still under unbroken glass. I look at it even as I write and it is a treasure. But there was little else.

Toward the end of the last day, with the garage nearly empty, my dad rummaged in the back corner, digging through one of the last of the larger boxes. "What do you suppose we should do with these?" he said.

I looked to see him holding a slide carousel and our old projector. I walked over and looked in the box. There were many carousels. I knew what they contained. I knew most of the slides were not very good. But I couldn't tell him to throw them away. To be honest, I couldn't throw them away myself.

"Put some tape on the box," I said. "I'll take them down to the post office and mail them to my house."

"You sure?" he asked.

"Oh yeah," I answered. "I'll take care of them."

"And what about this?" he asked. In his hands he cradled the old Argus C3 Range Finder 35 mm in its rotting leather case. Without a thought I carefully took the old treasure and casually tossed it against the cement block wall. We had a good laugh.

Mr. Blumenthal fit the camera into its case and screwed the fastener in the bottom connecting the two. It had begun to snow outside.

“Go slow on those roads,” he said to my mother. “It’s gonna be really slippery on the hill.”

My mother thanked him and tied a floral printed scarf beneath her chin. Mr. Blumenthal picked his cigarette out of the holder.

“I’m telling you,” he said. “You’re going to be very pleased. You can hardly take a bad picture with that camera. Those slides are going to be priceless.”

He was thirty percent right.

Slide 31



The Slide: My sister Ingrid

The Date: Early Spring 1964

The Photographer: My sister Sally

It's late Saturday morning in my older sister Sally's bedroom. Our two-year-old sister Ingrid sits in a tangle of bed covers. She wears cold weather pajamas—the kind with

plastic bottomed feet. Her left leg is not pulled fully into the PJs so the empty foot, beneath the twisted ankle, dangles comically off the edge of the mattress. Minutes earlier, Sally rinsed Ingrid's hair and set it in rollers. Now for the first time she sits inside the inflated helmet of a modern home hair dryer circa 1964. She cringes in delight as a din of rushing air flows up the corrugated plastic tube covering her head in noisy warmth. With adoring smiles, the rest of her family gathers in the doorway as her big sister snaps a picture to be enjoyed for years to come.

Nearly half a century later, I study the slide and feel my eyes pulled steadily away from it's subject to the back left corner of the room. A phonograph sits on its own tubular metal cart. Beneath the phonograph, a wire rack holds a dozen record albums. I remember them all. In the picture I can clearly see the smiling face of a very young Steve Lawrence, but in my mind I see the other albums nearly as well. There are three by Ricky Nelson, two Bobby Vees, a Kingston Trio, a Brothers Four, a couple Henry Mancinis, an album of Ferranti and Teicher piano duets and one other... which was a treasure.

All but the last one was sent to our home from the Columbia Record Club in Terre Haut, IN. After much discussion my parents allowed Sally to join the club. Many other teenagers in our town and presumably across the country were doing the same. Had this not happened we could not have afforded to buy even this small collection. As I recall, the club worked something like this. Club members were required to buy a few record albums at full price. This was the tough part because albums cost over three bucks—a hefty sum for a teenage girl who might only earn seventy-five cents for a day of babysitting. But here's where the rules of the club got exciting. If you bought those first ones at full price, you got the next four hundred for a nickel. Maybe my

numbers are off a bit but it was something along those lines.

You chose from a huge selection of albums and if you didn't choose the club chose for you and another record would arrive in a cardboard mailer. Unfortunately most kids discovered pretty quickly that there weren't all that many albums they actually wanted. The Columbia Record Club didn't care. The albums kept coming and that explains our Mancinis and the piano duets.

Steve Lawrence was one artist that Columbia chose for us but he was worth whatever we paid if only for the song "Go Away Little Girl". I ignored most of the other cuts that sounded like *grown up* music but that one I listened to hundreds of times carefully placing the needle as close to the beginning as I could and then lifting it off at the end. Eventually I ruined that song and the ones on either side. I remember every word of the lyrics and often stood before the high closet door mirror, holding my sister's hairbrush mic and harmonizing a third part to Steve's lush double tracked vocals. The end was particularly moving.

*When you are near me like this
You're much too hard to resist
So go away little girl
Call it a day little girl
Please go away little girl
Before I beg you to stay*

I was eleven so the little girl I sang to was probably in the second grade but... what a song!

During this time my favorite albums were those of Ricky Nelson. I felt like I knew him personally because my family watched his family on the *Ozzie and Harriet* show every Saturday evening. I

thought the Nelsons were very normal... much like us. Ricky was their youngest boy and during his teen years he often closed the shows with a song. He'd be on a gymnasium stage, strumming his leather-covered acoustic, licking his lips while mouthing his latest hit. Beautiful pony tailed girls in saddle shoes, poodle skirts and tight cashmere sweaters held their hands to their mouths waiting for him to finish before erupting in cheers. Jumping and clapping they glanced at their boyfriends as if to ask, "Isn't Ricky so much more handsome than you? Don't you love his dreamy voice?" And the boys clapped along as if to answer, "Oh yes we do! Honest we do!" That's what they got paid for.

Despite my best efforts to be careful, I destroyed Ricky's albums. It was just too easy to inadvertently drop the player's arm and watch the needle bounce noisily over a new disc of shiny black vinyl. It was too easy to bump the cart and jump to the screech of the needle scratching a new gutter across five pristine songs. From then on, each trac had one more annoying crackle per revolution. When a record was scratched badly enough the needle couldn't decide which groove to follow. That's when I taped a couple lead toy soldiers to the arm hoping the additional weight would hold the needle where it belonged.

Technically all of our albums belonged to Sally. She was, after all, the Columbia Record Club member. I was just a human being. My music collection was strictly 45s. The *Five and Dime* was the one store in my town that sold music and my friends and I spent a few hours a week there. The storeowner allowed one of each new 45 to be used as a demo. As long as we behaved ourselves, we were allowed to quietly listen to them all. They cost eighty-four cents apiece so every few weeks I was able to scrape together enough nickels and pennies to buy one. On a display rack to the

left of the 45s were the albums. They were way out of my price range.

One winter day during my sixth grade year, I walked into the store after school. A new shipment of records had arrived that afternoon. There on the display rack, from a cover photo, four men stared. The photo was dramatic, high contrast black and white, with the light source streaming from the left. Their hair was unusually long and oddly combed straight forward. They wore high dark turtleneck sweaters and the background was black so their faces were only visible from the eyes down. Three men made a row across the top. The fourth, (and probably least attractive) nestled beneath the others in the right corner. I knew who they were.

Grabbing the album and frantically looking for the Columbia Records logo, I felt my heart sink as I read the word "Capitol". I knew I had to have that album and I knew now that it wouldn't be arriving in a cardboard mailer.

Fortunately for me, Sally's birthday was only a few weeks away. It took very little persuasion to convince my mother and father that I knew the perfect gift. When the big day arrived, Sally sat on our living room sofa and excitedly opened a box that looked to me to be just about the right size. Both of our faces registered disappointment as beneath the birthday decorated paper we recognized a familiar cardboard mailer.

"Oh Mom... Dad... thanks," she said allowing sarcasm to leak into her voice. "Did you give me my own records for my birthday?"

"Well now Sally," my mother said, "you need to look closely."

There were three albums. The top one was a Perry Como for which neither of us could even fake a smile. The next was the original Broadway cast recording of “The Music Man”. On the bottom my parents had snuck in, “Meet the Beatles”.

“Oh, thank you!” Sally cheered.

“Let’s go listen!” I said, and with that we ran to her room and closed the door. She split the cellophane sleeve with her fingernail and removed the shiny record with the rainbow label. As she placed it over the player’s metal stem, I sat on the bed staring at the picture on the back jacket. The four stood smiling in their collarless grey suits and pointy boots. They appeared to be very happy guys. Sally swung the stabilizer bar over the stem and flipped the switch to automatic. The disc dropped on to the turntable. The arm lifted, moved over the edge of the record and then lowered with a soft rumble onto the vinyl—four bars of joyous guitar and a voice began.

*Oh yeah I’ll tell you something
I think you’ll understand
When I say that something
I want to hold your hand
I want to hold your ha aa aa aa and
I want to hold your hand*

We sat motionless, taking in every sound and at the end both of us laughed out loud. Just for the joy of it—we laughed. Four more bars, the same guitars and the voice continued.

*Well she was just seventeen
If you know what I mean*

Well, to be honest I didn't know what he meant. I'm still not sure I know what he meant though I suspect he meant that she could have been just thirteen or just fourteen, fifteen, sixteen or nineteen but the syllables would not have fit nearly as well... if you know what I mean. But it didn't matter because I was caught up in the most joyous sound I ever heard. I would be wasting words to explain the effect the Beatles had on my generation. Too many have done so and besides, the whole world knows it's true. But I will share one extreme example.

In August of '65, two girls from my school—one from my class and her older friend—talked their parents into driving them to Toronto to see the Beatles at Maple Leaf Gardens. This was in itself an amazing thing. Toronto was over five hours away not to mention in a foreign land. But somehow they got their parents to agree. A couple days later I rode my bike to the Tastee Freeze and saw her seated at a picnic table surrounded by a gaggle of friends. She excitedly shared her experience, speaking oddly in a Liverpool accent.

“It was the coolest thing evah!” she said. “Everyone was screamin' and cryin' and one bird passed out clean away.”

“One what?” I said.

“Bird,” she said. “That means 'girl'. The bird just fell plumb ovah and the bobbies came and auled her away.”

“The bobbies?” I said.

“Yeah the bobbies... the constables.” She looked at me with exasperation. “The POLICEMEN,” she said. Perhaps a dozen of us stared as her accent thickened with each phrase.

“Why are you talking like that?” I said.

“Like whuh?”

“Like that,” I said. “Why are you trying to sound like you’re from England?”

“I’m naw,” she said. “I’ve always talked ligh giss.”

“No you haven’t,” I said. “Why are you doing it?”

“I doan ave to ansah yo questions,” she said, “and besides, why are you gettin' yo knickahts in a knot?”

“My what!” I said.

“Ooo ahh you to criticize ow I speak?” she said, “I’ll speak anyway Oi bloody well please.”

And she did. I swear—she and her friend spoke that way for two full years. A few weeks later, when we began the eighth grade, some of our teachers were not happy about the accent but decided to ignore it hoping it would go away. Eventually it did though upon graduation, five years later, she was still the only person in our part of Pennsylvania who pronounced the word "either" with a long “i”.

Now, nearly half a century later, I stare at my little sister sitting on the bed. The kind of hairdryer she enjoys would only be sold a few more years before the design gave way to a better idea. Some ideas, like The Beatles, would last longer than most could

imagine. They would even change the world. That's the thing about ideas. You never know what they might lead to.

Sally and I listened to the album clear through and then we listened to it again. In fact, for many months, I listened to little else. Later, Steve Lawrence, Perry Como and Henry Mancini were replaced by The Association, The Beach Boys and Peter Paul and Mary. I loved them all. I loved all the music. But more importantly, I loved the idea that there were people who could make a living by writing and performing. That idea transformed my life.

Slide 72, 63, 47



The Slide: Three girls on Main St.

The Date: Summer 1967

The Photographer: My older Sister

My older sister Sally was, I believe, the first person to ever represent our town as a Rotary Exchange Student. Following a memorable and impressive senior year she prepared for her adventure. Besides getting her passport and visa she was required to take pictures representing her life in America to share

with her sponsoring Rotary Club in Sweden. The pictures she took are the best on my carousel, vividly capturing our town in 1967. They include shots of the back road to my grand parent's farm, the pond behind our home and several more, including the elementary school and our church, featured in later chapters. Sally had aspirations as an actress and a flare for the dramatic which translates well into her old slides.

I'm particularly happy with one though it is not one of the better. It shows three girls walking down Main St., smiling toward the camera. Slightly behind them a younger girl stands by some vintage bikes. To the left a row of cars angle toward the parking meters. To the right are store fronts with hanging signs and awnings and a big clock that says 9:15 but the shadows on the sidewalk indicate early afternoon.

I remember the three girls. They were a couple years younger than I and had just finished the seventh grade. After so many years I still remember the tone of their voices—the timbre of their laughter. I had a crush that whole summer on the little one to the right. I've not seen her or the others in forty years. It is odd for me to realize that I am not certain all three are still living. I hope they are. And I hope they are well. And I hope they've aged better than the town we lived in. One thing is certain. They have aged... a lot. All are now in their early sixties. If they've changed as much as I, they too are now nearly unrecognizable. Sadly, the same might be said of our town.

My father told me that our town's best years were in the thirties. The flood hurt us bad in '42. My time there in the fifties and sixties was quite prosperous but everything was aging and much was maintained poorly. I mean no offense to those who remain there but the last times I visited things looked a bit broken.

A memory...

When I was five, I lay with my family on a woolen blanket in the back yard, gazing wide-eyed, open mouthed, as one lonely little star made its way across the moonless sky. My father said softly, “Look closely kids. That’s the first satellite and it’s gonna change the world.”

His words were prophetic. He badly blew his later prediction about the demise of the Beatles but he sure nailed that Sputnik one. Today there are over eight thousand man made objects orbiting the earth and on top of one a little camera transports me in ways my father could not have foreseen. From my home in Minnesota, staring at my computer screen, I orbit halfway across the country in seconds and descend to about a thousand feet above my hometown. It’s not a live picture. In fact, it was taken several years ago but it captures my town below looking much as it did in my boyhood. The streets are laid out as they were and the houses all where they belong and the Allegheny still flows through, yet I know that much has changed.

I fly over my high school where the track team gathers at one end of the football field. In white hoodies they look like a flock of gulls against the dark rubber track. I hover slowly over the community pool and toward Hillside Cemetery where many of my family are buried. Then I soar above the hill toward my house. This is the hill for generations and for descriptive purposes called Old Baldy. Now the late afternoon sun casts long shadows through Baldy’s stark April forest. Visually it becomes chaotic and briefly I lose my way before climbing higher to regain my bearing. My neighborhood and then the top of my house appear. My parent’s



pickup truck still sits in the driveway though they moved to Connecticut several years ago. I ascend. The chaos of forests and shadows reappear and then I stop. There is something in the trees—an odd convergence of shadow. I drop down for a better view but losing too much photographic clarity I rise again. There it is. I know what I'm seeing. I've found The Rocks.

They are house-sized boulders, slid about by glaciers long ago and conveniently deposited high on the hill behind our home. They've changed very little since. During the eighteen years I lived in that town and every time I visited thereafter, I climbed the steep trail to The Rocks. Season after season I returned. Many times each summer and several times each deep winter, I went

there with friends or family or all by myself. As a little guy climbing fast I could get there in half an hour or so. I doubt I could do it faster now. The more impressive rocks have names. The two largest are Elephant and Bird. On top of Elephant is a large slab called Table Rock. Another is named Pyramid and everywhere are smaller boulders tossed about creating room sized caves and one tight-squeeze tunnel. The tunnel was a frightening rite of passage for every child who found it as was the thrill of first scaling the front of Bird.

A memory...

My best buddy lived across a field and over the little creek behind my house. In the late winter of our sixth grade year his parents had to fly to California where his dad was interviewing for a new job. They asked my parents if Craig could stay with us for a week. He and I were thrilled, almost as much as my little sister who adored my best friend. On the way to and from school each day we tried to encourage our hopes that his parents would turn down the job and stay in our town.

One summer night a few months later, Craig and I and our neighbor buddy David camped all night at The Rocks. I was a bit surprised that our parents allowed us to do it by ourselves but we convinced them that it was important. It was, after all, Craig's going away party. We hiked up there early in the evening carrying sleeping bags, canteens, hotdogs and buns. We collected a lot of fire wood, started a blaze beneath an over hang and waited for the darkness. We didn't sleep much. I'd never spent a night out in the woods and was spooked by the eerie squeaking of trees in the breeze. Foolishly we'd decided to sleep on the rock rather than the ground but we weren't planning on sleeping anyway. Instead



we talked most the night about all the fun we'd had together and even dared to share that we would miss each other a lot after Craig moved away. We told each other that, no matter what, we'd always be friends. Pretty vulnerable stuff for little boys.

Two days later I stood quietly in the street in front of Craig's house as he and his three younger siblings climbed into the sedan with his mom. The little ones were all crying and his mom was in a frazzle. His dad was waiting in California already busy at a new job. His mom would drive the family, by herself, across the entire country to Sacramento. Craig was quiet. We shook hands the way men do and I slapped him on the back as he turned to climb in

the back seat with the baby. Then they pulled away. I knew they were going to say goodbye to some friends out on the east end of town so I rode my bike as fast as I could to the Tastee Freeze on Main St. I thought I might be able to wave goodbye when they drove back through. I sat at a picnic table for about twenty minutes and just when I thought I might have missed them, I saw the car approaching. Craig looking out the side window lifted his hand. I lifted mine. And then they were gone. It was terribly sad and perhaps the first time I realized that nothing remains the same. Everything changes... except maybe The Rocks.

Nearly fifty years later, staring at my computer screen I can see there's been activity in the woods. A number of new trails are cut for logging equipment and a few areas culled pretty thin so somebody's making money. Even this economic change for the better makes me sad. I am, however, not concerned about The Rocks. Even in poor detail, the convergence of shadow is consistent with my memory. I can easily identify Elephant and Bird. The last time I climbed her I was surprised to find large trees growing on top of Elephant but she was, of course, still there. The same is true of the little town below nestled in the valley, shining on my screen and imprinted on my soul. It will change some for the better and some for the worse but it's not going anywhere soon... and that makes me glad.

Three pretty girls walk toward my sister. They're downtown. It's a warm summer afternoon in '67. They all know Sally. This is. after all, a small town and well... she was the prom queen. "Smile girls," she says. They do and Sally snaps the picture.

Slide 76 and 985



The Slide: My family beginning our big vacation

The Date: Summer, 1966

The Photographer: Unknown

We are standing almost on the tarmac at the Mt. Alton Airport in a nearly forgotten time when, on summer days, we sometimes waited behind a wrought iron fence for planes to land. We would hear the twin engines roaring off in the distance

and then see the Allegheny Airliner flying in from Pittsburgh, coming in low over the treetops and landing on one of the two runways. We covered our ears as it taxied within fifty feet. When the engines turned off and the props stopped spinning a man opened the iron gate and with a smile motioned us through. We'd walk right out to the bottom of the plane's descending stairway to wait for the passengers. By the time they stepped on the tarmac and everybody hugged, the man who opened the gate would have loaded the luggage on a handcart and pulled it over by the fence. We'd walk to the cart, grab a suitcase and head out to the parking lot.

In the slide I'm almost fourteen years old and had been through the routine plenty of times. People from our area occasionally flew off on vacations and when they returned we'd sometimes pick them up. But this day, as we pose for the camera—this day is different. Today, for the first time, my family and I are the ones flying. And flying as a family will not be my only new experience. In a couple hours, my father and I will play our first game of pool and then I will have my first brush with fame.

We were heading for San Francisco but couldn't get there without a stop in Detroit. I was looking forward to the three-hour layover. I'd been in the Detroit airport the year before while traveling by myself—returning from my own vacation with relatives. At that time, unfortunately, the airlines deemed it necessary to escort me while outside the fuselage. I felt like a prisoner. To make it worse there was another minor on the plane with whom I shared the experience. She was a chatty, unattractive girl on her way home to Pittsburgh. Unfortunately, my route made a connection in Pittsburgh so we were required to stay together with an attendant for a couple hours while awaiting our flight. I sat uncomfortably as our female escort and the girl talked on and on about braces

and dances and boyfriends. It was embarrassing. I stared from my seat in the terminal rotunda to an upper level where people played pool in a billiards parlor.

Now, a year later, I found my window seat toward the back of the plane. “Hey Dad,” I said, “When we get to Detroit can we shoot a little pool?” I’d always wanted to try the game. There was a pool hall in my town. It was just a couple buildings from my barbershop so I’d looked inside a few times. I didn’t actually go in the place but during the summer, when it was really hot, the door stood open and I could see dangerous looking people, mostly high school dropouts, hovering over the tables, vulture like, with a pool stick in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I noticed that they laughed and shouted the word “damn” quite a lot. You could hear it way down the street.

My father helped my little sister with her seat belt. “We’re only in Detroit for a couple hours,” he said, “I doubt we’ll have time to look for a pool hall.”

“Oh no Dad,” I said as if I traveled through Detroit regularly. “There’s one right in the airport. I can take you there.”

“Well then,” he said, “if we have time we’ll check it out.” Then he looked at my mother and they smiled. Apparently something struck them funny.

We arrived in Detroit ahead of schedule and had more than enough time for my father and me to play our first game of pool together. He was very good or very lucky. After a few games he paid the clerk and then said to me, “I’m going down below and check on the women. You can wander around the terminal a bit if you want. Probably a good idea to stay close though.”

Halfway down the stairs we saw my mother and sisters in a waiting area just up the hallway to the left. Straight ahead, sitting on the edge of the rotunda fountain were several college aged guys. I couldn't see them clearly because a group of girls, who looked to be about my age, stood in front of them facing away from me prancing about excitedly. My father turned left at the bottom of the stairs and I walked toward the fountain. One of the girls let out a scream and thrust her hand in the air holding a piece of scrap paper. It was then I realized that the guys were signing autographs. When I was within ten feet the girls screamed a chorus of "Oh thank yous," and gushed off down the hall to the left, their heads close together staring at each other's papers.

I now stood directly in front of the boys—or maybe they were young men. I couldn't tell. There was, at that moment, no one else in the terminal. I stood staring at them. They sat staring at me. I could tell they were waiting for me to say something—almost leaning forward in anticipation of my comment or request. But as I looked from face to face—left to right—though they looked vaguely familiar, I couldn't identify them. Then the skinniest guy on the far right said, "I think we better go guys." I hadn't gotten down the line to his face yet but glanced directly at him when he spoke. He had on a little corded captain's hat—the same kind Davey Jones of The Monkees wore. He held drumsticks and casually beat out a complex rhythm on his thigh. I knew immediately who he was. He was Gary Lewis.

Gary Lewis and the Playboys was a huge band that year having hit the Top Ten seven times with releases including "Count Me In", "Save Your Heart For Me", "Just My Style", "Everybody Loves a Clown" and "This Diamond Ring" that went all the way to

number one. I knew every word to every song. Now I recognized all the guys. I'd seen the band five times on Ed Sullivan.

I turned toward our concourse and could just make out my older sister Sally sitting in a chair, reading her "Seventeen". Surprisingly she glanced my way and I shot my hand up.

I heard Gary say again a little louder this time, "Let's go guys. Now."

I ran halfway to Sally frantically gesturing. She stood and walked casually my way. I sprinted the remaining distance grabbed her elbow and started speed walking her toward the band who appeared to be fleeing. I was surprised. I'd seen "A Hard Day's Night" three times. It was filled with scenes of screaming kids chasing the Beatles around London. Gary Lewis and the Playboys were huge stars but they sure weren't The Beatles—they weren't even British and it's not like Sally and I were a mob. Why would they run from us? But as they turned down a concourse at the other end of the rotunda I realized we were chasing and they were getting away.

Sally was irritated. "What are you doing?" she snapped pulling her arm away.

"Those guys. Right there!" I said pointing, "Do you see them?"

"Yes," she said. "So what?"

"That's Gary Lewis and the Playboys."

"No!"

“Yes! Come on!”

We sprinted across the rotunda and saw them ahead standing at a boarding gate down the hall. The two in the back glanced nervously toward us and motioned the others to hurry. Gary Lewis spoke to a desk agent who looked our way and then gestured the band to follow. They disappeared around the corner. We reached the spot only seconds later and saw the last guy going through the jet way door. The others were ahead laughing, jostling, heading toward the plane. We watched the agent close the door and walk behind her podium to begin boarding the other passengers.

My sister looked disgusted. “That wasn’t Gary Lewis and the Playboys,” she said.

I grabbed her arm again and walked to the attendant. “Excuse me Mam,” I said. “We were just wondering if you could tell us. Was that...”

She cut me off mid-sentence. “Yes,” she said.

We walked back excitedly to tell our parents never wondering what we would have done had we caught them. I guess maybe we would have stood there and stared a while. I might have said hello.

That was my first of many encounters with famous people—singers, television and movie stars, sports figures and politicians. My vocation has introduced me to many but most often the encounters have been in airports and on planes. That is, after all, how these people get to and from work.

