

People, Places, Faces and Things

From the Writings of
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Looking Back... It seems like only yesterday... when I sped down the hill looking out over the handlebars of a rusty old red bicycle...

A cloud of yellow dust billowed up high behind me... the signature of fun, for a farm boy in the summer of the early 1960's.

It was a Schwinn, I believe, hard to know for sure, because it was a hand-me-down, as were many of the things I owned in that day, and time.

Never-the-less, I sat high in the saddle, whistling, and singing loudly, to make sure that anyone I passed along the way would be sure to take notice of my prize.

It is almost laughable thinking of that old bicycle as I stand here before you today.

Turned out, it was going to be thrown away, but my mom convinced the owner to let her have it, and she gave it to me. It is also kind of hard to imagine being proud of junk, but considering not having a bicycle at all... it was a real find.

Overall, it was in pretty fair shape too, albeit, more than a little rusty, badly worn tires... and as I recall, a broken pedal on the right. Anyway, for a time... I rode it with the one good pedal it had on the left side.

It took a little practice, but after a while I got pretty good at using my left foot to start off... and then, by giving a nudge once and a while with my right toe, I was able to push the crank back around to where... my left foot could really put the power on.

And perhaps, some of the joy and love of owning that old bike came from the days it took me to cut through the original pedal crank with a hand file. Soon after getting the bike I found a used pedal crank while going thru a pile of scrap at the junkyard. And after a little back and fourth, the owner was kind enough to sell it to me for a dollar. So, for a dollar bill I had practically brand new pedals on both sides.

But as I said earlier... swapping out the old crank however, was a real chore. The nut holding it on had seized, and since we didn't have a wrench to fit it. I was left with one choice... using a hand file to cut thru the arm of the old crank.

Anyway, time and elbow grease finally won out, the old crank was removed, and the replacement one was a perfect fit. And it made all the difference in the world... it was as if I had been given the keys to the kingdom.

I could take off with either foot now, and with a hard back-pedal, from either side, I could lock up the rear wheel and come sliding to a squealing eye-popping stop. And I often did this just for the heck of it. Like most kids my age back then, I enjoyed making the rear end of my bicycle slide around, sending dust and gravel in all directions.

Riding on one wheel, sliding, braking and spinning had a litter deeper purpose too, as the neighborhood girls of the time placed a value on a good trick rider. And when you add in the fact that the schoolteacher nearly had a heart attack whenever we decided to do this sort of clowning. And... you get the idea.

At any rate, from bicycles and BB guns, to fishing rods and reels... I grew up fast, and in no time at all I was longing for motorized transportation... a car. However, earning less than \$5.00 a day, I quickly came to realize that coming up with enough money to buy a car over the summer break was way beyond the rim of possibility.

Still, to that end, I worked harder and harder, and for a while, even drew caricatures at night to earn a little extra money. Now, in the broad scheme of things this effort seemed to be going well enough... owing to the fact that most of the time, I had more work than I could do.

My faith, I thought... would allow good fortune pay me a visit.

I say seemingly, because years later, I learned the real story. Whereas, I was always taught that there is no shame in having been born poor, over time, I learned that wisdom comes form experience.

Moreover, I learned that knowledge... comes from practice, perseverance, and study... not just from a sheepskin hanging on the wall.

Well, the good news is... I was able to trade my rusty old bicycle for a two-tone black and white '55 Ford Fairlane. A rusty old clunker really, but it was a first-class ride for me. It had a radio, pretty good seats and glass-packed mufflers. And after a little rubbing and polishing... it was what you could call... sweet!!!

The point here, is... I have always been proud, or at least proud enough not to want anything I had not earned. Somehow though, the word of my pride, or pig-headedness, got around, so most knew that I did not want... and would not accept, a handout.

Still, for many reasons, whenever I think back to this incident... somehow a proud feeling comes over me. Though I was unaware of it at the time, a guardian angel was looking out for me.

As I said, it was sometime later when I learned of the others were also looking out for me. People who really care, are rare finds... but they do exist, and it still gives me a sort of comfort just thinking about them. In my case, they knew of my plight, and they also they had an old car... so unbeknown to me... a kind of sting was on.

Strangely enough, something that would almost certainly cause alarm in a many neighborhoods today, for the most part, was ok by back then... Well, at least ok for working class blacks in the little town where I grew up. I am talking about black people cutting thru white neighborhoods to save a few steps to and from work.

So the story, as I was told, goes... after finding out about what I made a week on my summer job. The people with the old car made up a sign that read in really large numbers \$25.00, and put it on the windshield.

