THE CHIEF

“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.”

John Quincy Adams

“You get the best effort from others not by lighting a fire beneath them, but by building a fire within.”

Bob Nelson

Somewhat slight of build if not of stature, black haired and mustachioed, as I recall he was invariably attired in a smart Harris Tweed jacket and brown slacks when not in khaki field dress. Not perhaps your average vision of what might make up a chief, but a chief he was and no man I have ever met wore the title more deservedly and with such distinction as did The Chief. I use the word “recall” with some degree of caution because it has been nearly fifty years since I last saw Dr. Henry (Hank) Woodard. Memories can dim over that time, if for no other reason than the writer may also have grown a bit dim. But The Chief he was then and The Chief he remains to all who have met and known him, including I suspect, even to his family.

It was just as the nifty fifties were about to change into the sexy, psychedelic sixties, and I was in my home town of Montreal and attending McGill University as an undergraduate. Starting out as a general engineering student, I had in my first year undergone an epiphany and was now a second year geology undergraduate. Interested readers might refer to the essay “The Beginning of The Beginning” in my book Tales From The Underbrush, to find out how that all happened. I had finally found a path of study that really interested me and I was having the time of my life. Unfortunately, that was the problem. I was having too good a time of my life!

But that’s my home town for you. Over the years, I have since touched base with many parts of the world and the cities within them, but I cannot think of a more interesting and fun city to be born and brought up in than the Montreal of that era. Part North American, part European and very French, if there was a single word that could be used to describe the city, to summarize its character or to paint a mental image of its underlying fundamental essence, that word would be “energy.” That energy was manifest in all facets of city life, starting with sports, and in particular Les Habs, the Club du Hockey Canadiens hockey team, one of the most successful professional teams in the modern history of professional sport. The Canadiens were not so much the object of major support by the city’s populace as an object of near veneration. But the high level pulse of Montreal was not just restricted to its sports teams and sports activities. A hot bed of music of all kinds, the famous jazz pianist Oscar Peterson was born, raised and honed his prodigious talents in Montreal. Theatre and other of the arts played a dominant role in city life. Montreal’s quality and breadth of cuisine was unmatched in Canada and at that time the city was the business capital of the country. Montreal’s nightlife was legendary not only for its profusion but for its avant garde and often law breaking variety.

That was the environment with which a young and obviously immature McGill University student was faced. It’s not as though I possessed a fat wallet with which to finance a “wild and crazy” life, to coin the phrase of a well-known comedian of the era. It is not as though my life was socially so involved with the opposite sex that such activities compromised my studies. In point of fact I was normally dateless, spending the majority of my so-called social life drinking beer with my buddies at the Mansfield Tavern, eating pig’s knuckles and drinking beer at the famous Rymark Tavern, eating 32 ounce porterhouse steaks at the equally famous Magnan’s Tavern in the Point St. Charles district, as well as, well, drinking
beer in a profusion of other Montreal taverns. So there was no opportunity to meet the odd young lady in the process you might ask? The short answer was no. In those days, taverns in the province of Quebec were bastions of beer only, with generally good, cheap food but exclusive only to the male population. Yes, I know, a throwback to history but quaint and comfortable nonetheless, especially for a student with a limited budget.

So it was not the social life that put pressure on maintaining my studies so much as sports. I was a swimmer both for McGill and a private club in the city. I also played water polo, football, hockey and squash. Further compounding the problem was the fact that in order to support both my attempt at academic studies as well as what passed for a social life, I was forced to take on several part-time jobs at the same time. But it was not even all those activities that were undermining my academic status as was the fact that in my immaturity I had not learned how to prioritize my life. As a consequence, I found myself heading for a very short academic career at McGill. If not immediately doomed, I certainly was sliding down the slippery slope to academic disaster, the consequences of which, other than the obvious, would have been the loss of my varsity sporting activities. Fortunately, if only by a hairsbreadth, I was just mature enough to realize where I was heading, and the fact that the problem was not going to be solved by maintaining the lifestyle in which I had become entrenched. A change was in order if I was to continue my studies at a university level. Such a change would have to be fairly dramatic and probably take place in a location not called Montreal. Most importantly I had to initiate such a change sooner than later if any academic success was to be achieved. And so........I left town!........not run out by the sheriff, but by my own immaturity.

As a consequence of this crude form of self analysis, I had decided that the most effective and potentially successful path along which to pursue the geological studies that so now interested me would be at a small college with a sound and reputable school of geology, and located in a town away from a big city. In preparation for this planned departure from Montreal, I set out to investigate an environment that would offer the desired geological curriculum as well as, in particular, an opportunity to become a part of a varsity swim team and possibly water polo team, two sports in which I was of a national calibre. I furthermore determined that a small college setting might not only best suit my goals and purposes but most importantly might provide me with an opportunity to mature as a person.

After extensive research which in those days was not as simple and available as the digital world of the internet, and after enough rejection slips to make me think I was an aspiring author or artist trying to attract some commercial interest, but also with the understanding that my marks were not particularly good, I finally had collected some acceptances from a number of small colleges in the USA.

I cannot remember why I chose Beloit College. I had some American relatives in mid-west America and had some familiarity with that part of the country, but there were a number of other choices at hand nearer Montreal in the northeastern part of the U.S. Maybe I chose Beloit because of its more remote location from Montreal, I cannot recall. In any event, in the Fall of 1960, I set out to rediscover myself in a strange place bereft of anyone I knew. Little did I know how rewarding and fulfilling this journey was to become.

The home of Beloit College is Beloit, a small industry-college town whose population in 2000 approached 36,000 people, but was I suspect smaller than that in 1960. Located along the border with Illinois, Beloit lies adjacent to its even smaller cousin town, South Beloit, on the Illinois side of the state line. Beloit College is of the so-called liberal arts variety and is said to have a present enrollment of some 1,300 undergraduate students. My memory is of a smaller such number fifty or so years ago, but that memory, along with other such details may have grown faulty with age. From a student’s perspective, one of the chief (if you’ll pardon the expression!) differences between Beloit and South Beloit were the drinking laws. While I don’t recall what was the minimum drinking age allowed in Beloit, it was generally higher than the ages of the vast majority of the College’s students. On the other hand most of the students qualified for the lower drinking age that Illinois, and therefore South Beloit allowed. It became a bit of a standing joke that the difference in the laws allowed the faculty to happily separate themselves from the
student body after classes were out. The faculty drank in Beloit and the student body did so in South Beloit. I suspect both sides might have been happy with that arrangement!

So it was that I found myself on the campus of Beloit College, a kid of twenty in a strange place in virtually a strange country, the only experience with which I had had being day trips from Montreal south to upper New York state with my parents. The object of those trips was for my parents, and in particular my mother, to stock up on as many cheaper American goods that one was allowed to bring back across the border, and a quantity that were not. The latter had in theory made my mother into a smuggler of goods, which when I think of it was a hilarious concept. A staunch, upright, weekly church attending Anglican and whose harshest blasphemy was “Darn!” or “Ye Gads!”, the incredibly cheaper price for dresses in the U.S. was just too much for a woman who was the matriarch of a family best, and perhaps even generously, described as (very) lower middle class. It still boggles my mind to think of my mother sweetly denying to the border guards that she had anything to declare, as she sat there in my uncle’s car wearing an abundance of dresses layered on her like onion skins. I’m still not convinced that the border guards were not aware of the subterfuge, although maybe they thought my mother was just a bit on the chubby side with an appropriately lumpy build. Why her strong moral sense did not trip her up with guilty behaviour or the blush that sometimes comes from some people when issuing bold-faced lies, remains a mystery to me, but she always pulled off the deception. I seem to recall that the following few weeks were notable for their Sunday church attendance at both the morning and evening services. A coincidence?

Included in the application to attend Beloit were questions regarding my outside interests, participation in sports, etc. I can only surmise that the information on this part of the application was distributed to the numerous sororities and fraternities as applicable. It was therefore with mild surprise that I remember being contacted by one fraternity before I had even arrived on campus, and who expressed interest in interviewing me with the possibility of having me join them. The concept of fraternities was not unknown to me but in Montreal at that time, campus fraternities tended to be refuges for out of town students and/or that catered in particular to a segment of society that might be described as affluent. My home in Montreal and my absence of the latter status therefore precluded any experience with campus fraternities in Montreal, excepting those occasions where a friend or a friend of a friend might invite me to a party, usually of the post varsity football game variety. Whether flattered or maybe just having figured out that joining a fraternity might provide an on-campus residence solution, my arrival on campus lead me directly to the fraternity in question before I even had a chance to locate the building housing the geological department. It turned out that my swimming background had attracted the fraternity, many of the college’s varsity swim team having the fraternity’s “brothers” on the team. I was being recruited to bolster both the team and the fraternity’s reputation in that regard. But that remains for another story.

So it was that I ultimately found myself at the entrance to the Department of Geological Sciences as geology and its sister disciplines of geochemistry and geophysics were known by in those days. Now it is all called Earth Sciences, a not unintelligent substitute but I sometimes do wonder why the bother to change. Memory is an interesting phenomenon, as is how it might be affected by age. In my case, certain long-ago details insofar as actions, events and the like are concerned have in some cases faded in their detail. Vividly remaining and undiminished in their clarity however are the memories of past emotions, and the character and behaviour of people long ago encountered along life’s journey. So it is that I cannot quite remember the physical details of meeting the Chief. I recall asking to be introduced to the head of the Chairman of the Geology Department who I knew not as The Chief, but only as Dr. Henry H. Woodard, a specialist in petrology, the study of rock chemistry, and a subject in which I had a particular interest. His welcome was as open and friendly as a stranger could ask for, his boundless enthusiasm for his profession and surroundings evident for all to see. While the invariable twinkle in Dr. Woodard’s eye was normally the precursor to a rapier wit and a ready smile, that twinkle could turn to diamond hardness should you cross him with dishonesty or irrelevant verbosity. Having said that, few people I have ever met were as approachable and welcoming in their interaction with people as was Dr. Woodard. He of course quickly became The Chief to me, as he was to all others in the Department, both students and staff alike. It did not take me long to ascertain why.
Those who may have read the chapter entitled “The Beginning Of The Beginning” earlier referred to might recall the highs and lows of learning that this writer experienced at the start of his academic journey. At McGill, I had suffered the drudgery of tedious lecture regurgitation but had, on the other hand, also experienced the wide-eyed joys of learning that a great teacher can bring forth. Unknowingly at that time, I was to meet at Beloit College, and engage with over a longer period of time, another remarkable teacher that made a lasting impression on my life; he was The Chief.

The singular feature that I have found that distinguishes a great teacher from merely a good one, is that magic ability to impart, in addition to their specialized knowledge, a host of important life lessons that can fall far outside the boundaries and particulars of the formal field of academic study being undertaken and taught. Whether it be a conscious and deliberate strategy or just an unconscious side effect, all great teachers seem imbued with that skill and are themselves of superior character. The exercise is of course two-sided. To gain knowledge, even from a great teacher, the student must adopt the posture of a dry sponge open to the waters of learning and devoid of the barriers that indifference and arrogance breed. Great teachers also sometimes have a way of answering a student’s question by guiding the latter along a path where the student provides the answer him or herself. Such was The Chief in that regard as I recall. Ask him a question and you sometimes got a question back that suggested a line of thought where you found the answer to the question yourself. Now that is both teaching and learning at its finest! Sometimes a question simply demanded a straight answer. With The Chief you got it and no one was straighter with people than was he. Most of all he made geology both interesting and fun, two major prerequisites to the magic of discovery in my view.

In any event, I learned a lot of geology under The Chief’s tutelage, but I also was imbued by him with a lot of other things that the boy-man I was needed to learn, namely diligence, resourcefulness, hard work, teamwork, honesty, and respect for both self and others in the face of adversity. These are all lessons within but also way beyond the boundaries of geology.

As a consequence of these and other factors, I was to spend two and a half of the happiest years of my life at Beloit. Geology was learned. I was recruited to both a fraternity and to the varsity swim team where I had some success, and I met interesting people and experienced other aspects of life outside academics and sports. One such person was my roommate at the fraternity, a blind student named Jay, who was a music major with perfect pitch, and one of the most amazing people I have ever met. With several programs of his own on the campus radio station, and where he did all his own engineering in managing the program, including the manipulation of several turntables used to play music records which was the technology of the day, Jay got me a position on the same radio station. There, and despite the undistinguished quality and suitability of my voice for radio presentation, I had a marvelous time for several years doing several radio shows of my own. From Jay, I learned a lot about blind people too, lessons that have lasted and have been applicable to a current friend of mine who is blind. It was fascinating to hear Jay describe in what key was a particular car horn, a factory whistle, the squeal of brakes and a host of other everyday sounds. This was a man whose hobby was assembling stereo kits, and even repairing them. He memorized the layout of the College campus and walked anywhere thereon without the aid of either a cane or seeing-eye dog. I have seen him walk down a street and stop twenty feet from a car whose back end stuck out from a driveway and partly over the sidewalk. An amazing display of sixth sense! He had a wicked sense of humour that was manifest on many occasions. One such was when he necessarily required no lights on in our room but when I suggested that I needed the lights on, his response was to complain that the light got in his eyes! There are many other campus stories that could be recounted of my time at Beloit College, but they will remain untold in this essay. Perhaps they might provide sufficient fodder for another day.