The next encounter after Gary Lewis occurred nearly a decade later. It was a double—two stars in one day. I was, by this time, beginning a career in performing, mostly singing and telling stories. Judy and I lived in Chicago where I worked in a Children’s Theater during the week. On weekends I occasionally flew away with my guitar slung over my shoulder. I went wherever people would pay me. I went wherever people would pay me anything at all.

One Saturday morning I walked down a concourse at O’Hare and saw Jim Yester leaning against a wall carefully observing me walking toward him. Jim was part of the popular band The Association and was someone I had admired since junior high. I looked at him and he smiled. “You’re Jim Yester,” I said informatively.

“I sure am,” he answered and reaching out his hand he asked, “What’s your name?”

“My name’s Bob,” I said.

He motioned toward my guitar “What do you play?”

“Oh it’s cheap.” I said almost apologetically. “It’s Japanese.”

He waved off my response. “No, I mean what kind of music do you play.”

“Oh... I write songs. I’m singing for some kids in Buffalo tonight. Hey... I’m a huge fan,” I said. “Really nice to meet you.”

He took a step back toward his departure gate and motioned me to follow. “If you have a minute—come over here and I’ll

introduce you to the guys.”

And that’s what he did. Behind him sat the rest of the band. “Hey gentlemen. This is my new buddy Bob. He plays guitar and writes his own songs—our kinda man.” All but one looked up and smiled. Terry Kirkman, who wrote “Cherish” and many other big hits, extended his hand and I shook it.

The guys were not as talkative as Jim so I stood awkwardly smiling for a moment and then glancing at my watch I said, “Gotta go. Nice to meet you.”

Jim shook my hand again. “Happy Life,” he said with a smile and waved goodbye.

I was impressed. I have often reflected upon the encounter because it was unlike most to follow. I don’t know why he was so kind. Perhaps he saw me as a young kid with no idea how tough it could be to make a living as a minstrel. Maybe I reminded him of himself a decade earlier. Maybe he’s just a really nice guy. I don’t know. But I know our encounter was not typical.

A couple hours later I landed in Buffalo where I walked down another concourse and decided to stop in a café for a quick cup of coffee. There sat Wilt Chamberlain. I didn’t have to wonder if it was him. LA played the Braves the night before. He sat, his knees rising above the top of the little table. He ate Corn Flakes. I thought of my little brother in law and the possibility of handing him Wilt’s autograph moved me toward the table. Wilt did not raise his gaze above his cereal bowl. I stood for a few seconds digging in my jacket for a pen and retrieving my airline ticket from my back pocket. Still he looked at his bowl. “Excuse me,” I said, “I wonder if you’d mind....”

“Yeah I would mind,” he snarled. “I’m wondering if you’d mind letting me eat my Corn Flakes.” He did not lift his gaze. “Would that be too much to ask? Do you suppose it would be okay if a guy could just eat some Corn Flakes without being bothered?”

“No problem,” I said feeling my face flush in embarrassment. “Sorry.” I didn’t bother ordering coffee. I walked away and promised myself that I would never again ask anyone for an autograph. I never have.

I have a friend who loves the idea of spotting celebrities. She’s interested in popular culture. She enjoys movies, and her favorite TV shows. She hosts a fun Oscar party every year on the evening of The Academy Awards. Because of her interests, there are a lot of celebrities she would enjoy encountering. We once sat with our families in a San Diego restaurant and another friend reported spotting Elton John earlier that day. She lit up with excitement. Responding a bit dismissively I said, “I would not walk across the street to see Sir Elton.”

“That’s not true,” she teased. “If you knew he was in that store over there, you’d go.”

“To do what?” I scoffed. “To look at him? Why would I do that?”

“You’d go,” she said seriously.

I’ve thought about this a lot and I stand by what I said. I would not cross the street to see Elton John. I just can’t imagine being interested enough to take the steps. I could not, however, say the same of James Taylor. If James was across the street, I’d go over, but not so I could see him. I would go with the hope of thanking him for all the enjoyment he’s given me through the years. I know

it's an odd thing but I feel as though I have a relationship with James. And, if it's odd for me, it must be really weird for him but I think he understands. Relationships are created through communication. One party speaks. The other listens and then responds. James has been speaking to me for many years and I've been listening. I just haven't had the opportunity to respond. So I'd enjoy walking across the street to say thanks.

I got the chance to do that very thing with Davy Jones. He sat in row 4B directly across the aisle from me. He spoke with a woman to his left and I recognized his voice before I looked at his face. "Well, how about that," I thought. "It's Davy Jones." When we disembarked I stood and said, "Davy, thanks for all the fun you gave me so many years ago. I appreciate it."

He smiled, "Well... you are welcome," He said.

I wouldn't have that conversation with Elton John. I know many people would. I'm just not one. I don't feel like I have a relationship with Elton. He may have been trying to speak to me through the years but I wasn't listening so I have nothing to say. And that's exactly how I feel about dozens of other celebrities who I've encountered in airports or on planes. I feel no excitement or fascination at all. I just see people going to work or flying back home —Dionne Warwick, Forest Whittaker, Martin Sheen, John Ratzenberger, Hal Linden (remember Barney Miller?), Brock Lesnar, Jesse Ventura, John Thompson, the entire Detroit Pistons basketball team, Teller of Penn and Teller, Richard Simmons (noisy flight) and of course Garrison Keillor. I live in Garrison's city and we fly out of the same airport so I've encountered him several times. Because he is arguably America's favorite storyteller it is unsurprising that I would feel a kinship. But he is also, admittedly, America's shyest storyteller. I've taken

several opportunities to thank him for his work. Each time he muttered something.

Tiny Tim flew with me from Detroit. With his tall frame, large hooked nose, and stringy grey hair he was impossible to miss. There were less than thirty of us on the plane so most of the seats were empty. He sat across the aisle. I noticed that his grey hair was just about the color of his skin. The flight attendant announced that, due to the small number of passengers, we were free to choose a more comfortable seat. Tiny Tim shuffled way back to the last row where he sat alone looking out his window. Of course I can't say he felt lonely but he sure looked that way. He died a week or two later. The memory saddens me.

As does my memory of Jerry Springer though not because he looked lonely. Unlike Tiny Tim, Jerry was surrounded on the plane with at least a half dozen noisy people though I couldn't tell if they were friends or just fans who sucked on to him as he walked down the concourse. I sat in row five directly behind him. I half expected a couple overweight trailer park women, sitting back by the lavatories, to parade up the aisle and claim that Jerry was responsible for their pregnancies. I imagined the plane cheering, "Jer Ree! Jer Ree! Jer Ree!" Listen... I don't know Jerry Springer. I don't know the man's heart. But... I hate what he does for a living and it was sad to feel so little in common with another human being.

That was in contrast to my flight with Fred Rogers. I was living in Massachusetts and flying out of Bradley Airport serving the Springfield/Hartford area. Fred had been in Connecticut where he received an honorary doctorate at Yale. As I stood in line to board my flight I saw the familiar face of jazz pianist Johnny Costa who, being the musical director of Mr. Roger's

Neighborhood, made frequent appearances on the show. I introduced myself and thanked him for his great work, telling him how much my own children loved Mr. Roger's Neighborhood and what that meant to Judy and me.

"Oh thanks so much," he said. "When we get on the plane I'd love to have you share that with Fred. He'll appreciate it so much."

I expected to see him in first class but we passed by and walked several rows into coach where Fred sat talking very quietly and patiently to a little girl. The girl seemed quite unsurprised to see him on her plane but her mother was beaming. Fred reached out his hand to greet the woman and introduced himself. "Hello, I'm Fred Rogers," he said. Then placing his hands on the little girl's head almost as in a blessing he said, "You have a very sweet daughter."

"Thank you so much," she said. "Amanda, can you say thank you to Mr. Rogers?" The little girl nodded and smiling followed her mom down the aisle.

"Fred," Johnny Costa said, "I want you to meet Bob. He's a musician and a storyteller."

"Hi Fred," I said, "Thanks so much for the joy you've brought to my two little boys and my wife and me. I was just telling Johnny that the kids can be bouncing off the walls but when he starts to play the theme music and you walk in that door they are mesmerized. And you hold them for half an hour. It's amazing really."

"Well that is so wonderful to hear Bob," he said sounding remarkably like... well actually just like Mr. Rogers. "You know..."

here's the thing." He said, "I look into that camera and I imagine I'm speaking right to your boys. That's the secret. But it's not a trick. I'm talking right to them and you can tell them that."

"I will," I said. "Thanks again. So nice to meet you."

He was not guarded. While we spoke he looked me right in the eye. It was as if he recognized the relationship I felt with him and was not threatened. Ninety minutes later, at the baggage carousel in Pittsburgh, I grabbed my suitcase and glanced toward Johnny and Fred. They were looking toward me. They waved and Fred shouted, "Nice to meet you Bob. Hope to see you again." I actually believed him. I still do. That was my best celebrity encounter though not nearly as thrilling as the day my sister and I chased fame through the terminal in Detroit. I'll not experience that excitement ever again.

Through the last couple years, as a result of some success in my work, I myself have a small degree of celebrity status. By this I mean that I get recognized very often—mostly at the airport. It's always people who are happy to share how much they've enjoyed a performance—people who just want to say thank you. It's nice to never feel the urge to run away like Gary did. I always try to have an encouraging smile and a ready handshake like Jim. Most of all, I try to be loving and real and patient like Fred. People deserve that much. After all, they didn't initiate the relationship.

Our parents were not familiar with the band we'd chased through the terminal though my mother didn't care much for their name. We made our way outside to await the plane that would carry us to San Francisco. My father lined us up on a bench. My little sister Ingrid was, of course, clueless. Sally tried to look composed the way she might imagine the girls in "Seventeen". I was still

elated, reliving every moment of our breathtaking pursuit. He snapped our picture.



Slide 13



The Slide: My grandfather, sister and mother

The Date: Christmas Eve, 1963

The Photographer: My father

Film is exposed at the speed of light but most of us don't move that quickly. That's why we're so often caught unprepared in photographs. In this slide my mother is somewhere between facial expressions and my big sister who is

tenderly cradling our little sister's doll... well... who knows what going on there? But my grandfather, the subject of the photo, smiles in obvious delight at his Christmas gift. It is a King Size paint-by-number oil set from Craftint. My father raised the camera, focused carefully and snapped the picture.

“Sheesh Dad,” Sally complained. “Thanks for letting me know. That’s gonna look stupid.”

My grandfather turned the box around so I could see. The two panels shown on the front were shown on the back as well though one of them, the one of The Last Supper, was pictured in stunning color. I followed along as he read aloud.

*“CRAFTINT KING SIZE DELUXE
PAINT-BY-NUMBER OIL PAINTING OUTFIT
The Ultimate In Paint-By-Number Sets”*

“Each set contains, two huge 18 x 24 genuine artist's panels, 30 numbered jars of oil paint, 3 deluxe artist's brushes, a large bottle of brush cleaner, and complete directions.”

“It's exciting and challenging for you to paint the 2 beautiful panels in each King Size Set. Remember BOTH of the panels paint-up in FULL COLOR! One is shown in black-and-white merely to withhold the thrill of achieving the actual FULL COLOR results!”

“Wow,” I said. “Let’s do it!”

My grandfather laughed. “No Bobby. I think I’ll work on these myself. This project is going to take some very careful work. You

see, this is what you call real art.” And with that he raised the age- old question. What is art?

My mother and father bought the gift knowing he would love it. He had retired from the bottle factory and needed something to keep himself busy. And, where some would suffer from the tedium of filling one paint number at a time for hours on end, my grandfather just finished forty years on the line putting bottles in boxes one by one, hour after hour, day after day. Tedium was not a problem. Furthermore he had an artistic bent—or at least a creative one. He loved to build things. He played nearly a dozen instruments including the musical saw. He sang, whistled, whittled and carved. And he’d been hinting about a paint-by-number set. For years he’d seen full-page Life magazine advertisements promising that anyone could be a Rembrandt. Of course it wasn’t quite true. What they meant was, anyone could put paint on a panel - or as Craftint called it a “HUGE 18 X 24 genuine artist’s panel” –and after a few days or maybe weeks they could have a painting that reminded one of Rembrandt. But, of course, Rembrandt never painted the way these paint-by-number painters did. I wonder though...what if he had? What if Rembrandt or Leonardo or Michelangelo or Picasso had decided to create this way? I’m guessing these guys could have still pulled off some real art?

Craftint did not start the odd revolution. In fact Michelangelo may be guilty of inspiring the whole thing by assigning pre-numbered pieces of his famous chapel ceiling to his students. But Palmer Paints, the first of many paint-by-number companies, launched Craft Master in 1951. In the first two years they sold nearly five million kits created by a staff of twenty-five full time artist/designers. Wide-eyed kittens, Scotty puppies, New England seascapes, Swiss Alps, tropical lagoons, Alaskan glaciers,

oriental shrines, Venetian canals, snowy egrets and yes even nudes—all could be painted by anyone able to hold a brush and see. Stores were forced to set up entire paint-by-number departments to handle the rush of sales. In what became a huge publicity ploy, red-faced judges at The San Francisco Art Show awarded third prize to a Craft Master painting. Even President Eisenhower was a paint-by-number enthusiast giving kits to his entire White House Staff for Christmas. Television stars “Ozzie and Harriet” were seen on their show dipping a brush into tiny vials of premixed color and painting away at the kitchen table.

Paint-by-numbers were an American craze. Nearly every home had one hanging somewhere. Art critics were, of course, beside themselves—nearly apoplectic—but they held little sway over America. Certainly no one in my town paid them any attention. We lived in a fairly artless, culturally deprived part of the Appalachians. Did we think paint-by-numbers were tacky? Hey, we’d just spent four months gluing together a ten thousand-piece puzzle of the Taj Mahal. We hung it over the fireplace. We were probably the wrong people to ask that question.

“Okay,” the critics said, “but all this staying in the lines is defeating the artistic process and destroying the creative spirit.”

Well, I wasn’t so sure that was true. After all, staying in the lines was pretty much what we did in the 1950s. And who was to say we couldn’t get a little crazy once in a while--maybe use vial number 9 to paint all the 1s and 4s. I’m not saying I ever got so wild but hey—I could have.

My son Nate is a real painter—an artist and teacher. We often find ourselves grappling about the art world. Judy and I recently returned from a trip to Washington where we visited The

National Gallery of Art. It was there, one floor down from a gorgeous exhibit of small French landscapes that we gazed upon a shower stall hanging on the wall. It was an old ceramic shower stall just hanging there—about three feet off the ground, placed at a twenty degree angle. I later told Nate, “I’m not sure how many of my tax dollars were used to create this grand masterpiece but whatever I paid was too much.”

“You have to understand Dad,” he said, “There are two camps. There are the fine art people and then there are the conceptual artists. Most of the time, they don’t have much in common.” He went on to explain that fine art is often quite beautiful... or if not beautiful at least displaying the effort of a skillful artist. Fine art is the kind most of us like to hang in the dining room. On the other hand, conceptual art is not concerned with skill. Conceptual art is all about the idea as in, “Hey I have an idea. I think I’ll write a grant to hang that old shower stall on a wall. I’ll put it about three feet above the ground at, let’s say, a twenty-degree angle. I was thinking ‘bout the National Gallery.”

I know that art appreciation is a matter of personal taste. I’ve seen television ads and heard the announcer screaming, “The Starving Artist Sale at The Holiday Inn! Three days only! Original paintings! All for under \$14!” A thirty-second ad is long enough to know why these artists are starving and why some should probably die. But, I gotta say... forced to decide between these works and an askew shower stall hanging in my living room, I’m going with the crappy paintings every time.

Nate earned his MFA. He spent two years creating paintings using old 50s snapshots as source material. I think he did a great job combining skill and concept. In his own words: “My paintings navigate and comment on the historical space of 1950s America

as seen in discarded snapshots and slides. Paint and brush become the tools for possessing a photograph and the memories of people and places. The camera captures a moment of frozen time, but by slowly remaking the photographic image into a painting the viewer is compelled to reconsider what is depicted and to search for its inherent meaning.”

What a great concept. And the viewer is indeed compelled—which, I think, is a characteristic of real art. Real art compels one to ponder, consider, contemplate, feel, act, change and on and on.

So here’s what I’m thinking. Conceptual art is about the idea. That being so, can you think of a more exciting idea than the one Dan Robbins thought? In 1950, Dan was a twenty-six year old artist working as a package designer at Palmer Paints. He had an idea. I can’t say he thought of it as conceptual art. It was probably just a way to make money—but what an idea! He decided to make paintings and then deconstruct them into areas of pure unblended color, each color represented by a number. Then he’d mail the numbered drawings to millions of people around the world. Many of these people would never have held a paintbrush in their lives but that was the idea. Dan would convince them that if they followed his simple instructions they could create a work of art. If they believed him, it would result in millions of paintings. What would happen in the art world... no.... what would happen in the *world* if he could pull this off? Well he did pull it off. And what difference did it make? I can only speak for one man.

During January and February of 1964, nearly everyday after school, I stopped by my grandparent’s to see my grandfather’s progress. Each day I got more excited. And so did he. As I walked

in the front door I could see him seated at the dining room table covered with newspapers. He peered through the bottom of his bifocals carefully filling in the spaces.

“I finished all the 26s this afternoon,” he said proudly. “Now I’m thinking it’s time to stop before I go blind. Look it here.” Then he held up the panel so I could see and each day I was more amazed. If I stood far enough away, all the pure colors blended beautifully. “Yes sirree Bobby,” he said. “This is gonna be some real art.”

What did Dan Robbin’s dream mean to my grandfather? I can honestly say that I never saw him happier.

So I wonder...was it real art?

Slides 32, 46, 652, 66 and 9



The Top Slide: The Evangelical Covenant Church

The Photographer: My sister Sally

The Date: Summer 1967

My town had only a couple thousand residents but boasted a dozen churches, though actually I don't recall a lot of boasting. The churches were all small. The Methodist and Presbyterian were probably the largest but even so I don't think they could

have squeezed more than a hundred-fifty in their pews. Our little building exceeded fire code at a hundred though seldom was that a threat.

Speaking of fire codes, the front doors were the only way in or out of our church—makes me shudder a bit. On the other side of these doors was a small entry area with coat racks and hat shelves. The sanctuary was straight ahead through glossy painted, creaking double- swinging doors. A carpet runner bisected the pews—ten rows on the left, eight on the right. There were fewer on the right due to the heating register in the floor. The upward blast through that metal grate would easily melt an old lady's nylons were she forced to sit above it on a winter morning.

At the front were two elevated platforms. To the left stood an upright piano and to the right an electric organ. Between them a large wooden pulpit anchored the room. Behind the pulpit sat three chairs. The center one (the one with the arms) was largest and, oddly, never sat upon. When I was seven the pastor's son told me that no one sat in that chair because that one was for God. This seemed plausible. Even at so young an age, I had a vague conceptual understanding of God's attributes like omnipresence (meaning always there), omniscience (meaning all knowing) and, of course, omnipotent. I also understood, purely from personal experience, that God was invisible. So he might very well sit in that chair. Who could tell?

From the beginning of my life I was around the church a lot. My father was the chairman for thirty some years as well as a Sunday school teacher. My mother served as treasurer for most of my life and both parents sang in the choir. From elementary age on, I helped my father mow grass, rake leaves, shovel walks, vacuum

carpets, scrape and paint—really whatever needed doing. I was happy to be grown and gone the morning he pulled on hip waders and descended into the church basement to pump out two feet of raw storm sewage. The man was dedicated.

I remember being in the building one Saturday while my mother dusted the pews in preparation for the Sunday service. I wore my hair short in those days, much as I do now, and I liked it to stick up straight in the front. Like many boys, I used a nearly miraculous product called Butch Wax. It came in a blue plastic tube about four inches long. To get the product on your hair you twisted off the cap and then with one finger pushed the wax from the bottom until it oozed out the top. Then you placed the tube onto the front of your hair and slid it upward. Boy, that did it! If you left your hair alone it would not move all day or perhaps ever again.

On this particular Saturday, I horsed around in the sanctuary waiting for my mother to finish. I don't recall how it happened but somehow my Butch Wax fell inside the top of the upright piano. On tiptoes, hanging by my armpits from the hinged lid, I gazed deep into the guts of the instrument. The tube was gone. My mother had not seen what happened, so I quietly closed the lid and innocently ran my finger up and down the keys to hear if anything sounded at all... well... waxy. Fortunately, everything seemed fine so I was off the hook. Of course, if God was sitting in his center chair, he could hardly have missed what happened but I wasn't sure it qualified as a sin so I kept it to myself.

It was my secret until well into my twenties though by then I'd long abandoned any guilt. Honestly, I'd nearly forgotten. Judy and I visited my parents one Christmastime and went to the church with my father to help decorate the tree. This involved rolling the piano a few feet to one side. Normally it was a simple

procedure but this year one of the piano casters would not roll. Stooping to investigate I was delighted to find my old tube of Butch Wax jammed between the metal wheel and housing. Judging from the wax's smell and color, it had aged none at all.

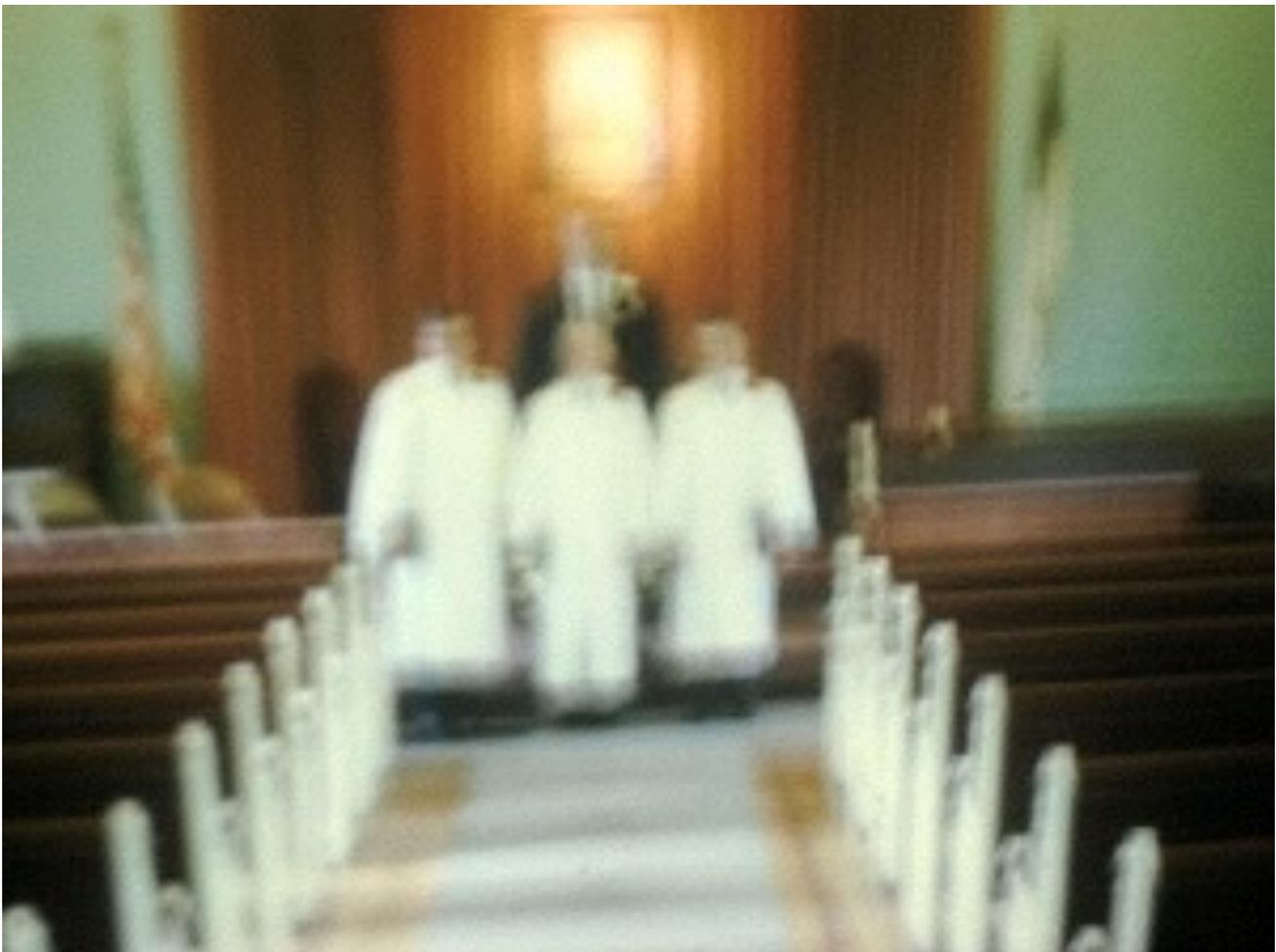
In retrospect, I should not have worried that a little wax would harm the music in our church because, honestly, it could not have gotten worse. Like most churches, we sang the great old hymns of the faith. Unlike most churches, we sang them at half speed—maybe slower. Everyone needed three or four breaths just to make it through the first line. When we finally reached the chorus, I could not hold a whole note without growing dizzy and tilting toward my grandmother. Occasionally people just passed out. True, it happened most often in the summer so heat was certainly a factor but it always happened while singing. My mother warned my grandfather not to lock his knees. This was easier said than done. Many hymns had seven or eight verses—maybe more—with a chorus sung between each. That meant my old grandfather stood bent kneed for ten or twelve minutes. He never passed out but often, early in the week, found himself unable to walk.

