

On the Sidewalks of New York

26. Leaving New York Behind

In reflecting on the first month of my Senior year at Union, I am astounded at the speed with which Eunice and I committed ourselves to one another. It was a momentous decision for me, as it was for her. We were assuming a great deal about each other. We had not really delved deeply into one another's background. For myself, I had political beliefs which shaped my worldview. At college my politics had set me apart from many of the women I had dated. At seminary I had now decided upon the area of ministry to which I wanted to devote my life. It was a side stream of the normative pastoral ministry to which ministers were called in the Presbyterian Church. Would these long term commitments be acceptable to Eunice and her own career plans?

As our relationship deepened over the next months, any doubts I might have had diminished. I knew that Eunice was weighing some of my same concerns. It was obvious that we came from disparate family backgrounds. We talked openly about our families. Eunice told me about her father's recent death in the crash of his private airplane. She told me about his work in the aviation industry and of his devotion to the company he had founded, Aeroproducts. She also helped me draw a mental picture of her mother, a person who had always been active in the life of the church, particularly its social concerns. I saw a determined woman with much devotion to her beliefs which she fulfilled in volunteer activities, particularly her work in the League of Women Voters. I had already taken comfort in the fact that her mother was a strong supporter of Wooster. She told me about her brother David's physical problems and how their father's death had affected him. I shared my own struggles in my mother's death. I sense that our mutual loss made a common bond between us.

Eunice had a chance to meet the Poethig clan at a family celebration at my Aunt Helen's. Aunt Helen's flat on East 84th Street was the scene of many family holiday celebrations. This was natural since Grandmother Poethig

lived with Aunt Helen and Uncle Bill Wagner. All family parties took place at Aunt Helen's. This gathering, though close to the Thanksgiving holiday, was surreptitiously planned for the family to get acquainted with Eunice. This was a testing of the waters.

Poethig family gatherings were always tumultuous. Special celebrations brought together all the aunts and uncles and the cousins. Aunt Helen always cooked up a storm. And Uncle Bill Wagner, whose occupation was as a bartender, provided the drinks, but not without goodnatured jibes at all the "freeloading" Poethig's. Grandmother Poethig, now in her late eighties, would sit quietly in her chair receiving the greetings and the embraces from all the family. Her presence kept the proceedings from becoming too boisterous. The gathering that year was considerably subdued since it was largely the aunts and the uncles who came. Most of the cousins, who now had their own families, had longer distances to travel. The meal, which provided the central focus, was superb - rouladen, red cabbage, potato pancakes and applesauce. After all the festivities were completed, it was apparent that Eunice had had a genuinely good time and had expecially hit it off with grandmother Pauline.

At Christmas time it was my turn to visit the Blanchards in Dayton. Christmas in Dayton was to serve two purposes. First, it was to celebrate the Christmas holidays in the Blanchard style. From the start to finish, it was a heartwarming occasion for me. I had never had such a complete Christmas celebration. Home and church celebrations were closely interconnected. Preparations for Christmas included more than Christmas eve and Christmas day. There was the house to be decorated, carols to be sung, and friends to be greeted in small family celebrations - all of these added to the delight of the season. Through all the preparations I felt myself being drawn into the family circle. Christmas was to become, from this time on, a high family celebration for me.

The second purpose of the visit was to prepare for the wedding. Since there would be little time in the next months at Union Seminary to give to wedding preparations, the Christmas holidays would have to do double duty. Eunice and Juliet spent whatever time, not given to Christmas preparations,

to planning for June seventh, the wedding date. Arrangements had to be made at Westminster Church. Patterns for silverware and dinner settings had to be chosen so they could be listed in the bridal gift list at Dayton's major department stores. The size and the composition of the wedding party was a point for discussion and decision. Then there was the reception: where should it be held and what should be served? How should the reception tables be arranged?

The wedding gown came in for serious discussion. Eunice had already located the "bridal shop" section of New York City. This was crucial since it provided for wider choice in a gown. It was decided that Juliet would come to New York and help Eunice in her selection of a gown. It suddenly dawned on me, as this discussion got more complicated, that getting married was a major production.

