

"Nose Prints on the Kitchen Window"

by Ted Gleason March 1, 2010

On a deceptively warm autumn Saturday afternoon, Tim Russell and I stood in the end zone, watching the first game of the season against St. Mark's School from Southborough, Massachusetts. Beyond the far goal post, sunlight shimmered like gold on the Charles River. Graduates, parents, friends ambled down the hill, across the adjacent baseball diamond, to enjoy old friends and make new ones. No better way to spend a beautiful, relaxing afternoon: acquaintances became friends; casual conversation became memorable; more than victory and defeat were at stake.

Tim and I were still quite new to one another on that long-ago afternoon. Now, twenty years after his death, he remains one of the important friends of my lifetime. For several years he was President of the Board of Trustees, and I was the headmaster. Everything that happens in an independent school flows from this relationship.

During the first period of the game, we talked about convictions. I asked, "Tim, tell me what you think makes it possible to know the truth?" The question hung between us for a short while before Tim said, "Looking for nose prints on the kitchen window when you come home at night." Looking for nose prints on the kitchen window when you come home at night.

Earlier that year, mid-winter, Tim's predecessor as President of the Board took me aside after a Trustee meeting to say the time had come to conclude his term. "No rush," he said, "But you and I should talk." We met for dinner, and after we'd eaten, retired to a small sitting room for coffee, brandy and cigars. During a reflective moment, I wondered aloud, "Do you think Tim would do it?"

"He would if you asked him."

Tim and I met in his office at the Boston Safe Deposit and Trust Company. A year had passed since he and his wife had returned after seventeen years in Cleveland, where Tim ran Carling Brewing. Back in Boston, where they had grown up, Tim succeeded Ralph Lowell as President of the Boston Safe; his office over looked the Old State House.

As I approached his door on a Tuesday afternoon, Tim looked up, smiled, waved, rose to greet me, pointed to a chair facing him. No need for small talk. I told him I needed a friend, wiser and older, who loved the school, was willing to talk honestly about everything.

Without a pause, Tim agreed. "I'd do anything for Noble and Greenough School."

Nobles was as much a part of Tim's life as his family: father, grandfather, sons and two grandsons were graduates. Tim had been thirteen, when his father died. There was little money. His mother, Josephine Dorr Russell, sold the house in Brookline, moved to Dedham, across the street from the front gate of the school. Someone, I never knew who, paid for Tim's tuition for his six years at Nobles. Sister Russell, as she was known by everyone, supported Tim and his younger brother by taking in cleaning, not washing, but cleaning, which she worked in great vats in the basement, before pressing and delivering the cleaned clothing. Other than her two sons, Sister Russell's interests included gardening and painting. She attended every Nobles athletic contest, including all of Tim's football games. Tim was inevitably the Captain of the team; his remarkable skills as an athlete were outstripped by his gifts as a leader.

Tim and I spoke frequently on the phone. He answered and dialed his own calls, never, "I have Mr. Russell on the phone for you, Mr. Gleason." More often we talked face-to-face, in his office, over lunch, as he dug Jerusalem artichokes, or chopped wood in his backyard, sitting in his study or mine or in my office, when Tim came to school, as he did more than once a week.

Seamlessly, virtually without effort, our lives belonged to one another. There were no secrets; He spoke frequently of the small change of brotherly love: be on time; answer your mail. Small change is nose prints on the kitchen window.

What is a nose print? It's as simple as stance and statement, and far more.

For twenty-seven years Samuel S. Drury was headmaster of St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. Every day he visited boys in the infirmary, where he prompted conversation by moving the artwork on the walls from place to place. His favorite was Millet's familiar peasant scene, "The Gleaners." Drury would ask each boy, "Which would you rather be: a reaper or a gleaner?" The boy would reply, "A reaper." The headmaster then said, "So did I, once; no longer. Now I want to

be a gleaner. That's what a schoolmaster is - a gleaner - one who cherishes moments of nourishment, quietly shared."

Nose prints on the kitchen window. Moments of nourishment, quietly shared.

On my seventh birthday my father gave me a red, one horsepower Muncie outboard motor, an unusual present in those days, long before Squam Lake in New Hampshire, and every other body of water, had been overcome by motors. The Muncie meant I was free to go anywhere I wanted (at three miles an hour) to catch small mouth bass. That's what I did until a Saturday afternoon in early August, when, crossing the broadest part of the lake, there was a loud clanking noise, metal striking metal, and the Muncie stopped. I wound and re-wound the starter cord, pulled and pulled, to no avail, got out the oars and rowed home, where I found a wheelbarrow and toted the Muncie up to the tool shed and Saint John Williamson, the head of outdoor operations at our family camp.

