

A Cold Day with Warm Memories

By Reginald D. Smith

The cold clear Michigan morning slapped me in the face when I stepped out of the door. It was the start of day in which a series of events transpired, and would leave a lasting impression that has followed me to this day. It was a Saturday morning in early March. The many snows of winter were grudgingly giving up their hold on the season. It was in the midst of those days when the capricious weather of Michigan would tempt you with a warm and sunny spring day so you threw off your jacket in the afternoon, but by the next morning, all the muddy roads are frozen rock hard, and fresh ice covers the puddles from the previous day's melt. A blizzard can strike at any time because that happens often in March in that part of the country. This day presented a blue sky with no clouds in sight, and the sun was creeping over the horizon, bringing the dawn of the new day.

My sleep that morning had been shattered with the sound of my alarm clock while it was still dark outside. I got up, showered, had breakfast, and dressed in my best suit, white shirt and tie. It was a Saturday. One of the distinctions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is keeping Sabbath from sundown Friday, until sundown Saturday. Another distinctive belief is recommending abstinence from tobacco, alcohol, and stimulants such as caffeine.

Vegetarianism is recommended as the preferred diet life style. Adelphian Academy in Holly, Michigan was a coeducational boarding school operated by the church for the high school youth. A relatively small group of students, who lived within an easy commute, attended the school, and referred to as "village students." I lived within 7 miles from the school, so my sister and I lived at home, and attended the school. Sports were based on intramural activities almost entirely for the male students. The church favored and encouraged musical activities with bands and choirs for the students instead of athletics. The entry-level choir was the Melodians, and the upper division choir was the Cantus Chorale. This choir was made up of predominately upperclassmen, and it was the choir that toured to special events and constituent churches.

I was a senior in the Cantus Chorale. The choir was scheduled for an early departure to travel by school bus to the little town of Vassar, some 55 miles away. In 1963 there were no interstates between the little towns of Holly and Vassar, so it was a combination of four lane urban or two lane country roads to travel. The school bus was a decade old, International chassis with the customary yellow body. I remember that on one trip to Southfield (a suburb of Detroit), to sing for a Friday evening service, that old bus stalled and refused to start with the electric starter. A bunch of us guys jumped off the bus in the middle of traffic and pushed the bus while the driver put the bus in gear and let out the clutch to start the engine. It worked, and we completed our trip and performance that night with no further glitches in the transportation.

The bite of the cold air was one thing, but sliding into the car with freezing naugahyde seats at the break of dawn was another. The chill on my backsides was another reminder of the icy fingers of Jack Frost and the season. The car started with a grumble but took me safely to the school to meet with my fellow classmates waiting for the impending trip.

For a coeducational school, the social restrictions of the environment sound somewhat Draconian by the social mores of today. I recall that one morning I happened to meet my sister outside on the sidewalk and talked with her for a few minutes. I was later “counseled” by the food service director that a boy and a girl standing out there talking, just wasn’t right without a chaperone, even though she knew it was my sister.

The girl’s dorm was on the west side of the campus facing the boy’s dorm on the east. The Music Building, an old badly outdated Victorian wooden building housed the practice rooms and teacher’s studios on the ground floor. The main floor housed the Food Services director and her husband in an apartment, and the cafeteria. The second floor held more practice rooms, the band director’s office, and the band room. The third floor was no longer occupied and was used for storage. It was a cold and drafty building in the winter, with a hall to accommodate the girls waiting to enter the cafeteria. The boys got to stand outdoors on a staircase on the opposite side of the cafeteria. Inside, each table held six students, three girls and three boys. Seating was designed to be random, however, several of the more “serious” couples became very proficient at counting and getting in the line so that the random seating would put them together at the same table.

We all jokingly referred to the sidewalks as being colored pink and blue. It was considered unseemly for a male student to be seen on a pink sidewalk, and vice versa. The chapel was configured so that boys sat on the outside rows, and girls in the center section. There was no comingling unless you were sitting with your parents and seated in a section designated for the other gender. The first infraction of being in a situation where you and a member of the opposite gender were caught in a close social situation, was typically “de-socialization”, which meant no being together as a couple for a month or more.