Eunice and I made it back to New York and Union Seminary all "celebrated-out." We both had to get down to serious studying. I had my B.D. thesis to complete. The next five months of 1952 became a blur in my mind. All I could remember were the target dates for the Union graduation in late May and the wedding date in early June in that order. But then, what was I graduating to do? Where was I to take my young bride after graduation and the wedding?

The job pursuit had been foremost in my mind when I got back from the Adirondacks. But then I met Eunice and other things consumed my time. The Fall went so quickly and then Christmas. Now I had to get back to serious thinking about job possibilities. I was not ready to do graduate work as were some of my classmates. I had been "doing" academics for almost eight years since I started at Wooster. It was time to "go out and get a job" as my father would say. Or as I had learned to say "to fulfill my calling."

Easter time brought two prospects. My name had been given to Ken Neigh, the executive presbyter of Detroit Presbytery. The Presbytery was looking for candidates for one of their inner city parishes. Ken Neigh visited Union Seminary and met with several of us. He told us generally about the work of the Presbytery of Detroit and about his plans for revitalizing the Presbytery. I

was interested but did not want to jump at the first inquiry. About the same time Robert Heath, one of my classmates, caught hold of me one day in Hastings Hall and told me he had given my name to his father Paul Heath who was the executive presbyter of Buffalo-Niagara Presbytery.

In late April Paul Heath called to tell me about a new church development project which they were beginning in the Presbytery. It was in the Town of Tonawanda, close to an area of industrial development. His son Bob had told him that I was interested in a ministry with working people. This new church development was being organized to do just that. Did I think I might be interested in that prospect?

The proposal had the ring of a real challenge. Organizing a congregation from the ground up. And a congregation of working people. It sounded like something I had been preparing for. I told Paul Heath that I'd like to discuss the possibility with him. He made arrangements for me to visit Buffalo. I would also meet with a small group of people who were the first prospects of the new congregation.

I told Eunice about the prospect of organizing a new church in Buffalo. She was as excited as I was. Buffalo had been one of her earliest homes. Her father had worked in Buffalo for the Curtiss-Wright Company - a pioneer in aviation, during the mid-1930s. The family had lived in Kenmore and had attended the Kenmore Presbyterian Church. She would not be able to come with me on the trip, but she assured me of her support.

I made my first visit to Buffalo in May. Paul Heath took me to the site where the Presbytery had bought the property for a church in the Town of Tonawanda. It was next to a public school. In the evening I met with some of the first people who had responded to the Presbytery's inquiry for a new church. The meeting was a friendly one. I sensed, however, a withdrawnness on the part of some of those invited.

After the meeting Paul Heath told me that there had been some initial friction over the time schedule for beginning the church. Some people had already been meeting for several months. Personality conflicts had erupted

within the group. Now that the Presbytery was showing that it was serious about beginning a new congregation some of the tensions had eased. Resolving the personality problems within the group would be one of the first tasks of the organizing pastor.

As I was leaving the next day, Paul Heath asked me if I was still interested in coming to Buffalo. "The organizing committee is agreed that they would like you to begin the organizing work." he told me. I responded that I was ready to come to Buffalo. But first I had to graduate. Then I had to marry. Then to be ordained. I would be there for the first of July.

I came back to New York with the good news for Eunice. I told her we had a call to organize a new congregation in the Town of Tonawanda. Now we had to take care of everything else.

Life was hectic the last weeks of May. Eunice finished her courses at Teacher's College and Union. I put the finishing touches on my B.D. thesis and completed my course papers. I completed my Presbytery of New York requirements for ordination. I checked that my seminary friends I had asked to be part of the wedding party were ready for the event. Jim MacNaughton was to be my best man. Art Bradley, Walt Ziegenhals, Steve Chamberlain and Pete Staples all had agreed to be in the wedding party. They all were Congregationalists except for Pete Staples.

