

## FRATERNITY – ONE BOY’S EXPERIENCE

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I knew immediately who it was. The cruise ship bartender had just put a single malt before me when I heard that unforgettable laughter coming from the adjoining room. I quickly did the math – had it been 50 years? Yes, but there was no question. The laugh came from Tom Mason.

In less than a minute, he headed toward me. He looked as I imagined he would after 50 years. But, would he recognize me? He glanced in my direction, and his head snapped back. “Phipps!” he exclaimed, “is that you?” He laughed again. We shook hands and hugged.

Tom is my fraternity brother. Beta Theta Pi, Delta Chapter, DePauw University. He was from Brazil (Indiana, that is), just 50 miles down the road from Greencastle, home of DePauw. I remembered lots about him – a celebrated high school three sport athlete whose picture I saw hanging on the wall of a bar & grill in Brazil on one of our road trips. Smart, I.U. Med School, skilled Euchre player. He married well -- a DZ whose family name you’d recognize, resulting in an abbreviated medical career and lots of time on cruise ships.

We agreed to have dinner with our spouses the following night, and after we parted I thought about what I could

dredge up from our pledge days which would surprise Tom.

I remembered that, as pledges, we had to recite the names of the eight Fraternity founders within seven seconds. I found the Founders' names on the internet and re-memorized them.

At dinner Tom began talking about our pledge experiences, and when he asked if I remembered the founding fathers requirement, he was shocked when I rattled off:

John Reily Knox, 1839  
Samuel Taylor Marshall, 1840  
David Linton, 1839  
James George Smith, 1840  
Charles Henry Hardin, 1841  
John Holt Duncan, 1840  
Michael Clarkson Ryan, 1839  
Thomas Boston Gordon, 1840

"of ever honored memory"

It happened to be Tom whom I saw on the cruise ship. But, it could have been almost any other of my fraternity brothers, and the re-connection would have been the same. That's just the way it is in Fraternity.

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I'm sad when I read of problems in college fraternities today. Some schools have banned fraternities altogether. Other schools have suspended chapters. Individual fraternity members have been prosecuted. Mostly it seems for alcohol abuse, hazing and sexual misdeeds. There is no excuse for the bad conduct of a few.

I recently read a Macarthur Foundation funded research report regarding brain development and judgment making of young adults, ages 18 to 21. The findings included that, for this age group, the areas of the brain regulating judgment and self-control are still not fully mature and that persons in this age group are more vulnerable to poor decision making than adults in their mid 20's or older. Perhaps not surprising, and adding to the belief of some that it is just too dangerous to allow a group of young men in that age bracket to associate in a loosely regulated fraternity setting.

I intend by this recount of my own experience, albeit nearly 60 years ago, to express my belief that college fraternities can provide a wonderful opportunity for young men and should be supported.

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It was late August 1959 when I and my parents and younger brother left home in the early morning on the 3 ½ hour drive from rural southern Indiana to Greencastle. I'd

not been away from home except for a week-long camp when I was 12.

My dad had been up early to fry chicken which we ate for lunch in Robe Ann Park when we arrived. We then went to the Admissions Office to be directed to the home of one of the families in town who hosted new male students for the few days of fraternity rush which occurred before school started. I'll always remember the pang in my stomach and the tears in my eyes and in my parents' eyes as my father drove away, leaving me standing in front of the host house with a suitcase of clothes and a basketball.

Over the course of the next few days, the new students visited fraternity houses for interviews. After a round of interviews the students and fraternities submitted preferences, and where there were matches, follow-up interviews were conducted and new preferences submitted. In the end, through this winnowing process, a student might have a choice between a couple of fraternities or might have no choice and would be assigned to the general Residence Hall. I landed in the Beta House and immediately moved in with my 24 new pledge brothers, mostly from Midwestern cities and towns, and with varying degrees of preparedness for college life. I felt least prepared.

I learned my first lesson in what it would mean to be in the fraternity the night after we moved in. We were told that another candidate for pledgship would be visiting after dinner. We were divided into groups to interview Michael.

He was from Chicago. There was a uniqueness about him which I couldn't identify. I immediately liked him. He was easy to talk to, intelligent, informed about many subjects. I felt he could be a good friend.

After the last interview, Michael left and everyone gathered in the dining room. We pledges sat together in the front. The pledge trainer explained that unanimity would be required, including new pledges, for an invitation to Michael. This was the first opportunity for the new pledges to participate in a fraternity decision. There were several positive comments about Michael, and when the pledge trainer called for a vote, I and the other pledges enthusiastically raised our hands in support. But about a half dozen upperclassmen in the back raised their hands in opposition.

"What's the problem?" the pledge trainer asked. "He's Jewish," one of the group said. There was deadly silence. A jolt ran through my body, and my mind raced That was his uniqueness. I had not known anyone who was Jewish. In my hometown there had been only Baptists, Methodists and United Brethern.

I sat silently as a vigorous debate ensued among the upper classmen. "How dare you express that kind of prejudice in a Beta house. He's just as good and clearly a better man than you," shouted one.