Sometimes my father and I tried to push the tempo, singing extra loudly, hoping the organist might follow along but she would not do it. Or perhaps could not. Either way it was a tug of war we always lost. Most likely, it was a tug of war she didn't know was happening. I don't think she even heard us. Certainly she was unaware of her own hearing aid dueling with several others in the congregation causing the neighbor's dog to howl mournfully. It was a sad sound coloring even our more joyful dirges. The first time I heard Good Vibrations by the Beach Boys, I remember thinking, "That weird space-aged instrument in the chorus sounds just like Sunday mornings."

Music was not my only complaint. There were also the pews. It is clear to me now that the pews in my church were not designed to be sat upon. They were hard maple and slippery beyond a child's control. The back and seat were set at ninety-degrees though, I swear, the back tilted in a bit in several rows. During the service my parents quietly (you know the look) encouraged me not to squirm and to sit up like a big boy—bottom in the corner, legs dangling over the edge. This I found impossible as sitting like a big boy with my bottom in the corner meant my little boy legs did not reach far enough to dangle over the edge. Consequently my calves rested painfully on the front of the pew cutting off my circulation within minutes and causing what I called “stinglies” to vibrate from my toes half way up my body. At that point I slid noisily onto the floor and then could not stand because my legs were no longer connected. One of my parents would put me back on the pew whereupon the cycle repeated and this brings me to my next complaint—the preaching.

The preaching was after all the only reason I endured the pews and honestly I never really understood much of it. My earliest recollection was feeling frightened by an angry man, Reverend Perry, who strutted and screamed. The style was not consistent with our denominational heritage and fortunately he was our pastor for only a couple years. Unfortunately those were the very years I became able to retain memories. After he left, it was a new pastor every year or so and not one prepared sermons for children. So a sermon was twenty-five minutes of stinglies and mind numbing incomprehension to be endured until we all mumbled the final fourteen-verse hymnslog during which time my grandmother could have killed, cleaned and cooked a Sunday chicken.

At the beginning of seventh grade, I was required to enter a two-year study called Confirmation. Two buddies and I met with our pastor for an hour or so every Saturday morning and I did perhaps another hour of homework each week. We were given an elementary overview of the Bible, Church History and Christian Belief but none of it felt elementary to me. It felt important, sometimes confusing and mostly difficult particularly the memorization—the books of the Bible, The Apostle’s Creed and much more that I’ve forgotten. At the end of two years, if we believed what we were taught and were willing to say so in front of the congregation, we were invited to join the church as official members. I believed it all and gladly joined but I can’t say I enjoyed the Confirmation experience very much. Actually, I can’t



say I remember it much.

I have one slide taken on Confirmation Sunday. I stand at the front of the church. I am white robed like my friends Curt and Phil on each side. Behind us stands our pastor in a black suit. I don't know whose fault it is but the picture is terribly out of focus. I don't know whose fault it is—probably my own—but that's the way I remember Confirmation too.

Fortunately my church experience was not all so difficult. In fact some of it was wonderful. Our congregation began in 1900 as The Swedish Mission Covenant Church. By the time I was born they'd dropped their Scandinavian moniker but held on to many of their best traditions. One of them was the annual Christmas Smorgasbord, probably the envy of every other Christian in town and most of the heathens too. Since we had nowhere to eat at the church, we rented the top floor of the Grange Hall. Parking on side streets, we walked the sidewalks between deep mounds of shoveled snow and climbed the crooked outside stairs to the banquet hall. Even before opening the door our nostrils flared with the spicy smell of a couple hundred thousand Swedish calories.

The windows dripped from heat rising off tables full of steaming food. In the kitchen, women in fine dresses beneath colorfully printed aprons looked as if they'd gained a few pounds from the sheer smell of it all. Meatballs, korv sausage, thuringer, smoked salmon, baked ham, pickled herring, deviled eggs, baked beans, rice pudding, lime Jell-O with pear halves and maraschino cherries, pickled beats, cucumbers, olives, limpa rye, hardtack, pepparkakor—have you had enough or should I go on? This was the kind of feast that historically made pillaging Vikings sleep for months.



As a special treat, at the end of the evening, each child was given a clear plastic gift bag containing a candy cane, a Hershey bar and a fresh Florida orange. This may not seem like a big deal today but it was then. In those days it was hard to find an orange in the wintertime and these oranges were the size of softballs. The candy canes were a foot long. I'm serious. And the Hershey Company hasn't made a chocolate bar that big since Barney Fife left for Mt. Pilot—since Will Robinson got lost in space.

My church knew how to celebrate. Every summer, following the service on one particular Sunday we headed out to the Hooley property for a picnic. I never knew Mr. Hooley but he had a nice



piece of woodland beside an open field and he offered it for our use. Picnic Sunday was the only time I went to church without a suit and tie. After the service we climbed in our cars and headed out of town. My father and some of the other men spent the previous afternoon scything grass for softball and putting up long tables in the grove. Ten minutes after we arrived, charcoal grills poured smoke from hot dogs and burgers. We shoved our hands into deep tubs of ice water searching for homemade root beer or Grape Nehi and then the eating began. Insert half of the Smorgasbord above and then add hotdogs, burgers, barbequed chicken, corn on the cob, apple, cherry and strawberry rhubarb pie topped off with rich vanilla ice cream made on site. What a great afternoon.

So here's my point. I did not always love being at my church but I

loved my church. Outside my home, it was the most important place in my life. Why is this so? Because of the story I heard there again and again. I could not escape the story then nor can I now. From my boyhood it wove itself seamlessly into my being. Here it is in a nutshell...

God who was omni-always (that's my word for around from the beginning) made us all, made us perfectly and loved us completely. It couldn't get any better than that. He also made us with free will, which was the best thing to do but unfortunately we used it to turn against him and that got us into terrible trouble because we became separated from our very source of life. This meant that we had to experience death. Death hadn't even existed until then. So to help us out, God made us some rules. There weren't even a dozen but we couldn't follow them, which only made things worse. Some people were so miserable they just threw up their hands and quit trying. The only good thing about the rules is that they convinced us we couldn't get back to God by being good. And that's just what he wanted us to know.

Then he did an amazing thing. He came down to earth as a human baby. Talk about a great disguise! Only a few suspected who this baby might really be. Even his mother forgot from time to time. Anyway, the baby (who was named Jesus meaning "The Lord is Salvation") grew into a boy. We don't know very much about his early years. Only one story is told about him getting separated from his parents during a pilgrimage. He was twelve and they were scared nearly to death. One can imagine them thinking, "It's one thing to look after a God-baby but quite another when he hits puberty."

The only other thing we're told is that he never sinned. Then in his early thirties, after amazing many people with his teaching

(not to mention his miracles) he got into trouble. He angered the religious authorities of his day until they figured out a way to get him sentenced to death. So Jesus, who was innocent and could have called down a few battalions of angels to defend himself (that's a whole other story) instead allowed himself to be executed upon a cross. It was his idea to pay the price for all the sins that men and women would ever commit. I know. It's crazy. Omni-crazy even. And there's more. Jesus didn't stay dead but instead rose back to life proving that he was God, more powerful than death and able to offer us a gift of life—full, free and forever.

This is the story I heard from my earliest boyhood. I didn't often hear it all in one sitting, but week after week, month after month,

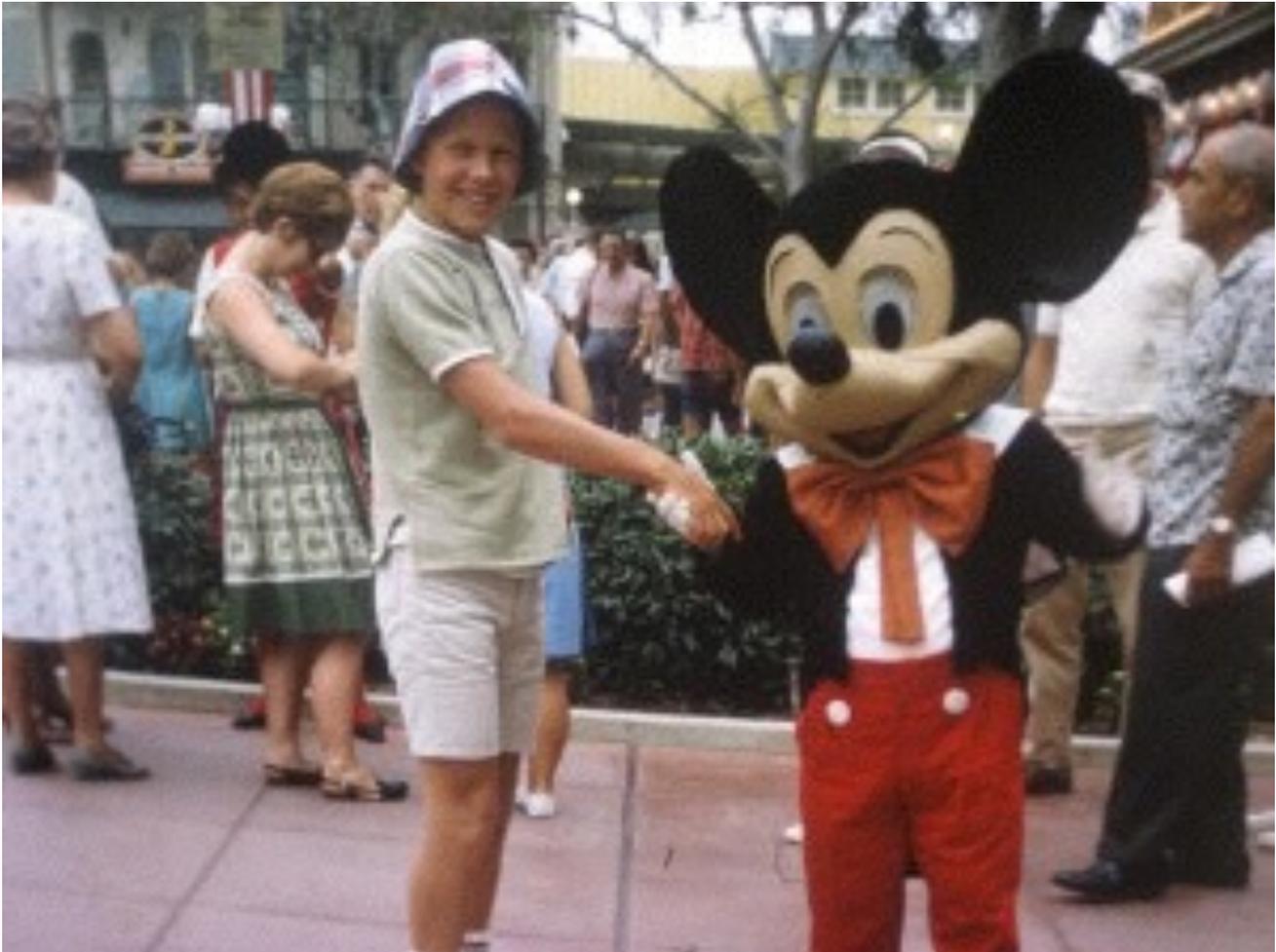


year after year, in Bible stories and sermons and dragging hymns, through Advent and Christmas, Holy week and Easter, smorgasbords and picnics, in the lives of people sitting next to me in the pews, some who lived well and others not so much, the story came alive. It belonged to me. I could not be myself without it.

Of course, there is much more to tell. This is only a snapshot—little more than a thumbnail really. I know that some people haven't given the story much thought. Others know it well and ridicule the whole thing. I stand with those who believe it is true.

At the end of the service, Rev. Perry would shout, "Let us pray." I loved it when he said those words. It meant he was almost finished and then we could go home and eat.

Slides 20, 44, 864 and 1106



The Top Photo: Mickey Mouse and me

The Date: Early July, 1965

The Photographer: My cousin Peter

I went with my Californian cousins to Disneyland. I may have been the first in my town to go there—maybe the first in all of Northern Pennsylvania. People from our parts didn't travel much. A trip to Disneyland was a big deal in

1965. I suppose it still is but back then Disney World was six years from opening and Disneyland, Walt's original dream, was still one of a kind. Walt himself kept a little apartment on the second floor of the fire station, just inside the main gate, and it was not unusual to see him strolling down Main Street greeting his guests. Like most American kids, I watched "Walt Disney Presents" every Sunday night so I was familiar with many scenes around the park. What I'd not seen I imagined well.

I was twelve years old, only days from turning thirteen as evidenced by the slides in the carousel. In one I stand in my madress hat with Mickey Mouse, shaking his white glove, feeling a little silly knowing I might be too old for my level of excitement. In another, two mermaids lay sunning on the rocks of a serene lagoon, apparently unaware that I am photographing their alluring, scaly forms from The Sky Ride gondola floating high above. I remember viewing the processed slide for the first time and being disappointed that the mermaids appear so far away. I recalled capturing them in my viewfinder. I remembered focusing the lens so carefully. Believe me, I had 'em! They were right there! I rode The Sky Ride a lot that day. The ticket taker knew my name.

On one of my flights I was stunned to find the mermaids gone. I peered deep into the coral green. A fleet of grey submarines followed a rail around the lagoon. There! Right beside a sub, I saw one swimming porpoise like only more attractive than any porpoise I'd envisioned. Even from so high I could see she was beautiful. I had to get on that sub for a closer look. My cousin Peter rode the gondola in the seat across from me. He was a year younger. He stretched his chubby frame to look over the hand rail dangling spit from his lips. It was a game he'd nearly perfected. The idea was to let the spit stretch toward the ground a few



inches—maybe as many as four or five—and then suck it back in before it fell on the tourists below. Unsuccessful in his last attempt he jerked his head back in the gondola and slunk down as far as the safety bar would allow.

“Oh Sheesh,” he said, howling in laughter, “I think I got that lady bad.”

“Hey, you wanna try that submarine ride?” I said casually.

“Naw. Look at the line. It’s clear over to the Matterhorn. Let’s do this some more.”

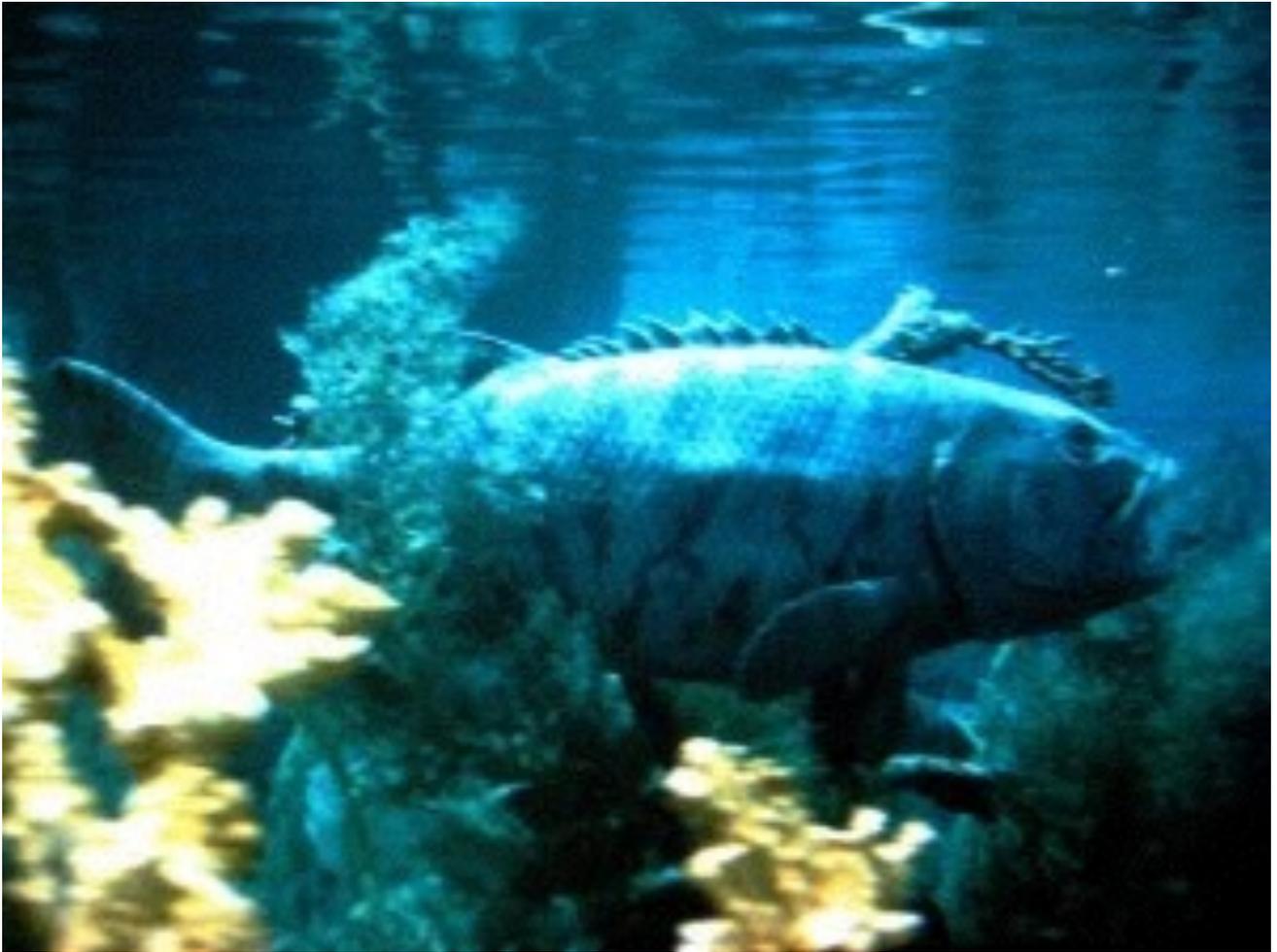
So we took another ride across. This time from a distance I could see the creatures were back, tail fins flapping playfully, bodies glistening in the late afternoon sun. When we were directly above them, the gondola stopped for about a minute swinging slowly back and forth. I did not know for certain that it was an answer to prayer. It may have been a coincidence. Either way, I took the opportunity to snap a picture. I looked at my cousin. He was about year away from sharing my interest.

“I think I’ll try that sub,” I suggested again. “I always wanted to ride one. You comin’ or not?”

We stood for a little over an hour and as we neared the front of the line I peered toward the outcropping of rock where the mermaids lived. They were gone. This either meant they’d punched their time cards and blended into the mostly human park populace or perhaps they were back in the water. At the front of the line, we squeezed through the turn style and descended the stairs into one of the eight subs circling the lagoon. Ours was called Nautilus. I grabbed the first tiny seat, flipped it down and peered out my porthole into a coral reef possessing beauty only Disney and God could create. Slowly the sub began to move. We heard loud sonar pings and the voice of our captain. “Let me be the first to welcome you to the port of Rainbow Ridge, the gateway to the wonderland of the sea. Please keep your hands and arms inside the submarine. The fish get mighty hungry!”

My cousin looking through his own window said, “Oh cool, look at that big fish. It looks almost real.”

I hardly heard their words. I shoved my nose against the tiny window and tried to look right or left, my breath condensing on the cold glass. Crabs, spiny lobster, a large grouper, a giant squid



and then more sonar pings.

“Now ahead of us, folks, is a seaweed forest. The submarine’s pressurized atmosphere sometimes gets to you, and makes tangles of seaweed take on strange shapes like fish and maybe even mermaids.” I shoved my face against the glass. No mermaids.

The captain droned on, “Now we’re going deep into the ocean to view a dazzling maritime graveyard.” A mournful sound filled the submarine echoing my fading hopes. “There my friends is the

saddest sound of the ocean,” the captain said. “That is the song of the hump-backed whale.”



He talked the entire time but peering deeply into the ocean depths, beneath polar caps and past Neptune’s sputtering paint pots, I heard little. After seven or eight minutes he said, “Well I can see we’re once again approaching Rainbow Ridge and we’ll now begin our ascent. You may need to pop your ears.” I’d seen the subs from the sky so I knew we’d not descended but now my heart sunk deeply. This was our last day. My cousin would never agree to wait in line again and we couldn’t stay on for another ride. We’d tried that twice at Pirates of the Caribbean and been told by a human pirate that we ought not try it again if we hoped to live another day. He let out a laugh and a loud arghhh. Then

leaning near our faces with a distinctly southern Californian accent he whispered menacingly, “You - really - do - not - want - to - mess - with - me. You understand don’t you?” That seemed a bit harsh for one of Walt’s employees but yes... we understood.

I was about to pull away from my porthole when I saw a splash of bubbles and something swimming toward me. I cupped my hands goggle like around my eyes and tight against the glass. Yes! It was a mermaid! She swam to my window, reoriented her body vertically, smiled and blew me a kiss. Graceful bubbles escaped her lovely lips as I felt my face flush. She was an exquisite specimen. Her scales, glimmering rainbow colors in the refracted coral light, modestly covered her partially human form. She ascended slowly toward the surface and I took her in fully—thick flowing hair, tanned human skin, dark eyes, two large frustratingly effective clamshells and luminescent scales flashing tiny dots of light on the palms of my hands. She was only inches beyond my face. Then with one flip of her impossibly long fin she was gone.

My camera hung around my neck but I never thought to take a picture. Instead I experienced the moment. The sub stopped and the captain thanked us. “I hope you’ve enjoyed your trip into the wonderland of the sea. Please lift your seat as a courtesy to our next guests.”

My cousin said, “Cool.” I looked at him and realized he not seen her. The portholes were too small, the glass too thick and of course there was that oddity of refracted light. Only I’d seen her smile, felt her kiss and gazed upon her lithe sparkling form. She was mine alone.

Twenty years later and three thousand miles away, I sat around a New England meal with my wife Judy and our closest friends. I shared my siren tale. Laughing, my buddy said, “What a great picture of that peculiar passage from boyhood to being a man. And... it sure rings true. Our son turned thirteen last week. I opened his dresser drawer the other day. On one side were his Legos and on the other side his shaving cream and razor.”

Ah yes. I suspect it was something like that for us all. For me it was Mickey on one slide and mermaids on the other.

Slides 8, 96, 97, 98, 6 and 484



The Slide: Judy and me in Sweden

The Date: June of '75

The Photographer: My father

My paternal grandfather grew up in the province of Smaland in southern Sweden. It is to this day a beautiful land of misty white birch, fields of buttercups and stonewalls everywhere. The walls are not decorative like those in New England. The walls in Smaland are big, five feet tall, six feet across the top, stretching field after field and longer every year.

Each spring the fields yield an abundance of new boulders. The farmers gather this crop they did not sow and pile it higher along the walls preparing for a more fruitful harvest. This hard land was my grandfather's home.

Barely more than a boy, he embraced his mom and dad for the last time and left those rocky fields of tiny potatoes, dreaming of deeper, darker, American soil. The fields he envisioned were probably in Minnesota, where I now live, but he had no idea how vast his new country was. By the time he reached western Pennsylvania, years had passed. He now knew the love of a wife who spoke his language. He knew the joy and worrisome responsibility of young children. He knew the hopeless monotony of American factories and the sweat of the oil fields. And he knew the ache in an immigrant's heart—an ache for which there was no remedy.

One day he saw something that filled him with joy. A "For Sale" sign stood in a field by a farm nestled on a hillside. The farmhouse didn't look like much and was far too small for his growing family, but it was every bit as good as what he'd known in Sweden, maybe better. There was plenty of lumber to build a

barn. The few fields were dark soil, and most wonderfully, there were boulders everywhere. He was finally "home" in America.



My father grew up on that poor farm, sharing the tiny house with his mom, his dad and five siblings. It was a tough life but joy nestled on that rocky hillside. My father's mother, my grandmother, had not met her husband's family in Sweden but she wrote to his sisters faithfully, for sixty years, nearly every week.

In 1966, my grandfather died. My father felt terribly sad that Grandpa never made it back to Sweden. "I should have taken him for a visit," he said. "I could have made it happen." So for his mom, he *did* make it happen. In June of '75, my father, mother

and younger sister Ingrid drove to the farm, picked up my grandmother and began a long journey back to the homeland. There she would meet her beloved sisters in law, Anna and Ruth, to whom she had written most of her life.

During the same weeks, Judy and I traveled back from Africa where we spent our first year of marriage. The chance to meet my family in Sweden was serendipitous. We had planned to spend another year in Zaire but due to Judy's continual struggle with tropical disease, we decided to come home early. She'd had a tough time. From the moment we stepped off the plane, she suffered from the heat and humidity, which by comparison made most American cities—Miami for example—seem brisk and invigorating. It's safe to say her first year of marriage was less romantic than she'd anticipated.

Within three weeks of our arrival I was flat on my back with malaria. It's a scary disease. As the missionaries say, "The first week you hurt so bad you're afraid you might die. But by the second week, you feel so much worse you're afraid you might not." Judy was just nineteen and spent the first month of marriage playing nurse to a delirious husband, crawling on all fours to and from the bathroom and eating through a straw. To make things worse, most of our new friends were missionaries who had long ago made the tough cultural adjustments and didn't seem to remember our novice fears. I believe missionaries are the most forgetful people I've ever known. Let me explain.

The first week we were there, the deacons at our church organized seven consecutive suppers in missionary homes. Each evening the stories began over salads and fresh garden vegetables and continued through chicken mwamba (a delicious combination of chicken, palm oil and peanut butter gravy over

white rice). The dish is surprisingly tasty, though not recommended for seven consecutive evenings. At some point during the meal, our host would say, "So, are you starting to learn your way around?"

"Well, no," I'd reply. "Actually, we're still waiting for our drivers' licenses. Until they come, we're stuck at home."

"Well, praise God for that!" our hostess would say. Then with a little laugh, "Believe me, the longer you're stuck at home, the safer you are. Most of the drivers out there are little kids! Arthur, tell them what happened to Mary."

Each evening the names changed, but the stories remained much the same. Mary was back-ended by a ten-year-old cabby whose uncle, a government official, demanded a payoff or Mary's family would be kicked out of the country.

A guy named Jim stopped his car with the front bumper two inches over the crosswalk and was thrown in jail. Of course the phones didn't work, so no one in the church knew where he was. It took three days to find him. In Africa, prisoners are fed by their families, but Jim was single, so Jim "fasted".

The name Verner Pauls remained consistent through all seven evenings. Poor Verner's car was slammed from the side and shoved into a crowd of people. Verner wasn't hurt, but apparently someone in the crowd was. When he attempted to help them, a mob over turned his Fiat, set it on fire, and beat Verner within a breath of his life. He flew back to Goshen, Indiana, and no one expected him to return very soon. Usually, following a fairly detailed description of Verner's battered body, someone sensitively noticed Judy's tension. Trying to steer the

conversation in a more pleasant direction they'd ask, "Seen any big snakes yet?"

This would lead us into Green Mamba territory.

"Oh, yeah, deadliest snake in the world," our host would warn. "Why, they can kill a horse in three minutes!" Since I'd seen no horses, I was surprised everybody seemed so fixated on that three-minute equestrian statistic. " 'Course, if it bit you, you'd be lucky to last thirty seconds. Did you hear 'bout that Bowers girl who got bit last Christmas?"

Well... yes. We had heard but that didn't matter. They'd tell us anyway about little Lori, who would have been dead if she hadn't been bit in the fatty part of her bum and if her dad hadn't had serum right in the fridge and if the houseboy hadn't chopped the Mamba's long green head off in mid-flight just before it bit her again. The conversation usually ended with our hostess saying, "More dessert anyone?"

I don't know why this behavior surprised me. I suppose it did because one would expect loving Christian people to be more sensitive. On the other hand these were not just loving Christian people. These were missionaries and they are a different breed. I remember their type coming to our church when I was a kid. I endured many long slide shows. Most of the pictures were of church buildings, hospitals, maybe a baptismal service in some muddy river—fairly calm stuff. But always mixed in the middle was a shot of the smiling missionary standing with a painted tribal chief, mud red, holding a long spear, sporting a belt of monkey skulls and always... always someone's femur bone stuck through his nose.

"This is my dear friend Chief Bonsongungu," they'd say. "He comes Wednesdays for tea."

In truth, I believe missionaries are remarkable people. And, who knows, we might have joined their ranks had Judy not contracted Malaria, Typhoid Fever, Shigellosis, Amoebic dysentery and a lovely orphaned family of tapeworms—all in the first six months. On our way home, stopping in Sweden to meet our family, Judy was down twenty ill affordable pounds and I didn't look too beefy myself.

We made our way to my parent's hotel having not seen them in a year. Needless to say they were shocked by our appearance. Their daughter in law was still beautiful but rail thin and their son looked like an indigent. I'd not touched my hair or beard since our wedding day.

For the next week we traveled with the family and my grandmother nearly wore us out. She was the first one up in the morning—ready to go. Stockholm, Goteborg, Malmo and then over to Copenhagen for a day or two at Tivoli Gardens and an evening with the Danish Circus—my grandmother's first circus. She loved it all. Finally the big day arrived, the reason for her journey, the day she would meet Ruth and Anna.

It was a sunny summer morning. We drove our van to the small village of Nybro and then headed out of town into the countryside. My grandmother translated aloud the directions she'd received from Anna while my mother compared each tiny farm to a black and white photo she held in her hand. "Okay, I think we may have found it," my mother said glancing back and forth between picture and landscape. "Bob," she said to my father, "turn here. This is it."



For a hundred yards, we followed a dirt drive—a high wall of boulders on the right, white birch and pine on the left and at the end a farmhouse the color of dandelions. As we approached, an old man rose from a porch swing yelling to those inside. We pulled up in front of the house. I slid the van door open. Two old women shuffled through the screen door. My grandmother saw them and uttered a soft sound. I helped her step from the van as the women made their way down from the porch. All three laughed aloud with outstretched arms before meeting in the middle of the dusty drive where they wrapped themselves together and wept.

Other distant cousins quietly appeared standing with us in a circle around the old women. No one spoke. It was a holy moment. Later formal introductions were made in a joyous blend of languages.

Over the next couple days more cousins arrived, many meals were prepared and eaten, hundreds of photos snapped and then sadly it was time to go. Of course there were more tears. For my grandmother, Anna and Ruth this was a final goodbye. "Okay ladies," my father said, "one more shot." They stood together—Anna, my little grandmother Gerda and Ruth. My father snapped their picture.



The reunion was the highlight of our trip but not the highlight of the eventual slide show. My father had taken most every picture. My mother made it clear that unless my father was in the shot, he would be taking it. Judy and I didn't help much because we used our own camera—a tiny Kodak 110 that we'd carried through Africa. I bought it because I loved its' compact size and because the salesman assured me that everything was going that way. "In the next ten years," he said, "the 110 will become the camera of choice. " Unfortunately, that meant I had no choice about buying the tiny 110 projector since the slides were half the size of my father's more common, supposedly soon to be obsolete 35mm.

Several weeks later, back in the States, all our relatives gathered at my parent's for an evening of slides. They were excited to hear all about Grandma's trip and vicariously meet their Swedish family. Judy and I were there too. Earlier in the day I had organized the slides, discarding the really bad ones and placing the others chronologically in the carousels. My father had returned to work that week so he appreciated my help never questioning my motive. But I had one. Though he did know, he had not taken all the slides. I took one.

We were in a Swedish village. My mother needed something in the drugstore so while my father ran into to get it, my mother stayed in the van with my grandmother. My sister and Judy and I got out to stretch our legs and it was then we saw the advertisement. It was on a large column right in the center of the street. It was unlike any ad I'd seen in modern 1970s America. For that matter, it was unlike any ad I'd seen anywhere. Ingrid commented first, "Sheesh! You won't see that back home."

"No kidding," Judy said. And then laughing, "In fact Bob, I don't think I want you even looking at it."

But I did look at it and I thought to myself, "This advertisement is quite beautiful. It is quintessentially Swedish and I think Dad needs to share it with the family back home."

"Mom," I said through her open window, "give me the camera." I removed the cover, set the shutter speed as quickly as I could and snapped the picture. My father exited the store. We climbed in the van and drove away.

Weeks later, our living room was filled with extended family and a few close church friends. About 9:30, we all agreed it was dark enough and I began the show. My grandmother commented throughout, particularly delighting in the shots of Tivoli and the Danish Circus. "I couldn't believe it," she said, "These crazy elephants sat on stools and this young lady drove her motorcycle on a tight wire right over my head. It was so loud. Oy yoy yoy!" Then she added, "The lady wasn't wearing very much either." Everyone laughed.

Toward the end of the evening came the slides of the reunion, the moment the three "sisters" met and the litany of relatives—who was who and how we were all related. Finally the three old women appeared on the screen posing at their final goodbye.

The room fell quiet.

The projector fan hummed.

No one spoke.

"You know Dad, " I said, "these are beautiful slides."



"Well... thanks," he said softly.

I turned to my uncle. "Don't you agree Carl?"

"I sure do Bobby," he said, "I think they're really something. Makes me so sad I couldn't be there too. They're beautiful. Really great."

I turned back to my father. "I mean it Dad. You really did capture the experience through these images. We can see your heart.

More silent agreement...

Oh look," I said, pretending to fuss with the projector. "I think there's one more." I pushed "forward" on the remote and an image appeared. It was taken in the center of a tiny Swedish village. There was a moment of quiet and then laughter—loud and long laughter. When my father was able to breathe he offered his stammering disclaimer but no one accepted it.

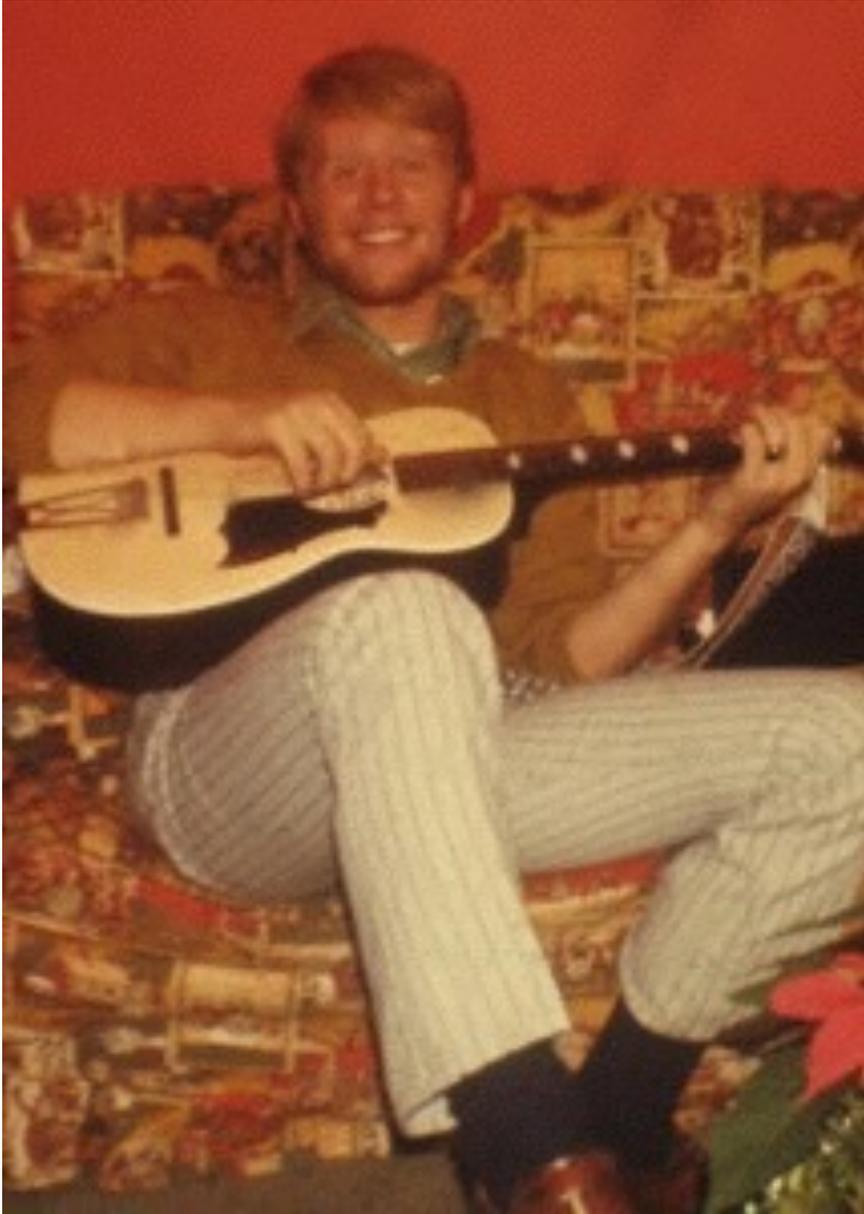
My uncle Glenn, beautifully dead pan said, "I'm disgusted. Come on Martha we're going home."

More laughter.

I had anticipated this moment for over three weeks. It was worth the wait.



Slides 16 and 71



Slide 71: Me on the couch

The Date: December 1971

The Photographer: Unknown

The photo shows me at age twenty, home from college for the Christmas holiday. It could be Easter but camouflaged in the lower right hand corner is one red Poinsettia. It's Christmas time.

I'm slouching comfortably in the corner of our old sofa having found my sweet spot. The soft fabric is printed with early Americana but the design screams 1970s, as does the orange wall behind. The wall wasn't always orange. The previous summer it was a lovely understated mossy green that my family enjoyed for years... so I painted it orange.

For several winters we had ice problems on our roof and the resultant leaking caused cracks in the living room ceiling. I had a couple free weeks between the end of my freshman year and my summer job so my father hired me to Spackle and repaint the ceiling. "And while you're at it," he said, "you might as well go ahead and repaint the walls."

"Yeah, I could do that," I said, "but you know Dad you might want to change it up a bit—maybe paint one of the walls in a complementary color."

"What exactly does that mean?" he asked.

I had just decided to major in art and was anxious to answer the question. "Complementary colors are colors that complement one another," I explained. "They are two parts that create a whole. One color makes the other appear more vibrant. Red with green. Blue with orange. Purple with yellow. With this particular green I say we go with a bright yet soothing reddish orange. What do you say?"

"Well," he said tentatively, "I don't know. I wouldn't want a big change. I've always liked how calm and peaceful this room feels."

"Calm and peaceful are good," I said, "but I've learned some things in my art classes that could really improve the design of this room. I think we could make it pop a bit." My father didn't respond which seemed oddly condescending and I felt an unfamiliar irritation rising in my chest—maybe because this was the first time that I thought I knew something he didn't. I shrugged defensively. "Hey, it's your room Dad. You want green, I'll paint it green. No big deal to me. I don't live here anymore."

He seemed uncertain. "I don't want to be closed to something more attractive," he said. "It's just... I wouldn't want to... I'm just a little concerned that... Explain to me again what you were envisioning."

"Well Dad," I said, "I know you love the autumn and that's all about complementary colors. If the leaves were all red or all orange it would be beautiful but when you mix in that touch of green pine and that blue sky it really pops. Doesn't it? That's the power of complementary colors."

My father stared at his wall. He seemed to not be getting it. "And you're thinking that would work in our living room?" he asked.

"Yes I am," I said passionately. "Dad, if my college courses have taught me anything it's that complementary colors work. One color makes the other even more beautiful. That's why we say they complement each other."

"I don't know," he said. "I think we'll stay with the green."

"And I agree," I shot back. "I think you should stay with the green... on one wall. But why not complement it with another wall of subtle orange?"

"Because I don't know if I've ever seen a subtle orange," he said. "It seems to me that orange is sort of an unsubtle color."

I threw my arms upward gesturing in wild frustration. "Hey that's fine Dad! We should probably forget about it then. Jeesh!" My father, surprised by my reaction, stared at me saying nothing so I continued gaining speed and volume. "Your lack of confidence is irritating because I just studied this stuff for an entire ten week trimester and as you know I got an A plus for the first time in my life which is why Stu Carlson my Art professor told me I'm good at this so I think I know how complementary colors are suppose to work but if you want to stay with peaceful calm soothing subtle mossy green boredom I'm fine with that... really."

He was smiling—maybe on the edge of laughter though I couldn't be sure. "You okay?" he asked.

"Of course I'm okay," I said way too loudly.

He paused staring at the wall, then at me, then back at the wall.

I waited.

"Okay," he said. "You go buy the paint tomorrow and I'll see you after work."

The next morning I stood in the hardware store seconds after the clerk unlocked the front door. I was determined to prove to my father that I could deliver on my promise. I would create a calm

yet vibrant living space. This was important to me because I was at the age when I needed to choose a potential career.

A year earlier, when I went off to college, I knew I wanted to be some kind of performer. I was writing music, playing guitar and singing songs. I was telling stories. I was trying to make people laugh whenever I had the chance and often when I didn't. None of it applied to my college curriculum. I could have chosen to study music but I'd never learned to read notes and it was a tough major. Coming off a less than exemplary high school career I was afraid to attempt that tract.

The next and most logical choice was theater. My freshman year, I auditioned and was chosen for a play. I enjoyed it and thought I did well. Unfortunately the director did not share my feelings and worse yet never thought to tell me his. So one day I stood excitedly outside his opened office door and rapped a knuckle on the glass. He glanced up wincing and waved me in. He sat behind his desk piled high with scripts and blue book essays. He slouched nearly horizontally in his chair with one hand flayed across his brow massaging his temples— headache. With his other hand, he pointed toward a stool and mumbled, "Mr. Stromberg what can I do for you?"

"My advisor told me I should stop by and tell you that I'd like to major in theater," I said.

"Oh she did huh? And why would she advise that?"

"Well, I told her I'd like to become some type of performer and we thought the theater program might be a good place to start." He leaned further back and turned slightly toward the wall. Both hands massaged his eyes now. He had a bad headache.

Then he said slowly, "You don't have it Bob."

"I beg your pardon."

"You don't... have... it."

I was confused. "I don't have what?"

"You don't have the temperament. You don't belong in the arts Bob. This is no place for fun and games. Honestly, I think you should go into nursing. Hospitals need smiley guys like you but we don't need you here."

I don't remember everything he said though he didn't say much. He had a really bad headache. It was clear he didn't know me well and the little he knew he didn't like. I left his office confused, red faced—so embarrassed. I stood in the hallway for a long time staring at an audition board knowing my name was not welcome there. He could not technically keep me out of the program but he directed every play. My chances of getting on stage were not good.

Spring term I enrolled in Art 101 and met Professor Stu Carlson. He saw something in me. He appreciated my work and that changed my life. I knew someday I'd find a way on to a stage but until then I was an art major.

A few weeks later I stood at the counter in the hardware store back in my hometown. "What can I do for you?" the clerk asked.

"I need a gallon of orange paint," I said.

He reached beneath the counter retrieving a large book of tiny color samples. "What color orange are you lookin' for?" he said. "Do you have a name or a number?"

I was unprepared for the question. Staring at two pages of orange squares, one barely discernable from the next I said, "I need an orange that will complement a wall and go with a couch."

"We can mix pretty much any shade you need," he said. "Maybe you could bring in something and we could match the color for you."

And that's what I did. I ran home and got a couch cushion. I figured that way I'd tie the couch color into the orange wall, which would then complement the green wall and carpet creating a well integrated, calm yet vibrant design.

I finished painting in the late afternoon and had just enough time to pick up the drop cloths, wash my hands and return the furniture before my parents pulled in the driveway. I was excited. I thought the room looked great though optically the color created a slight tickling sensation. I grabbed a magazine and sat casually on the couch. I heard my folks pull into the basement garage... then footsteps and conversation up the stairs. The door opened. They looked toward me and their jaws dropped. For a moment, speechless, they did not move. Then my mother said, "My glory!!! That's really... orange!!!" And then, "I hope it's not too bright. Do you think it might be a little bright? Maybe?"

"No, no, I don't think so," I said quickly, "These are complementary colors that's why they seem to kind of....."

My father completed my sentence. "They vibrate don't they? Is that an optical illusion or is the room bouncing around a bit? And Lucielle," he said to my mother, "Look at you. You almost look like you're tipping."

"I am tipping," she said sitting awkwardly on the ottoman. "I feel little queasy too. Do you guys feel that?"

"No," my father said, "doesn't really bother my stomach but I am a little short of breath."

I tried to remain calm, which was difficult with the room pulsing so. "Well," I said, "autumn can take your breath away too. Let's give it a few hours. It may dry a little calmer."

And it did...but not by much. It was a terrible color choice that really only looked somewhat natural from mid October through Halloween. The rest of the year, the orange was far too dominant to integrate with seasonal décor like red Poinsettias. Christmas time was an interior designer's nightmare.

I look now at the photo of myself sitting against the orange wall. I remember my clothes—the favorite brown buckle shoes that I bought for a high school dance and still wore two and a half years later. I loved those shoes. I loved them so much that I bought them a half size too big mistakenly thinking my feet were still growing. I wore two pairs of socks. I remember my favorite light grey denims with the dark pinstripe that I got at the Jeans Boutique on Lawrence Avenue in Chicago. I remember my favorite sweater, my hairstyle and my beard that was finally coming in fully. This was a good time in my life.

And there I sat at Christmas time, my skin reflecting that awful orange. The wall was a failure. But, and here's the point, I was not. I was not a failure or at least never felt like one because for a decade my parents delighted in that awful wall. I'm not suggesting they liked it but they delighted in it decorating it with my equally amateurish paintings. They delighted in the wall simply because it was mine.

Slide 16 on the carousel shows my folks around 1967. They're standing together by the kitchen sink in my grandparent's home. My mom washes. My father dries. At that time my grandparents lived next door and we shared all our evening meals—one day at our house, the next at theirs.



In the photo they are smiling.

This is what I saw most everyday of my life. Oh, I remember many other expressions but if I had to choose one that exemplified who they were and how they looked upon their children, this is the one. We were loved unconditionally which meant we could fail without being a failure.

I remember a conversation. My wife Judy and I had just returned from Africa. We spent our first year of marriage there on the Christian mission field. It was during this time that we decided I had to give performing a try and we formulated a plan. Back home again we sat around the kitchen table with my folks.

"Okay you two," my mother said excitedly, "we are dying to know. What are your plans?"

I was a little nervous to answer. It's not as if we'd been able to calculate our risks but clearly the stakes were high. We had no money and owned little more than our clothes. But... my mother asked so I answered. I said, "I have decided to become a mime."

My mother said, "What's a mime?"

"Well," I said, "It's a kind of actor that usually doesn't talk but that probably won't work so well for me. Still I want to learn how to move like they do. I want to understand the power of gesture. I want to add that to my stories and songs and comedy just to see what happens."

My father looked serious. "Where do you go for something like that?" he said. "And how do you make a living?"

I knew these questions were coming and answered with my rehearsed response. "I found a little theater school in the state of Maine," I said. "We thought we'd move to New England—somewhere near the middle. There are lots of people there and I figure where there are lots of people there are lots of schools. I was thinking I could go to those schools and ask them if they need an assembly program. If they do, they can pay me some money and then we'll pay our bills."

Even as I spoke I felt my confidence waning. *"Why?"* I thought. *"Why had I not chosen graduate school like my friends? I considered seminary. Why didn't I stay with that? Would any schools hire me? Could I find enough work to pay our bills? Could we ever buy a car let alone a house? And we want to start a family! Am I out of my mind?"* It was a crazy idea like the bright orange wall right behind me in the other room.

I looked at my hands. I played with my cup. My finger traced a pattern on the tablecloth. No one spoke. I looked at Judy for help. She sat to my left her expression mirroring my own. We looked across the table at my parents.

They were smiling.

They were both smiling that smile.

"Oh you two," my mother said, "it's perfect."

As it turns out, it was. It was perfect, or nearly so, and it began an adventure continuing to this day—an adventure I might have feared, perhaps fled, had I not known the freedom to fail. What a gift that is.

I am not my parent's only child so I will not speak for my sisters —though I doubt they disagree. They can tell the stories of their lives and are more than welcome to a carousel or ten of their own. As for me...

My parents smiled on my orange wall.

They smiled on me.