When I really think about it, I should have sensed something was amiss. I mean, even in that day and time, less than \$100.00 for a car of any kind was really low, even for a struggling African-American teenager.

However, there is... a real blessing here, and again, after the fact. You see... to ensure that I would be the buyer... they would only put the sign out when they saw me cutting thru their neighborhood.

Again, I won't dwell on this event too long... even after all of these years it still touches my heart. So, let me move on.

Still, quite often when I was growing up, especially during racially troubled times, I used this point to this time in my life, as an example, to help others see... the good in the few... amid the hate, of the many.

Not too long before that, I learned that I had been accepted to attend the Al Gable Art School. So I was really anxious get moving, and more anxious to be out on my own.

The truth is... I had little idea of how difficult life would be for me, but surmised that it could be no worse, than cutting tobacco, hauling hay, and chasing hogs... which was pretty much standard fair down on the farm.

So be that as it may, later that summer... I was Chugging down the road in that old Ford, riding along the highways and byways, on my way to Cincinnati, Ohio. Bouncing on bald tires, peering thru a cracked windshield, with a front end... shaking up, Yankee, Doodle, Dandy!

Now the trip itself was pretty much uneventful, if not boring. Still, driving a car, with a maximum safe top speed of about 65 mph... made a trip of a little under 300 miles seem like an epic voyage.

Most of the way, I passed the time recalling fun times and happenings of tales told by the community elders tell. Now you may well imagine... life for the average farm worker of the time, was pretty harsh, and quite dangerous by today's standards. Still, some of these stories, the heroic mentions in particular, would cause the most stone-faced of God's own, to smirk.

These memories kept a silent laughter ever-present, but in the back of my mind was a distant fear of a gunshot ringing out.

Looking back today, it is really difficult to grasp the oversights, injustices, and stretching of laws, particularly on the parts of truly upstanding citizens, and perhaps, even some of the police of a time.

For me, this was all the more clear in light of having grown up, and lived in the racially charged, and unsettled south. So suffice to say, it was reason enough to cause this eighteen-year old African-American man to set up, and take notice.

So, whereas... in my old heap, at least, I couldn't put the pedal to the metal, so to speak, I never-the-less kept enough fire under that old Ford to leave no doubt that I would make it to my destination before nightfall.

And in the end... I made it with flying colors, and life went on from there.

After arriving here in Cincinnati and starting classes at the Al Gable Art School, I learned of another commercial art school nearby... the kids who went there called it, Storey's. Years later, I learned it was operated by an artist of some fame... named Jackson Grey Storey.

All-in-all the history of my coming to Cincinnati really moved fast, the Al Gable Art School, and Storey's closed down in the seventies after both Mr. Gabel and Jackson Storey "better known as Jack" passed away.

You know... it is often said that truth, is stranger than fiction. And whether that it is a fact or not... I will always cherish the time I went over to Storey's with one of my classmates and his friends.

The Al Gable art school, where I attended was far different than what I had expected, you might even say, it was somewhat of a shock. Unlike the sprawling building, or group of buildings I had imagined from the photograph in the brochure sent to us, it was a fairly plain red brick building.

But, Storey's... Storey's had a certain charm... it was an old castle-like mansion with ivy growing on the walls. The lawn had flowers, and trees in bloom, and more than that, was how the building stood out from all of the others on the wide tree-line street.

But as I said, truth is stranger than fiction, and the strange part here is, that the love I had for the Storey art school, has a rewarding and happy end. You see, that old house, is where my wife and I live today.

And it is fair to say... my life has been an eclectic mix of happenings and events, some of which, has taught me valuable lessons, some... have helped me to find my way, and some, has kept me on the narrow path... I follow today.

It is never easy recounting and telling stories of childhood, and growing up. Questions almost always arise, and many of them pose challenges... what to keep in... what to leave out.

Still, and more often than not, for me, the incident that most often comes to mind takes me back many years. And even though it simply does not seem like all that long ago, to my best recollection, it has been 40 years or so.

Soon after starting my first real job I came home to my 3rd floor walkup apartment... peeked into the letterbox, and saw a bright blue envelope inside. For the most part, in that day and time, the letters I received were the standard number 10 size white envelopes. So a brightly colored one... usually meant a letter from family, or friend.

Stranger still... is looking back to a place in time from a perch surrounded by the marvels of smart phones, email and the World Wide Web. Any one of these everyday items back when... I started out in life would have seemed like an act of God. And for a teenager living out on his own more than forty years ago, even an occasional letter from family, or friends would sometimes bring tears of joy.

