

To my Walnut Hills class of '53 classmates:

I had originally planned to expose the following epistle to the light of day just before our 55th reunion but since Ruth and I are taking a cruise soon and like to tidy things up before doing so, I am shoving it out the door like Microsoft launching a new Windows release, ready or not. Putting a point on this uncharacteristic burst of efficiency was a recent news item concerning a cruise ship going down in the very waters we will be plying come New Year's Eve. The owners of the ship now in Davey Jones' locker tried to mitigate the concerns of future passengers by saying that the ship had not hit an iceberg but merely a "submerged piece of ice". The author of this nifty little piece of hair splitting could well be offered a job as the next Presidential spokesperson.

Come December 31, we'll be "rounding the horn" as Magellan did, except our ship will be ten times as long, five times as fast and will have about 100 times the displacement, plus, we'll be drinking champagne and noshing petit-fours.

I'm sure most WH graduates would agree that, of all the subjects they ~~shoved down our throats~~, made available to us, the one that probably did the most good was the six years of English we had to take. Whether we enjoyed it or lived in dread of those words, "This paper will be due the end of the semester and will count as one third of your grade", most of us could not have achieved whatever success we have without it. The English teacher I most remember was Miss Ross and I recall that she was really big on footnoting term papers so, in her memory, you will find this missive replete with footnotes. ¹

One of the down sides of all this English training, as you all know, is that, when trying to communicate with the syntactically challenged, you run the risk not only of being misunderstood but getting that "What'd you do, swallow a dictionary?" look. These are the people who think a well constructed sentence is "I'm like 'duh', and she goes 'excuse me?'...". Fifty percent of their vocabulary is comprised of words that would have landed us in LP's office if we had used them in the boy's locker room.

I was in a Barnes and Noble one day and noticed two women poring over the latest copy of a Jackie Collins potboiler and I thought to myself, "If these gals had graduated from Walnut Hills they'd be reading something a lot more intellectually stimulating than that." ²

¹ **This is a test! This is only a test!** If this had been an actual footnote, it would have contained some inane sarcasm only tangentially germane to the subject.

² Something like, "Quantum Physics For Idiots".

As one who watches a lot of football on TV I've learned to mentally block out the semi-literate patter of the ex players and coaches who do color commentary, but every now and then I flip out, like the time a former quarterback for the LA Rams used the phrase, "between he and I", and I started to tell myself "He's just a dumb jock, it's not like he's a Rhodes Scholar", then remembered that it was Pat Haden who, in fact, was a Rhodes Scholar. I yelled at the TV, " **'Between' is a preposition, you #!@# numbskull, it takes the #!*@# objective case**". ³

The TV networks' occasional attempts at upgrading the lexicon of their on-air talent have met with less than resounding success. I remember a couple of years ago when ABC experimented with Dennis Miller on Monday Night Football. I thought he might be a little sophisticated for the audience. Sure enough, a few minutes into his first broadcast he made some reference to Proust. I told Ruth, "The average MNF viewer thinks 'Proust' is something you say before chugging a beer." Dennis didn't last very long and, considering the flak ABC execs got, he probably isn't their favorite "remembrance of things past".

I remember Miss Ross telling us one time, "You can express any thought in the English language using quotes from Shakespeare or the Bible ". Many are the times I've done this:

- Like the time I waited patiently for a space in a mall parking lot. Just as the car pulled out another car with a better angle at the space turned the corner and zipped into it. I was reminded of Shakespeare's tragic heroine, the thirteen year old Juliet who, upon learning she had been stood up by her fourteen year old boyfriend Romeo, uttered those famous words, "Methinks I be majorly pissed."

- Another time I was talking to Ruth's boss at a party when another employee arrived with a very attractive wife. Under his breath the boss made a rather lustful comment to me about her and I admonished him with the Old Testament quote, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor, nor his wife, nor his oxen, nor his ass, nor his wife's ass".

Looking at the "red-line" Microsoft-Word gave me on the word "majorly" (it accepted "pissed"), I was moved to reflect on what Shakespeare and other writers of his era could have done if they had only been blessed with word processors.

Of course, what really got us grounded in English was the study of Latin. Without Minnie Wilson I would not have been able to state to a linguistically challenged friend, that, "homo erectus" does *not* refer to a gay guy on Levitra.