They are smiling still.

Those smiles have, in a big way, empowered and sweetened every step of the journey.

Slide 881



The Slide: Relatives from California. I'm in the background.

The Date: October 1964

The Photographer: Unknown

My relatives drove all the way from California to our little town in Pennsylvania. At the time, we were living in State College while my father finished his doctoral studies at Penn State but we drove back “home” on the weekend for a visit. I'd never before met my second cousin Tom and I was

impressed. He was only eighteen but had chauffeured his grand parents, Ralph and Julia, across the entire country. The picture shows them standing in front of my grand parent's home on a late October day. In the background I'm riding a bike. It has big tires, wide handlebars, and a broad seat with long springs. It might be mistaken for a classic vintage beach cruiser. By today's standards (and at a distance) it almost looks cool. It's not though.

A closer look reveals that only the front tire is a whitewall. I ran out of paint before I got to the back. The handlebars, spokes and sprocket are not chrome but silver painted. The bike is impossibly difficult to pedal and, most embarrassingly... it's a girl's. My mother and aunt rode it when they were kids and then it hung in my grandfather's barn for twenty years. It is the very kind one would expect to see ridden by a witch in a tornado.

A few months before the slide was taken, I was staying with my grandparents for several weeks while my folks found a place for us to live in State College. It was during that time that I asked my grandfather if I could restore the bike. I wanted to create something different—unlike any other bike in town—and I might have succeeded had I money, skills or tools.

Bikes were important in my town. Nearly every school-aged kid had one. Between the months of May and October it was difficult to open your eyes without seeing a bike. They were parked in driveways, on front walks or porches, inside opened garage doors, lying in ditches, leaning against storefronts and strewn across front lawns. I knew most every bike in town or at least those belonging to kids near my age. On hot summer days there were perhaps a hundred in the racks by the community pool and not a chain or lock in sight. Flying into the parking lot, I'd swing my left leg over the back tire, stand on one pedal and glide up the

sidewalk before slamming into the rack. Then I had only to scan the other bikes to know which of my friends were waiting for me in the deep end.

Like most kids my first real bike was a twenty inch. It was bright red—probably from Sears. The natural bicycle progression through childhood was as follows.

1. Ride a twenty inch between kindergarten and third grade. The seat and the handlebars were raised as the legs grew longer.
2. Begin riding a twenty-four inch around fourth grade. The seat was lowered back down on the cross bar to resume it's slow ascent.
3. A few years later, if one's genes were tallish, begin riding a twenty-six inch and enter puberty.

I skipped #2, which was preferable to skipping puberty. I kept my little twenty inch far longer than it fit my body. I managed to do so by adding an extra long stem for the seat and adjusting the handlebars straight up. I did it because bike styles were changing right about that time.

For several decades bike designers espoused a “more is more” philosophy. Every bike had fenders with big reflectors. Most had lights both front and rear. There were baskets for the front and wire saddlebags for the back. There were rack carriers with spring clips above each tire. There was a tank between the double cross bars serving no purpose other than looking pretty and adding weight to an already unwieldy design. I don't know who did it first—don't know who came up with the idea but about

fourth grade we started stripping our bikes down to the essentials. Everything came off right down to the chain guards.

My parents were not thrilled with my modifications. My father said, “I think you’re gonna be unhappy without those fenders.”

“Nah,” I said, “It’ll be fine.”

He almost started to laugh but then held back. “Okay,” he said smiling and walked away.

A couple evenings later, during a Little League game, it started to rain hard—real hard. Our parents sprinted for their cars as we kids scrambled for our bikes and all headed for home. A deluge backed up the storm drains as mud and gravel washed onto the paved streets. My parents passed me on Arnold Ave and gave a greeting beep as they drove by. I would have waved had I been able to see. A shower of muddy water flew off my tires plastering a streak of brown from my butt to the base of my neck. A similar one shot into my face and up my nose. Ten minutes later I pulled my bike into our basement garage.

“Hey you,” my mother shouted down the stairs. “You take those clothes off and throw them by the washing machine. Do you hear?”

I did. I took off my uniform, climbed the stairs and walked naked, shivering through the living room to my bedroom. My father, delighting in the moment, smiled as I walked by but never said a word.

It didn’t matter. I loved that bike. It took me anywhere I needed to go in my little world and it took me there fast. My house was at

the top of a steep curving road. It was my launch pad. If I didn't slow down at the intersections—and I seldom did—I could shoot out my driveway and halfway through town before stepping on a pedal. I had a few close calls but unbelievably was never hurt. None of us were—almost seems like a miracle.

The summer following sixth grade, during those weeks I stayed with my grandparents, I finally outgrew the little bike and asked my grandfather about the old one hanging in the barn. It might seem like an odd request but there were some strange bikes coming on the scene. An older kid in town welded two bikes together, one on top of the other. The seat was six feet off the ground. It took him a month to figure out how to get on. Schwinn came out with The Stingray that same year. It was the coolest bike...ever. During the winter months we all looked at the pictures in the Sears and Roebuck catalogue and by spring a few Stingrays started to pop up around town. It had the distinctive banana seat and the high handlebars and it was the first bike I'd seen with multiple speeds.

I worked on the old bike for two weeks—mostly painting. I also took apart the sprocket and laid all the parts on a newspaper. Then I held my grandfather's long stemmed oil can and *boink boinked* some lubricant on the metal pieces. I put things back together but I think not very well. I didn't really know what I was doing. Then one evening I rode my creation to the Tastee Freeze to show my friends. I was excited. They were unimpressed—thought it looked stupid. I acted like I agreed with them—like it was all just a joke—but I was disappointed. A couple months later, during my relatives visit, I took it out for a quick spin and realized that my friends were right. By that time I was okay with the truth though. By that time I had a new bike and it was beauty.

My father and I had talked it through. That road in front of our house was great for shooting down but very difficult to climb back up so I hoped to get a bike with three speeds. I wanted The Stingray. My dad had a better idea and he showed me the picture in a brochure. It was what we commonly called an English bike though a company called J.C. Higgins made this one in Austria. A twenty-six inch, it had fenders but it was sleek and clean, painted black with a little white trim and, best of all, it had three speeds. My parents bought it for me. It wasn't my birthday or anything and I knew they had very little money but they bought it. When I sat on the seat for the first time, stretching my legs to reach the pedals, holding those gummy rubber handgrips, I knew it was perfect.

Like the little red twenty inch, the J.C. Higgins became part of me. For five months out of the year I was on it nearly everyday. Other big "three speeds" began to appear and some may have been better than mine but, for what it's worth, mine was the only J.C. Higgins in town. I loved that bike.

I remember one August day—a week before tenth grade—my memory seared with detail. It was very hot and my bloodshot eyes stung badly from swimming all afternoon with my friends. Approaching dinnertime, someone's smoky barbecue mixing with sun and chlorine called me home. I stepped into my flip-flops, threw my wet towel around my neck and headed toward the bike racks. Half a dozen transistor radios, tuned to the same station, blared The Grass Roots through tinny speakers.

Sha- la- la- la- la- la
Live for today
And don't worry 'bout tomorrow
Hey eeee ey eeee ey

By that time most of the kids had already pedaled home and the rack was nearly empty. Even from a distance I could see that my bike was gone. I was confused. There was no chance it was stolen. That kind of thing never happened in my town—couldn't happen. You couldn't steal my bike and ever hope to ride it. Everyone knew it belonged to me. I heard a friend shouting my name and turned to see him running toward me.

“Strom,” he shouted. “Your bike’s out behind the bleachers by the football field. It’s all smashed up. Somebody threw it from the top.”

“They what?”

“I’m just tellin’ you what I heard,” he said. “Someone threw your bike off the top of the bleachers.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. “Who?”

“I don't know.”

“No, I mean who told you? “

“Hey, I'd rather not say. I don't want to get in the middle of...”

I was in his face. “What do you mean you'd rather not say? Do you know who did this?”

He paused. His shoulders slumped. He took a deep breath. “Yeah, I think I know.”

As we walked together past the pool, around the gymnasium building and up toward the football field, he told me what he'd

heard. By the time we found my bike, we were pretty sure who had destroyed it. Both wheels were pretzeled, fenders smashed, seat ripped, and hand brakes hung from their cables. The bike was ruined.

My buddy helped me carry it back to the rack. We walked past the pool's chain linked fence where people stood gaping and some spoke soft condolences. My face burned with anger, hurt and deep embarrassment. Everyone stared and I didn't know what to do. It made no sense. I didn't have an enemy in the world. "Why?" I wondered. "Why would anyone do such a thing?"

We lay the crippled bike by the rack and I considered what I should do next. "I guess I'll just leave it here for now and walk home." I said.

My buddy climbed on his bike. "Yeah...sorry." He pedaled off.

I stood staring at the bent frame. The J.C. Higgins emblem had sheered a rivet and hung upside down. I heard stifled laughter. Turning to see the backs of two older boys passing by I spoke loudly, "I can't believe you did this." The words were not aggressive but filled with hurt and confusion.

The bigger of the two turned and shot back. "Did what?"

"Did this!" I said pointing at my bike—anger rising in my voice. "I can't believe you threw my bike off the bleachers."

His smaller friend spoke to him. "Come on," he said under his breath. "Let's go."

"Look me in the eye," I said. "Tell me you didn't do this."

The big kid took one step toward me looking me in the eye—but only for a moment. Then quickly turning away and walking off he said, “We didn’t do it.”

At home I told my parents. They were angry and asked me who it was. I said I didn’t know which was mostly true. After all, I couldn’t know for sure. Only the vandals saw my bike flying through the air. I could have told my parents the whole truth but then phone calls would be made and other parents would get involved and I knew I couldn’t prove anything.

It took a long time to get parts to fix my bike but eventually I had it running almost like new. I saw those older guys every day at school. Surprisingly perhaps, I became a close teammate with the big kid—both football and basketball. I actually grew to like him and I admired him as an athlete. He moved away before my junior year. We never spoke about the bike.

Twenty years later I sat at a restaurant table in Orlando, Florida, preparing to entertain a few thousand pastors at their national convention. I heard someone speak my name. I looked from my notes and into the smiling face of my old teammate. Laughing in surprise I stood reaching out my hand but he ignored it and wrapped me in a bear hug.

‘Please join me, “ I said, gesturing toward a seat. “I can’t believe this. What are you doing at a pastor’s conference?” We laughed again.

Then he said, “I threw your bike off the bleachers. It was me.”

I was stunned—not because he'd done it but because the confession came so suddenly after so many years. We sat in silence and he did not look away. "I don't know why we did it," he said. "We were just lookin' for trouble I guess—just lookin' for something to do. It's bothered me ever since." His gaze did not leave mine. Then he said very slowly, "Please, will you forgive me?"

"Of course," I said. "I think I probably forgave you long ago but yes... I forgive you." Then he told me the miraculous story about how Life had thrown him off the bleachers but Love picked him up and with new parts put him back together. With that our real friendship began.

I think there is something so right about natural life progressions—you learn to crawl, then walk and eventually—Woah!—you are running! You mess up, then ask for forgiveness, then are restored and set free from regret. You learn to ride a twenty-inch, then a twenty-four and eventually you stretch your body out on a big twenty-six and it feels so good. At that moment, who can say where those two wheels will take you?

Slides 7 and 48



The Top Slide: My sister Sally and me at a wedding.

The Date: August 22, 1959

The Photographer: My father

I am seven years old and I am sharp! “Sharp” is a word I’ve just learned in this context and never before used to describe myself. A couple hours ago, before the wedding, my mother pinned a flower on my jacket. Then licking her fingers and

flattening down my eyebrows she said, “Young man you are dapper dandy.”

I understand why she said it. After all, she’d never seen me in a tuxedo before—what my new uncle Ted calls a “Penguin Suit”. She was surprised and quite impressed with my appearance so she called me dapper dandy. It means that I am very handsome and indeed I am—particularly today as I am wearing white dress shoes... Unscuffed!

Though I appreciate my mother’s comment, my enthusiasm is tempered by the fact that she also made a terrible fuss over how beautiful my sister Sally looks in her flower girl dress. Please don’t misunderstand me. I too am impressed with the dress. It’s pretty big—much like Cinderella’s gown at the ball, and the outfit includes a stylish little crown with a table doily. It is an impressive ensemble though I must say I think Sally herself looks much like she always does. But hey... if Mom thinks that she is beautiful... well... fine.

I am not beautiful though and I’m not dapper dandy either. I am sharp. I know this because before the wedding my new uncle Ted (whose outfit is just like mine only much bigger) looked at me and said, “Whoa Bobby.” He grabbed me by the shoulders and squared me off for a good look. “I gotta say it. You my man are sharp.”

What was I suppose to say? “Oh no, I’m not sharp. I’m dapper dandy.” No... I’m happy to be sharp and proud to be a ring bearer.

I remember well when our Aunt Audrey and her boyfriend Ted asked Sally and me if we would be in their wedding party. By the

way, don't be fooled by the term wedding party. It might sound fun but that's just so the two people getting married can get someone to come. It's no party at all. For one thing it doesn't just take a night. It takes practically a whole weekend. When you join a wedding party you are committing yourself to an evening without friends, sitting in a church and rehearsing for the actual party that happens the next day. And even that one is more like going to church than a party. The whole deal is pretty serious—not a lot of fun. Anyway, Audrey and Ted came to dinner and afterwards they hung out with our family in the front room.

Audrey is our favorite aunt. She is quite beautiful. She has eyeglasses with real gems glued in the corners. I really liked her boy friend Ted a lot too. He has curly hair and is what is called a giant. I knew he'd make a great uncle.

Audrey asked if Sally would be her flower girl and then went on to explain what the job entailed. Sally went crazy with excitement, probably because all she had to do is walk in with a bunch of flowers, stand there for three or four hours and then walk back out again. As long as she didn't have to pee or pass out she could hardly fail.

Then Ted asked me if I would be his ring bearer. My job description was a bit more ominous. I would be given the actual wedding ring in the "best of view" at the back of the church. The "best of view" is a small entry area that my grandpa called the "vestibule". I think that's the Swedish. I would need to carry the ring clear to the pulpit in the front of the church—a distance of nearly four hundred yards. To make matters worse, I would not be permitted to touch the ring with my hands but would balance it upon a tiny satin pillow. I am only seven. My knowledge of fabrics is limited but even I know that satin is slippery. I asked

for a rationale concerning the pillow but was given none. I sat upon the couch in our living room. Ted sat in a chair on the other side of the coffee table and waited for my answer.

“I’m wondering about the material on that pillow,” I said. “Why does it have to be satin?”

“I’m not really sure,” he said. “It’s just always satin.”

“Yeah, I understand that,” I said, “but I was wondering if we could maybe use a scratchy wool or burlap.”

“Nope,” he said laughing, “I’m pretty sure Audrey wants the pillow to be satin.”

“Rubber might be nice,” I countered.

“No,” he said, “I think we’ll stick with Satin. It’s already been ordered.”

“How big is the ring?” I asked.

From the other side of the room Audrey held up her hand flashing a band with a diamond setting. “Just a little bigger than this one,” she said.

I didn’t want to say it but I was concerned about the heating registers in the floor just inside the “best of view”. If I tripped, that ring could slide on that slippery satin and fall down in the register. If that happened it would be lost forever like one of my mother’s ear rings and several of my peppermint candies.

“How much did the ring cost?” I asked nervously.

The adults laughed and my mother said, “Bobby, it’s not polite to ask how much things cost.”

“How much do you think it cost?” Ted said.

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe a million dollars?” I said. More laughter from the adults.

My father spoke up, “I’ll tell you something. That ring is worth far more than a million. That ring is gonna cost Ted every bit of freedom he ever had.”

More laughter. I never did find out for sure how much it cost but I’m guessing it was about a million and one hundred dollars. Ted waited for an answer.

“Yes,” I said finally. “I will do it. I will bear your ring.”

Now I’m standing next to Sally on the steps of the church following the wedding. She is still holding her flowers. She did fine considering the little that was required. I on the other hand performed excellently.

Before we walked out the door a lady said to me, “You did a great job young man.” Then reaching for a basket on the back pew she said, “Oh wait... I have something just for you.” I was excited as I’d not been expecting payment for my services. The lady turned toward me and emptied a napkin full of rice into my hands. I have no idea why.

“Gee thanks,” I said. “You shouldn’t have.”

Sally looks a bit miffed. We walk out the door. Our dad is standing on the sidewalk with his camera. “Wait you two. Hold it right there,” he shouts. So we do and a bunch of other people start snapping pictures too. I’m feeling a bit awkward, trying hard not to spill any rice. It’s okay though. I can handle it because I am sharp.

Fourteen years later I stood at the front of another church and, as always, I was sharp—this time in a polyester brown tuxedo with a yellow ruffled shirt. One could hardly look sharper in 1974. I stood beside the love of my life—a beautiful girl, only eighteen



years old. A pastor asked me a series of questions each one requiring a response. At the end I answered, "Yes. I will." What I meant was, "Yes. I will bear the ring."

It was a far riskier pledge this time around. This ring I would bear whether sick or healthy, rich or poor, whether things were good or bad. I know some who are unable to make such a commitment. I know others who tried, some for a long while, and then gave up. I don't judge them though. It is serious business bearing this ring.

I have done so for over four decades and will until the day I die. Years ago I worried that it would slip off my finger. There is no chance of that now. Whenever I remove it (which is seldom) I'm surprised to see how it has left a permanent mark in my skin—how my finger has changed its very shape to hold the ring safely.

And here is the mysterious thing. Every year the ring takes on more weight but every year it is lighter and more joyous to bear.

Slides 89 and 920



The Slide: Wearing my basketball uniform in our living room

The Date: November, 1967

The Photographer: My mother

It's a November afternoon. I'm two weeks into the basketball preseason. I'm a pretty good small town athlete and a starting forward on my Junior Varsity team. Following practice we received our new uniforms though to call them new would not be entirely accurate. The uniforms had been passed from the Varsity to the JV several years before and they were old even then. I got #44 and I'm happy about it. I know every player who ever wore that very jersey. Now the jersey is mine.

I'm sporting white canvas Chuck Taylor basketball shoes. Though they offer little support, "Chucks" have been the shoe of choice for at least a dozen years. I remember looking in old yearbooks where my father stood with his team wearing dark shoes—what he called "leather uppers". They looked ugly to me and I wondered, "Who would wear leather shoes on a basketball court?" Answering my own question I thought, "No one. That's who." A couple years later some guys at Adidas and Nike asked themselves the same question but came up with a different answer.

My socks are high and my shorts are...well... very much so. Both are the style of the day.

The previous year I'd been the high scorer on my team and was proud that the statistic was recorded in the yearbook next to a picture of me. The caption read, "Bob Stromberg, high scorer on the junior high team, tries for two in a game with Bradford." I scored one hundred twelve points for the season. The yearbook failed to note that my teammate, Tom Huffman, scored one hundred and eleven. The omission didn't surprise me. Why would it be mentioned? He was, after all, only second highest

scorer. I'd clearly beat him and won the title for myself. That's why the yearbook called me, "Bob Stromberg, high scorer..."

Following our last game (a game in which I'd scored two points and Huffman scored fourteen), he said to me, "I almost beat you Strom! One measly point! One little foul shot!"

To which I said, "No you didn't Huff. You almost tied me. You would have needed two points to beat me." I felt bad for him but hey... the bragging rights were mine. It's now nine months later and I'm hoping to once again excel.

I came home after practice and shouted, "Hey Mom. We got our new uniforms."

"Oh good," she said. "What's your number?"

"Forty-four," I said.

"Well put it on and we'll get a picture." Minutes later I stood in the corner in front of the TV. "Stand up straight," she said. I did and the flashbulb lit up the room.

At first glance what appears odd is the picture's context. One cannot imagine why I would be standing in the living room in a basketball uniform. If it were a little league baseball uniform, having just put it on, I might be ready to hop on my bike and peddle to the game. But there is no natural scenario in which I would wear a basketball uniform in the corner of the living room. The reason, of course, is because my mother said, "Well put it on. Let's get a picture." I didn't argue with her because I'd been waiting eight or nine years to put it on.

Through my elementary years, my father taught at the high school and later became the principal. Very often, as a little boy, I tagged along with him to ball games. Even as a kindergartener I knew every player's name, number and position. Sitting in the bleachers I watched pretty cheer leaders line up near the locker room doors. I rose with the crowd as the players burst out, dribbling single file past center court in their satin warm up suits. I dreamt of being one of them.

During football season on cold autumn nights, outside under the lights at "away" games, I huddled next to my father. The smell of hot dogs and cigars mingled in the cold air as the cheerleaders in stretch pants and varsity jackets lined up by the goalpost. I rose with the crowd as our players in orange and black roared on to the field. I wanted to be like one of them. Oddly, even then, I imagined how it would feel if others wanted to be like me.

Through elementary school and junior high my greatest goal was to play football and basketball. It's all I thought of. In the autumn we played back yard football every day rain or shine—particularly rain. All summer long we shot baskets on any hoop we could find.

I began to suspect, early on, that I would never be a great athlete. I didn't allow myself to think about it much but the truth is, I wasn't fast, quick, or strong. Nor did I possess a competitive drive. These were prized athletic qualities and three out of the four could not be faked. What I did possess was adequate size for a small town athlete and I had what coaches called "good hands". "Good hands" meant I could catch a football if it was close enough to hit me in the head and I could make a basket if I was wide open. These attributes were good enough to gain a little notoriety. Following a successful freshman football season I was



one of a handful picked to play varsity the next year. Of course I didn't play much, but playing on varsity was not as important to me as being on varsity.

In basketball, following a good year on JVs, I was the only junior with important varsity minutes. It was during this junior season that I experienced for the first and last time what it felt like to be a star. In the din of an important game, I sat on the bench with fourteen seconds remaining and heard my coach shout, "Strommy!" My knees went weak. We were down by four points with no time-outs and no three-point line. In the final seconds, thanks to my teammates' defense and my opponent's ineptitude, I

scored six points. In slow motion from some inner world, deep in the corner with 0:01 left on the clock, I launched the last shot from my hip... nothing but net! The following year as a diminishing senior, I experienced what it felt like to know that others wanted to be like me.

I was picky about my shoes. I didn't like high top sneakers. They felt clunky. Unfortunately, due to the threat of ankle injuries, our coaches would not allow us to wear low cuts. Improvising, I wore two pairs of socks and folded the outer pair down around the ankles giving the shoes the appearance of low cuts. I took a little razzing from my teammates but I liked the way they looked and felt. Halfway through the season I went to a freshman game. All our young players sported my sock styling. I was a basketball fashion trendsetter.

I competed in athletics from as young an age as possible. Early on I was one of the best in my grade but kids mature at different rates. Some of the big kids, who were dominant in junior high, stopped growing and were left behind. One of my classmates barely made the teams year after year. Following our junior year, he finally grew into his awkward body and won the coveted "Athlete of the Year" award at graduation. Another basketball teammate—a year older than I—competed with me for a starting position his entire senior year. He went on to a big university, made the team as a "walk on" and had an outstanding college career.

I just got a little better each year and held my own. I wanted to be the star but the thing about athletics is... you can't fake it. You either are or you're not. And no one needs to wonder. You just look at the stats. Mine were just good enough to be lauded by the younger kids. I was, however, fortunate to play on a football

team that won twenty-three games in a row. A number of my teammates and I received letters from interested college recruiters. The truth is I didn't have the desire or the talent to play college football. However several colleges couldn't tell that from my game films. I should have gotten out when I had the opportunity but I didn't even know how to quit when I had the chance.

I'd invested such a large part of my identity in athletics that I didn't know who I would be without a ball in my hand. To make matters more difficult, in my family you just didn't quit. You didn't quit anything! You didn't start a game of monopoly unless you planned to finish it. You didn't quit just because the game went six hours. Quitting wasn't fair to the other players. No, you toughed it out. In the first eighteen years of my life (all the years I lived at home), the only thing I remember quitting was Cub Scouts. Even then I'd stuck it out for a whole year.

I somehow grew up believing that quitters were bad, unambitious people who never amounted to anything, vagrants not worth the cardboard they slept beneath. Take Old Dicky, for example. Old Dicky our town drunk (who wasn't all that old), slouched against the town square World War II monument, snoozing away hot summer afternoons. He was the quintessential quitter.

My grandpa said he remembered Dicky when he was younger. "Well, I'll tell you, Bobby, he wasn't the brightest kid I'd ever met, but he was a nice little boy till he started quittin'. Quit Little League. Quit Junior Firemen. Quit high school. He even quit work at the bottle plant. And for what? Just look at 'im now. If that's not the saddest excuse for a man I've ever seen. Just makes your heart ache."