For the three or four summers after my sixth birthday Williamson was the most important male person in my life, nearly as important as my father and grandfather. He was wise and warm, and as far as I was concerned, this PhD candidate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Iowa, knew absolutely everything. He smoked a pipe, drove a truck, answered all my questions.

As I struggled up the hill with the wheelbarrow, Williamson saw me coming through the open door of his tool shed and came to help. Once inside, I said, "Fix it. Please fix it." He did; took it apart, read the manual, ordered parts, put the engine back together. On the last day of summer vacation, I took him for a ride.

Thirty years later, S. J. and his wife were in Boston for a professional meeting, and they came for dinner. As we sat at table, I asked, "Do you remember?"

"Remember? Of course I remember. What I remember most is that to this day I know nothing about gasoline engines."

"Then how, how did you fix my Muncie?"

"You asked me. You believed in me."

Nose prints on the kitchen window. Moments of nourishment, quietly

shared.

What are they - nose prints, moments of nourishment? When do they happen? Why?

Going away to a large, highly competitive, all-boys' boarding school at age fifteen was not a pleasant experience. Youngest child, only son, always first in everything, boarding school was new, unpleasant, unwelcome; no one cared about me. But the school had been my very own choice; I was there to stay, come what may. I survived and endured, even if I did not prevail.

The final day, the long-awaited end, was a great relief. My parents were present. So too was the love of my life, the girl to whom I would later be married.

When the festivities ended, we emerged from the school church, where, years later, I would preside, the entrance to be named in my honor. As we walked to the sidewalk, I could see, right across the street was parked the 1940 Ford Convertible with which I'd grown up. "Congratulations," my father said. "It's yours." He handed me the keys.

Not an hour later my future wife and I drove out of town, heading south. As we crossed the town line, I said words long remembered. "I shall never, never, never, never return to this place."

As it turned out, I could not have been more wrong. Nine years later, almost to the day, we returned, married with children, to spend six years as a young family engaged in two different jobs in the very same town and community.

* * *

Late afternoon, a foggy, rainy Saturday in March, Anne and I sat with her parents in front of the fire in their living room in Middletown, Rhode Island, making plans for our forthcoming wedding. The telephone rang. Jim went to answer it, called out, "It's for you Ted. Why not take it upstairs in the guest room." He knew this was a call I should answer while all alone.

"It's Daddy," the voice said. "I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you. Mother drowned this afternoon." I remember the white chenille bedspreads, the empty fireplace, the white curtains gathered at the

sides of the window against the wallpapered walls, but I didn't know what to say.

I stammered. "There. There . . . there must be some mistake."

"No. I'm afraid there's no mistake." Then I knew. This is it. This is how it feels. That's why there isn't anything to say.

* * *

Exactly a week after we were married in the month of June, my father died. A month later the ship to which I'd been assigned as a newly commissioned Ensign departed for destinations north of the Arctic Circle, not to return until mid-October. Despite the midnight sun, ice floes and polar bears, it was a long, long summer. All that changed the day my ship returned. Anne was on the pier to meet and drive me to our first address, which she had found, rented, moved into and settled, all by herself. The memory of being led up the stairs to the second floor of a two-family house in the Ghent district of Norfolk, Virginia is vivid. Nose prints were everywhere. Every detail of those four rooms was a moment of nourishment, quietly shared. I remember nothing of our conversation, only the long anticipation of the summer becoming reality in an instant, eclipsing every daydream

Nose prints mark a marriage; mark every relationship - family, friendship, and community, opportunity - when two or three are gathered together.

Nose prints on the kitchen window. Moments of nourishment, quietly shared.

Thursday afternoon, the first week in May, a brilliant, sunny, spring day I was in my office preparing for an afternoon class. The month of May was never my favorite as a student or schoolmaster. I was feeling sorry for myself. The year had been long and demanding. There was a knock on the door, and Ned Hallowell walked in. "I left a book here in your office last Sunday," he said. "Mind if I have a look?"

"Go right ahead." I replied. There was no book, but if Ned wanted to look, let him. I continued my preparation. Ned whistled, pretended to search.

"No; must have left it someplace else," he finally said. "But as long as I'm here, mind if I sit down for a minute or two." Without waiting for

response, he took the seat on the other side of my desk. We talked, maybe for fifteen minutes. Then, almost as abruptly as he'd appeared, Ned stood up and left. Half an hour later, when I closed my office door and headed off to class, I too was whistling.

When I returned that evening, Anne said to me, "Did Ned Hallowell find you this afternoon? I was in the garden out front working when he walked by. I told him you were in your office, feeling sorry for yourself."

* * *

Dick was demanding, but he was an accessible boss, always available, constantly present. He knew the Woody Allen dictum, "Showing up is 80% of life" long before it became legend. He'd hired me to do something new, different, unprecedented. I knew what it was; Dick knew too, and he knew I was the one who had to do it. As long as I did, he would support me.

He did support me - thoroughly, although not always in the normal ways. He would say such things as "You know, there's a better man for your job." When he did, I knew he knew that I'd leave his office determined to prove him wrong, which was exactly what he wanted.

Or he'd say such a thing as, "I'm giving you a new job. Starting today, you're the one appointed to prevent the revolution from happening here (this in the era when all educational institutions were blowing apart). I'll support you in any and every way you ask. Please understand, you can have anything you want - no classes for a week, small group seminars on the lawn, whatever. But if you fail, and this place blows up - you're fired on that very day." He smiled as he spoke. He knew there'd be no revolution.

The last time we met, six weeks before Dick died of a heart attack, we sat at a small table for lunch. Just before it was time to leave, he looked across the table and said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I failed you."

"You never failed me,"

"Yes, I did," He continued. "I wanted you to succeed me, and I failed. I'm sorry."

Nose prints on the kitchen window. Moments of nourishment, quietly shared.

The school I inherited as headmaster had a hundred year old tradition of morning assembly. Each school day began as the headmaster stood before students and faculty to speak or read. At the time I arrived, it was fashionable throughout the world of education to change time-honored customs. Instinct told me that change may well be essential, but it was important to hold on to certain traditions that lent identity to the school. Assembly should remain, grow and prosper, which was exactly what it did.

Although the money had not been raised nor the building named, the Trustees voted to build a new, completely separate structure, to be used solely as a daily meeting place for the entire school. The week the Assembly Hall was completed, a host of other uses were found for the building, but it had been identified as a place to assure continuity and community. Patterns and themes were established. I remember most: laughter and tears.

The elevation of the stage made my pants appear short, but this was also because when my father took me to purchase clothes, he taught me to say to the tailor: "Just the suggestion of a break."

As the tenure of students in school grew longer, I prided myself in knowing their full names, and often used them, especially the middle name. If I spotted a senior talking with his neighbor, I would stop in mid-sentence and address the student, using the full name.

Mid October, I looked up and saw two seniors, right in front of me, in full conversation, not even pretending to pay attention. Without skipping a beat, I remember saying, "Timothy Denton Mansfield: what are you and Mr. Lyne discussing?"

The room became deadly silent. Mansfield hesitated for a moment before he replied, "Actually, Mr. Gleason, we were discussing the length of your pants."

The place erupted in laughter, guffaws, whistles, cheers and finally applause. When the furor subsided and the floor was mine, I knew what I chose to say next had to be memorable. It wasn't.

* * *

Jim stopped by my office frequently, sometimes after making an appointment, at others to offer words of greeting, tell a story or recount a recent event. His words and bearing conveyed trust. We

worked together harmoniously for two decades. Jim was steady and reliable, spent most of his time with his accustomed tasks - teaching English, coaching the offensive line - for which he'd been hired. As time passed, however, he found energy for new challenges. He initiated skiing - Alpine and cross-country - as competitive sports, coached three boys and girls teams to league championships. He created new audio-visual programs to inform graduates and friends, near and far, about what resonated today in the school they knew and loved.

Jim did nothing slowly, all things well and with confidence. Thoroughly married, he and Ginny were customarily engaged in different endeavors, but their union was palpable; their four sons bore testimony to it and to them.

Given all of this, which I knew well, I should have seen it coming. I didn't.

Early each calendar year - in January or February - I met for an hour with each faculty member to review their "hopes and fears", taking a phrase from Phillips Brooks. These conversations worked well, most of the time, and I looked forward to them. 1983, the year I stopped smoking on May 30th after more than thirty years of smoking at least a pack a day, Jim arrived early on a January morning for his annual conversation.

He took the initiative. "There's much to discuss," I well remember him saying, "But before we begin, I have something important to say. I love you, and I want you to stop smoking."

That very day I began a regimen to do what Jim asked and smoked my last cigarette four months later.

Nose prints on the kitchen window. Moments of nourishment, quietly shared.

Nose prints result from anticipation and catch you unaware. The ability to notice has to be practiced, learned. It is impossible to make nose prints happen. They have a life of their own; however, if we do not pay attention, they pass us by, appear and disappear, as if they'd never existed.

"Hello. Hello. I'm home. I'm home." Can merely be a voice calling through the front door into a dark house after dusk, or it can be the

beginning of a new lifetime. The difference comes from paying attention.