Graduation came off without a hitch. My father and sister both came for the ceremonies. It was the first time my father attended any of my graduations. Not that he had anything against graduations. It was really the first opportunity he had had to come to a graduation. I had graduated from the High School of Commerce at mid-year in January, 1942, one month after the U.S. entry into World War II. The graduation had little significance in the midst of the crisis of those days. Wooster was too far for him to travel in June, 1949. I was never sure how he felt, since he was never expressive.

Eunice's mother and brother David came for the graduation. After the ceremonies we went out to eat together. It was the first time my father had met Juliet Blanchard. I could not imagine two more different people. But our

little party went well. When the bill came, Juliet picked it up to pay. My father would have none of that. He retrieved the bill and paid with dignity.

Our next stop was Dayton. We got there early enough to help with wedding preparations. The weather was glorious. I had been to 2520 Adirondack Trail in the Winter. It was the perfect Christmas house. Now in the late Spring it was the ideal setting for a wedding reception.

I was enlisted to do yard work, to keep me out of trouble. The lawns, the hedges and the flower beds needed tending in preparation for the outdoor reception. I could not think of a more pleasant work to do. Except that I had a difficult time distinguishing wildflowers and exotic flowering vines from weeds. When Juliet came out to inspect my handiwork, she decided I needed a course in plant identification. I had extricated some of her prized columbines from the garden. She was good-natured enough to consider this a learning experience for her city-bred son-in-law to be.

As June seventh drew near the wedding party began to arrive. On their heels came the relatives and friends from Indiana, Kansas, Chicago, Wisconsin, Michigan and New York. All but one of the relatives were from Eunice's family. My lone family representative was my sister Erna who was in the wedding party as a bridesmaid. It gave me comfort knowing that she was present. Her comments to me from the first time she met Eunice, was how lucky I was to have found such a great woman. She always had a penchant for knowing quality.

The anticipation began to build as more and more people had to be greeted and settled in their various locations. The night before the wedding 2520 Adirondack Trail was filled with all the frenetic energy of those in a wedding party. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Jim MacNaughton asked me. "This is forever, you know." That unleashed a torrent of comment on the holiness of the celebrate life from the ministerial members of the wedding party. "You guys are trying to break me," I countered. "My mind is made up. Nothing will sway me."

June seventh broke forth as a blue sky day. This brought a deep sigh of relief from Juliet. She had been scanning the weather reports to see if any cloud formations would threaten her outdoor reception. With all the preparations for an outdoor reception, everything depended on good weather. I could not imagine how any alternate arrangements would now be possible. The skies remained clear as the hour approached for the gathering at Westminster Church.

We had met with Hugh I. Evans, the officiating minister, for the rehearsal on Friday. Now we were ready for the real thing. The whole process had overwhelmed me. All the preparations. All the comings and goings of the wedding party and the guests. All the anticipation. And now the wedding ceremony. I was in a state of suspended animation.

The church was full of expectant faces. The male members of the wedding party marched out and filled the chancel of the church. I looked down the long line of bridesmaids coming down the aisle to see if Eunice was really part of the wedding party. Suddenly she was there on the arm of John Ballantyne, her father's best friend. She was beaming. Now I had to remember everything I was told. I repeated my vows, meaning every word, but in a half-dazed state. Was this really happening to me? Before I knew it, the ceremony was over. Eunice and I were married. Beginning of a new chapter. Or should I say a new book?

The skies remained clear and the sun shone on the reception. Juliet was relieved. I was now alert and enjoying every moment of the reception. I felt completely relaxed as the folks came down the line offering greetings and best wishes. I tried to take a mental picture of everyone coming through the reception line. When the reception line was finished, I moved quickly to conversations with old friends and sought out Eunice's relatives who had come. As I wove in and out among the guests, I could see everyone was enjoying themselves. This, I thought, is what a wedding is all about. It was a time when complete strangers are able to greet one another and be open to one another.

