

31 January 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Late in the last century, I came to know a fascinating man in a parish Church I served for a year-and-a-bit. He was a retired High School English Teacher. The Church was between Ministers and I was between jobs.

The Life and Times of an Eccentric

Just as Classrooms need Supply Teachers from time to time, so Churches need Supply Ministers. The Ecclesiastical Powers-That-Be yoked us together on a temporary basis. We cohabited 'out of wedlock', as it were, until one side or the other might find a better offer. It was fun and it worked well while it lasted.

Many of the pew-dwellers in this Church were the best kind of eccentric. It comprises those who don't know how eccentric they are.

The man I came to know had always wanted to be a School Teacher. In his childhood, when the farm chores were finished, he'd assign his siblings to chairs arranged in a row, 'teach' them, set exams, and grade them. When his wisdom teeth needed pulling, he pleaded to be allowed to wait until his Grade 13 Provincial Examinations were behind him. He travelled to the next town to sit the exams, passed with high honours, and faced the dentist's chair with a happier heart.

He hurried on to Normal School and landed his first posting, a one- room schoolhouse in rural Ontario, the kind that no longer exists. In his first week, he was forced to use the strap on the mammoth hands of a farm boy who was nearly his age. To make matters worse, their families were known to each other.

This upset him so much – the teacher, not the boy – that he vowed never to use the strap again, and he never did. Thereafter, he maintained discipline, not with physical force, nor with condescending words, but through the power of his own magnanimity, his enthusiasm for life, and the strong curiosity that fuelled his love for learning.

Then the War came. He signed up and was shipped to the UK. "It was *the* adventure of my life," he told me.

Though he wore a Canadian uniform, he was assigned to the Education Department of the British Army, a feather in his military cap. Back then, the

British looked upon Canadians as inferior British Subjects, not inferior Americans, as they do now.

My friend fit right in. He returned salutes with chalk in his hand. He never had to fire his rifle in battle, and that was fine with him. He befriended a family who had billeted him. They became close, and he visited them often in the ensuing decades. Seeing an advertisement posted by the British Council for tutoring in English literature, he signed up. He was sent to the famous poet Walter de la Mare for instruction.

After the War, he thought he should obtain his Degree before returning to teaching. So, he enrolled at the University of Toronto. Being Presbyterian, and with a letter of good report from his Minister, he was allowed to live in Knox College, where the rooms were more posh and the Dining Hall served better fare, compared to the slummier lodgings at Victoria College.

One of his friends in those days was equally eccentric. He became the French teacher in my High School. For the world is small and abounding in eccentrics if you care to look for them.

A Night at the Opera

When my time as a Supply Minister came to an end, we wrote each other letters. He wrote with a fountain pen in a beautiful style of 'italic' handwriting. He always glued a New Yorker cartoon on the back of every envelope, as much for the Postman's amusement as mine.

He introduced me to Opera. Every year, he purchased two seats at Toronto's O'Keefe Centre (as it used to be called) for the Canadian Opera Company's entire season. Because he had an enormous talent for friendship, he had a long list of friends whom he'd ask in turn to fill the seat beside him. I was one. Because I was such a novice, his 'inner teacher' would emerge.

During the long interval, but still in our seats, he'd take out a hip flask he'd smuggled in. It was filled with brandy. Then drew out two small glasses he'd stowed somewhere on his person, poured, and handed one to me.

"Cheers. Now, this is what you should watch for in the final act," he might say, as I sipped nervously while keeping an eye peeled for ushers who could bust us. (Later, I learned they knew all along, but knowing my friend was a regular they overlooked his friendly foibles.) "The orchestra is very good tonight, don't you think?" he'd add; or "Just nudge me when you want a turn at the

opera glasses"; or, after the curtain fell and the applause died away, "Tell me everything. What did you like about it and why?"

He loved fine food and drink, and he entertained lavishly in his home. He'd spent several summers in France taking *Cordon Bleu* classes. I was invited to a dinner party and met some of his many, many friends. One was Rohinton Mistry, the quiet, prodigiously talented author of *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, and other acclaimed novels and stories.

My friend died suddenly one hot summer night almost twenty years ago. He was busy in his messy kitchen, the opera blaring over his radio, as he happily prepared for his annual "Christmas in the Summer" feast for some equally eccentric friends.

A bachelor his whole life, he nourished the adolescents who passed through his classroom, year after year, with his avuncular charm and curiosity, his wisdom and good guidance. His students loved him. So did his many friends.

He loved the rhythms and rituals, not just of school life, but of the 'School of Life' itself. His secret was to live in festive harmony with those rhythms and rituals. His gravestone says, "A Friend to All". I'm grateful I was allowed to be one of them.

"Don't Bore Me!"

As he entered the classroom on those listless afternoons when even the 'good' students were weary from their lessons, longing to be elsewhere, and staring vacantly into space, my late friend would stand as straight as a Sergeant, glare right back at them, and boom in a firm voice, "Look, don't *bore* me today!"

I've always thought this was a clever move, but risky. "Don't look to me to amuse you," it seems to say. "Let the roles be reversed. Are you up to it? Let's see if you can do it. *Don't bore me!*" Did this challenge rouse their spirits and kindle their flame of interest? For that was surely the aim.

Though I've never dared to say anything like this from the Pulpit – (I'd only get one chance, I suspect) – I have been tempted. Instead, though, I smuggle in the *disposition* that lies within and behind my friend's words into my own teaching and preaching. "Don't *bore* me! I dare you!"

I've learned, though, that people who *look* idle may not be bored at all; their imaginations may be working overtime, feeding them inwardly. Conversely, those who seem frantically busy may be desperately trying to outrun their boredom. They'd rather do anything, *anything*, than sit still to face their spiritual hunger and feel their own boredom.

“Boredom is a lack of imagination,” some say. Maybe. But boredom may also be imagination’s stimulant, the hunger that propels us to seek satisfying nourishment for our otherwise empty and idle attention. Boredom is idle attention’s empty plate looking to be filled. If we’re truly bored, and stuck in the mire for something to think, or feel, or do with ourselves, then why don’t we turn our attention to *that*?

Just as an acknowledgment of ignorance can be the beginning of wisdom, so the feeling of boredom may be the beginning of adventure. Boredom puts important questions to us. “What *would* catch your interest? What *would* grab your attention? What *does* thrill you? Do you know? Would you dare to live it out if you did? What would *that* look like?”

To ask these questions, even before we attempt to live their exciting answers, is already to leave the House of Boredom and take the first tentative steps down the long and winding road to a larger life – and more fulfilling too.

Somehow, my late friend – an opera-loving, *Cordon Bleu* trained, teacher of High School English, with a fine ear for music and an enormous talent for friendship – had learned how to befriend his own desires. Who taught him to do that, I wonder? He must have a good teacher along the way.

As he lived his long life, he never allowed himself to inflict a state of boredom upon himself by stifling his wholesome desires. Nor would he let himself spend the precious allotment of time and attention this life affords us on people and things who kindled no flame of interest within him.

“I’ve *loved* being a teacher,” he smiled and spoke. But he could never have been such a *good* teacher, nor such kind friend, had he not, in the first place, loved and accepted the eccentric person God had made him to be.

There’s another chapter to this. But I’ve exhausted you but not *bored* you, have I? I’d better leave it for another time.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew