

On the Sidewalks of New York

25. Starting a New Chapter

Jim MacNaughton and I came back from our Adirondack Summer refreshed and ready for the home stretch toward graduation. The time in the Adirondacks had been both restoring and reassuring: restoring in the opportunity to change one's pace from the pressures of seminary life, and reassuring in the knowledge that the seminary had prepared us well for our weekly task of preaching and conducting worship.

The mountains were an ideal place to regain a larger perspective on life - the open air, the sky with its varying cloud formations, the sudden rains which seemed to come out of nowhere, the vast expanse of uninhabited mountains, the quietness, and the cleansing quality of daily physical labor. All these stood in contrast to the harried and cluttered life of the city. I had drawn my energy from the city and was indebted to the broad humanity into which I had been woven. But during the summer I came to realize that rarely in my twenty-six years had I ever experienced such solitude. The summer of 1950 in a Pittsburgh steel mill helped me locate my specific calling, the summer of 1951 had revealed the importance of seeing life in its wholeness.

When Jim and I returned to Union in September, we returned to responsibilities. Now that Bill Cary was president of the student body, we were enlisted in the Seminary programs. Jim and I were among those Seniors who had the responsibility to assist the incoming Junior Class and other Master degree students in getting acquainted with Union Seminary and one another. Our first duty was to take groups of incoming students on "round robins" to faculty homes.

This was a delightful job. Not only did we get acquainted with the new students, but it gave us an entree into the faculty residences. We had a high regard for the Union faculty and any chance to meet them in a setting other than the classroom was a welcome opportunity.

The "round robins" took place several nights in the middle of September before classes got underway. Both Jim and I had about six people in our groups. On the first evening as we were getting our assignments of students, I took note of a particularly attractive young woman in Jim's group. When we got back to our room that night, I asked Jim her name. "You're interested?" he responded.

"Sure. How come you get all the good looking women. You've been working with Mary Muir, the secretary in the Dean's office, that's how, isn't it?" I kidded Jim. "You know I think she's the same woman I spotted this morning during chapel. She was wearing a brown suede hat. She really stood out among the others."

"You don't miss a trick," Jim said. "I think her name is Eunice.....yeah, here it is.....Eunice Blanchard. She's from Dayton, Ohio. A graduate of DePauw University."

"Where's she living.....on campus?"

"I think she's at the James Foundation." The James Foundation was a mansion on 67th Street off Park Avenue which housed women students from Union.

"That sounds great. What do you say that after we finish the "round robin's" tonight, we drive her back to James Foundation. We can stop off at the Gay Vienna on the way back," I plotted. Jim had been with me to the Gay Vienna. It was a family restaurant on Second Avenue in Yorkville. I had introduced some of my Union Seminary friends to the Gay Vienna. It had become a haunt for many Union students. One of the Gay Vienna's main attractions was the convivial zither player.

"You're not wasting any time," Jim retorted

"Hey, remember we're Seniors. This is our last year before the cold, cruel, impersonal world closes in around us. May I also remind you of one of

Walter Davidson's (our professor of Practical Theology) principles: Seminary graduates should not start dating all the eligible women in their first parish."

"You shouldn't have waited this long," Jim shot back.

"Hey, I wasn't ready to get serious. I feel the time has come. Anyway I need to have assurance, so I can get my mind on my B.D. thesis," I jested.

"Anything for my roommate. Meet me outside Hastings Hall about 10:00. My last faculty visit will be in Knox Hall. I'll invite Mary to come along tonight."

Fortunately Jim had his car in New York. Jim parked his car on the street outside the Seminary. Parking on the West Side in the early 1950s was not as nerve wracking as it became in the 1960s. Jim used the car for his field work in Brooklyn where he was working at the United Church of Bay Ridge, a congregation with a Presbyterian affiliation. Jim got along well with John Paul Jones, the minister who had persuaded him to stay on for all three of his seminary years. The Bay Ridge area of Brooklyn had a German ethnic population. (1)

I completed my last "round robin" in McGiffert Hall just before 10:00. I was at Hastings just as Jim was leaving Knox Hall. Knox and Hastings were adjacent buildings on the Union Quadrangle. In his affable style, Jim glided right into introductions.