Eunice and I slipped away from the reception to make a quick escape for our honeymoon. One of our wedding gifts from Juliet was a 1952 green Chevrolet sedan which the family had owned. It was to be the first in a long line of Chevy's that our family would own. There was no escaping without notice. Jim MacNaughton had done his job well. The car was equipped with a lone string of tin cans and a "Just Married" sign. All the wedding party and the relatives were there to see us off. Our first night's destination was the Golden Lamb in Lebanon, Ohio, an historic inn not too distant from Dayton.

Before Eunice and I left for the Golden Lamb, we had made up our mind to return to Kettering the next day. A newly built Boy Scout pavilion was to be dedicated to the memory of Pete Blanchard. Charles Kettering, the inventor of the self-starter in automobiles, was to be one of the speakers. Everyone was surprised when suddenly we appeared at the dedication. But it was especially pleasing to Pete's brothers and his sister Margaret that we had returned for the ceremony.

Next it was on to the honeymoon. We had planned a trip which would take us through Buffalo and Niagara Falls on our way to Montreal and Quebec, Canada, down through Maine, into New Hampshire and Massachusetts arriving in New York City in time for my ordination. My ordination service was set for June 26th at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. We decided that we would make our honeymoon a camping trip. We bought equipment for camping. Our first opportunity for camping was in Maine. We had not counted on the swarms of black flies that filled the Maine countryside in early June. We set up camp fighting off the black flies that swarmed around us as we cooked our meals. It was the first and the last time we went on a camping trip.

We arrived in New York City in time for the ordination service. As I thought about my ordination, my mind went back to the mid-1930s and my appearance in the mock League of Nations at Good Will Sunday School. My mother had bought me a serge blue suit for the occasion. She had taken great pride in the fact that after the League of Nations' drama someone told her that I looked like a little minister in playing my role. Seventeen years later I was bringing to fruition that dream.

The service was held in the chapel of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. A small core of family and friends attended the service. I had invited C. John L. Bates to give the ordination sermon. John Bates had been the college pastor at Wooster during my years there. He had been called to the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church of Greenwich, Connecticut. Philip C. Jones, the associate pastor during my youth at MAPC, also took part in the service. Phil Jones was the person I first told about my decision to enter the ministry. He was now heading the Interreligious Council on Christian Education. Frank Grebe, who had taken Jones' place at MAPC, also took part in the service. To add a Union Seminary dimension to the service, John T. McNeil, my professor in Church History and a Calvin scholar, also agreed to participate.

Momentous things had happened in the last month. I had received a call to become the organizing pastor of a new church development in Buffalo-Niagara Presbytery. The church was to be located in the midst of an industrial area of northwest Buffalo. The people were to be largely those who worked in industry, both management and blue collar. I had graduated from Union Theological Seminary, the completion of seven years of education. These had been years of struggle within the family as I continually pressed forward to fulfil the task I had begun in February, 1945. And now ordination.

At the time I made the decision to begin the course for the Presbyterian ministry, I had no way of knowing what it would take. But I knew that this was the road I wanted to travel. In all those seven years I never wavered from my intention. Many decisions had been difficult to make, particularly as I had to leave my family. Those decisions had meant great agony for my family. But now I was here, kneeling in the same chapel where my mother's funeral service had been held six years before. The words of the Irish woman in the St. Francis Hospital bed next to my mother came back to me, "Your mother was proud of you. She was proud that you were becoming a minister."

The ordination service was my last business in New York City. Our schedule called for beginning work in the Town of Tonawanda on July first. We had a last visit and meal with my father and sister Erna. I picked up some of my

last belongings which I had kept at 732 East 137th Street. We headed toward the Hutchison Parkway and upstate New York. As we drove out of New York watching the skyline change from the apartment buildings of the Bronx and Pelham to the green beltway of Westchester County, the road was leading away from the past and toward a new adventure. Twenty-seven years of my life had been rooted in New York City. It had left an indelible mark on who I was. As Eunice and I drove out of New York, I had a strong feeling that a new book was opening in my life.