Off-campus field trips were part of the geological curriculum and in one case bore witness to an aspect of life to which I had never been exposed. This particular field trip, as usual organized and led by The Chief was particularly noteworthy, especially for this Canadian boy whose closest experiences with the USA would be those associated with the northern part of that country rather than its southern regions. On this
particular trip we journeyed in a convoy of cars southeast to and through the states of the southern Appalachian Mountains, and then south into the so-called “Deep South” states of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and the like. It was there I was shocked to see real life chain gangs of exactly the type later depicted in the 1967 movie called “Cool Hand Luke”, one of actor Paul Newman’s best films. The gangs that I observed were mainly made up of black prisoners working to maintain state highways, and overseen and supervised by large white men on horseback carrying shotguns and .30 - .30 rifles, just as later depicted in the film. For some unknown reason given the innocuous composition of the scene, a particularly lasting memory was our following a truckload of prisoners heading back to prison after a hard day’s work. Strangely, I remember them to be a seemingly happy group, laughing and waving to us like old friends. Perhaps, as a convoy of rather wide eyed white students, we represented some sort of novelty to their dreary, everyday routine.

While these field trips were rewarding both from a geological standpoint as well as being a general adventure, it was always comforting to return to the welcoming charm of the Beloit College campus, a world of its own and on which I had found a comfortable refuge that seemed to perfectly fit my life at the time. So it was that with some regret that I left Beloit College forever in 1962, relieved to be clutching a Bachelor of Science (Geology) degree in my hands and eager to face the world ahead of me, but at the same time saddened to be leaving an environment and its people that had impacted my life so significantly, and in particular The Chief.

Despite my joyful time at Beloit, I still did not graduate with any notable academic achievement. I was however a better student than my exam results might indicate. The one thing as a student I was never able to master was the ability to write a good exam. Many exams and many observations have led me to the firm belief that writing an exam is as much an art and skill as it is a test of the particular subject matter of the exam. I have many times seen people with half my knowledge of a subject do twice as well on an exam. I never learned the knack. Notwithstanding that, and in my defense, time has shown that I went on to become a pretty fair geologist and I hope some semblance of a decent human being. For both attributes I am indebted in large measure to The Chief and the lessons in geology and life he left with me.

Hail to The Chief!

Postscript

Why have I written this essay you might ask, or indeed more relevantly I might ask myself? Perhaps there comes a point in one’s life where notwithstanding how progressive, optimistic, futuristic and “modern” might be one’s existence when having attained a so-called “senior” status, reviewing one’s past can become if not more important than looking to the future, at least an exercise of redeeming value. People and events of long ago that have impacted a life, but that time, distance, and life itself have thrust to the back row of the memory bank, can suddenly make their reappearance on centre stage in an almost involuntary manner. Why can this happen? Is it a chemical phenomenon of the brain? Is this life review an act of penance?......of guilt????...........of confession? Is it a signal of full circle? For is not life itself the strangest race of all? Although different in time and place, with few exceptions we are each one of us aware of the starting line, but not the length of the race, and while we may sense or feel the finish line, when it is crossed we are not aware of it. Try betting on that one!

The penning of this tale was however, only partly undertaken from the above considerations. Equally manifest was a dream I had in 2009, nearly fifty years after I last set foot on the Beloit College campus! In the dream I was attending a large dinner banquet. When I went up to the buffet table for a second helping, there was nothing left on the table but a few scraps of chicken, and no one left in the room except The Chief and me. He was standing by the table for the same reason as me. Wearing the same brown Harris Tweed jacket and dark pants I recall from my student days, we remarked to each other that it was a good thing we were at least omnivores if not carnivores, and not vegetarians, or there would
have been nothing more to eat that night. I know! I know! I can't figure out the context of that remark either but that was what the dialogue was, verbatim.

Waking up the next day, the dream still vivid in retention, I determined to try and contact The Chief after all those years. Not ever having been particularly attracted to ongoing alumni activities and their sources of information, I nevertheless had the magic of the internet at hand to help me with the tracing process. Knowing from a perusal of the Beloit college website that The Chief was long retired as a full time professor, I also ascertained, unsurprisingly, that that status was a mere formality when it came to his ongoing activities as an active and published geologist. What’s more he still had an e-mail address at the college. Putting together a brief “you’ll never believe this even if you remember me” e-mail, I was both shocked and thrilled to promptly receive a reply stating “Ian, I am amazed!”…………….more to follow shortly, The Chief.”

In a later e-mail he reminded me, much to my embarrassment, that we had actually once met later in the 1960’s after my graduation, the encounter being at the Quito, Ecuador airport when he and his wife were on a trip and I was returning to Canada after a three year stint as a geologist in Ecuador.

But that’s The Chief for you. Always on the ball!

“A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”

Henry Brooks Adams

“The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.”

Mark Van Doren

“There is real magic in enthusiasm. It spells the difference between mediocrity and accomplishment.”

Norman Vincent Peale

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