"I know who I want to live with," replied an objector, "pledge him and I'm gone".

I thought there might be a fight. What was happening was wrong, and I felt my face grow red. I saw Ralph, the boy next to me, clench his fist.

“Another vote,” someone cried, and a shiver ran down my back. Now, I and my pledge brothers would be truly identified by our vote. Ought I vote “no”, simply in deference to the strongly held view of the half-dozen? I took a deep breath and again raised my hand in support and saw that all the other pledges had done the same. I was proud of us but distressed that the situation could occur in my new home, among boys that I had picked to live with and who had picked me.

The vote count remained the same.

“So be it!” said the pledge trainer, and he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. We pledges sat in bewildered silence, not knowing what next was to come. What kind of group had we joined? And then, as we began to quietly talk about what had just happened, the door swung widely open, the pledge trainer reappeared, along with Michael, grinning ear to ear.

The upperclassmen erupted in laughter. It was a set-up for the pledges! Michael was actually a graduate Beta, who had returned to the House for this performance.

The pledge trainer admonished the pledges, “there’s no prejudice in this House. I’m glad you voted as you did.”

That was my introduction to the fraternity. I felt at home.

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In remembering fraternity days, or college days in general, it's often the "not so adult" things which come first to mind – in my case (1) the goat that we secreted in the basement for several days before it became known to our housemother, or (2) our adopted Newfoundland, Nanook, who had an embarrassing attraction to coeds, or (3) the "boulder run", a late night nude stampede from the fraternity house to a giant boulder in the middle of campus. And the pranks - such as when my pre-med roommate put his anatomy class fetal pig under the covers of my cold dorm bed, leading to a bloody scream when my foot touched the cold moist body.

And, we tend to forget or gloss over the problems that did exist. Alcohol and underage drinking was a problem for a few. Depauw was a dry campus, and the no-alcohol rules of the fraternity were enforced unevenly.

And, there were pledge requirements, mostly innocuous, such as housekeeping tasks, a quota of flies to kill, a duty to pay deference to upperclassmen. But a few which would amount to mild forms of hazing, now rightfully prohibited by rules of the National Fraternity. They weren't pleasant, although enduring them together played some part in forging a bond among the pledges.

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From my standpoint, the positive aspects far outweighed the negative aspects, and the fraternity experience was a

very important part of my college life and personal development. The fraternity's Constitution identifies as objects worthy of association mutual assistance to each other in the honorable labors and aspirations of life, unsullied friendship, unfaltering fidelity, and cultivation of intellect. Through the fraternity experience I learned:

- about developing communication and social skills – living together, taking meals together, meeting together, singing together;
- about developing personal leadership skills and recognizing leadership qualities in others;
- about participating in making rules which would govern our association, including what social conduct would be acceptable and what would not;
- about making financial decisions, including developing House budgets and allocating financial responsibilities;
- about the importance of traditions;
- about being loyal to other people and to the ideals of the fraternity; and

- about having pride in an organization and striving to enhance its reputation by conduct in the classroom, on a varsity or intramural athletic field, and elsewhere.

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Toward the end of my freshman year, I looked forward to initiation. There remained one final hurdle, passing a Beta history test of three questions on the day of initiation, required of all initiates. The questions would be taken from the small Beta history book which we pledges had nearly committed to memory. We were quizzed individually, by a committee of the Pledge trainer, President and Vice-President. The first two questions were easy. But the third was completely foreign. I could draw upon nothing in the book for an answer. The examiners were horrified. I had been one of the outstanding pledges, they said. But, the matter was out of their hands. Passing the test was required of all initiates.

The committee deliberated briefly. To minimize embarrassment for me, all of the pledges would be brought into the heretofore secret Chapter room, hoods over heads, and when I was told to leave I would remove my hood and quietly return to my room. The ceremony would continue, and later, someone would visit me to talk about options. I was to say nothing to others about having failed the test.

I was devastated. I realized at that moment how much being part of the fraternity meant to me.

When all the tests had been administered, we were led hooded into the Chapter room, arranged so it felt in a circle. After a brief introduction about the honor connected with becoming a Beta, the President announced that, sadly, one member of the group had failed the test. That person, he said, should now remove his hood and return to his room. Despairingly, I removed my hood and looked for the door. But, to my great surprise, all other pledges were removing their hoods as well.

There followed much laughter and celebration, singing and passing the Loving Cup.

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I came to Cincinnati because of the Fraternity. In my senior year I received a letter from a DePauw Beta alumnus, class of 1930, who had read in the Chapter newsletter about one of the graduating seniors going to law school. Bill Seaman invited me to visit him at Frost & Jacobs, and that led to a summer internship and an invitation to join the firm with which I practiced for 43 years.

Bill was an extraordinary tax lawyer and citizen and mentor. He talked often about the importance of the Beta experience in his life. In 1976, I accompanied Bill back to

Depauw for the celebration of his 50 year anniversary as a Beta. There were tears in his eyes and in mine, as we gathered arm and arm with other Beta brothers, singing the Beta Doxology and passing the Loving Cup.