

To the National Honor Society at St. John's Preparatory School
April 30, 2007
Rosamond Kilmer Spring

Congratulations to the new members of the National Honor Society. We are gathered here to honor the four qualities which this society represents: Excellence, scholarship, service and leadership. I am here to honor you, and to offer you a challenge. There is a common maxim in anthropology that the person who tells the stories to the young in a culture directs the future of that culture. I am here to tell a story that directed my life. Perhaps you will find in it challenges for your own.

So I will tell you about a man who embodied those four qualities with a grace that was remarkable. That man was my father.

My Dad was always, it seemed to me, a somewhat fragile man. Not physically fragile, internally somehow. When my father was nine, his father was killed in France in the last days of World War I, so he was raised by a single mother, a widowed mother. He was the oldest of five children and felt that he had to carry the responsibility for that household, not because anyone told him that he had to, but because that was who he was. In the space of a few short years he also lost his six-year-old sister Rose and his younger brother Michael.

From the tragedies of that young life he learned the terrible horror of war, (a horror our own nation and the people of Iraq and Afghanistan are learning again), and the loneliness and difficulties a woman experiences when she has to raise her children alone. He also carried the grievous loss of two siblings.

This was a man who had a Benedictine heart. He was born on the feast of Saint Benedict and took the name Benedict when he was baptized at a fairly young age. He died on the Feast of Saint Scholastica.

Because of his parents' awareness of social issues, and his own deep faith, my father was keenly aware of the injustices in the society around him. He had a deep love of literature (his favorite books were *Don Quixote* and *Huckleberry Finn*), and a sure gift with poetry. When he got ready for work in the morning, he put on his vest and tweed jacket and hat with a particular flourish. I thought when I was very young that that was especially for my entertainment. I know now that he was putting on his armor, preparing to sally forth. My parents knew that there were many wrongs in the world to be righted and that they could not right them all, but they could at least give clear and silent testimony where there was injustice. And as for *Huck Finn*, I think some mornings my Father set out as if he was Huck going to join Jim on his raft. Also, both my parents had a particular love of those final words in *Huck Finn*. Huck says he thinks he'd better light out for the territories. Tom's Aunt Sally says she wants to adopt him and "sivilize" him and he don't want no part of it, he's been there before. My parents had explored, for their older children, all the local schools. They were young parents with high standards, and they had been educated in the best that civilization has to offer. These schools had their strengths, and their serious limitations. In some ways they tended toward the "sivilizing" that Huck was hoping to avoid. So with a group of like-minded parents, my parents started their own school.

My father took his first degree in English Literature and his MA in philosophy combined with a concentrated study in embryology, just because a science was required and he

thought embryology would be fascinating.

He worked during World War II as a research librarian at the Library of Congress and ghost writer of speeches for members of Congress. These were not political speeches. They were speeches for special celebrations such as the Fourth of July, St David's Day, St Patrick's Day. They were designed to emphasize the abiding principles on which this country was founded. My Father was keenly aware of the power of words to change minds and hearts, and he used words to address the various moral issues that plagued our country. That was his job—that was also his vocation.

He was absolutely insistent that one was to learn from history, and what he had learned from history was that one had to act as quickly and determinedly as possible in the face of clear injustice. As soon as the news of the Holocaust broke around this country, he joined, with my mother, the international society of Christians and Jews. He was determined that the horrors of the holocaust would not be repeated.

Our family lived at that time in Virginia, part of the South in which the Jim Crow laws were in effect. Segregated buses, segregated schools, no service at lunch counters for blacks, separate water fountains, separate bathrooms. (When we were on a boat in Newport News and I was about five, I managed to separate myself from my family to look for the bathroom for "blacks only." I couldn't find one.) The segregation of the buses was accomplished, as I'm sure you know from your history lessons, by requiring blacks to ride at the back of the bus, and as the bus filled with whites, to give up their seats to the whites and stand. Perhaps keeping in mind the image of Huck and Jim on the raft, my father, every day of his working life, walked to the back of the bus. He could not, singlehandedly, fix what was wrong in our country, but he could give courageous and silent testimony that segregation was wrong. That walk to the back of the bus was slow and deliberate. He made it as if it was the most natural and ordinary thing in the world. There were a lot of reasons others might have had not to make that walk. The bus was a small community. The people on the bus were neighbors and friends and one wouldn't want to create a stir. Most of the people on the bus were the sole wage earners for their families, as was my father, and racially motivated violence was common in those days. But my father, nodding graciously to the people who were his neighbors, the people who were his colleagues, the people he saw every Sunday in church, walked to the back of the bus. And by the time the bus had arrived in Washington DC, my father was standing at the back, having given away his seat.

