

The News-Review – Roseburg, Oregon

July 10, 1986

No, sir, you are not an idiot

Jerome Webber of Lookingglass is at this writing in the netherland of Marine Corps boot camp. When he told me he had enlisted and was leaving for San Diego Marine Corps Recruit Depot, I almost suggested he write me a letter, but then I recalled my own boot camp experience more than 40 years ago, and what happened to Steve Gibson, a newspaper reporter who chose Marine Corps enlistment a few days after he was notified he was drafted for Vietnam.

Gibson was the friend of a newspaper columnist and wrote the columnist letters detailing some of his experiences as a boot. The columnist was a flat-footed, myopic 4-F, who thought Gibson's letters funny enough to make his column.

Among other items that the columnist used was Gibson's description of his drill instructor, commonly known in the Corps as a DI. Gibson wrote that the initials meant "Demented Idiot." The column would have probably never been seen by the DI, except the Marine recruiter in the city where the newspaper was published was a buddy of the drill instructor and mailed him a copy of the column.

Now you are beginning to see the plot. Gibson was in deep

trouble. He penned another letter to the columnist, in between scrubbing the barracks fore and aft with a toothbrush, telling him never to mention his name again in print. The columnist not only ran another column attacking the brutality of the Marines, but thinking the telephone was more powerful than the pen called the commanding general of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at San Diego to save Gibson from being target practice for a firing squad. Gibson found himself standing before the general, along with the drill instructor, to answer questions about his maltreatment at the hands of the drill instructor. The one line that saved Gibson from being drummed out of the Corps was "Sir, if the civilians would get out of my way, I think I could become a Marine."

Gibson survived boot camp, but he never spoke to that columnist again.

My own experience in boot camp also involved the mail. In my platoon at Parris Island, S.C., Marine boot camp, there was another boot named Duncan. My name was William and his name was Willis.

The drill instructor told Willis to go get mail one day and Willis got

lost. When Willis didn't return, the DI bellowed "Duncan," and I came running.

When he asked me where the mail was, I tried to explain that he sent the other Duncan. He looked me straight in the eye and said: "You go find your twin brother and get back here on the double."

I found Willis several barracks over looking for Platoon 381. Once we returned to our barracks, the DI gave us our new assignment. Each day, Willis was to go get the mail and William was to show him the way home.

All through boot camp, we kept up this routine. At the end of boot camp, I went into infantry training and no longer had the responsibility of the mail. Where Willis ended up, I didn't know.

I finally made corporal after a hitch as a PFC and was returning from overseas when I ran into Willis at Camp LeJune, N.C. To my surprise, he was a staff sergeant. I thought how could this guy make staff sergeant when he was so dumb I had to show him the way to and from the post office.

"Where are you stationed?" I asked.

"I've been here since boot camp," he said. "I'm a postal clerk."

And I'm a seeing eye dog.

The News-Review – Roseburg, Oregon

November 3, 1988

Death is just another dimension

The older one gets the more funerals one attends.

I'm not sure if there is any correlation. Nor should one struggle to make the connection.

I don't necessarily enjoy funerals, but I do feel they are important, if not for the dead, for the living. I disagree with a friend who says we make too much of death. He has written in his will that he is to be cremated within hours after he crosses the bar.

Not me. I'm going to be mad as hell if no one shows up for my funeral.

I agree fully with Carrie Munson, the Milwaukee, Wis., woman who is dying of pancreatic cancer. She held her own funeral "because you can't communicate with your friends and tell them how you feel from inside a box."

A few years ago when I was teaching a writing class at Umpqua Community College, one of my students, Jennie Nesseth of Roseburg, wrote a story in which she planned her own funeral. Like Carrie, she wanted to hold it before she died. She said she wanted to sit in the back of the church and hear what they had to say about her.

I don't know if Jennie ever carried out her plan, but we have

shared a pew or two lately to pay our last respects to friends.

I think the reason people don't like funerals is that death is in another time warp for them. It is scary. However, once you've come face to face with it, it no longer holds mystery. It is just another dimension.

I went into cancer surgery in May of 1980 after hearing a medical prognosis that my chances of survival were one in 25. You can get better odds playing the state lottery.