And of course I knew you didn't have to look too far to find other examples. There was Al Capone and Oswald and that crazy guy who killed the nurses in Chicago. They probably all quit junior high choir or something. Quitting revealed a basic flaw in one's character. Quitters didn't have the stuff to stick it out when the going got tough.

I'd wanted to quit a bunch of things, as a kid, but I didn't. Now I think I should have. In high school I took geometry, trigonometry and calculus. I started to get lost about three weeks into my first freshman term and never found my way out of the confusion. This caused tremendous stress and made me feel intellectually inept. I've never completely recovered. In college I took Math 101 pass-fail, passed by a hair (I have no idea what that is in metrics), and have not opened a math book since.

And Spanish! Mi Gloria! Why did I have to take four years of Spanish? Why couldn't I have taken two years like some of the other kids? No one spoke Spanish within three hundred miles of my town except maybe my Spanish teacher, and I don't think he spoke it very well. I know I couldn't understand a word he said—which was, for him, a continual irritant.

“So Senor Stromberg. Apparently you do not think that the Spanish language is worthy of your time. Is this not so?”

I could have said, “No”. This would have been proper usage in either Spanish or English but I thought it best to remain silent and look straight ahead.

“Well Rrrrrrrroberto,” he said with a long rolling R—a sound I was unable to even approximate, “I want you to know that I do not care. Do you hear me? Look at me Roberto.”

I thought it best to follow his instruction.

“Mi amigo,” he said, his eyes red, anger seething just beneath the service of his otherwise calm demeanor, “if you would like to quit this class it is fine with me. And do you know why Roberto? Do you know why it is fine with me?”

I felt uncertain.

“Because,” he said. “I... really... could... care... less.”

At this point I wanted very much to ask what the whole class was thinking. I wanted to ask, “Senor Mullins, do you mean that you could care less? Or do you mean that you couldn’t care less? You said that you really could care less. I’m concerned that you are perhaps not saying what you mean to say. If you mean that you really could care less then you still must really care. If that is the case I would like to ask... por que'?” If I’d had any fighting, competitive spirit I’d have said it but intimidated and embarrassed I remained silent.

Looking back I realize I probably should have quit Spanish. I’m embarrassed to say that I sat in that class for four years and still can’t speak a complete sentence. It’s inexcusable. After graduation, I should have quit football too. And I would have, had my coach not said, “Hey we could send some game films out to your college. You never know.” I would have quit had my hometown paper not written a story about several of us who were seeking scholarships. I should have quit. But I didn’t know how to let go and move on with my life. It was too scary at the time. There were too many unanswered questions like; if I quit will I end up sleeping over a heating vent? Will I snooze away summer

afternoons against the WWII monument? Will I have to marry someone in the eighth grade? Well, yes, probably. Those are the kinds of things that happen to quitters.

My college football experience turned out to be worse than I could have imagined. My first-year-coach, Coach Vader (no relation), was a maniac. You remember Woody Hayes when he went nuts on national TV and beat up one of his young players? Remember Bobby Knight and his folding chairs? Remember Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*? Remember Anthony Hopkins with his mask and fava beans? Then you get the idea. Coach Vader berated us in practice, screaming at us nonstop even during meals, his face only inches from the side of our heads. We awakened in the dark each morning to his voice taunting us over the dormitory intercom. Actually many of us were so nervous we'd never gotten to sleep.

It was so bad that two tri-captains, with distinguished college careers, quit on Friday, five days into the preseason. I only made it to Thursday. I didn't even have the guts to talk to the coach. At 5:30 in the morning, on the way to the field house for ankle taping, I turned around, hopped a Chicago cab, and rode off in the sunrise. The cabby said, "A donde vas?" Of course I didn't understand.

"Take me to my aunts in Brookfield," I said extra loudly presuming that the louder I spoke the better he might comprehend.

We drove for an hour and I began to wonder if my cabby was taking me to my aunt's or taking me for a ride. It seemed as though we passed the same laundromat quite a few times, though perhaps there was a chain called Ronnie's One and Only

Cleaners. Several hours later, he collected a good portion of my summer saving with a big smile and a "Muchas gracias!"

I said the only Spanish that came to mind, "Que sera, sera." At least it was true. I stayed with my aunt for a couple of weeks until school began. I was a quitter.

In retrospect, I think I did the right thing. My mistake was to begin in the first place. One plays college football for the love of the game, or at least for the love of the scholarship money, but I played for neither. I played—if only for four days—because I didn't know how to stop. I didn't know how to move on with my life. I didn't know that I could be me without a helmet in the autumn.

Surprisingly, when I quit what I was doing I discovered who I was. I saw that I could do lots of things and still be me. I joined the college choir. I played intramural ball. I studied hard—a new experience. I even began to understand what I might ultimately do with my life. Most importantly I figured out that what I am is less important than who.

I do not advocate frequent quitting. There are things we should stick with—hold on to and never let go. But sometimes the best thing is to quit what we're doing, take who we are and move on.

I was a pretty good small town athlete. One day I put on my basketball uniform and stood in the corner in front of the TV while my mom snapped a picture. I did it because I thought the picture would represent who I was. I didn't realize that basketball was just something I did.

Flash forward four decades. I haven't held a football in twenty years—unless it said Nerf on the side. When we moved into a new home I didn't even bother to put up a ball hoop. The boys were grown and gone by then and I didn't feel like shooting around by myself. When I was a kid I could not have imagined behaving like this but... here I am—more myself than ever.

Slides 79, 91 and 500



The Slide: Mom , Sally, Johnny, Ingrid and me on Old Baldy

The Date: October, 1965

The Photographer: My Father

When people ask me where I come from I tell them I'm from a little place in north centralish Pennsylvania. If they say, "Oh really, what's it's near?" I tell them it's near south westernish, NY. I do so because, really, it's not near anywhere. The nearest big city, Buffalo, is about a hundred miles away but I

never knew anyone who had actually been there and I knew I never wanted to go. The only three TV stations we received in my little town were broadcast from Buffalo, so I had watched the local news enough to know I was better off staying right where I was. Every night I'd hear about the killer fires in suburban Cheektowaga or the four-alarm blazes in lower Lackawanna. When, as a junior in high school, I finally did drive with my family to the city for the Ice Capades, I was surprised there were any buildings left.

We were pretty isolated in my little town, but we liked it that way. On the radio dial all I could get during the day was WFRM (The Farm and Home Broadcasting Company). But on cold, clear nights, if I tuned my Sears Silvertone very carefully—I can still smell the hot tubes—I might pick up ABC in New York, CKLW in Detroit and my favorite WLS in Chicago.

“Radar weather, eye-eeee-iiii-eeee-iiii,” the weatherman’s choir sang in four-part harmony. “Radar weather, eye-eeee-iiii-eeee-iiii.”

“Hey Chicago, It’s cold out there,” the announcer would say. “Radar weather has forty-one in Des Plaines, thirty-nine on the North Shore and it’s a chilly thirty-seven in the loop.”

Tucked in my bed, I lay in the dark night after night and wondered what the heck a Loop was. I thought it was probably something like the circular drive at our high school though maybe even longer. We didn’t have the bright lights, subways, fancy restaurants, or a Loop, but what we had was beautiful. Nestled in the rolling Allegheny Mountains, everywhere you looked it was just so beautiful. All the little towns around were nice too but none more so than mine because we had Old Baldy.

Old Baldy was a big piece of hillside, stripped clean of trees, jutting out into the center of town. I asked my grandfather how it got so bald. He told me that it was originally clear cut by turn of the century lumber barons. The forest would have grown back like it did on the surrounding hills but, for several generations, it became a common pasture where town folks grazed their milk cows. The cows kept it bald.

From my house I could run out the back door, across the creek, and up through the pine grove at the base of the hill. Fifteen minutes later, I'd be standing at the most magnificent spot in my world. From here the town looked exactly like the postcards at the Five and Dime, but you didn't have to pay even a nickel for the view. From here tiny cars drove slowly on rolling country roads. From here the Pennsylvania Railroad, like a Lionell model, snaked its' path along the river to unload at the glass factory. From here on hot summer afternoons, barely discernible from so high, you could spot kids on their bikes weaving their way to the pool.

It was a magical place and from the age of five I climbed there often. On summer nights I'd go up there with a whole pack of buddies. We carried our sleeping bags and little blue boxes of Camp Fire Marshmallows. As the sun dropped over the far hill, we'd watch the street lamps blinking on below, only to be outdone an hour later by the blazing stars above. In the winter we tobogganed down Old Baldy's icy face, six little blue-lipped buddies, laced together holding on to one another's frozen buckled boots, screaming at the top of our lungs. In the late summer lying on sleds of flattened cardboard boxes we careened down it's grassy front.

Old Baldy was just a big piece of hillside in the center of my little town, but it played an important part in my growing up. I took my first solo hike there as a five year old. I had my first campout there at eight—pretty big deal. I met my first girlfriend up there once when we were thirteen. I'll call her Denise because...well... that was her name. I recall it was exciting but a bit awkward. We sat up there, side by side, on a log and looked at the town for a few minutes.

I said, "Pretty huh?"

She said, "Yup".

Then she stood up, smiled and kind of waved. She went down her side and I went down mine. Okay it wasn't a hot date but it was better than having my dad drive us somewhere.

When I was twenty, I took another girl up there. She was very impressed. For years, every time we visited "home" we climbed there with our kids.

But the most special times on Old Baldy were the times I spent with my dad—many of them when I was very young. Dad always pulled on black artics over his shining dress shoes. Then he'd pull on a scratchy school letter jacket, and a wool hat. My mother would help me put on every imaginable piece of warm winter clothing that a child could legally be required to wear and off we'd go.

As hard as the climb was, stumbling over my own feet, sliding on the nearly frozen ground, sweating through several sweaters and a winter coat, I plodded upward, I wanted to get to the top. To me, the whole idea of climbing Old Baldy was to get to the top.



But apparently my dad knew better. He'd stop and say, "Shhhh Listen," We'd be by the creek or by a stand of pines or under a rusty old oak still clinging to its dry leaves. "Listen!" he'd whisper so softly I could hardly hear.

I was never sure what I was supposed to be listening for. Then, very faintly at first, I would hear it. The complaint of a maple gently moving in a breeze. The flourish of a black squirrel running a tightrope from tree to tree. Maybe the mournful chorus of a thousand geese flying far too high to be seen. And once, I remember, it was the plinking burble sound of trickling water flowing between layers of melting ice. To my dad it was all beautiful music. Eventually we would reach the top where we'd

rest a while and enjoy the beauty. Then all too soon we'd have to head back down. My dad taught me to experience the climb and I grew to love it. As a young man though, it became increasingly difficult to be quiet—to be still. I still struggle with the urge to just get to the top. Then I hear my father's voice, "Shhh. Listen!"

Old Baldy is gone now. The hill is still there but it's no longer bald. Each year, the pine grove and the leafy seedlings crept higher and higher toward the top. Sadly, the last time I climbed Old Baldy I stood, surrounded by a deep forest, unable to see the town below.

It's a beautiful Saturday afternoon in mid October. The leaves are just beyond peak. My cousin Johnny went with my father and me to the football game. We returned home, to find my mother packing a picnic basket. "Thought we might take a hike up Old Baldy," she said. "It's just so beautiful this evening." My sister Sally helped little Ingrid into her sweater. "Don't forget her hat," my mother said,

Sally rolled her eyes. "Mom," she said, "it's hot out there."

"But it might get breezy on top," my mother said, "and who knows, maybe we'll want to stay a little while."

My father grabbed the camera.

An hour later, as the sun was setting, we gathered around a campfire and roasted our hot dogs. My father said, "Hey Johnny, do me a favor and snap a family picture for us. Will you?"

Johnny grabbed the camera, looked through the view finder and said, "Ingrid! Hey! Hey! Hey Ingrid! Look this way!" Ingrid, a

perfectionist even then, was intently focusing on her hot dog and the job at hand. She never heard his voice. The rest of us looked toward the camera and Johnny snapped a picture forever preserving the memory of a beautiful place.



Slides 89 and 70



The Slide: My buddy John and Me

The Date: 1968

The Photographer: My father

It's the springtime of my sophomore year. I'm only weeks away from a major summer growth spurt during which I will add three inches and put on another ten pounds. I've been excitedly and nervously anticipating this change. Excitedly—

because my father told me this would happen soon. Nervously—because... well he'd been wrong before. I'm sitting on the flower garden retaining wall playing my guitar. Next to me perched on the hood of his '62 Ford Falcon is my buddy John. He's a junior—one year older than I and it's evident. John could easily grow a full beard and did most everyday. He looks a bit like Elvis just before he got fat. I, on the other hand, look a bit like Opie just before the Andy Griffeth show got cut.

We're strumming twelve-string guitars—the only ones in our town. They're not identical but they're both seventy-five dollar "Harmony" guitars bought at a music store, twenty-five miles away in Olean, NY. I bought mine first. John saw it and thought it was cool. A couple weeks later he bought his own and we started practicing. We're playing a "C" chord, one of the few that we've perfected. My dad pulls in the driveway after work. He stops directly in front of us, rolls down his window, retrieves his camera from beneath the seat and says, "Hold it right there you guys. This'll be a nice one." He snaps a picture.

John and I spent a lot of time practicing. We met at my house most every day and I always looked forward to his visits. They made me feel good about myself because... well... he was an impressive guy. He was good-natured, an excellent student and leader, an athlete, an actor and perhaps most impressively he was an outstanding singer who had already experienced something of a music career.

Two years earlier, he and four other guys formed our town's first rock and roll band The Changing Tymes though within a month they were simply The Tymes. John was the front man, beating a tambourine against his thigh and screaming into his handheld mic what are now known as the Rock and Roll Classics. Back

then they were brand-new. The Tymes had a repertoire of perhaps a dozen songs but they could fill a couple hours easily by stretching a three minute song to six or nine by simply repeating it two or three times. Or they could add a drum solo and then the length was only limited by the drummer's stamina. A drummer's skill was not particularly important or even appreciated. Speed and stamina were what most impressed.

When I was in junior high, The Tymes played at all our school dances. I was a huge fan and imagined myself being invited to join the group. It was not an entirely foolish thought. I had a good voice. It was not as mature as John's but I had a strong falsetto, sang harmony parts easily and, unlike John, I already knew all their songs on my starter guitar. I sat by my bed stand radio for hours fingering the frets searching for the chords I heard. I was surprised to discover that most of the songs used the same three chords. Sometimes, when I was unable to find the right ones, I'd wrap an elastic capo around the guitar's neck and... what do know... same three chords! With this new knowledge I was able to create a flawless medley arrangement of "Louie Louie", "La Bamba", "Hang on Sloopy" and "Twist and Shout". I figured it out in my head! Took me about a minute!

During their first year, none of The Tymes were old enough to drive so they were unable to play outside our little community. This created a dangerously small market place for a band that had invested a fair amount of cash in instruments and equipment. They could play at school dances but there weren't very many and the band wasn't likely to be booked for the big ones like The Prom. Other than the school gym, our town had only two performance spaces where a dance could be held. The first was the banquet room on the second floor of the old Legion Hall. Unfortunately after several sold out dances the building

tipped a bit to one side. It was less than a foot but you could see it. For several years afterward my little church continued to meet there for the annual Christmas Smorgasbord but dances were forever banned.

The second and only viable option became The Moose Lodge. Above the bar, on the second floor, “The Moose” had a fine dance floor with an elevated stage at one end. It was here that “The Tymes” built their following.

I wanted badly to be in a band but my parents forbade it. They did so not because they disapproved of the music but because they disapproved of “The Moose”. Or more specifically, they disapproved of my presence in a place where alcohol was served. I think it’s safe to say that teenagers attending the dances consumed none of that alcohol and I made that case to my parents.

“You guys are being SO unreasonable,” I said, “The bar is downstairs and kids aren’t allowed anywhere near it.”

“Bobby,” my mother said, “We’re not going to talk about this anymore.”

“Then I can never be in a band,” I protested, my voice cracking on the edge of angry tears.

“Then you’ll have to do something else, won’t you?” she said.

I looked at my father... pleading. He raised his eyebrows as if to say, “Why are you looking at me? You know your mom and I are together on this one.”

It wasn't long afterward that I asked my folks if they would help me to buy the expensive twelve-string and surprisingly, without hesitation, they agreed. My mom had said that I'd have to do something else. They recognized that this was it and were willing to help.

The Rock and Roll Classics didn't sound so good played all by myself so I turned to folk music. I learned songs like "Lemon Tree", "Green Fields" and "Where Have All The Flowers Gone". While the other kids were rockin' out at "The Moose", I sang to my parents.

*Yellow bird so high in banana tree
Yellow bird you sit all alone like me*

It was pretty depressing.

“Oh Bobby,” my mother would say, “play the one about that answer that's blowin' in the wind.”

At some point I decided to write my own songs, which I modeled after so many romantic heartache hits I heard on the radio. I'd experienced very little romantic heartache myself but that did not deter me. The previous year, my eighth grade sweetheart moved away from our town. Her dad got a job halfway across the country and, apparently giving no consideration to my feelings, he decided to take it. To add insult to injury, he insisted on taking his daughter and the rest of his family with him. If not heartbreaking, the experience was at the very least profoundly unpleasant. I used the memory and wrote a song.

*In the darkness of the night
I can hear your voice callin' to me*

*In the darkness of the night
I can see your face smilin' at me
And then it makes me wonder
Why you'd leave me all alone
Now I know what it's like
To be on my own*

*We use to be so happy together
All the time
Now I'm hanging on
By the end of the line
And then that makes me wonder
Why you'd leave me all alone
Now I know what it's like
To be on my own*

And there was a chorus, which is too embarrassing to reproduce here. It was a poor song conceptually, structurally, and lyrically but it had a nice melody putting it right on par with just about anything by The Archies. In retrospect I'm amazed that I stood in our living room and performed it for my parents. I'm even more amazed that they didn't laugh though they may have lost it when I left the room.

"Mom... Dad, " I said, "I wrote a song. Wanna hear it?"

"Sure," my father said. "Let me turn down the TV."

I remember no embarrassment—even when I knew my sister Sally was listening in the hallway. She was a tremendous tease but I didn't care. I sang like my heart was breaking. When I finished my parents clapped. Sally, with a huge smile, walked into the room. I was ready for ridicule.

“Oh my gosh,” she said. “Did you write that?”

“Yeah,” I said defensively. “So what?”

“Because,” she said, “it was *SO* good. I can’t believe it.”

It took me a moment to realize she was sincere.

Shortly afterward, my choral director asked me to play my guitar for our Christmas concert. Following a rehearsal I sang a few lines of my new song for some friends. I heard someone harmonizing behind me and turned to see John. I stopped singing.

“Cool guitar,” he said, “I’ve never seen a twelve string.”

“The Byrds play guitars like this,” I said. “You can hear the sound on ‘Turn Turn Turn’”.

“No kidding,” he said. “Where’d you get it?”

“Olean,” I said. “Seventy-five bucks”.

“Cool,” he said. “Hey, play that song again”.

And that’s how our friendship began.

I’d always known who he was but in the elementary years not many friendships crossed grade levels and he lived on the other end of town—literally and figuratively on the other side of the tracks. His house was a poor structure that I did not often visit. When I did visit there, his mom was as sweet as could be, always smiling, often cooking or ironing in their cluttered kitchen. His

father was sullen and distant. My only insight into their family dynamics came one day riding in John's car. He was driving backwards. He'd been doing so for nearly three weeks while he waited for a part to fix his transmission.

"It's amazing how good you can drive," I said. "I mean, a lot of us can drive but you're so relaxed. You act like you've been sitting behind the wheel your whole life."

"Well," he laughed glancing in the review mirror, "that's because I have."

"What do mean?" I said. "You just got your license last year."

"Yeah," he said, "but I've been driving since I was seven."

He went on to tell me the story of his dad leaving him in the car while he went into a bar. A couple hours later his dad returned and fell asleep. John, only a second grader, drove them home.

Most often we practiced at my house. After a year or so we had a repertoire of our own and shared it wherever we could. We played at some private parties, won our school talent show and even late-night serenaded a pretty girl from beneath her second story bedroom window.

One day after school my mother handed me an advertisement she had cut from our local paper. "Take a look at this," she said. It was an announcement for a talent show being held by the Wellsville, NY Art Guild. Auditions were the next weekend. "You and John should try out," she said. "There's a one hundred dollar first prize."

“Mom,” I said, “That sounds great but Wellsville is over an hour away and John ‘s car only goes in reverse. Even I think the trip would be too risky.”

“I’ll take you,” she said. And she did.

A week later we stood before a small table of judges and sang two songs—my original and somewhat improved “In the Darkness of the Night”, and a traditional railroad song.

*In eighteen hundred and forty-one
I put my corduroy britches on
I put my corduroy britches on
To work upon the railway*

They told us on the spot that we were “in”.

Three weeks later we stood on a stage in a full high school auditorium. We sang our best and it was the best we’d ever sung. Then we sat down back stage on folding chairs. With each act we began our victory celebration. One little girl tap-danced while lip-syncing “Me and my Shadow”. She was cute and no threat. An older woman attempted a classical piano piece but succumbed to stage fright, skipped a movement or two and played the last chord four times before getting it right. It was sad but hey... that’s show business. One old man played several harmonicas poorly before swallowing a tiny one. It was deliberate. He’d tied it to a string. I later overheard a judge arguing with the man. “Yes,” she said, “I understand that it is a unique talent but it’s gross.”

With the conclusion of each act we were spending our prize money. Then the announcer said, “Ladies and gentlemen.

Would you please welcome our final contestants—first prize winners for the previous two years— the pride of Wellsville, our very own ‘The Liberty Boys’”. The audience went crazy, as did the judges in the front row. John muttered a mild expletive.

From the other side of the stage, four young men bounded into the spotlight. They were dressed in sharp black trousers, red and white striped shirts and sparkly vests. They carried a tambourine, tenor guitar, banjo and an upright acoustic bass. They began with a ballad. All four sang in near perfect unison.

*Today while the blossoms still cling to the vine
I'll taste your strawberries I'll drink your sweet wine
A million tomorrows will all pass away
E'er I forget all the joy that is mine today*

It was beautiful and I felt the joy that was mine today disappearing. Before my eyes I saw our blossoms falling from the vine. The audience sat in rapt attention and at the end burst into applause as The Liberty Boys strummed into the introduction to “This Land is Your Land”. By the second line the audience had risen and was singing along.

John leaned closer to be heard. “How much was second prize?” he said. “Do you remember?”

“Just a trophy,” I said. “But hey... don’t give up! They could still blow it!”

But I was wrong. They were far beyond blowing it. At this point they could have shouted vulgarities at the judges—they could have gestured lewdly—no one would have cared. And they weren’t done! When the audience joined in the last chorus the

bass player began spinning his instrument revealing the red, white and blue of the American flag painted on the backside. Presumably they were still singing though the audience was too loud for us to be certain.

John shouted, “Was second prize two trophies or just one?”

It was just one—a gold painted, Olympic athlete with garlands, standing upon a wooden pedestal. It was terribly generic and in that respect much like The Liberty Boys. But hey... I have to give them credit. They knew something about showmanship that we had not learned. They knew their audience and they connected with them big time.

After graduation, John went to college somewhere around Harrisburg. He met a girl there and fell in love. He asked me to be his best man. The night before the wedding we shared a hotel room and talked far into the early morning hours. I wanted to express how much I’d appreciated his friendship. I wanted to say, “Thanks for being such a good friend.” I don’t know why I couldn’t find the words.

“Hey John, “ I said. “I can’t believe you’re getting married. I can’t believe I’m your best man. That’s cool.” That much was the truth. It was cool. He had a lot of good friends. He could have asked any of them but he asked me. It was a great honor. Sadly the marriage was brief. I saw him only one more time maybe five or six years later. I was visiting my folks and heard that John was in town. I gave him a call and he came to the house. We tried to sing some of the old songs but agreed that we didn’t sound so good anymore and by then I considered my early originals to be embarrassingly bad. It was good though to be together again. That was over thirty years ago.



I think everything in our lives—everyone makes a difference. I admired my buddy John. I was impressed with his charisma and talent and so pleased that he wanted to create something with me. Our friendship gave me confidence. It helped me to believe that I might actually be really good at something—that I might find a way to do it someday.