In 1954, we moved to another small town, this time about twenty miles from the Capitol. We moved into a large house on the edge of town. At least it seemed to be the edge of town, because the paved streets stopped there, and the city water, and the city sewer. They stopped at the end of our block, exactly where the black neighborhoods began. And my father began again in this small community, to walk to the back of the bus.

After several weeks, my parents got a call quite late at night. Some people wanted to come to talk. The little group came to our back door, not out of habit, but that was the darker doorway and the most hidden from the road. The conversation took place in low voices: "Could my father lead an interracial group and be their spokesperson before the town council? He seemed to know how to make a point just by walking to the back of the bus!" The delegation had come on behalf the black neighborhood, and "No, never mind about the dirt roads and the no sewer and the no running water and the segregated schools just for now, what they wanted was access to the town library—access to books—everything else would follow from there." They weren't sure they wanted their children

“civilized” either.

Anything one does that is courageous carries the possibility of an unpredictable cost. One can pay in fear, one can lose one’s job, or one’s life, as Martin Luther King did. When my Father’s walk to the back of the bus was combined with the quest for an integrated library, there was a cost for our family. My family only paid in fear. Threatening phone calls, vicious anonymous letters, nasty letters to the editor published in the town newspaper, Molotov cocktails thrown into the yard. And still my father continued to walk to the back of the bus, alone.

The library was won, the streets paved, the water and sewer provided to all neighborhoods, the schools integrated. My Father had helped to achieve these things through a simple gesture because he understood the guiding principle of justice. It is expressed quite simply in the Benedictine Rule as Hospitality: everyone shall be welcomed as Christ. It is expressed even more simply in ancient thought as “Welcome the Stranger.”

Because of his sense of justice, my Father worked at a number of causes during his lifetime and followed others with prayer and concern. His sense of justice awakened at the thought of anyone from whom protection was withheld or withdrawn. His sense of justice extended to the earth and all its threatened creatures. About the time I was born, the last six of the Whooping Cranes living in Louisiana died. There were only fifteen Whooping Cranes left in the entire US, and those were threatened with extinction. A marvelous program was begun to raise cranes in captivity and release them when their numbers grew sufficiently. Throughout my childhood, whenever news of the Whooping Crane appeared in the paper, my Father announced their progress. I rather suspect my Father did some of the research that led to the funding of that program.

For each injustice that threatened any part of the human or earthly community, my father walked to the back of the bus. His study of embryology led him to protest the withdrawal of protection from unborn human life every year on January 22nd until his death. He and my mother participated in Amnesty International, horrified at unjust imprisonment throughout the world, the Gulags in various nations and our own School of the Americas.

There were more injustices, and each occasion invited from my Father the same dignified response that he had given in the face of segregation. He was primarily a man of words, a man of rhetoric, but when he came face to face with the most serious of injustices, he used the rhetoric of the body. This is the rhetoric of pregnancy and of childbirth, of the Eucharist and of the Cross.

In the month before my Father’s death, a stamp was issued to celebrate the success of efforts to restore the Whooping Crane to a viable population. On the day of his death, surrounded by his family on the feast of Saint Scholastica, the birds from all the land around our house (my father had purchased the land to provide wild places for them to nest) gathered in rows on all the fence rails and sat in silence until he passed. Theirs too was a gesture, a rhetoric of the body.

You too will have a life story. I hope you will include in it welcoming the stranger, protecting the innocent. No matter the cost.