I can recall awakening in an anesthetic fog after the surgery and hearing the faint tinkle of bells in the distance, followed by music from a hundred violins. Then came the quiet harmony of angelic voices.

The sound was confusing and not familiar to me until a female soloist began to sing the "Ave Maria."

As the sweet words filled my mental fog, I knew I had made it. Not that I had survived the surgery, but that I had slipped across the line unnoticed without any stops in between.

It was a warm feeling. A glow. A peace. I thought, this is sure easy.

I felt someone touch me. A blanket was removed. I felt cold. Very cold. My teeth began to

chatter. A sharp instrument jabbed my toes and I reacted to the stimuli.

Then a warm blanket was wrapped around me and I could feel someone tucking it in like my mother used to when I was a little boy.

It was comforting.

The soft music continued. The room had a strange aura. The soloist was now joined by the heavenly choir.

My eyes were tightly closed. I heard a voice. A whisper.

“Are you awake?”

I wanted to ask where I was, but did not dare.

I could still hear the music. There was a gentle shake of my shoulder and I opened my eyes to see in a haze a woman in white.

“Your wife is here,” she said.

My wife! How did she get here!

That was enough to wake up the dead.

I found myself under a pile of hot blankets on a gurney in the recovery room.

I wasn't dreaming. The nurse was listening to side three of a tape of Fantasia on the recovery room stereo.

So much for death.

Shakespeare said it all, it the words Macbeth spoke on learning of his wife's death:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterday, have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

'That struts and frets his hour upon the stage

And then is heard no more; it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full o' sound and fury

Signifying nothing.

Now if I can just get Sister Laurena Alflen to practice singing “Amazing Grace” this old wretch will be ready to go in peace.

The News-Review – Roseburg, Oregon

February 6, 1992

Fond Memories of the Swensons

Distance and time prevented me from attending the golden wedding anniversary celebration of Carl and Cecile Swenson in Fullerton, Calif., last December.

Swenson was my first managing editor when I was a cub reporter on the Fullerton News-Tribune. His nickname was “Pony,” a name some family member gave him because of his gangly looks. He never outgrew the gangly look, or the nickname.

After a year’s apprenticeship under Pony’s tutelage, I moved on to a metropolitan daily, but never lost contact with my old boss.

Through that professional association, his family and mine became life-long friends. Even though I could not be at the Temple Baptist Church in Fullerton to join with Swenson and his family and friends, I was there in spirit — much due to the thoughtfulness of their only daughter, Barbara, who wrote to all their friends and asked for a page of memories about her parents.

There was no way my wife and I could sum up our friendship with Pony and Cecile on a page, so we both ignored the word limitation and wrote of our fondest memories. Like everything else I write, including this column, I put a self-imposed crisis deadline on it, so I was comfortably waiting until the magic 11th hour to write my memories. Punctual Ada started writing almost as soon as Barbara’s letter arrived.

One day I came into room where she was putting her thoughts on an amber

computer screen and I found her crying. I am just 10 years shy of my own golden wedding anniversary and if there is anything I’ve learned in 40 years of marriage is not to question why women cry. Instead, my reporter instinct caused me to read over her shoulder the words she had typed on the word-processor screen.

She was writing about the time she was seriously ill and Cecile took over the feeding and caring of our family, which included at that time three toddlers. The cursor on the screen had stopped after she had written:

“When I was well again, I said to Cecile, ‘How will I ever repay you. You have so many friends and family here that would help you if you ever needed it.’ Her answer? ‘When you find someone who needs help and has no one else, help them’”

Strange what brings tears to women.

Barbara had asked us to include some funny anecdotes from our memories. Ada wrote about the time Pony volunteered to hang wallpaper in one of our bedrooms. He claimed to be an expert paperhanger. It had nothing to do with the law of gravity, but what went up, came down.

Swenson obviously didn’t find any humor in that anecdote because after the anniversary memories were read, he wrote us a letter to challenge the facts. “...let’s get the record straight on that wallpaper job. If you remember, you bought some pre-pasted paper on sale.”

