

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 71

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(Written last winter)

This morning I rose from bed at 0400, sleep deprived, and stumbled into my day. One might think that 50 years of this early morning discipline should have made it easier. It has not. My body resisted me every step of the way, as the thought of walking across an icy pool deck before diving into a 70-80 minute swim workout, argued for a return to the comfort of my warm covers and still sleeping wife. I performed my morning ablutions and focused my mind to send out a text of "Daily Words" to former students, friends, and my extended family. I've not formally counted, but including the group texts, there are easily more than a hundred recipients. Each "send" is a prayer. This centers me.

I then opened up the Family Fed link on Facebook and tuned into Dr. Yong's morning sermon, which today addressed the topic of "God's Sorrow."

Dr. Yong related the story of his early school days and how the teacher commented on the fact that he always cried, and how this experience prepared him to be drawn into the presence of our sorrowful God. I could not help but to reflect on my own experiences as a young child first attending school.

As a military family, we often moved. I changed schools with frequency and, although I developed strong coping and social skills as I matured, the early years were very difficult. Excavating these buried memories has yielded some insights and an awareness of unmerited shame. What I recall: a deep fear of abandonment; a longing for home; and a profound sense of rebellion towards the institution of school that took me away from my woods, my imaginative wanderings, and my play. I felt terrible anxiety every morning as I separated from my family for the day, and I associated school with a sense of injustice over the emotional wrong being visited upon me.

That my anxieties had no rational base--my parents would never abandon me--meant nothing. As I seek to identify the experiences which may have seeded these fears, several occur to me.

The first occurred when my father left for the Korean War. Although I was too young to understand, a mere year or so, I was not too young to feel. Certainly, my mother's loneliness and longing heart were communicated to me by intuition, by osmosis, by the spiritual atmosphere of existential concern with which our hearts resonated in my father's absence. I have no doubt I inherited an inexplicable longing for God through my mother's inconsolable longing for my father. This longing has been a defining characteristic shaping my life.

The second experience is related. When my father was the executive officer for the 2nd Recon Battalion--

as I have written elsewhere--on short notice, President Eisenhower deployed them to Lebanon to prevent a civil war. I recall helping my father pack his seabag, while I was instructed that I was the "man of the house" in his absence. I was 6 years old but took this anointing quite seriously. Shortly after he departed, a hurricane landed on our North Carolina coast, and I donned my slicker to march around our home as a guard against.... Who knows what? I remember missing my father greatly. He returned home safely after being gone from July through October.

Like many little boys, I felt school intruded on my real life, frustrating my love for nature and play. After my father returned from Lebanon, I recall feigning illness so I didn't have to climb on the big green Marine bus that transported my sister and me from our home at the Rifle Range in Stone Bay to our parochial school in Jacksonville. Our drive took us through stretches of North Carolina pine forest covering much of Camp Lejeune. Occasionally, we would find ourselves smack in the middle of a war game and would evade hostilities by flying a white flag. Witnessing these exercises only exacerbated my sense of dislocation: I didn't belong on the bus but with the Marines deployed in the field! If only....

When we moved from North Carolina to Missouri, the strangeness of it all overwhelmed me. The first few days, as I entered the Third Grade, I broke into tears when dropped off and insisted to the Irish nuns that my mother come and retrieve me. Even now, I can recall the sense of panic that my family was going to be gone when I tried to return home. Matters were not improved by the gray flannel shorts, knee socks, and white shirt and tie in which my mother dressed me. This had been our school uniform in North Carolina. However, in Missouri, all the boys wore brown corduroy long pants and my foppish attire did not go over well with these country kids. I ended up getting in fights at every recess. The girls got into the act and would run up and pull down my knee socks. At night, I would go home and complain to my parents. My father understood because he suffered a similar fate when they moved from Chicago to San Francisco in 1935 and he went to school in knickers. My mother phoned the Irish sisters, who, evidently, were oblivious to what was going down on the playground. They encouraged me to continue wearing the East Coast uniform because it reminded them of their home in Ireland. Finally, I prevailed upon my mother and she purchased corduroys for me. Or maybe I didn't actually prevail, maybe winter was coming.

Though my self-control improved and those coping and social skills did finally emerge, I could never quite shake a sense of dislocation and of "missing something" from my life, which I couldn't quite identify. As I look back now, I know what I missed was a deep sense of personal connection to those around me and to my environment. One of my favorite rock songs in high school was performed by the band Blind Faith and titled "I Can't Find My Way Home." Every time we moved, though comforted by close family ties, I felt the emotional fabric of myself unravel and the experience left me saddened and searching.

Thus, in my senior year of high school, I began to try to fill that sorrowful void with my initial halting steps of spiritual seeking. Largely incapable of making deep personal connections, I sought solace in the forests of Germany where we lived, taking long, silent, reflective walks. Gradually, my heart opened up and I began to experience the hints of a spiritual life. Though I experienced many setbacks, God led me through my longing heart first to the monastic community of the Cistercian Trappists and then to the Unification Church. Without my course of sorrow and my unmet need for connection, I don't know how I could have found God.

As I write, the reality of my brokenness, my deep shame at being so incomplete, and my profound need to keep my weakness hidden, have been revealed to me more profoundly than ever. So too, in equal measure, I know more certainly the substance of my salvation and the invaluable course of restoration I have walked since turning my heart to God.