"Oh, here's my roommate. This is Dick Poethig. You must have finished early?"

"Everyone in the group introduced themselves. I was, of course, interested in one particular young woman. Her friendliness was encouraging. We fell into conversation about the visits to faculty apartments. I asked Eunice where she was living at Union. She told me the James Foundation. I told her that while it was inconvenient, it was one of the more elegant arrangements that Union provided. As the group began to disperse, I made my suggestion to Jim.

"It's late, Jim. Why don't we drive Eunice down to the James Foundation? We could stop off in Yorkville on the way."

"I would appreciate that," Eunice said. "The busses don't run as regularly this late at night."

We piled into Jim's car and headed cross town to the East Side. I had suggested that we stop off in Yorkville. Both Eunice and Mary Muir, Jim's date, were delighted to get to see another part of town.

We got to the Gay Vienna about 10:30. We entered the door to the dining section and went to the back tables to be close to the entertainment. Like most German family restaurants it was divided by a wall, on one side was the bar and on the other were tables for dining. The back section also had a small raised platform for the zither player. Eunice looked over at the bar which, from the back section, was in clear view. "Do they also serve food this late?"

"Sure," I said, "this is a restaurant. How about some apple strudel? They have great apple strudel. And some coffee?"

Both Mary and Eunice chimed in, "That sounds good."

"We'll have two apple strudels and two coffees. And we'll have two dark beers." I told the waiter.

The zither player resumed his place and began his medley of German songs and Austrian waltzes. The strains of the zither music filled the air. Tensions in the room melted away. Conversation seemed to flow with the sounds of the music. We talked about the places we were from, about our course work at Union and our denominational affiliation. Mary Muir was the Episcopalian among us. It was a warm and cordial atmosphere.

As we left the Gay Vienna, Eunice said, "This was a neat place." Mary agreed. We drove Eunice to the James Foundation and headed back to Union well past midnight.

After we dropped Mary Muir off at her apartment, I told Jim, "I'm really interested."

"You better move quick, if you want to get your B.D. thesis out of the way. I'm sure that there will be someone else moving if you don't."

"I'll catch her after chapel tomorrow and have lunch with her."

James Chapel was crowded for Friday morning worship. I sat in the balcony for a clearer view of the congregation. There were many heads to sort out. When the service ended, I caught a glimpse of the brown suede hat. I recognized the hat from the day before. I made my way quickly down the balcony steps and caught up with Eunice as she was leaving the chapel.

"Hi! Hope we didn't keep you out too late last night."

"No, it was a nice evening. I enjoyed the Gay Vienna," she said.

We went off to the Refectory where I pursued my now deepening interest in this young woman. I knew I'd have to be intent in my attentions. We made plans to see one another again for Sunday worship.

I suggested that we attend First Presbyterian Church in the Village. John Mellin was the preacher. He was the closest thing we had in New York City to a "Niebuhrian" preacher.

I picked Eunice up on Sunday morning at the James Foundation. We took the I.R.T. down to the Village. John Mellin was good as usual. He was a thoughtful preacher. He provided an ample opening for us to discuss theology and the prevailing climate at Union. We walked over to Washington Square to catch the flavor of Greenwich Village. Then I took Eunice to the Jumble Shop for lunch. It was a restaurant which captured the spirit of the Village.

She asked me about life in New York. This unwound me. It didn't take much to get me to talk about New York. I reflected on particular memories of

the places I knew in the city. The Village was closely connected to my student days, especially some of my more radical associations. I wasn't sure how all of this was going over, but I was never reticent about identifying my political point of view. If anyone had qualms about my politics, it was better to find out early. None of this seemed to faze Eunice. She seemed genuinely interested.

When she heard that I had graduated from Wooster, she expressed particular delight. "I missed going there by a whisker. My mother pressed Wooster on me. She was a Wooster graduate. But I had my own mind and chose DePauw over Wooster to my mother's despair. My father attended Wooster for two years. That's where they met." The Wooster connection provided a common bond to our relationship.