This I don’t doubt. If it was on sale,

she bought it.

My memories of the Swensons were all humorous anecdotes, especially when Pony admired my artistic landscaping of a hillside lot with drywalls built of broken concrete and draped with California's famous ice plant. When he found out that I had made a deal with an urban renewal contractor to haul to my house slabs of broken concrete free of charge, he wanted part of the deal.

There was no problem there since urban renewal in Southern California is a continuing cycle of endless broken concrete. When the first truck load arrived at Swenson's house, he was at work. The truck driver asked Cecile where she wanted it dumped. She pointed to the vacant lot next door.

After the load was dumped, the driver asked Cecile if she wanted any mOregon "Sure," she said and promptly left on a shopping trip. When Pony returned home that night a broken concrete mountain loomed before him. It was on someone else's property so Pony began moving the mountain, stone by stone. Before he could complete the task, the vacant lot's owner showed up inquiring who had used his property as a dumpsite. The Swensons bought the lot. Later, he ended up in the hospital for a hernia operation.

The concrete caper inaugurated Scavengers Inc. and for a number of years we teamed up to scrounge free building materials of one kind or another. Once Swenson got a line on tons of firebrick that didn't meet specifications and was tossed in an industrial bone pile. It was "free" to anyone who'd haul it away. Of course the free brick was in Vernon, in the heart of the industrial district of Los Angeles. But like

everything else in California, it was freeway close.

Greedy as we were for scrounged material, we made several trips in a borrowed pickup truck up the old Santa Ana Freeway to Los Angeles and back to Orange County. Once loaded, the truck could make about 30 mph at top speed.

On one of those trips back to Fullerton suddenly there was that single winking red light behind us — a California highway patrolman. We knew we were in for at least six citations — driving on the freeway at 30 mph during a peak traffic hour, driving an overloaded pickup truck, recycling without a permit, violation of the Interstate Commerce Act, failing to have proper warning signs for a slow moving vehicle, and causing a CHP officer to miss his coffee break.

Strangely when we tried to pull over to receive those citations, the officer waved us on, but continued to follow us slowly from Los Angeles to where we turned off at Artesia Avenue in Buena Park. We were sure this was where we would get the six citations, maybe even a dozen. Instead, the officer kept going on the freeway probably thinking that he wasn't going to spend his day off in court with two nuts from Orange County.

We may be the only scroungers in history to have received a police escort.

Pony built a driveway with his share of the firebricks. I built a beautiful patio with my bricks.

I'm not certain of this, but from the way the lady who bought our house raved about the patio, it must have had something to do with why she paid cash for it. It certainly wasn't for that sagging wallpaper in the master bedroom .

The News-Review – Roseburg, Oregon

September 3, 1992

A teacher is warmed by the fires of the young

August seemed different this year. I suppose that September will be different, too. For the past six years, the month of August for me meant hours of preparing lesson plans and lectures to teach journalism courses at Umpqua Community College. September meant standing at a podium and gazing out on the eager freshman class looking for an introduction to the mysteries of the Fourth Estate.

In June I taught my last journalism class, passing the torch on to Diane Williams, who by this time has already faced those eager freshmen on the first day of class.

Thinking about that, I recalled a particularly poignant passage on John le Carre's "The Secret Pilgrim." His old spy, George Smiley, had been retired and was coming back to Sarratt to talk to a new crop of spies that were still in training. The narrator, Ned, is talking to himself about Smiley:

"Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach. And what they teach is what they can't do any more, because either the body or the spirit or both have lost their singleness of purpose; because they have seen too much and suppressed too much and compromised too

much, and in the end tasted too little. So they take to rekindling their old dreams in new minds and warming themselves against the fires of the young."

I don't quite agree with the old saw that "those who can't, teach." For those who believe that, I would suggest they read Kevin Ryan and James M. Cooper's collaborative work, "Those Who Can, Teach." I slipped in through the back door of the teaching profession and therefore was always upfront with my students explaining that I was a professional teaching, not a professional teacher. Through my experience I have gained the highest respect for the professional teacher.

I am grateful for the years I was privileged to spend in the classroom. Indeed in those six years I have rekindled old dreams in new minds and warmed myself against the fires of the young.

Hopefully I learned as much from them as they did from me. I believe that a teacher who does not learn is no teacher. I learned that from a class I took at Loyola University in Los Angeles from a guest lecturer, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. I still have my notes from the class and I quote him:

“Teaching is one of the noblest vocations on earth. For in the last analysis the purpose all education is the knowledge and the love of truth.”

In one of the classes, he wondered aloud why there is tenure for teachers and not for football coaches. Again quoting from my class notes:

“There can be mediocrity in the classroom. Yet the football coach who does not produce a winning team is forced to leave.”

He said he had received some advice on teaching from an old French Cardinal:

“Always keep current. Know what the modern world is thinking about. Read its poetry, its history, its literature. Observe its architecture and its art. Hear its music and attend its theater. Then plunge deeply into the wisdom of the ancients and you will then be able to refute its errors.”

The Cardinal also advised Sheen to “tear up lecture notes at the end of each year. There is nothing that destroys the intellectual growth of a teacher more than the keeping of notes and the repetition of the same course each year. Teaching then becomes communication from the notebook of the teacher to the notebook of the student without passing through the minds of either.”

I tried to teach by that rule, preparing fresh lectures each term that went beyond the textbook, which incidentally was all too often either wrong or grossly outdated.

I tried to impress upon those who were hell-bent for a journalism

career that theirs was an awesome responsibility. I tried to teach them that the First Amendment is not a license to walk around in other people’s lives, but is the profession’s holy writ and therefore should be protected from misuse. I tried to teach them that the single ethic of journalism is objectivity.

Did it pass through their minds, or did it remain in their notebooks? Only time will tell.

Back in June I went through all the farewell platitudes, plaques and plants. There was a story in the college newspaper, *The Mainstream*, about my leaving. The story included student comments. One student confessed in print that the first day he walked in my class he viewed me as an “imposing instructor who loved to flunk his students.” Another said I was a sort of legend, which brings me back to George Smiley in “The Secret Pilgrim.” Ned was introducing the old master spy to the young student spies and said:

“Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. George Smiley. A legend of the Service.”

Smiley protested:

“Oh, I don’t think I’m a legend at all. I think I’m just a rather fat old man wedged between the pudding and the port.”

And warmed by the fires of the young.

The News-Review – Roseburg, Oregon

June 3, 1993

The General gave lessons in caring for others

On Memorial Day as I have done since 1984, I laid a wreath of red roses on grave C17-9 at the Roseburg National Cemetery. The roses come from my rose garden. The wreath I personally make in the shape of a red cross.

It is placed beside the simple headstone that reads: "Curtis T. Beecher, Brig. Gen., USMC, 1897-1984"

Gen. Beecher died Feb. 23, 1984, in the Douglas County nursing home where he spent his last days. My friendship with Gen. Beecher began when I was manager of the Douglas County Chapter of The American Red Cross. Beecher was a local Red Cross volunteer and in addition was a Red Cross voluntary field consultant in disaster services for seven southwestern Oregon counties.

Despite the number of times he reminded me to call him Curtis and to knock off the "sir" when I spoke with him, this former corporal couldn't address Gen. Beecher any other way. That respect deepened when I learned that he had been taken prisoner on Bataan during World War II and had spent the war years in a Japanese prison camp.

As a writer I have always been

intrigued by stories of people who endure and survive such ordeals. So whenever we were alone I would question him about his experiences.

At first he was reluctant to talk about it. His conversation would wander off to other highlights of his career - service in Haiti, China and the Dominican Republic.

I thought my trying to pry information about his captivity might be dredging up painful memories. Later, as our friendship grew, I learned he just didn't want anyone assessing him as a hero because he was taken prisoner. Once he understood I wasn't trying to make him a hero but simply wanted to record information about people who survived against such great odds, he opened up.

The reason he was so fond of the Red Cross, he told me, was his memories of the Red Cross food packets and how these kept him and many other prisoners alive. Finding enough food to survive was the main occupation of the prisoners of war. He told me many horror stories about conditions in the prisoner of war camps and how once he was free, he had trouble controlling his anger when he would see food wasted in this country. Even

popcorn spilled on the floor of a movie theatre disturbed him because he could remember eating rice that looked like it was coated with black pepper. The "pepper" was weevils, which he said he ate with relish because of the protein they might contain.