I have a slide of John. I dropped him off after school. My dad's camera was on the seat. I grabbed it, pointed the lens out the

window and shouted, “Hey Elvis”. John spun around, smiling, and I snapped the picture.

He’s standing in front of his house. It’s a rundown setting and the slide is gritty—the film damaged—the sky eaten away by some chemical whim. Swirls of light encircle him like streamers. The lens catches him in the middle of some inadvertency. I remember thinking at the time that he looked like a rock star. I still think so.

Slides 12, 56 and 57



The Slide: A family on a highway

The Date: Around 1970

The Photographer: Unknown

The picture was taken from our car's passenger side window. The subject of the photo is a young American family—father, mother and toddler—off for a motorcycle ride on a summer day. The father wears a white t-shirt and long cotton trousers—the mother, shorts and a sleeveless blouse. The toddler, a little boy, wears a one-piece sun suit and is sitting in a child's travel seat behind his mom. The seat is strapped onto the bike's luggage rack above the back fender. A small sneakered foot dangles close to the rear tire. The father is driving fast and the woman's hair flies in the wind. None of them are wearing helmets. I'm guessing they didn't bother with the sunscreen either. They're off for the afternoon and having fun.

Today the parents would be prosecuted for child endangerment. It's hard to look at the photo without shuddering. It's hard to imagine that in 1970 we thought this photo was cute but that's because... well... things were different then.

Safety was not a cultural priority. I suppose the farm kids learned about the importance of being careful. They were probably taught to keep their heads out of the hay bailer—maybe told to stop pullin' on the bull's nose ring—but we didn't get many of those warnings in town. I do remember it was important to wait an hour after lunch before swimming. Observing this summertime discipline was important in preventing death. Sure, we missed the best pool hour of the day but we all survived.

I also remember a catchy safety jingle that filled our airwaves for nearly a decade.

*Buckle up for safety
Buckle up
Buckle up for safety
Always buckle up.*

It was a nice little ditty—a wonderful safety campaign—which would have been far more effective had they, in those days, sold cars with seat belts. In the late sixties my father bought a new Ford Tempest and that car had belts in the front but one of the buckles fell off and got stuck beneath the seat. We tried for a few days to get it out and then gave up. It wasn't much good with only one side to the buckle so we tucked the belts under the seat too. It wasn't a great loss. It's not like we would have ever worn them. They seemed unnecessary. After all, these were the days when, if I fought in the car with my sister, my father sent me to the back window for a time out. I liked it up there lying in the solar heat. It was especially nice in the late autumn. Sometimes on short rides around town my father let me sit on his lap and steer—and more than a few times, just for fun, he'd let my sister and me ride in the trunk. These were the same years my wife's family vacationed with all five kids laid out playing games on the back deck of the station wagon. They probably didn't even lock the doors. Safety wasn't a big deal back then.

It was a different world in which we could not have imagined the culture of today. For example, restaurants were places you ate next to tables full of chain smokers. The smoke was so thick you couldn't see the menu. Nor could you taste the food. Oddly, I don't ever recall anyone complaining. It was part of the culinary experience. And of course it was worse on airplanes. Back then, as now, I flew nearly every week. On many flights I was the only one who didn't smoke. I swear, in the bigger planes, from the front you could not see the back rows. You found your seat by following the tract lighting on the floor. This is nearly unimaginable now in a day when the entire country of Ireland has gone smokeless.

It's as if safety consciousness had not yet evolved. Coffee cups did not display warnings that the coffee might be hot. Everyone figured it probably was. The manufacturer of Super Glue did not warn us to keep the drops out of our eyes. Most of us never felt the urge. Frankly other warnings from Super Glue might have been more helpful. I could have used one that said, "Not for use in practical jokes involving toilet seats." Though even in this case my classmate survived and is nearly scar free which proves again that time heals all wounds.

Still, when I look at the picture of the motorcycle family I cringe. The parents are smiling as if they can't imagine that anything could go wrong. I ask myself, "What's the matter with these people? Are they that stupid?" Of course the answer is... Yes! But so are we all. Honest parents with even a few short years of experience know how foolish they can be. And most of us looking back recognize how foolish, at times, our own parents were. That being said, is it not a great and marvelous wonder that any of us are still alive?

I first understood this truth about my own father when I was fourteen. Until then, I'd always seen him as the intelligent, loving dad that he was. But that changed during Christmas vacation. My cousins from California were coming with their parents for the holiday. This family was, as we used to say, pretty well off. They lived in the hills above Oakland in a big home with lush beautiful landscaping. Our whole house would have fit in their living room. I'd spent the entire previous summer with them and now nervously anticipated their visit. They planned to stay for nearly a week and I was concerned that we wouldn't have enough to do. This is the family that took me to the beach in Santa Cruz where we killed entire days at the amusement park on the boardwalk. We visited Yosemite, Monterey, Carmel, and

Disneyland. We drove over to San Francisco one night where we ate in China Town and then saw Yul Brynner in *The King and I*. Several times we watched the Giants play through the fog at Candlestick Park. These people had given me the biggest adventures of my life. Now they were coming to my home in rural Pennsylvania and I was concerned that they'd be bored.

At first it seemed my worries were unfounded. I'd not considered that they'd spent almost no time in snow—and snow was something we had lots of to enjoy. For a couple days we played snow football in the front yard, did some sledding on the hill behind our house and had a few good snowball fights. Then we began looking for something more exciting. Fortunately, I had an idea.

A couple summers earlier one of my buddies, who lived by the river, found a big rectangular piece of floating Styrofoam caught in the branches of a fallen tree. We hauled it to his house and sawed angles in the front creating a boat shape. Then we hollowed it out and hauled it back down to the river where we spent many summer days just floating around. At the end of August we talked our parents into allowing us to take an entire day just to see how far we could float down river. As it turned out the river was very low that summer. We had to get out and let the boat float by itself most of the way but that evening the odometer in the car said we traveled about five miles. Of course, we'd floated much further because the river always takes the long way around.

Now a year and a half later I worked in the backyard with my cousins shoveling two feet of snow off the frozen Styrofoam. Peter, who was a year younger than me and a little over weight

looked concerned, “So you’re telling me this will float. Right?” he said.

Sure it’ll float,” I said. “That’s not the problem. The problem is getting our folks to let us do this.”

My older cousin Tom looked inside the boat. “ You know,” he said, “I don’t think I can fit in there.” At nearly 6’5” Tom had reason to wonder.

“You’ll fit,” I said. “You can sit on the back ledge if you have to. Pete can sit in the middle and I’ll paddle on my knees up front. What do you say? Shall we ask them?” They agreed and we headed inside.

I knew it wasn’t a good idea. That’s the reason I’d brought it up—it sounded adventuresome. It sounded perilous which put me in a good light with my cousins but I’d only suggested it knowing we wouldn’t be allowed. The river is dangerous in the winter. It is not only deeper and flowing more swiftly but ice encroaches from both banks—the water is swirling in places and, needless to say, it’s cold. I knew we weren’t going anywhere.

Our folks were all in the kitchen putting Christmas leftovers on the table. “Hey Dad,” I said as nonchalantly as possible, “we just shoveled off my Styrofoam boat and I was thinking we could take it up the river and then we could float back toward town and you could pick us up at the Mill Street bridge. Would that be okay?”

“Sure,” he said. “Let’s have some lunch first.”

Pete and Tom let out a, "Woo hoo!"

“Okay you guys,” my mother said, “who would like the last spoon of the corn pudding?”

I couldn't believe what I'd heard. But he said it. He said, “Sure. Let's have some lunch first.” So we did. Then we went out and hauled the hunk onto the top of our car and twined it down. We drove a couple miles up Route 6 to a place where the river almost joins the highway and pulled over. It was two in the afternoon and getting very cold. We cut the boat off the car, slid it down the bank and crawled in. Tom was right. He didn't fit. But the boat floated and we started down stream.

“We'll see you at the bridge in an hour,” my dad shouted. Then he snapped a couple pictures, hopped in the car and drove off. We sang the theme song from Gilligan's Island.

That was the highlight of our trip.

The photographic evidence is clear. We could have been killed. We didn't even have life preservers. We couldn't move in the tiny space—didn't dare move for fear of tipping and our bodies were freezing. The river is particularly circuitous in that stretch meaning it didn't take us an hour. It took us three hours and by the end it was starting to get dark. Before we could see them, from far off, we heard our fathers. They were shouting our names. There was a sound of desperation in their voices. When we shouted back they responded joyously as if they knew they had done something foolish. A few minutes later we floated around a bend and saw them where they'd been waiting for a long time. My father snapped a picture.

We crawled onto the bank beneath the bridge, miserable, unable to feel our hands and feet. We scrabbled awkwardly up the steep



grade to the warmth of the car. I was not happy with my father but didn't want my cousins to think any of the experience was other than normal. My father opened the car door and said, "Do you want me to try to pull the boat up the bank?" I didn't hesitate.

"Leave it," I said.

Later that spring the high waters washed it away.

My father's actions were the winter equivalent of putting the toddler on the motorcycle. Every parent is guilty of the same. Some are more cautious than others but the very nature of

parenting—twenty-four hours a day, day after day, year after year—insures that mom and dad will make some terrible mistakes. The old adage, “Accidents will happen” is closer to a law of nature than we would like to think. Serious accidents will be carefully avoided for years and then someone will say, “Hey Honey, do you suppose that car seat would fit on the back of my Honda?” Or, “Hey Dad, we just shoveled off the Styrofoam boat and I was thinking....” At those times one can only pray to God as my father did standing on that cold bridge. At those times one can only pray that everyone will be okay. Of course some people don’t believe in God so even that option is off the table. I’m guessing most of them are not yet parents.



Slides 61, 34, 87 and 75



The Slides: Bernt Goran and me

The Date: Summer 1975

The Photographer: My wife Judy

Recently I received an encouraging e-mail commenting on a piece I'd written. The e-mail said, "This... is... genius!!" Reviews like this are not common but it's not the first time my name has been connected to the word "genius". It is, however, the first time I received such a comment and read it more than once. It is the first time that I called to my wife shouting, "Hey Honey, come here for a sec. I want to read you something." The reason I was encouraged, and yes a little inflated, is because I respect the person who sent the message. This is not always the case.

Recently an audience member approached following a performance. "That was pure genius!" he said. I would have been more impressed had his next sentence not been, "Dude you rocked!" The boy was thirteen. He had mustard on his glasses and his belt buckled just beneath his butt. It was clear to me that he wouldn't know "pure genius" if it crawled out of his cotton boxers.

Sometimes the word "genius" is misused as a superlative to communicate appreciation. Many words are misused this way. Take the word "brilliant" for example. I had the opportunity to work for the better part of a year in a Dublin theater. I was so impressed the first week to have patrons say, "You were brilliant! Just brilliant!" This was very encouraging. I'd been called many nice things but never had I heard the word "brilliant". It took a couple weeks for me to understand that "brilliant" is used commonly in Ireland. It can mean anything from "pretty good" to "better than okay". I once asked a waitress, "Are the baked beans in your traditional Irish breakfast of the canned variety or are they freshly prepared?"

She remarked, “Oh... em... well they do come from a can but our chef prepares them quite brilliantly.” Which is to say, my performances in Ireland were about on par with canned pork and beans.

Last week though, I received the e-mail and it said, “This... is... genius!!” I respect the woman who wrote it. I appreciate the comment. I too think it was a good piece, maybe even “brilliant”. But “genius”? Probably not, and I’m okay with that. I think “genius” is highly over rated.

As a child, I knew that some of my classmates were a little smarter than I. Actually I knew that many of them... okay most of them were. I even suspected that a few might be geniuses. They were the kids who never had to study and yet they got straight A’s. I remember one girl in particular. Her name was Andrea. She always finished her tests with half our class time to spare. I would have just completed signing my paper and figuring out the date... maybe I’d scanned down to see if there were any easy questions. She’d be done. Then she’d file her nails while casually glancing over at my paper and smiling.

Was she a genius? I don’t know. Maybe. There was no way to know for sure because “genius” had to do with IQ scores and those were unavailable to us. Supposedly we’d all been tested at some time and somewhere in a dark office, probably underground, someone guarded a file full of IQs. But we were never to see them... ever! That was fine with me because I didn’t remember taking the test which meant I’d probably only signed my name and scanned for the easy ones before the bell rang. Best we leave the IQ file closed.

Honestly, I don't think there were many geniuses among us. If there were we probably wouldn't have known it. There was one boy in my sister's class who we all thought of as the dummy. That's saying something because even though I was three years his junior, I thought he was stupid. He's now a world-renowned brain surgeon. I'm not saying I'd trust him with my grey matter but supposedly if anyone could find it, it would be him. I also wonder about this guy because he always seemed unhappy. This might be attributable to the fact that we all thought him stupid, and more than a few told him so, but maybe he was unhappy because he was a genius. The two do seem to go hand in hand. I've met only one person who I believe to be a genuine, honest to goodness genius.

In 1975, Judy and I had the opportunity to join my grandmother and my parents who were vacationing in Sweden. Together we traveled to my paternal grandfather's hometown. It was there that I met my distant cousin Bernt Goran.

He was a young man my own age, bearing a remarkable resemblance to my father's family- in some ways a smaller version of myself. Like most Swedes of his generation, his English was quite good but he was soft-spoken, serious in his demeanor and didn't seem to have a lot to say. I found him intriguing. When he sat, he looked straight ahead. Even when crossing one leg over the other, as if relaxing, he looked on edge... he looked ready to bolt. His face would change appropriately with the room's conversation, smiling when he ought, shaking his head in agreement or raising an eyebrow in concern but he seemed not fully engaged. Some underlying preoccupation gnawed for his attention. Judy and I liked him very much. We found him to be kind hearted and oddly apologetic. We'd traveled enough to know that the latter quality can be the result of using a second



language, or it can be the result of shyness but we sensed there was something more.

“Bob, Judy,” he said to us one afternoon, “tonight I wish to prepare a meal. Will you enjoy to come to my house then?”

“Yes of course,” Judy said, “We would enjoy that very much.”

That evening he picked us up at exactly the time we’d arranged and drove us far into the countryside where we saw nestled in the woods a small cottage. It was stained a deep iron red with white painted trim and fully blossomed window boxes. The roof was hand hewn wooden shakes and the evening sun, casting long



shadows, gave it a soft mossy texture. Even from outside I could see that the windows were old wavy bubble glassed panes.

Inside, the floors of wide hardwood planking were covered with woven rugs the color of wild flowers, the same flowers that decorated the hand stenciled walls. The dining ware was set upon a lovely pine table its design and patina perfectly tuned to the rest of the room- down the center of the table a fine linen runner of blackberry purple, raspberry red, celery green. Around us, every detail was exquisite. I'd only a year earlier moved out of my own bachelor dwelling. I remembered it being not as nice.

Judy walked from vase to lamp to place setting admiring each article, softly touching the fabrics, running her fingers over each

surface and then standing for a long speechless moment before the stenciled walls. Finally she spoke softly. “Bernt,” she said. “Everything is so beautiful.”

“Yes, thanks very much,” he said. “It was many long hours.”

“What was?” I asked.

“To make this house,” he said.

“You made this?” I said. “You did it by yourself?”

“No,” he said. “Sometimes I have a little help with heavy things.” Choosing his English words carefully, he spoke quietly, mostly looking downward. “I must first dig a hole for underneath,” he said, “and there are many large stones. So I use them for the foundation. Then I must cut some trees and make boards. And I have found glass for the windows in an old house, which has been taken down. And I must make the shingles for the roof. It has been much work.”

To this point in my life I had learned to do almost nothing of a practical nature. I could not have measured a board much less cut it out of a tree. I was an aspiring musician. I’d written a couple dozen forgettable songs. That was the sum of it.

Judy returned to the table where she admired the linen runner. “This is a wonderful old linen,” she said. “Where did you find it?”

“Oh,” he said, “I have not found it. I have made it.” At this I laughed out loud only to realize he was serious.

“You made it?”

“Yes.”

“How?” I said. He looked directly at me and for a brief moment his expression changed. It was just a flash but I wondered if he thought I might be a bit slow.

“Well,” he continued, “first I must take a grown sheep...”

“Wait,” I said. “You grew a sheep?”

“No,” he said, “The sheep grew by itself but I shaved off the wool and spun it into threads on a... what do you call it?”

“A spinning wheel,” we chimed.

“Yes, yes and then I must make dye with flowers that I have grown. And the green color was very difficult because I must go into the forest for one kind of ...” He searched for the word and made like he was digging.

“A root,” we said.

“Yes, yes.” He passed his hand over the linen and pointing at a thin line of mossy green thread, he said, “It is a rare root but I think it makes a very nice color.”

He had prepared a traditional meal of fish with dill sauce, boiled potatoes and summer beets. While we ate we asked about the leather shoulder bag and hat. We asked about the candlesticks, the flower arrangements and the woolen wall hanging. He made them all. Words like “master craftsman” and “renaissance man” came to mind. Two times I thought the word “moron” but both

were in reference to myself. Surprisingly I did not wonder if he was a genius. Not yet.

Following the meal we drank dark coffee and he showed us a dulcimer... that he had made. Then I saw the accordion case in the corner. For anyone who plays the instrument the case is easily recognized. It can be for nothing else.

“Do you play the accordion?” I asked.

“Yes, this is a new one,” then he added with a smile, “but I have not made it.”

“I play the accordion,” I said. “I took lessons when I was a young boy.”

“Well then,” he said, opening the case, “you must play a song for me.” He put the instrument in my arms. I knew then that I could not play him a song. Even if I could remember one from my boyhood I could not play it on his instrument.

“Bernt,” I said, “I’m sorry but I can’t play this kind of accordion. I learned on what we call a piano accordion. On my instrument I have keys for the right hand. But you have no keys. There are only buttons. I have no idea how to play even the simplest song.”

“Well give it a little try,” he said and unwisely I did. With the left hand I could produce a polka oom pah pah, but that was it. The right hand was as foreign to me as spinning thread, weaving linen, turning pots, digging foundations, tanning leather, planing wood, shingling roofs, growing flowers, dying fabric, stenciling walls... well you get the idea. “I’m sure this one is very much the same as yours,” he said.

“No,” I said, “not really. I mean both have bellows and they get squeezed but that’s about it. I think you’ll have to play something for me.” I secured the bellows with the snap and handed him the instrument.

“Alright then,” he said and he left the room. When he returned he had the accordion on and was adjusting a large harmonica to a neck holder. “Alright then. This song I have written.” He closed his eyes and began.

I don’t remember how long he played. I do remember though that he did not play a song. He played a masterpiece... lyrical and



intricate. Melodies from both hands and another from the harmonica wove together. Once I thought I heard Copland and then again something like Bernstein. Always it was wholly Scandinavian, intrinsically Swedish, moody with long mossy shadows and then flashes of midnight sun that stole my breath. How does one describe music with words? Let me fail even more and say it felt like Van Gogh.

When he finished he smiled.

We sat in silence.

“It is just something I have made,” he said softly. I shook my head. That’s all I could do. If I were brighter I might have told him that it too was exquisite. Like everything else in his home, its design and patina were perfectly tuned to... well to their maker. I was unable to find those words.

“Bernt,” I said, “I have never heard an accordion played that way. I can’t believe it. I can’t believe any of this. Bernt, do you know how remarkable you are? You are... you are...” and then the word came. “I think you are a genius.” He lowered his gaze to the floor and shook his head side to side. “No,” I said. “I mean it. Everything you’ve done. And what you have just played... Bernt it is genius.”

Perhaps I expected a nonclaimer or at the least a “thank you”. Instead still shaking his head he said sadly, “It is not so good to be like this. My mind... it always goes. I sleep very little. Almost never. It won’t stop. My mind, it is always going round and round. I am always thinking, trying to...” Still shaking his head he said, “It is just not the best.”

I don't remember leaving that night but I will never forget being there. I was awed standing in the presence of a genius and yet so thankful to be me.

I think of my cousin Bernt very often. I always hope he is well.

Slide 3



The Slide: Arnold Avenue Elementary School

The Date: Summer 1967

The Photographer: My sister Sally

The Arnold Avenue School was built in the late 20's and it was built to last. Constructed from yellow brick

the two-story structure had large, lovely arching windows both front and back providing wonderful natural light for four classrooms on each floor. At one end was a small cafeteria/gymnasium. At the other, as I remember, a grand auditorium with impossibly squeaky wooden seats. At any assembly of students we were not only required to behave. We were forbidden to move. The flagpole stood in the front lawn which was the greenest in town and meticulously maintained as were the hallways of heavily polished Terrazzo reflecting walls of yellow gloss. I don't recall the ceilings. They were probably too high to be seen.

Behind the school were large fields for kickball and a designated area packed with delightful, deadly playground equipment. Here by the Merry Go Round, it was not uncommon to see a flying first grader flung centrifugally before cutting a teacher off at the knees. I remember waiting in a long line so Mr. Hughes, a rotund third grade teacher, could buck me on the Teeter Totter. At the top I had the choice to hold on to the bar grip resulting in a dangerously high handstand, or I could let go and just... fly!

Our swing set was constructed of heavy welded steel with chain links the size of a child's hand. We took turns while classmates wound us round by the legs until we were hunched over, six feet off the ground. If our fingers happened to be caught in the chain we were, at this point, nearly unconscious. When the chains could be wound no more we were released to spin for long minutes at eye popping speeds. I once watched a sixth grade girl jump off at the bottom, stagger three steps and dive head first into the Monkey Bars. It was great fun. Even children who preferred to play alone were at risk. The plastic coil spring horses were known to toss a shy child upside down and head first for no reason at all.

I loved my Arnold Ave. School. Our town had few other public buildings so we grew up with very little sense of architecture. For this reason, though I could not put it into words, I thought my school was beautiful. I thought of it as "dignified".

All of our homes were of four types. Old factory housing looked like it was designed by preschool draftsmen. Four walls were topped with a two-sided pitched roof. In the front there was a door and a window or two - maybe the same on the back- and that was it. Over time many of these homes had fallen but there were still a few on North Main in a section my grandfather called Tannery Row.

The newly built homes, that replaced the fallen, were mostly ramblers or ranch homes as they were called. My neighborhood, of perhaps a dozen homes, sported Frank Lloyd Wright inspired flat roofed structures. The neighborhood was designed by a Lloyd Wright protégé who also designed our new high school. The architect's own home and office hung to the side of a hill, high above us all, barely visible so naturally was it wedded to it's environment.

I remember being very taken by the modern flat roofed homes and was disappointed that ours was the only dwelling on the street that had an old style pitched roof. But my father said, "No, no. Wait and see. We're the lucky ones." Within fifteen years all our neighbors, frustrated with the leaking, gave up and built pitched roofs on top of the flat ones. In most cases the results looked awkward and self-conscious, like the local guy who decides to wear a toupee. Everyone knew they didn't quite fit. Frank Lloyd Wright must have rolled over in his cantilevered tomb.

The fourth type of home in our community was the grand mansion of which there were only a few. They were built by the lumber, tannery and natural gas barons and had names like The B.C. Taber, The John A. Weinman and the grandest of all The A.M. Benton which, when I was a boy, was called Isherwood's. Isherwood's graced an entire, cast iron-fenced in block along Main Street. Maples and Chestnuts filtered sun dappled shade onto the stately grounds accented with Mountain Laurel, cement ponds and playful fountains. The squarish house had wide elegant porches wrapping three sides and a covered carport on the fourth. Most impressive to me the building was topped with a glassed in cupola. Our old mansions were the only buildings that surpassed the Arnold Ave School in architectural beauty.

Arnold Ave, as it was called, was built as the high school and remained so until 1955. Both my mother and father attended there graduating in '45 and '46 respectively. Dad was a star football player, number 75, whose team boasted a perfect record his sophomore year. No team would again go undefeated until my sophomore year a full generation later. One Saturday evening, following an uninspiring defeat of a winless opponent, I sat at the dinner table with my family. "How 'bout that Dad?" I said, "I scored a touchdown and I'm only a sophomore."

"That's really great," he said with obvious pride.

My mother looked at my father and smiled. I thought she smiled because she was pleased for me but she kept smiling and staring at my father. He avoided her gaze. Finally she said to him in mock exasperation, "Bob, are you going to tell you son or should I?"

"What?" he said. "I told him that's really great."

"Bobby," she said to me, "when you're dad was a sophomore..." I cut her off.

"I know Mom, " I said. "I know they went undefeated and we're going to do it too."

