

Anecdotes that Transform

By Harold Kent Straughn

Review of Part Seven: Schooling

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I appreciate Tom Olbricht giving me the assignment where Harold discusses his journey over the years he spent gaining his education. As noticed by others, he often chooses to structure things in sets of threes. Consequently, I will arrange my discussion of the chapter in three parts: the years of public schooling, college, and post-graduate studies.

The Years at Public School in Kansas City

Of course, we all have varied memories of these formative years; but in the hands of a gifted writer like Harold, these times come alive for us as we compare his experiences with our own. Harold makes the ethos of the times in which certain event occurred come alive. This is really striking for me as all of my schooling before college was spent on the other side of the world! It was much the same.

I was struck by the observation that we seldom remember the particularities of the lessons taught by our teachers. Rather, we recall most clearly incidents that happened which featured a particular teacher. How true that is! As a gospel scholar, my thoughts even drifted over to thinking about this understanding of ‘social memory.’ It may apply to the way the gospels were composed.

Also in this section, I was touched by Harold’s reflections on how he handled the deaths of two of his classmates in these early years. He writes about a failure to move to closure in not speaking directly with the closest ones involved in remembering what happened. He describes his actions as “an awkward suffering in silence.” This strikes home for those of us engaged in ministry. Was this an intimation of future directions in his life somehow learning how to make appropriate corrections?

The Years at ACC

And now for an interesting surprise for the reviewer. In part, Harold’s direct connection with Abilene overlapped my stay there from 1962-1967. I get to compare impressions with something we both knew directly. I recall well Harold’s involvement with the student newspaper: *The Optimist*. I moved in more modest circles.

Despite these differences, I was fascinated by Harold’s descriptions of his educational journey at Abilene and his assessments of the instructors and administrators of the school. I can see his point that many courses there were not much more demanding than those he had taken in high school. I had some of those courses. However, one must remember that in those days Abilene struggled to find appropriate instructors who were member of the church who could fill out the edges of a viable Liberal Arts

curriculum. From what I hear, this problem is still around. But I agree that it was a bit troubling that a large number of their teachers at that time had never done serious doctorate work.

Nevertheless, I think that Harold may have missed the real astonishing story of Abilene in the critical decade of the Sixties. Somehow, there emerged a core of outstanding students and faculty who did have the ability to do serious and significant work; in its own right, it was as good as what was being done at the time in the elite undergraduate colleges in the country. These students tended to coalesce in two areas: Bible and Science.

They would all take Culp and Hesser for their literature classes. In Bible, there was Pack and then as the Sixties unfolded, Ferguson, Malherbe and Olbricht. At the same time, Witt and Tommy McCord had a very challenging program in Chemistry. Since these students were so often in class together, the student *esprit de corps* transferred to most aspects of campus life that involved this group. It was the dynamic engine that propelled most of them to do graduate work in Bible and Theological studies in the North-East and to be accepted in Chemistry and related fields at the University of Texas and other schools of that status.

Listers from other sectors of the Stone-Campbell Movement are still puzzled about the force and power of this development breaking out, in all places, among the non-instrumental churches in Texas. But there it is. I often thought there is material for a good novel here. Someone with the tools of a Harold Straughn could do worse than attempting it. My own thesis is that Abilene in those days could choose students knowing it had the backing and confidence of a worldwide constituency of nearly two million. People would literally book dorm rooms for their children who at the time were only nine or ten years old. Developments along the lines of what I described resulted in this exciting constituency. The facilities at that time were not much. It was the people that mattered.

Much of the section on Abilene in the chapter is taken up with short vignettes on the teachers and administrators. As one would expect, they are carefully crafted, although as I recall, some of the teachers came after Harold had finished his undergraduate studies. Without question, a key figure is LeMoine Lewis. Dr. Lewis became Harold's advisor for doing graduate work. He encouraged him to go to Harvard Divinity School rather than returning to do advanced work in Journalism. Throughout the chapter, Straughn refers to a series of "what if" decisions he had to make about future directions in his life. This was one of them. But I wonder whether they are as important as Harold tends to believe. All of my earliest education transpired in a strict British system in Australia. There were two key exams that basically shaped the direction of one's life. One was in the eighth grade to decide whether you were eligible to follow an academic track in high school as opposed to commercial for everything else. The other after high school was to determine whether you would be granted a seat in the university. In the former, much to the astonishment of my parents, in the area of social studies, I finished third out of over 13,000 students who took the test. I had my name in the paper, and all of a sudden, my parents told me (a thirteen year old) that I would be sent hundreds of miles away to a prestigious private school. In short, I faced one of Harold's "what if" decisions. After strenuous objection, I ended up going to the local high school. How was I to know that decades later shortly after my first teaching appointment in Austin, I was invited to participate in a prestigious seminar in British Studies and would work closely for years with one of the world experts on the British Empire. So much for "what it" decisions. Maybe there are forces at work that transcend what we, at first, consider to be irreconcilable outcomes.

Post-Graduate Work

Finally, the chapter concludes with the years at Harvard Divinity School and the climactic time of personal study at Tübingen during the years of the European student rebellions. As one who made it to the North-East (Yale), I recognize many of both Church of Christ students and the general faculty from Harvard that Harold profiles. My impression (and it is only that) is by this time Harold was eyeing wider territory than doing academic teaching in Churches of Christ.

This raises a question that I have often wondered about. I am curious about the motives of many of those in the Stone-Campbell Movement who have made the trip to places like Harvard. What was the goal? Was it a teaching position where they could do professional work at a safe distance from the vicissitudes of constant turmoil within our Tradition itself? If so, I am puzzled. While I was down the road a bit in New Haven, the Theology Department at Yale was in constant turmoil about how to evaluate Harvard's Harvey Cox book on the Secular City. Was Cox claiming that there were some people who in no way could be religious? If so, the reigning paradigm of liberal theologians like Tillich collapsed. The point is that wherever we are we cannot wall ourselves off in certain professional cocoons from turmoil. You have to take a stand. I think Harold may have wrestled a little bit with this in his dealings with LeMoine Lewis. There were times I came away from his classes wondering about that. I would be interested about how Harold approached the span of these issues.

Toward the end of the chapter, Harold writes a short moving encomium to Heiko Oberman, his teacher at Tübingen. It is interesting how he ends. He sees Oberman's story of his grandfather at prayer as the real key to his theology. Wherever theology may take us, ultimately, it is congealed in the recognition of the mystery of a higher power. In this "review," I have pictured Harold as one of those talented young men who found his way to West Texas at the dawn of the turbulent Sixties. Wherever his spiritual journey took him after that, I believe it was a far more interesting one than that taken by those celebrated ones of the Sixties who took the path of seeking to upend the political status quo.