With all of these strict prohibitions regarding being with your girl friend, being in the touring choir, and getting away from the school where there were all those watchful eyes, was a privilege not to be taken lightly. We were all normal adolescents and the hormones were raging. Traveling together on that old bus and being together was a very big deal! The choir assembled at the gymnasium before loading the bus. Boys were in one seat, girls in another, with no couples sitting together.

One of the early founders of the Adventist church was a woman considered to be a prophet of God in the 19th century. It was believed that she and her husband had personally helped to build the Vassar church. The church was built on what was referred to as a Michigan cellar. A foundation for a building in that part of the country has to be at least 4 feet underground due to the long winters, hard freezes, and average frost line. The walls of the cellar were built of fieldstone and mortar, with the dirt floor left open. This resulted in all of the useful space being upstairs where the lobby, church nave, and other rooms were located.

The church was nice and serviceable but nearly a century old. When you add the Cantus Chorale, the church was bursting at the seams. The choir performed a program that morning in place of the customary church service and the pastor gave a brief homily.

Following the benediction the pastor announced that a fellowship, potluck luncheon was provided at the Lutheran Church social hall, a short distance down the street.

The Lutheran Church was a larger building with a full social hall and kitchen in the basement. Upstairs, the nave had stained glass windows, a small pipe organ, acoustic plaster on the walls, a wooden floor, and a reverberation that every musician would appreciate. After the long ride on the drafty bus, the morning activities, and singing the concert, we all had a big appetite. Our hunger was quickly satisfied with the feast provided by the local church members.

The members of the choir started to drift back upstairs to wait for loading the bus for the trip back to Adelphian. The choir accompanist sat down at the pipe organ and we all began to become enchanted with the sound produced by that instrument. Our school had electronic organs but none with pipes, pistons, and stops with their electro-mechanical connections.

The accompanist had played a few songs and then we started to assemble as a group and did a reprise of a song from the morning concert. It is a song that conveys a message of promise, and safekeeping by God. It was composed by Felix Mendelssohn, and is a song from the second half of his masterpiece oratorio, Elijah.

The sopranos started it off. "He watching over Israel slumbers not nor sleeps." The tenors made their entrance repeating the text, and the fugue began to grow with addition of the altos, and finally the basses.

We went into our parts and harmonies. The choir director, Mr. Dwight Rhodes joined us and began conducting.

As we sang that song in the glow of the sunlight beaming through the windows, our voices blended and we all felt a sense of awe. The melding of the voice of the pipe organ and our ensemble formed a unity that seemed perfect, as it reverberated in that acoustically alive church nave.

Observers who were there that day sat quietly and contemplated anew the message and spirit that seemed to be speaking to our souls.

And then we noticed our director. Tears began to trickle down his cheeks to his chin. We all took note, but no one had the nerve to ask him why. We were aware that we had just experienced a spiritually engaging and special moment, but was our singing so moving that it had brought him to tears?

The song came to its quiet end and the moment was over. The spell was broken, and it was time to load the bus for the return trip.

Years later, I had married the love of my life. She was one of those girls on the bus that day, and sang alto in the choir. We never dated while in Academy but were brought together years later, fell in love, and were married within six months.

Nearly a decade had passed and our children were young when we went to the Michigan Seventh-day Adventist Camp Meeting at Grand Ledge. As our family was walking across the campgrounds, we encountered an older gentleman with a familiar face. It was our choir director from that special day in Vassar, Michigan. We had difficulty communicating because he now was quite deaf. He still had that smile, and had grown older, as we all have. And then it hit me. In that moment, I realized that he must have known that he had a condition that would progressively make him deaf and unable to enjoy the profession, which gave him so much joy and fulfillment.

Beethoven's deafness made him a very disagreeable person. His foul moods and temperament drove his friends away. Despite his deafness, he composed magnificent music, even while he was going deaf. Here was our former choir director, a present day example of a similar situation. It is hard to conceive of anything more devastating than the loss of a sense, which is so pivotal to one's personal and professional success. Here, was a man who met this adversity with a smile, and a friendly greeting. His disposition and attitude reflected to me, a man who knows that he serves the God of Elijah. The same God who watches over Israel, and slumbers not nor sleeps, and will one day restore him to full health.