Beecher was released from Japanese prison in 1945 and retired from the Marine Corps a year later, settling in Roseburg. One of the first things he did was to join the Red Cross. He volunteered in many of the multiple services the Red Cross offers, but his favorite assignment was disaster -- helping those in a time of crisis. He organized much of the disaster recovery work in the aftermath of the Roseburg Blast of 1959.

His wife, Juanita, died in 1977 and shares his gravesite at the National Cemetery. I never met her, but I do remember driving Beecher to the cemetery once so he could place flowers on her grave. He stood staring down at the headstone and said of her and the other wives of men who went to war, "These are the real heroes of war. They waited day after day in uncertainty."

I remember feeling that day how incongruous life is. He had survived years of torturous imprisonment and near starvation, yet she preceded him in death.

When he died at 86 years old, he remembered the organization that kept him from starvation -- the Red Cross. He bequeathed the Douglas County Chapter \$20,000.

In turn, each Memorial Day, I remember this benefactor and friend by placing a wreath of red roses,

shaped as a red cross, the symbol Jean Henri Dunant chose for an organization dedicated to alleviating human suffering, especially in the place where Dunant's idea was conceived -- the battlefield.

Capital Press – Salem, Oregon

July 22, 1994

A love sadly tempered by a raging fire

I came home from a memorial service in the park at Roseburg July 14 and wrote each of my children to make a simple declaration: “I love you.”

The service was for Rob Johnson, 26, a Roseburg firefighter who died in Colorado fighting a wildfire. He was one of nine Oregonians and one of 14 firefighters who died on that mountain July 6. Those from Oregon were all members of the Prineville Hot Shots.

I would not have thought about how fragile life is, nor would I, in my cold Anglo-Saxon way, have written that message to my children had it not been for something Rob’s father, Gene, told me when I embraced him to offer my condolences.

It was he who did the comforting. “Go home,” he said, “and hug your children and tell them you love them. You never know how long you’ll have them.”

I have known Gene, his wife, Marie, their son Rob, and his brother Tony and sister Anna for the 17 years I have lived in Roseburg. My two sons were of the same age as the two Johnson boys. We shared in their lives and they in ours for all those years.

Our contacts mostly revolved

around the children and the sports in which they were involved. It was my son, Jack, who now lives in Portland, who first alerted me that Rob was missing in the fire. His early report was that both Rob and Tony were missing. Tony is also a member of the Prineville Hot Shots.

A short while later, another son, Jeff, who was in Los Angeles and recovering from surgery, was on the telephone wanting to know more about Rob and Tony.

In neither call did I think to make that simple declaration: “I love you.”

Instead, sterile, factual information was exchanged. On my part, I, always, the reporter, provided the who, what, when where and how. I did not have the “why.” Nor do I now.

That all came home to me when a grieving father reminded me to go home and embrace my children. I suddenly remembered that recently Jack narrowly escaped death when his automobile was sideswiped by a truck on the freeway in Portland.

My son, Jeff, is still recovering from emergency surgery July 4 in at a Torrance, Calif., hospital where he had been taken after his appendix burst. For three days he ran a high fever from peritonitis.

In the last few years, a daughter in Los Angeles had three surgeries in five weeks after a simple gall bladder removal went awry. A daughter in Eugene just wrote reminding me that a year ago she was so ill from chemotherapy and radiation treatment after her mastectomy that she couldn't even go outside.

Of course I worried like any parent when a child is sick, but I didn't verbally express my love. I do write the word "love," as a closing to letters, but you can even buy a stamp that says "love."

At the memorial, the Rev. Bruce Russell, chaplain for the Roseburg fire department where Gene is a fire marshal, said the Johnsons were "as near the perfect family as one can find today. They loved and cared for each other."

I know that to be true and at his son's death, Gene, the grieving father, taught me that life is indeed fragile and that family is God's ultimate sign of love.