

February 14, 2016

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. - Amen.

"My Spiritual Journey" (Part 1)

Two weeks ago I shared with you about the times during our 46 years here that Judy and I considered leaving Lynchburg, and in each case decided against it. And I shared that each time this church community played an increasingly significant part in our decisions not to leave. This morning I want to share with you some of what I can remember about the spiritual aspects of my life before we arrived in Lynchburg, my life as a child growing up and through my college years.

I was born in 1937 in a small village in the town of Woodstock, NH, the gateway to the White Mountains just south of Franconia Notch where until 2003 there existed a rock formation known as the "Old Man of the Mountain" and also as "The Great Stone Face". I was born in my parents' house, the first of four children, delivered by a country doctor and his doctor brother from Bristol, Tennessee. His brother later operated on me when I was 10 years old. The country doctor and his family became close friends of my family, and I am still in touch with his oldest daughter.

My house was literally surrounded by family: six houses, one of which contained our village Post Office operated by my Aunt Rose, and 13 of my father's relatives, including my paternal grandparents whose home became my favorite place to visit. In addition to a Post Office, some of the other amenities in our village were a general store, a schoolhouse and a small Baptist church with a parsonage nearby. The church was within walking distance and we went to the church for Sunday school and worship every week. My mother was active as a Sunday school teacher and I can remember bringing home strips of paper on which were written the first two scriptures I ever learned. Each one consisted of three words. The first week it was "God is Love"; the second week, "Love One Another". Looking back I believe those lessons were good ones to start with.

My younger brother and I had bunk beds, and I slept in the top bunk. Each night we would say this prayer together before going to sleep: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. When in the morning light I wake, help me the path of Love to take, and keep the same for thy dear sake. Amen". There was another version of the prayer some of my cousins prayed which contained the words "If I should die before I wake". My parents did not want us thinking we might die that night.

One of the things I enjoyed about the church building was pulling real hard on a rope to ring the bell up in the steeple at 10:45 Sunday morning so that folks in the village would know it was time to go to church. During the summer time and through the foliage season, the Ladies Aid Society of our church would prepare supper for tourists who were passing through town on Route 3, our main highway, on their way south from trips north to the White Mountains. It was then that I learned my first employment skill: how to wait on tables. I still notice whether or not those who wait on me in restaurants "serve from the left" and "take away" from the right.

Although our village church was Baptist we shared a minister with a Methodist church in the town just south of us. Our Baptist minister presented me with my first Bible when I was nine years old, King James translation of course. After World War II for several years the two churches shared a Methodist minister with several children about the same ages as me and my younger brother and sister. Our two families became very close friends. After the Methodists transferred him to another location, the two churches shared another Baptist minister. I think that experience convinced me that denominational differences weren't terribly important.

During the summer of 1944 my father was serving as a Chief Petty Officer at Camp Peary near Williamsburg, VA, doing what he referred to as "pushing boots". He was responsible for training a group of new recruits. Somehow he located a two story house in Mattaponi, VA (near West Point) where he could rent one floor and have us join him for the summer. I was seven and my two younger siblings were four and two respectively. In June we traveled by train to Richmond and took a taxi to Mattaponi and our new home accompanied by my grandmother and an aunt. I actually attended school while we were in Mattaponi because classes in their school district began in August. However we did not return to NH until September just in time for school opening in Woodstock.

One of the strange coincidences of our stay in Virginia, something that I did not realize until just recently, was that Bev Cosby, co-founder of this church and my minister for 32 years, was at Camp Peary during the time my father was there, and at the time we were living in Mattaponi. My father was stationed there from November 1943 to November 1944; Bev was there for 10 weeks from June to August (1944). Although my parents in their retirement years were here on Sunday for worship many times, and had numerous contacts with Bev, who also officiated at the weddings of two of our children, the shared connection with Camp Peary apparently never came up for discussion.

In 1947 my parents enrolled me for a month in Camp Belknap, a YMCA boys' camp on Lake Winnepesaukee. I loved it and was fortunate to have that experience for four years. The camp had a beautiful outdoor chapel in a grove of pine trees where Sunday worship services were held. The chapel featured a large rock at the front on which the first words of Genesis Chapter 1 were chiseled: "In the beginning, God".

My mother played the piano and we always had one in our house. I began taking piano lessons from one of my uncles when I was six. I continued taking piano lessons through the eighth grade, but also started taking clarinet lessons about the fifth grade.

After completing the eighth grade in Woodstock, in the summer of 1951 we moved to Concord, NH. I left an eighth grade class of 12 and entered a ninth grade class of about 200. That was a big change, but as it turned out, a very positive one. My new school was much stronger academically, and there were many new opportunities for me to grow in my love of music: band, orchestra, mixed chorus and glee club, and during my first year I was able to participate in a student production of the Gilbert & Sullivan opera "The Pirates of Penzance".