"Well, I hope so," she said. "But what your father didn't tell is that when he was a sophomore he scored *EVERY* touchdown!"

I refused to believe it, not to spite my father but because I simply didn't think it was possible. Only recently while moving my parents out of their home did I find the newspaper clippings and learn that it was true. His old yearbooks failed to give him credit but the yellowed newsprint held the proof.

By the time I entered first grade my father was teaching at the high school and later became the principal. Because of his position, I felt I was held to a slightly higher standard than other children. I noticed, for example, that other kids were absent more often than I. I once asked my buddy why he stayed home and he said, "I thought I had a stomach ache."

I was incredulous. "What do you mean you thought you had one?" I said. "You either had one or you didn't. Right?"

"Right," he said, "I sure thought I did."

This would not fly in my family. I understood that to miss school I either had to have a fever or I had to be "losin' it" from both ends. Anything less, any other malady was considered tolerable. I could never have said, "Mom, I think I'm throwing up." I either

was throwing up, in which case there was evidence in the hallway or I was going to school.

Even when I was ill there was little motivation to miss school knowing I would suffer my mother's home remedies, the worst being a procedure call the enema. This practice, dating back to the ancient Egyptians, was "popular" (if that word can possibly be uttered in reference to such an act) until the late 1950s. One can hardly imagine how the idea first occurred but I'll give it a try.

Cyrus: *You know I've been suffering severe intestinal distress, diarrhea and debilitating nausea.*

Curt: *Well, I'm sure sorry to hear that.*

Cyrus: *Thanks. Say, I'd like to run a little idea by you.*

Curt: *Sure go ahead.*

Cyrus: *Okay well... I've been thinking a lot lately about sticking a hose into the bottom of the city cistern. And then maybe I'd stick the other end into my butt. What do you think about that?*

Curt: *Well what can I say? I imagine that will become very "popular".*

It's interesting to note a similar theme in every alien abduction ever reported. I believe there is no greater evidence against such occurrences than this very fact. Consider that nearly all abductees were raised in the 40s and 50s, well within the enema era. If you are in that age range you could hardly imagine a more disgusting, less dignified thing than being probed by a spider fingered alien.

Yet I'm guessing if these beings, from light years away, were intelligent enough to get here then they're probably sharp enough to keep their digits out of our butts. My mother, by the way, told me that she has no recollection of administering her soapy remedy. To which I said, "Well Mom that's either a mercy of your growing old or I've been abducted by aliens."

I attended Arnold Ave. from first grade through sixth. I enjoyed learning. I did well. Then, when I was preparing to change schools for the seventh grade, my family moved to State College so my father could pursue his doctoral studies. My new junior high had more people than my entire former town. Since this new school did not know me, the administration gave me tests to determine where I should be placed. Apparently I performed poorly and was placed in "lower" level classes. I, however, did not understand this. I seemed to experience a great year academically. Never had my classes been easier. Never had I so excelled.

My father finished his studies and we returned to our little town. Now, home again, the administration looked at my excellent grades and placed me back with my high level friends. This was, of course, exactly what I wanted. But then the struggle began. Actually I never caught up. I lived from one six-week grading period to the next, happy for the first three weeks and a nervous wreck for the last knowing I was in trouble. My parents said I just wasn't applying myself and no doubt that was true but it seemed foolish to study when I knew I couldn't succeed. I remember some of my senior friends deciding to "slide" through the last months until graduation. I would have enjoyed that had I not already slid for years. I did not find my footing academically until well into college when finally, again, I began to enjoy learning.

As a young adult I visited Arnold Ave. several times. Once after returning from Africa I spoke to the children about my experiences. They filed into the old auditorium, the screeching seats sounding like a flock of gulls. But when I spoke the children did not move. A couple times, while back in town, I stopped by the school to visit with my fifth grade teacher Mrs. Saiers. She was my favorite and remained in her classroom many years after I'd moved away. Always when I went there, I found the school more beautiful, more dignified.

With the passing of new laws, Arnold Ave. could no longer meet code. Renovation was considered too expensive and the school was abandoned for a new, very nice modern building across the street from the high school. For a while my school sat empty. The lawns were not maintained as well and in winter the walks remained unshoveled but still it stood like a jewel - a beautiful monument to four generations of students who attended there.

Unfortunately much of the town did not fare as well. Many of the older homes and particularly the stately mansions required heavy maintenance. For some owners it was impossible. Green Astroturf -always a good design choice- was added to the porch of one home. Another home was covered with vinyl siding. It looked good for a year or two, and then faded the same color as every other piece of vinyl in town. Saddest of all, the porches began to fall off the old Isherwood. For a while they were propped up with construction jacks but eventually those were removed and the porches fell away one side at a time. Most of the stately trees grew old and died. The cement ponds were filled in. A back corner of the property was sold for the construction of a duplex and the front for a Dollar Store.

Like the dead coal mine canary, perhaps the demise of our old homes was warning of worse to come. I returned home several years ago and found Arnold Avenue School in ruins, not having fallen but demolished to enable the construction of six rather ordinary homes. It broke my heart. When I asked my dad how he felt he said, "There oughta be a law."

I know time passes. I know things change. Still, remembering my old school, I'm sometimes overcome with nostalgia. It is my weakness. Often by mid-afternoon I experience a sweet melancholy recalling breakfast. But the loss of Arnold Ave. is terribly sad. After all, though it is unlikely, the old mansions could be brought back. They could be restored. Arnold Ave. School has been lost forever and with it some of our town's beauty and some of our dignity.

Slides 731 and 741



The Slide: Me (age 15) with a pretty girl

The Date: Summer 1967

The Photographer: My sister Sally

Every couple years while living in my parent's home and later while visiting there with my own wife and kids, someone would say, "Hey, maybe tonight we should take out the

slides.” This would be followed by a collective groan because taking out the slides meant spending several hours viewing poorly focused images, many showing the back of someone’s head. But with little protest we would relent and again enact the family tradition. It was a sensory experience. The screen had a surprisingly pleasant sweet moldy scent. The projector filled the room with warmth and soothed us with the soft rhythmic hum of the automatic focus attempting the impossible.

Always, part way through, a slide would appear causing my sisters and parents to cheer, “Woohoo!” The slide shows me at fifteen on a beautiful summer day. I’m standing on the back of a pontoon boat with a pretty girl. The girl is facing the camera but I am facing the girl.

“Whoa! What’s that boy thinking?” my older sister would tease. I always protested insisting that my facial expression was the result of the shutter catching me mid sentence. But the context clearly shows me ogling the girl as if about to say, with the rest of my family, “Woohoo! Baby lookatchu!”

My sister Sally took the photo, no doubt hoping to catch me in such a pose. Not surprisingly, she particularly delighted whenever the image appeared. The truth is, I delighted too. Though I never let on, I always anticipated the slide with a kind of nostalgic longing. I met the girl moments before the photo was taken. We spent perhaps three hours together and only a couple minutes alone yet I remember her full name over fifty years later. Had I not periodically seen her image I might have forgotten her. But I doubt it. Where I grew up, it was understood that you shouldn’t associate much with people from other towns. This pretty girl was not from my town and so for the first time I felt the exciting lure of the forbidden.

I lived in Port Allegany. Port, as it was called, was a town of about twenty-five hundred surrounded by other little towns roughly the same size. Smethport, Coudersport, Eldred, Emporium, Austin, and Shingle House were all within a circle with a radius of twenty-five miles. If Port was at the center of the circle -and it sure seemed to us that it was- then the northern arc crossed the New York line and included the community of Olean. At twenty-five thousand Olean was, to me, the big city.

As children we were indoctrinated with a fierce provincial pride. We were raised to think that our town was better than others. We were not taught this in a direct way. Surely most of our parents knew better. Our local worldview was, however, the very natural result of living separated from other communities. In elementary school we were taught our school Alma Mater and sang it religiously before every athletic competition.

*Although Yale has always favored
The violet star blue
And the gentle sons of Harvard
To their crimson rose are true
We will own our lily slender
No honor shall it lack
While Port High stands defender
Of the orange and the black*

I think it's safe to say that few if any from our town ever attended Yale or Harvard but we did not hesitate to compare our school to these institutions and when we did we found ourselves...well...truer.

We did not often meet children from other towns. The opportunities to do so were few and usually included team

competition accompanied by fight songs so we began to see others as rivals. They were the Falcons, Raiders, Terrors and Hubbers. In the latter case we did not know what a Hubber was but we suspected it was unfriendly. We were the Gators. We were defenders of the orange and the black.

We heard stories of older boys driving to other communities and always fights broke out. The following week boys from those towns descended upon ours seeking revenge. If they couldn't find anyone home they'd toss some manure in our community pool and on it would go. I did not participate in any of this but the stories reinforced the belief that it was better to associate with our own kind.

My older sister Sally had a boyfriend named Loren. He had some relatives who owned property on Cuba Lake and he invited our family to join his for a picnic on their pontoon boat. I was uncharacteristically enthused about the trip. Cuba Lake was in New York State well outside my twenty-five mile radius of comfort. But it was a lake. This was attractive because we had very few lakes in our area. More importantly, we were invited to picnic on a pontoon. I had no idea what a pontoon was but it sounded exotic. I remembered saying to Loren, "Are you serious? You mean you can walk around and eat on the boat?"

We drove a couple hours to a little cabin on a bluff above the water. We met Loren's relatives who all seemed very old. There were smiles and hellos and awkward handshakes. Then a woman handed me a large bag of charcoal saying, "Here you are young man. Make yourself useful. Take this bag down to the boat and give it to Betty."

I descended wet mossy railroad ties taking care not to slip and



wondered how the woman below negotiated such slippery steps. Then I heard her voice. “Hi,” she said, “I’m Betty?” I stopped and looked from my feet to see a girl standing by the boat’s Webber grill. She was not an older woman. She was a pretty girl very near my own age.

“You’re Betty?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she answered, “What’s your name?”

“Bob,” I said stepping onto the boat’s deck and putting the charcoal by the grill, “I wasn’t expecting you to be young,” I said, “Every Betty I know is over eighty.”

This made her laugh and that's all I've ever needed to feel comfortable. She started to empty the charcoal and asked if I'd carry some lawn chairs from the landing. During the next few minutes she asked me one question after another; Where do you live? What grade are you in? Do you like sports? I told her I played football.

"Oh, I'll bet I saw you play," she said excitedly. "Didn't your freshman team play against Olean?"

I felt the embarrassment burning in my cheeks. Indeed we had played Olean and lost by seven touchdowns. On a positive note I nearly caught a long pass and would have scored a touchdown had I not run directly into the goalpost. I told her the story and she laughed which almost made the loss worthwhile.

I couldn't take my eyes off her and the more I looked the more beautiful she became. To be honest, she may not have been more beautiful than some girls in my own town but that was the point. She was not from my own town. She was a city girl from Olean. A girl from Olean was not supposed to be so beautiful, so sweet, so kind. She was the first girl I'd met from another town and so she seemed alluringly forbidden. As the afternoon progressed I didn't want the day to end. I knew I'd never see her again.

But I did see her again just one more time. Two and a half years later my mother and I were shopping in Olean. We were at the counter in Bradners Department Store and I waited for her while she wrote a check. I wore my orange and black varsity jacket. Two girls entered from the snowy street in red and white Olean colors. As usual, I started to look away when the girl on the right glanced toward me and our eyes met. She broke into a wide smile that was two and a half years prettier.

“Hi,” she said. “How are you Bob?” I might have been able to respond naturally had my mom not joined the group.

“Mom,” I said. “This is Betty from the pontoon. Remember?”

“Of course I do,” she said reaching out to shake her hand. And then she added “You’re Betty from the slide show.” My mother wasn’t being mean it just slipped out. Betty looked at us quizzingly.

“Oh, uh,” I stammered, “We have a slide show of you. I mean we don’t have a whole slide show of you. We just have one slide of you that we look at. Sometimes. I mean... we don’t just look at your slide. We look at many slides and your’s is one of them.”

I was blushing badly and Betty laughed out loud. That was all I needed to feel comfortable.

“It was fun day,” she said smiling.

“Yeah,” I said. “It sure was.”

I stood on the pontoon. We were toward the back of the boat. I helped her with a folding chair. She put some cans of pop in the ice water cooler and turned away from me. I looked at her... and my sister snapped a picture.

Slide 5



The Slide: Helmer pretending to be angry at the Smorgasbord.

The Date: 1960

The Photographer: Probably my dad

When I was very young, each December, on one particular Saturday afternoon, my Dad and I would have lunch and then walk down to the church to meet Helmer Larson who would arrive shortly with a gorgeous Christmas tree in the back

of his pickup. Throughout my early boyhood old Helmer Larson was an endearing and enduring presence in my life. In church I always chose to sit in front of Helmer. When I began to squirm, even the slightest bit, (as I always made a point to do) I would feel his big hand on my shoulder. Without looking back, I'd reach into that old hand, and remove a neatly wrapped red and white peppermint candy, which if sucked carefully could last me through the sermon, the closing prayer and clear through the benediction.

Helmer worked for the gas company, driving, and hiking the gas lines that cut ribbon like over the rugged Allegheny Mountains. It was along those desolate lines high on the hillsides that Helmer found his Christmas trees for our church, though to say he "found" them is not quite true. It would be more accurate to say that he grew them, even nursed them, often for years. If he found a tiny evergreen along the edge of the line, he'd trim it. Returning the following year he'd trim it again patiently waiting until the tree had reached nine or ten feet. Then he'd cut it down and deliver it to the church. It was a lovely gift that only he could give.

As he grew past retirement age, it became apparent that Helmer would not be able to clear the gas lines much longer. His driving became a problem. He could no longer distinguish colors and had several minor mishaps involving traffic lights. The company said it was time to retire and he agreed to resign at the end of the year. I felt so sad that Saturday at the church when, for the last time, Helmer delivered perhaps the most beautiful tree I'd ever seen. Thick full branches, Deep summer green.

"And there're more where that came from," he said. "It's a shame I won't be able to get 'em "

My dad spoke up, “Helmer, you don’t have any six or seven footers up there do you? I haven’t gotten our tree yet. I wouldn’t mind hiking up myself.”

Helmer’s face lit up. “No need for you to bother Bob. You and Bobby go ahead and decorate here. I’ll go get you one and bring it up to the house. I’ve got one in mind and it’s beauty.”

Dad and I finished at the church and got home mid- afternoon where I took my post at the front window peering into the light snow, waiting to see Helmer’s truck winding up our road. My family always loved putting up the Christmas tree but this year the excitement was palpable. This year Helmer was bringing a tree. Not a little scrawny one like one we could afford. Not partial trees like my dad and I found on the hill behind our house, two little misshapen ones we had to wire together to look symmetrical. No. Helmer was bringing a tree this year.

When I saw him spinning his back tires, fighting his way up our snowy street and into the driveway I ran out to meet him followed closely by my mom and dad. Before Helmer was out of the cab I was gazing down from my perch a top the wheel well.

“What do you think Bobby?” Helmer asked dropping the tailgate, “Isn't she a beauty?”

“The most beautiful beauty I’ve ever seen,” I said honestly.

As Helmer dropped the trunk onto the ground and held the tree upright I saw my father’s face drop and I thought I saw tears in my mother’s eyes.

“Oh my! Helmer,” she stammered and then hugged him around the neck. “Helmer thank you so much. It is just... ,” she seemed at a loss of words, “ ... beautiful.”

It *was* the perfect tree. It *was* Helmer’s perfect gift. And I remember feeling so happy. We’d gotten his last and best tree. My dad patted him on the back and thanked him again and then Helmer got in his truck and drove off with a smile on his face. It was then that I realized that something was wrong.

“Oh glory,” my mom said to my dad. “Bob what are we going to do? We can’t have that tree in our house.”

I thought she must be joking. I said, “What do you mean Mom?”

“Bobby,” she said, “It’s bright yellow. There’s not a bit of green on the whole thing. None at all. Poor Helmer couldn’t see the color.”

Well I’d known my colors for several years so I too had seen that it was yellow. I just happened to think it was a stunningly attractive yellow tree. Who ever said a Christmas tree had to be green?

“Mom,” I protested feeling the tears filling my eyes. “We have to put it up. It’s from Helmer. It’s his very best tree. When he comes for supper he’ll know. Dad and I could wire together a dozen puny things trees from our hillside and never make one like this.”

Since they both knew I was right, we put it up. And it was the most beautiful yellow tree. But I don’t think my mom and dad saw it that way. Oh the shape! Yes certainly they knew that the shape was exquisite. But I don’t think they ever saw the beauty in the color. They’d had too many years of expecting green.

Fortunately I wasn't the only one who was impressed. All my friends gasped at the beauty of the yellow tree. One buddy mentioned that his family had been hoping to get a yellow one but then his dad got laid off so they had to stick with green.

Adults who visited our home noticed too. As soon as they walked in the door I could tell they noticed the color, but none said a word. Once I overheard my mom in the kitchen. In her quiet voice she shared the tree's story with a guest. No grownup said it was beautiful.

I guess it was an advantage that year to be a child. Only the children recognized the stunning beauty of Helmer's perfect gift.

He only lived another year or so. One autumn evening my dad asked me to go for a ride in the car. We drove up Mill St. to Helmer's house. Dad parked by the ditch and we walked around back where he knocked on the door. Helmer answered and invited us in. It was evident to me that he wasn't feeling well. He and dad spoke in soft tones about some illness "coming back" and both men seemed very sad. Then my dad took Helmer's hands in both of his. I couldn't hear what he said. On the way home I remember asking, "Dad, what's a prostate?"

Slide 41



The Slide: Dad at Cathedral Grove

The Date: Summer 1966

The Photographer: Me (age 14)

My father stands against a sweeping arc of stone block at the entrance to Cathedral Grove, a shade dappled, twelve-hundred seat amphitheater gracing a hillside of fragrant Redwoods in the California, Santa Cruz Mountains. We've been to church evidenced by the fact that, while on vacation, dad is

wearing a white shirt and tie. Cathedral Grove is located inside the Mission Springs Conference Center built early in the last century by The Swedish Missionary Association. That explains why we are here. We too are Swedish.

My father and I hiked the steep road and arrived at the entrance before my mom, and sisters. After snapping the picture, I handed the camera to my father and ran to the top seats. He followed. The view from above was impressive. The empty wooden benches hung to the hillside's graceful curve narrowing gradually to the bottom and the focal point of a small platform stage.

I thought to myself, *“One day this place will be full of people and I will walk on that stage to thunderous applause.”* But that's not what I said to my father. Instead I said, “Hey Dad. Can you imagine how cool it would be here at a concert with this hillside covered with people?”

“That would be something,” he replied.

The reason I didn't say what I was thinking is the same reason we were visiting Cathedral Grove. I didn't say what I was thinking because I'm Swedish. By this I mean I am of Swedish descent. It has been so all my life. My paternal grandfather spoke with a strong accent that made him impossible to understand. When I was very young he said something to me about, “Wiking blood wunning through my weins.”

After my mother translated the phrase I wondered if Viking blood was different from any other kind. I suspected it was. Once while savoring a boiled potato with dill, I bit my cheek and it bled profusely. I noticed a slight fishy taste. Later as a young man,

when entering small coastal villages I often felt an urge to rape and pillage but that may have been true of non-Swedes as well.

It was confusing because there were some aspects of my Swedishness that did not seem to fit with Vikingness. All the Swedes I knew were quiet people who did not abide boastfulness nor believe they were better than anyone else. Not to be too alliterative but they were predominantly peasant people from particularly poor parts, picking pea sized potatoes from piles of rock. Not a showman in the bunch. Even now, I can hardly think of a Swedish artist or star. Oh there was Abba but they sang almost entirely in English. The one exception might be the long locked tennis star Bjorn Borg. Borg was the rage, not in spite of his Swedishness but because of it. Borg never screamed at the referees, never threw a fit or tossed his racket at a ball girl. Bjorn was stoically Swedish in the way he quietly destroyed his foes. Sadly, he and his tightie whities are hardly remembered by the younger generation. All of this to say, I felt confused about my Viking blood.

“One day this place will be full people and I will walk on that stage to thunderous applause.” That’s what I was thinking but I felt too embarrassed to say it. I did not have it in me to say it. Apparently, that kind of blood was not running through my veins. Seven years later, the summer I turned twenty-one, I returned to this place as a staff member at the conference center. By that time I’d had four summers of counseling experience in New York State so, despite my young age, I was given a lot of responsibility. I over saw all large group gatherings, spoke at all youth chapels and did a bit of entertaining too. But most notably this summer of ‘73 was the summer I met Tommy.

During the first week, our director received a call from a pastor in the Bay area. "I've got a young man in my youth group who really needs something to do this summer," he said. "He's fifteen, dysfunctional family. Nice boy but definitely at risk. I'm concerned he'll end up on the streets and that would be very bad. Do you happen to have an opening on your staff? He'll do anything." Our director explained that we didn't have an opening, but if the boy was willing to work without pay we'd be happy to take care of him.

The next morning I met Tommy. He was a shy lanky kid who looked like he may have spent the last year growing too fast. He didn't know a soul and hid his scared eyes beneath a mop of curly brown hair, staring toward his high top sneakers. The director welcomed him like a long lost son.

"You hungry?" he asked.

"Yeah," Tommy said brightening.

"Well then, let's head over to the dining hall and get you something to eat. I'll introduce you to some of the staff and they can show you where you'll be bunking." And off they went.

I finished up some work and twenty minutes later entered the dining hall where I was shocked to find this formerly shy boy now boisterously delighting several tables with a 'chew and show' of potatoes, peas and boiled wiener. He had everyone's attention and was enjoying it. By all appearances he was a gifted teacher. Most of the young campers around him had already learned that they too could be funny by mixing a variety of foods and yelling wide mouthed at their friends. Even a couple younger counselors were seduced by this pied piper now smiling widely while forcing

an ooze of lemon Jell-O through his teeth. I had no choice but to step in and ruin the fun. The children responded quickly but guffawed again watching Tommy roll his eyes in mock exasperation. And so our relationship began.

“Tommy,” I said one morning. “You know that sound you make with your hand in your armpit?”

“You mean this one?” he said pushing his arm beneath his shirt and beginning a crude rendition of “It Only Takes a Spark.”

“Yeah, that’s the sound,” I said. “Listen Tommy, I want you know I recognize that is truly a gift. And I don’t want to discourage you from using the talent God has clearly given you.” My sarcasm was not missed and his eyes began the roll again. I continued calmly. “But Tommy,” I said, “I find it distracting when I’m speaking in chapel and you punctuate the ends of my sentences with those sounds. I’d like to ask you to not do that anymore. By *anymore* I mean *EVER AGAIN*.” He didn’t respond.

His behavior was the result of unmistakable charisma and uncontrollable immaturity. As I watched him that summer I wondered if he’d be Ok or if he’d end up on the nightly news another victim of poor choices. What makes one kid go right and another turn bad? How many bad decisions does a kid have to make before it’s too late? These were questions I asked while watching Tommy during the summer of ’73.

And then one day I saw a flash of something brilliant. I sat in the staff lounge on a Saturday afternoon. The campers had departed and the new batch were not expected for another day. I was listening to Neil Diamond’s new live album “Hot August Night”. The record was huge that summer. On the cover, Neil’s frizzed

hair is longer than shoulder length, his face glistens with sweat and he poses suggestively as if holding a woman in a lewd, passionate embrace. “Solitary Man” blared from the speakers and Tommy walked in the room. He stopped for a quick moment before shouting like a rock and roll announcer, “Would you welcome Neil Diamond and Hot August Niiiiiiight!”

It was funny and I was smiling. Then he struck the pose... perfectly! His brown curls fell over his face, his arms embraced the woman, his face distorted and he became Neil Diamond! Tommy disappeared and Neil Diamond stood writhing before me. It lasted five seconds. I applauded and cheered.

I don't remember saying goodbye at the end of the summer. I didn't think to look for him nor he for me. We just left.

I returned twenty years later to perform on the fourth of July. I walked up the hillside to Cathedral Grove. It was very nearly filled with people. I walked on the stage to thunderous applause. I wasn't even surprised. It seemed as natural as could be.

Tommy's life took a different turn.

When my sons were young I told them this story and one of them asked, “Dad, do you think he would remember you?”

“He might,” I said. And that's the truth. He might. I can't say it with any more certainty than that. I can no longer know or even imagine what goes through the mind of a man who is no longer the Tommy I knew. Time has transformed him into someone unable to experience life like the rest of us. Maybe unable to even recall it. Who can say what a man like Tom Hanks remembers?

