

Gifts Continue Along the Way

Following the gifts and the trials of Zion I was off to an entirely new world, a world that had me scared stiff. Scared because I never visited this campus before attending plus the academic part of it. When I left Peru for college, I was very conservative, a racist, a Nixon supporter and one who had no clue what the real world was all about. The gifts I received from Zion were robes, stoles my first Bible and a thirst for Christian education. What I was about to receive was a philosophy, a theology that was about to place my feet on a strong foundation.

I plan to chronicle events and people who converted my stoic, pietistic Evangelical limited upbringing with a progressive Evangelical theology. A theology that was full of imagination, neighborly vulnerability, and a narrative that was free and open, a narrative that included everyone.

This transfer of thinking did not occur in one semester. My first semester at Lakeland ended with me bagging 4 D's and a F, the F was in my major. I quit Lakeland and went back to Peru with my tail between my legs and I enrolled once again at LPO, LaSalle-Peru-Oglesby Junior College.

After attending classes at LPO for one day I went back to Lakeland College determined to get my academic life on the right tract. Upon learning from my Philosophy professor, Dr. Bauer that I was dyslexic my study habits were reinvented for me and learning became a little easier.

My religion courses were mostly taught by Rev. Schmidt, a hangover from the old Evangelical style of teaching. You guessed it, attending his classes were like taking confirmation all over again, memorize, memorize, memorize.

Only one year of credits transferred to Lakeland so I had to spend three years on campus before graduation. If you're a counter, I spent a total of six years in college before graduating. Years of taking religious courses at Lakeland did little for my growth but my major in Philosophy and other elective courses did help me out of my ghetto of ignorance.

On November 22, 1963 early afternoon I experienced an Epiphany. While walking from Old Main to my dorm I was told that President Kennedy had just been shot and killed. The rest of the day I was in my dorm room looking into myself about my racism, my dislike for other religions and my lack of direction.

Over the next several months my classes took on a different look, I felt that I could learn this stuff and I became less threatened about people different from me. I was expelled from college twice, but I wrote about that before. In 1965 I graduated from Lakeland College now I was bound for St. Louis, Missouri and Eden Theological Seminary.

It was at Eden, being surrounded by teachers working in concert that I was influenced by some great minds who were bent on teaching us the latest in academia.

Dr. Walter Brueggemann brought the O.T. prophets to life, Oscar Rumph opened up the world of counseling, Dr. Zuck made history come alive, and Ruth B. challenged us to take Christian education seriously. Of all my courses, Dr. Brueggemann's Old Testament classes were the most challenging and the most fulfilling.

Dr. Brueggemann was raised Evangelical however his teaching was not about memorizing but looking at the text in an imaginative way. Walter taught that the Bible was not a package of certitudes and we should not get hung up on doctrines and "thou shalt nots." Brueggemann taught us that the bible was alive, it is fresh, and it is always full of surprises.

Two teachings from Brueggemann stick with me today, “the Bible is not the Word of God, but the Word of God can be found in the Bible.” Secondly, a prophet is not a fortune cookie or about predicting future events. “A prophet is a person who interprets the times in which they live.”

Along with the staff of Eden I was introduced to a library of scholars. Reading took on a whole new look because I was encouraged, made to read a variety of books like I have never done before. I was being introduced to what is called the social gospel.

Theologian, Swiss reformer Karl Barth 1886-1968 taught when preaching or teaching “the Bible should be in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other.” In other words, when reading the newspaper hold it up against the teachings of the Scriptures.

During seminary books and teachings from Gerhard von Rad, the Niebuhr brothers, Paul Tillich, James Muilenburg, Bernard Anderson, Norman Gottwald, Abraham Heschel, Sigmund Mowinckel, Roland Bainton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Gunther Bornkamm, Jeremias Joachimm, Geza Vermes, etc took center stage. Throughout seminary we were expected to know the teachings of all these authors.

It was at Eden Seminary that I began to feel that I was a good student. Do not get me wrong, I was not an honor roll student, but I could keep up with the best of them. Besides being on several committees I was also class president two of my three years at Eden. SEMINARY GAVE ME A WHOLE NEW EXCITING LIFE. EDEN JUST ADDED ON TO THE GIFTS I RECEIVED EARLIER FROM ZION.

Thank you Zion, and thank you Eden.

The Rev. Dennis L. Siebert