Why do I remember? Did I make the right selections? Cherish what is essential? Nose prints are the trademarks of a lifetime.

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean -
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws, back and forth instead of up and down -
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face,
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

("The Summer Day" by Mary Oliver. New and Selected Poems, p. 94)

* * *

Easter Day we visited our eldest daughter and her family on Cape Cod. The day was glorious, sunny, unusually warm; we decided to take a picnic to the beach. Before every one else was ready, I took our two-year-old grandson to the car, buckled him into the back seat, got into the driver's seat to wait for the rest of the family.

As we sat together, I said to the little boy sitting behind me. "Oh, Matthew, you'll have to tell me how we reach the beach. I'm so stupid, I've forgotten."

The small voice from the back seat said the most important words he had yet said to me. "Baba, you are not Tupid."

Nose prints on the kitchen window. Moments of nourishment, quietly shared.

The four upper grades, the high school, of the school where I was headmaster were co-educated in the early Seventies. The two lower grades remained unchanged, their future uncertain. Several years passed before it was decided to enlarge and co-educate them.

Easier said than done; the politics had become complex. A small, vocal, conservative and powerful minority had coalesced around the desire to maintain the two lower grades as an all-boys' school.

Tim and I believed strongly that we needed to move forward as a united school. A special Trustee meeting was called to make this happen. It would be challenging but essential to work together towards a common goal.

Tim wanted to get it just right. He and I met for a good part of Saturday and Sunday, first at his house, then at ours, to plan our strategy, until everything was fully and clearly in place.

After the meeting began, however, on Tuesday evening, it became clear that something had changed. Tim entered the room, sat in his appointed chair before the fireplace and read the room. I was sitting to his left, watching. I could see him change his plan but had no idea what he had in mind.

He began by asking each person to speak his or her mind. This was not our strategy. Tim had developed a new way to proceed, but he couldn't halt the meeting, declare a time-out and take me aside. He had to know we could read one another well enough - all the nose prints - to know what each was thinking. I watched and listened, and I knew. Tim didn't have to tell me. I knew. The school's history included significant changes, momentous turns in the road. When each occurred, the decision had been unanimous. This tradition should continue.

Tim wanted a unanimous vote. He set the stage, played his cards, before announcing the headmaster had something important to say. I knew what Tim wanted. He avoided my gaze as I spoke, allowed me to speak for some time - all off the cuff. As I neared a conclusion, he let me know that was enough, and when I'd finished, he called for a vote. It was unanimous.

* * *

Tim's grandson and namesake applied to school while Tim was head of the board. I took one look at his test scores and knew he would never be admitted. I visited the Admissions Committee to tell them they need not debate this application. I would send a letter of acceptance and assign him as my advisee.

The boy's strengths were creative and artistic. He had difficulty with math and language. His first year I started him in a new language and placed him in the same algebra course he'd already taken, enrolled him in painting, ceramics, voice and guitar. By the end of the year he was an honors student. I directed him to board to allow him more time for academic work. He maintained an honors average, chose and applied to a competitive college, was accepted, launched into an interesting and productive career.

Several years passed. He became engaged. Called and wrote to ask if I would officiate at the wedding? I agreed. He and his fiancée came to Cincinnati for a weekend of preparation. Sunday afternoon, time to leave. He lingered in the front hall, ready to go out the door. Before he left, he said this.

"It took me a long time, but I figured it out. I want to say thank you for what you did for me when I came to school. You loaded me up with courses in which I did well. I discovered I had worth, could do the job, and I did. But it never would have happened if you had not been there to help."

* * *

The call came early in the morning. "If you want to see him, you'd better come soon."

"As you know, we're three hundred miles away," I replied. "I'll be there first thing tomorrow morning. What time is best?"

"Just come as soon as you can."

Nine-thirty the next morning, I walked into the kitchen. Tim's wife and daughter sat together, drinking coffee and smoking. After "Good Morning," they said, "Wish you could have been here yesterday. He was in really good shape. He's not nearly as good this morning, but he's expecting you. Walk through to the bedroom."

Tim was in the middle of the room, lying flat in an un-raised hospital bed, oxygen tubes to his nose. We greeted one another; he reached for my hand. His was warm. He was smiling. Conversation did not flow, but each of us was comfortable with the other, as we always had been.

"How's the oxygen?" I asked.

"I wouldn't recommend it."

I have no memory of what we discussed. What was there to say? This was our final conversation. I tried to hold on, literally to the metal rail of the bed, figuratively to myself. After a while, I was overwhelmed, found it was all I could do to stand. I said, "I've got to go." Where did I have in mind? It was a Saturday morning in June; I had no appointments.

Tim spoke for the last time. "Kiss me. I love you."

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