At the time it didn't dawn on me that I had not received a letter of that color before. But a letter was a letter, and receiving one of any kind meant that it was a message from someone who knew me, and from someone... who knew where I was. So without delay I rushed upstairs, put down my stuff, and opened it.

The letter started out in somewhat broken English, it read... I hope you are well and happy. I am all right myself, for an old man, but I wonder why you don't come to visit with me. It went on...

But, upon the sight of the handwriting, I knew this was a letter from Mr. David, the man who years ago had been so instrumental in helping me obtain the help and resources I needed to come to Cincinnati in the first place.

Still, I was kind of puzzled by his letter... particularly, when reading the part that said... why don't you come and visit me. Now whereas, it had been some time since I was able to go back to my old hometown. I always made a point of visiting him, often, before visiting my own family.

Anyway, I read the letter again and again, and though letters usually made me feel happy... this time, in the end, I came away feeling sad, and depressed. I had heard that the old man was not doing so well, so I thought perhaps he was just becoming a bit senile.

A day or two had passed, and still, I couldn't get that letter out of my mind. As I remember, I searched through all of the papers I had brought with me when I came to Cincinnati.

For whatever reason, I kept almost everything, even things that no longer had any value. Anyway, I finally found what I was looking for... the rejection letter from Yale University.

Don't know why I kept that letter, but I did. Still, I thought I would find the telephone number of Mr. David's son-in-law somewhere on it. He had tried his best to get me into Yale. So I wanted to ask him about my old friend. But after rummaging thru everything several times, the information I sought was nowhere to be found.

I suppose that today, a gifted artist, particularly, one of color, would probably have a better chance. So it is a bit tough for me to linger on this. Still, sometimes, I recall people saying, that even without training... my work was as good as, if not superior to many... who already had diplomas hanging on their walls.

But that was then, and this is now, so in the end... for me, it was simply not to be.

Whether absent mindedness, or just what... I had not notice the return address on the letter before. It was from a senior citizens facility only about a hundred miles away.

Be that as it may, I sat down and wrote my old friend a letter. Pretty much the standard fair... hope you are doing well, but peppered with enough tidbits of the times we had shared together in to try and determine his degree of recollection. After a few letters, and a phone call placed from a pay phone booth I decided to go visit him.

When I first saw him, I was a bit stunned. Perhaps, I was forced to grow up fast, and perhaps, I was looking for the cheerful face of the man who had hugged me goodbye at the bus station many years before. A strong, sure man, a man... far

different from the frail, and somewhat drawl little man who sat alone in a tiny room, looking out of the window.

Walking toward him, I said hello in as cheerful a voice as I could muster... at the same time reached out my arms to give him a hug. As happy as I was to see him, it was difficult not to notice his sparse possessions and humble surroundings.

It troubled me deeply to see the man, who was mostly responsible for my well being to have fallen so far. I didn't have much myself... a small bed, a folding chair and some cardboard boxes to keep my stuff in. But somehow, I always thought of my sparse means as building for tomorrow... and perhaps not giving a lot of thought to just how poor I really was.

Still, it was difficult to see the old man this way... Standing there, I remembered his grand farmhouse with elaborate furnishings, hot and cold running water, even a television, and all in a time when these were indeed luxuries. So it was hard.

I visited him regularly over the next several weeks. In time, I learned how he came to be there.

Maybe, not so much today, but in the 60's and 70's soap operas were as big as reality TV is today. And for the elderly, watching soaps helped to pass the time... and gave them something to talk about. And perhaps, many of them vicariously relived times gone by.

My friend's story started with a simple fall resulting in a broken leg, and grew into a near nightmare. As I remembered he had a sunken den just off of the main entry way in his home. This is where he kept, and watched his television.

I am not sure of just when, but earlier he had fallen and broke his leg. It was a pretty bad break too, near the knee, so the cast covered most of the leg, making it unbendable. However, for the most part he got along ok, but even on good days he was hobbled. Fortunately, his children stopped in from time-to-time to make sure he had what he needed.

Also casualties before their time... his wife, brother, most of his friends, and his favorite dog, Merlin, had died. So he was truly alone.

Actually though, he was on the mend, but as I said earlier, the broken leg turned into a near nightmare. As I recall, he said he had sat down to watch his favorite daytime soap when he realized, and most likely, and at the last minute that the television was on the wrong channel. So he grabbed his crutches and attempted to get over to the television to change the channel. That was when he slipped, fell and re-injured his leg.

It may never be known what really happened from there on. Perhaps, his family thought he could no longer manage for himself, perhaps, he had simply become too much of a burden... anyway, this was his home now.