After visiting several churches in Concord we joined the First Congregational Church. My mother had grown up in the North Congregational Church in Portsmouth, NH. My family really liked First Congregational Church. We had several excellent ministers and First Church was my home church during my high school and college years. My parents were members

until their passing in 2001, and it is still my sister's church today. I became active right away in the Pilgrim Fellowship (PF) high school youth group, and in the church choir. The PF connection led to two week-long summer camp experiences where I first became aware of the stark contrast between the relatively wealthy lifestyle of many if not most people in my country and the poverty that people in many other countries experienced. The first summer we were joined by Rev. Gifford Towle, a Congregational Missionary to India. He was working with people in India who had little or no access to clean water. His description of the conditions under which people in India lived deeply moved our PF group, and when the offering for aid to his mission work in India was made I remember an overwhelming feeling of wanting to give generously. Later on here in Lynchburg a young man named Avi Kasote whom Gifford Towle mentored, came to be part of the staff at Camp KBY. Avi later returned to India and opened a school for the blind which is still operating today. Although he has since died, his widow continues to operate the school.

The next summer we were joined by Rev. Perfecto Yasay, a native of the Philippines. His sharing of what life was like in his country impacted our PF group the same way, and evoked the same feelings in me.

In the fall of 1955 I entered Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH as a freshman. My high school grades and College Board scores weren't all that great, but apparently I had done well with my music. During my junior year I was privileged to sing in the mixed chorus at the High School All-State music festival, and was selected as one of two bassoon players for the All-State Orchestra my senior year. You would probably be right if you guessed there were very few high school bassoon players in NH in those days. Fortunately for me, the visiting Conductor of the All-State Orchestra was a Music Professor from Dartmouth. I have always suspected that my excellent preparation in both choral and instrumental music was a significant factor in my being admitted to Dartmouth. And I am grateful for that.

Two events which have significantly shaped my life occurred during my four years at Dartmouth. The first occurred in October of 1956, my sophomore year, when I pledged a fraternity. Our pledge class of 22 contained one African American student. Our fraternity had a clause that gave fraternity members who had graduated from Dartmouth the right to withhold approval of a pledge ("black ball") for any reason they chose. We wanted to be up front with the Dartmouth graduates who were members of the fraternity, and we told them that our pledge class contained an African American member. A few alumni cast their "black balls", but our pledge class unanimously decided that none of us would join the fraternity unless we all could join. Led by our senior class members, our fraternity began a lengthy and arduous process of trying to convince those few who objected to remove their "black balls". We eventually prevailed and all of us became members 6 months later in April of 1957. The African American student became my roommate my senior year in the fraternity house. He later graduated from Howard University Medical School, received a Navy commission and eventually became Commanding Officer of the National Naval Medical Center at Bethesda, MD. Our class selected him to represent the Class of '59 with an honorary doctorate degree 6 years ago at our 50th class reunion. To this day, among my classmates and fraternity brothers, he remains my closest friend.

The second event was a trip to the south of France in the summer of 1957 to participate in a student work camp at the College Cevenol, a private school in Le Chambon sur Lignon founded by two Protestant (Huguenot) ministers. The trip was very meaningful to

me because I was majoring in French at Dartmouth. The Congregational Church denominational office had a close connection with the American Friends of College Cevenol, a group of former work campers. My own church helped make it possible financially for me to make the trip.

My international journey began with my first airplane ride: a flight from Concord to New York City. We traveled to France by ship, sailing from New York City and later returned from France on another ship via the Saint Lawrence River to Montreal, Canada. Before the work camp began I was able to visit Paris and travel through Normandy and the chateaux country of the Loire River valley with other students by bicycle and train.

A week after arriving at College Cevenol and working on the installation of a water line there, a call went out from the International Civil Service for help with cleaning up the devastation massive flooding had created in the French Alps. With the encouragement of our hosts at College Cevenol, our group of work campers responded to that call and we left for the small town of Ceillac, near the Italian border. What was normally a small river running through the town had literally filled the homes next to the river with mud. We spent the next 3 weeks shoveling and "wheel barrowing" mud out of the peoples' houses. And in all my life I have never encountered flies like we did in Ceillac. They were everywhere, including where we slept and where we ate our meals.

The countryside surrounding Ceillac was absolutely beautiful. One weekend several of us hiked further up into the mountains where there was a crystal clear lake and a place where the townspeople would gather on Sunday for worship services. At night we slept in sleeping bags in a sheep shed. It was just like I had imagined it would be when I read books about Heidi when I was much younger.

After returning to Chambon sur Lignon, our group said good bye to College Cevenol and each of us left on our journeys home. This time I traveled alone to Le Havre where I boarded a ship for my return to the United States. It was the one time where I was forced to speak French, and the time when I made the most progress towards fluency in the French language. My parents met me when the ship docked in Montreal, and were really impressed when a few occasions arose when I needed to speak with French Canadians. I am sure they were thinking that all that money they spent on my college education was worth it.

The trip to France opened my eyes. The work campers at College Cevenol were from many different countries: the United States, Canada, England, Germany, Algeria, as well as native Africans from what was known then as French Equatorial Africa. Aside from College Cevenol itself, the town of Chambon sur Lignon has an amazing history of sheltering and hiding thousands of Jewish refugees during World War II when Nazi Germany's troops occupied Northern France and the Nazi friendly Vichy government was allowed by the Germans to oversee the southern part of the country. I still marvel at how blessed I was to have such a wonderful experience. One Sunday after my return home I shared a written report with the folks at First Congregational Church, thanking them for helping make such an experience possible for me.

Thank you for listening and letting me share with you this morning. I look forward to sharing Part II of my spiritual journey with you at some time in the near future. - Amen