³ You have no idea how many sports bars I've been thrown out of.

I received a lot of responses to my 2003 letter and treasure them all.

Dianne Wrassman Jeynes responded that she had run into Marie Becker on an elevator one time after graduation. I think one of my worst nightmares would be to get on the elevator to the top of the Sears tower and realize, after the doors closed, that she, (Boom Boom), was on it. Talk about your high anxiety!

Jan Marx Knoop (she of the dyslexic e-mail handle) chided me on one of my comments in reference to her. Those of you familiar with her artistic proclivities might say she had a bone to pick with me. She said that Julius "Groucho" Marx was no kin. (I told you I didn't remember how forgetful I used to be). I *do* remember she was one of the most talented people in our class. One of the few people I've seen since graduation, I bumped into her at Government Square in the early sixties the day after she had appeared on local TV playing the guitar and doing a Joan Baez imitation. (Uncle Julius would have been proud.)

Remember embarrassing things you said or did that you look back on now and shake your head? I remember the week before graduation someone telling me that only one of our classmates wasn't going to college. She was going to marry a 25 year old guy who had just finished his medical internship. I said to one of our classmates, "Why would a girl of eighteen want to marry an old guy of 25?" Eighteen years later I married Ruth, seven years my junior. Go Figure.

Among the many things that have changed over the years is the way doctor's offices now do things as a result of our litigious society. In going to a new doctor for the first time I filled out more paper work than when I bought my first car. I recently went to a dentist who had a good looking and flirtatious assistant who did the x-rays.⁴ I was laying back in the chair, looking at a 24x36 picture of the dentist's kid, which was fastened to the ceiling, when the assistant plopped a 10-pound, lead-filled pad in an area most delicately described as "Where the Allegheny and Monongahela converge to form the Ohio." The following dialogue transpired:

Me: What's this for?

She: *It's to protect your genes*

Me: Don't worry, they're old.

She: *(laughing) I wasn't talking about your trousers.*

Me: Neither was I.

⁴ I'm sure you guys have found, like I have, that, at our age, when it comes to dealing with attractive young women it's a "good news/bad news" situation:

The good news: They "come on" to us because they figure it's safe.

The bad news: They're probably right.

Ruth and I are probably good examples of the old saying "opposites attract". Each of us has strengths where the other has weaknesses so we complement each other. I once told a friend lamenting the fact that we never had kids, "It's for the best. If we had kids who got only the best genes from each of us, they would be so perfect their peers would resent them, and if they got only the worst genes, we'd have to drown them at birth."



My girl. I've often described her in the words of Shakespeare: "Age cannot wither her nor custom stale her infinite variety".⁵

After 36 years, we're still the same as we always were, with a few accommodations to advancing years. For instance, 30 years ago we used to toast each other at midnight with champagne. Now, we toast each other at 7:00 a.m. with Metamucil.

I'm blessed that Ruth appreciates my wacko sense of humor, or at least doesn't hate it enough to stab me in my sleep. Before we were married I sent her a valentine that had a cutout of a vampire with a heart shaped hole in it. It said "I've given my heart to another valentine, but I'm saving the good stuff for you."

On our first anniversary we went to one of those Mexican restaurants where, if they get wind that it's a special occasion, a half-dozen staff members come out wearing sombreros and shouting "whoooooeeee", then stand around your table singing something that sounds like a cross between "La Cucaracha" and "Happy Birthday" until everyone in the place is staring at you.⁶ I gave her a card that said, "Ours is a strange and wonderful relationship. You're strange and I'm wonderful." So you see, she's inured to this stuff by now, or at least she was after five or six Margaritas.⁷ Besides, she's from the Carolinas where people are very polite, although, sometimes, the charm camouflages a bit of underlying hostility. For example, they feel that if one prefaces a statement with "bless his/her heart" anything that follows is ok, for instance, "Bless his heart, he's dumber'n a sack o' doorknobs," or "Bless her heart, if she was any more of a fathead they'd hafta do liposuction on her skull".

One evening when Ruth and I were recalling old college drinking songs, she surprised me by reeling off several verses of "Roll Me Over In The Clover, roll me over, lay me down and do it again". What made me feel old wasn't so much the fact that I couldn't remember all the words, but rather the fact that I had to think a minute to remember what "it" was.

⁵ Antony and Cleopatra, Act II, Scene II, Row 5, seats 7 & 8.

⁶ For a charge of fifty cents per person they will refrain from doing this.

⁷ I would like to emphasize here that we do not abuse alcohol. It's abused *us* a bunch o' times.

I remember when the movie "Words and Music" came out in the late forties and I got a huge crush on June Allyson. I saw her on TV a while back and she still looked pretty good. I said to Ruth "You know you're getting old when you see a girl you fell in love with at twelve doing commercials for Depends."

Fresh out of college in 1960 I went to work as a computer programmer trainee at Union Central Life in downtown Cincy. The first machine I worked on was the IBM 650. Ruth and I stopped to look at a perfectly preserved one at the Smithsonian American History Museum a while back. It was sandwiched in between the first light bulb and the first round-screen TV. We had just left the Natural History Museum in the adjacent building and had marveled at the fossil of a pterodactyl with a 20 foot wingspan hanging from the ceiling. As I gazed upon the electronic relic in front of me, remembering when it was "cutting edge", I felt like I should be hanging next to the old bird next door.

Which reminds me of the time I took my Tandy 2000 in for repairs to a Radio Shack in Miami where English is optional, courtesy is by court order only. One salesman said to the other under his breath, "Dinosaurio". Ever the optimist, I assumed he was referring to the computer and decided to replace it... with a Gateway.

Until we moved to Hillsborough County four years ago, we had lived in Dade County for almost all of the past 40 years, the last 20 or so of which, Spanish was the primary language. Having grown up in Cincinnati, where the only foreign tongue we were exposed to was Kentuckian, I wished I had studied a little harder during the two years of Espanol I took at WH. I don't remember the teacher's name.⁸ I do remember she was young and attractive and she hailed from Madrid and therefore taught "Castilian" Spanish which didn't help me much in Miami since, to speakers of "Castellano", Cuban Spanish sounds pretty much like Jed Clampett would sound to William F. Buckley.

I'm sure most of you travel a lot and are familiar with Conde Nast's airport ratings. The last ones I saw showed MIA was numero uno on the list of ten worst in the U.S. It was not last worldwide, however. That honor fell to Moscow. MIA was second. People in Dade County were understandably outraged. They said "How could we finish second to a commie pinko place like Moscow?"

Taking a guided tour of Barcelona we found ourselves at the magnificent/outrageous Sagrada Familia, Antonio Gaudi's multi-turreted cathedral, the testimonial to bad taste that gave us the term "gawdy". As we watched, two huge construction booms worked at still another turret of the edifice built entirely with donated money, labor and equipment, and the guide said proudly, "This building has been under construction, non-stop, for more than a century." I said, "We've got something like that at home. We call it Miami International Airport."

⁸ Although "Sue Casa" rings a bell.

Gaudi's a great story. Most revered artists starved to death, died in duels, were shot by mistresses' boyfriends, etc. but Tony died in 1919 when hit by a Barcelona bus! I can relate. I was almost hit by a bus as I rubbernecked at his cathedral.

I think it would probably be safe to say that all of us at Walnut Hills were raised by highly focused people with definite opinions of right and wrong, traits passed along to us with the result that we have all likely experienced being characterized as "somewhat opinionated". This was brought to mind one day as I got off the Metro-rail in downtown Miami to report for jury duty ⁹ and was approached by a college kid carrying a clip board and wearing a badge identifying himself as working for a national polling service. He asked if I was for or against some hot-button topic of the day (I don't remember what it was, but it was something that had people polarized). I explained to him that embracing only the positive aspects of one point of view while ignoring those of the opposing point of view was the folly of small minds. I went on describing the pros and cons of both sides and the fallacy of taking a black or white approach to something with so many gray areas, then, sheepishly reminding myself that he was merely an hourly employee doing what he was told, I cut off the diatribe with "You see what I mean?" He nodded, said "Yes sir", and walked off. As he did, I saw him raise his clipboard and check off, "No opinion".

We were walking along a seaside shopping area in Hawaii on a slow day and approached a kiosk with a couple of attractive young ladies shilling for a time-share developer. There was one other couple just ahead of us and one of the girls called out to them, "Where are you from?" "Lincoln Nebraska." "Oh" the huckster replied, "my grandmother used to live in Lincoln". We looked straight ahead and picked up our pace before the other one could lock onto us. We weren't as fortunate on our return and the following transpired:

Saleslady: Where ya'll from?

Me: Miami.

SL: Oh, Miami...

Me: Where the time-share scam was born.

As I continued on, I could feel a middle finger directed at my back. And, speaking of birds...

⁹ The only way I would ever venture down there is by summons.

The Saga of D. B. Flinn

Wherein we encounter death, deception, and
a new meaning for the term "birdbrain"

About ten years ago, while walking through the back yard, we came upon a cockatiel sitting on a limb just over our heads. One wing had been clipped and the other appeared broken, possibly during his escape from his previous abode. We took him in, fed him and put a laundry basket over him for a temporary cage. When Ruth found no trace of a missing bird report at three different agencies, I built him a cage and he would join us for Sunday breakfast by the waterfall in the back yard. We would occasionally let him out and he would attempt to fly, always going in circles and never for more than about ten feet. He always seemed relieved to get back in his cage.

Ruth named him Demetrius because his crest reminded her of a gladiator. He was feisty and mean-tempered. Ruth had taught him several four or five note songs including the first four notes of Beethoven's fifth, on which he always went flat on the last note, cracking us up. He would sing the songs when I approached his cage but when Ruth did the same, he would hiss at her and try to bite her.



At lunch one day, with three of her work buddies, Ruth noticed they were signing up their grade-school-aged offspring for the Burger King Kids Club, so she signed up Demetrius, giving his age as six and date of birth as January first. For a couple of years we would periodically get coloring books and other kiddie stuff for "Demetrius B. Flinn" and, every January first, a birthday card. We would sometimes put a page of a coloring book on the bottom of his cage and he would "color" it, (rarely staying between the lines.)

Then one day Demetrius went to chew on that "Big cuttlebone in the sky", and we thought no more about the Kids Club until the following January when a birthday card arrived for the late, lamented DB and it occurred to us that it might be time to end our little charade. We ruminated on the possible repercussions: What if they had a drawing and he won something? Like a scholarship to MIT? ¹⁰ We knew it was time to come clean, but how? We toyed briefly with the idea of following the old admonition "When all else fails, try the truth", but we quickly nixed that option. We were afraid if we admitted that, "We let him out of his cage in the back yard and a hawk ate him", we might be charged with child abuse.

So we asked ourselves, "What would 'Dubya' do?" We sent the card back marked "No longer at this address."

¹⁰ My son, the engineer.

In closing, I wish you all the best, or, as Senorita Casa might have put it: "Salud, amor y dinero", which, if I remember correctly, translates to: "I would love salad with dinner".

Tom

P.S.: With the exception of attempts at humor, I normally avoid hyperbole, but I really believe that our years at Walnut Hills may very well have represented not only the apogee of the "Rise and Fall of the American Empire", but the high point of civilization on Earth. I've long believed that when historians do a Dow/Jones type chart of the aforementioned ascension/declension, the pinnacle will turn out to overlay our formative years. The WWII years and those shortly after probably saw this country at its best in terms of courage and character. Our parents thought nothing of letting us hop a bus to go to a night basketball game across town and people dutifully put their nickels in the canvas bags on the poles at bus stops before taking out a copy of the Enquirer. The ensuing years have seen an accumulation of national wealth accompanied by an erosion of values. Self absorption has become the norm and civility is seen as old fashioned. On the other hand, we have been fortunate to survive long enough to witness technological advances that would have been far-fetched in the science fiction comics of our day. Every time Ruth hooks up her digital camera to the computer and a few seconds later prints out an 8x10 that looks like it was just clipped from National Geographic I marvel that equipment that wasn't available to any publishing house twenty years ago now sits on our desk, purchased on the Visa card which is automatically paid from our bank account.

The synopsis? We were born early enough to see the character and class of one era and late enough to appreciate the scientific wonder of the next. The world will never again witness such an inflection point.

I think Norma Brooks Eberle put it best when, in response to my first letter, she said succinctly, "We had the best of it all, even tho' we didn't have a clue." -TF