As I said before, it was difficult to see him that way, but he seem so happy to see me that my feelings of pity, were soon replaced with reminiscing old times, and accounts of what I had been doing.

After a while, we were writing regularly again, I drove down to visit with him whenever I had enough money to buy a full tank of fuel. And over time, I got permission to push his wheelchair out to far edge of the courtyard.

And for hours... we would sit out among the trees, looking out over the rolling hills and into the deep blue skies. Sometimes, just looking, sometime wondering where all the time had gone, and sometime, laughing until we could not more... A task made easier by the flask of bourbon whiskey I would sneak in.

We talked of life... we talked of wars, and warriors, and of times gone by. We retold stories of the good deeds we had done, shared memories that made us proud... and noted things, that if we could... we would do differently again.

In a humbling sort of way, my visits with the old man were fun times. Still, it troubled me to see a man who had helped me so much... living out the last days of his life with so little love and care. There were a few times that a call came in when I was there, and although he smiled, his face steamed with tears.

It even caused me to wonder what my own life would be in thirty or forty years. And, briefly, I thought of my mother, and the life she lived bringing up four children on her own after the death of my father.

My father died when I was just seven years old, I clearly remember that night, and how... he might have lived a few more years too. But that story will have to wait for another day.

But as I thought of my dear old friend, and of my own life... I thought, how strange, in a peculiar sort of way. It was almost as if we have exchanged places, but then again, I never had, nor hoped for much to begin with.

But, to see one... one who had so much, or at least one, whom, I thought had so much, sitting among the common people, reading weeks old newspapers, watching, and re-watching... old VHS video tapes of an era long past, this really made me sad, and caused my heart to ponder...

People, Places, Faces... and Things

In times before...

I used to wonder why my mother always closed her eyes when the old songs played on the radio.

I use to wonder how starlight, and moonbeams, could mean so much. And how walks in the summer rain, could ever make one cry.

In times before...

I use to wonder why the schoolteacher was so afraid whenever I rode my bicycle along the steep mountain trail.

I use to wonder how prizefights, and baseball games... could arouse so much interest.

And how hunting dogs, and horseshoe games... won, or lost could push friends apart.

In times before...

I use to wonder why birthdays, and getting out of school in the summertime were always slow to come around, and yet so quick... to go rushing past.

I use to wonder how a job at the mill, and car payment, could stir conversation for hours... And how doctor visits, and growing old, were feared so much.

In times before...

I use to wonder why people marched, and stood out in the cold to enter unwelcomed into a crowded coffee shop.

I used to wonder how picture shows, and storybooks put communities and governments at odds... And how April fools jokes, and Halloween pranks ever really hurt.

In times before...

I use to wonder why meeting a movie star, or the president, was deemed so grand.

I use to wonder why pleasure boats, and beachfront suites were all the rage... And how tea for two, and autographs, could cause sleepless nights.

Then yesterday...

I was fifty-one, and I thought... so many days have come and gone since I was seventeen; And many more... since I wore high-tops and skipped to school.

So many faces I have seen, and so many faces I have forgotten since I learned to read, do arithmetic and explore the wonderment of life.

And yet, so perfect the makeup. So complete the disguise... that only the closest examination unveils a carefully hidden truth... that many of the faces, are really the same.

Now... now

I sit among the tall shade trees, and look out through cloudy eyes... in awe of sights that once... I hardly noticed.

I ponder days of old when I ran, and jumped on legs now weak, and withered.

I spend yarns with my neighbors here beside me, reminiscing thrills at amusement parks in years long past.

I look back at times when I dreaded getting out of bed for school. Now, sometimes... I lay in bed all day... wishing for someplace to go.

I miss getting up early in the morning...

I miss lunch on the run, and I miss... Christmas time...

How I still adore hearing Nat Cole sing "Chestnuts Roasting On An Open Fire".

And who can forget the mellow voice of Burl Ives singing... "Silver and Gold"... "Silver and Gold"...

Still, I long to understand, and now, more than never before... why people still cheer at the death of a would be enemy soldier, who... is just a child, and yet, mourn the death of one who has lived a very long life.

Now... I long to hear the voices of my children, even, if only on the telephone.

But now, as long before, my birthday, and Christmastime... always seems to be a long, long a wait.

So, sometimes on rainy days...and when the weather is cold, I sit and read old newspapers, and watch old TV shows.

And for a time... I forget, that so many of the People, Places, Faces and Things... have already gone, and many others, like me, are growing old...

So I sit, and gaze intently at a worn out picture of a little boy with a playful puppy... and lament, oh... to be young once again!