We had a good afternoon, as I departed from the James Foundation we agreed that we would see one another during the week. Classes began the next day and I had to get in my B.D. thesis topic at the beginning of the semester. This was not difficult since I had already decided to write on, "A Christian Doctrine of Work for a Modern Technological Society." I also had to tie down a field work position before we got too far into the academic year.

I had heard about a student hospital chaplain's position from Lyman Hartley, a Middler student at Union. Lyman had been a year behind me at Wooster. His father was the head chaplain at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in Washington Heights. I made arrangements for an interview and immediately hit it off with Lyman Hartley, Sr.

This was an area of ministry in which I had little knowledge. I had spent two years of field work in local congregations. The past summer in the Adirondack Larger Parish had added to that experience. I needed to explore a new field. Hospital chaplaincy was in its infancy. It was to become in the next decade a requirement of seminary education. It was to be called Pastoral Clinical Education. It gave rise to a whole new profession among ministers, the pastoral counsellor. In the Fall of 1951 I decided to take on the job of student chaplain as a challenge to my parochial interest.

Union had taken the lead in providing courses in counselling. We had several good professors in the area of pastoral counselling. I was especially drawn to David Roberts who taught the psychotherapy courses. I felt he was one of the more able theologians in the seminary. David Roberts was a sensitive human being with a great rapport with his students. His classes were alive with incisive Biblical reflections into human nature. Although Roberts was a relatively young man, he was to die soon after I graduated from Union.

All the time I was getting my courses, my B.D. thesis and my field work underway, my mind was continually on Eunice. I was deeply attracted to her. She had classes over at Teacher's College along with her courses at Union. I had to work hard to meet her for lunch or supper. After our lunches we took walks in Riverside Park along the parkway behind Union Seminary. Fall is the most pleasant and colorful season in New York. The Fall of 1951 was spectacular. The trees along the Hudson River were in all their glory. The parkway was awash in yellows, reds, oranges and chestnut browns. Our conversations took on the warmth of the scenery around us.

We easily moved into talking about family and future. We glided into that conversation like we were of the same mind, thinking the same thoughts. It was a great feeling...a feeling I had never had before. "What do you think is the ideal number of children in a family?" I asked Eunice. I already knew the number I wanted - four, maybe five. "I'd like to have five children," Eunice said. I smiled in great delight. "How'd you guess, that's close to my number."

Our conversations began to anticipate each other. In a short time I felt I had grown close to her. I hoped that she felt the same way toward me. I realized that we had known one another for less than a month. But that did not matter. As short as the time had been, I knew she was the person I most wanted to be with. I could not put off the moment any longer.

In early October on one of our walks, I told her of my feelings, which by now were obvious. She responded with warmth and deep affection. I asked her if she were ready to make a decision about marriage. She said she was....she

would marry me. It was a tremendous moment.....the beginning of a new chapter in my life.

On Columbus Day, which was a holiday in New York City, I made an appointment at a diamond merchant on 57th Street and the East Side. He was the father of the wife of a Union seminarian. I met Eunice at the James Foundation and we walked down to 57th Street. It was a glorious Fall day. The streets and the sidewalks of New York had never seemed lighter under my feet.

The diamond merchant greeted us with congratulations. He brought out trays of diamonds. We looked over many and finally Eunice chose one which pleased her. We agreed on a setting. We walked over to a nearby Chinese restaurant on Lexington Avenue. It was on the second floor looking out on the busy street below. We watched the people and the traffic of New York. We had known one another for a month and had made a decision to last a lifetime.

End Notes

(1) Bay Ridge was one of the few places in Brooklyn I had visited with my mother as a youngster. During Jim's time at the church I tracked down our family acquaintance and made a trip to Bay Ridge to visit them. It was a time when I was working on my Seyfarth-Schölzel roots. It was from this visit that I remembered that my grandmother Seyfarth-Schölzel was from the Bremen area. I had forgotten this until Erika was doing her own family genealogical research.