

## The Guy in the Tie

It has been said that the most arrogant thing a person can do is to write. As though they know anything. After that the even-more-most arrogant thing a person can do is write about themselves. As if anyone cares. But I am 7 months away from 65. It is my right to drink free coffee from Whataburger and to do stupid things. Therefore I shall record my story knowing that my heart has quit its voluntary beating once and may again at any time. In response to the overwhelming cry to know my story I shall write to satisfy the both of them. As Augustine wrote his Confessions, I shall write Tommy's Conflations.

I was born before my time, my parents needing a tax deduction at the end of 1950 – thus I was induced on December 29<sup>th</sup>, assigned ever to receive Christmas leftovers. Herbert Thomas Nelson, Jr., although I was the second born son. Bob, my older brother, received my grandfather's name because a relative named Thomas had soundly offended my parents. By the time I came, their ire had receded; I was dubbed Thomas, the 2<sup>nd</sup> son of Herbert and LaVelle Nelson.

Our stock was Miller, Logsdon, and Perry on my mother's side from Georgia, Belfast, Belton and Abilene. Daddy's side was Reid and Nelson from Corinth, Mississippi and Eola outside San Angelo. Mom and Dad met in Waco – their respective tributaries having co-joined in a chance meeting at a Piggly Wiggly cash register. Daddy outright lied and asked Momma there in 1942 to give him her hair ribbon before he went off to meet most certain death in the South Pacific which was a lie because Daddy was 4-F because of a chunk of wood in his inner ear that got stuck there by being whopped up'n side the head while out chopping. But it worked because Momma gave him a ribbon that he might not die disemboweled and alone on some island. He admitted he was six years older than she was, which was also found to be a prevarication as Daddy was ten years older, Momma discovering it 4 boys later while handling his drivers license producing it was reported a legendary donnybrook betwixt them. Thus my conception was cloaked in mendacity and deception. My birth expedited for a \$400 advantage. Misnamed at the abating of disdain. An inauspicious beginning indeed for the young wraith cast upon the hard bosom of this world.

Born in Hillcrest Hospital, the foursome (Momma, Poppa, brother Bob and me) traveled north four blocks to Wenz Avenue. One of a scad of new streets and brand new 12 thousand dollar post-war wooden pier and beam frame houses in West Waco. Readied for all the returning G.I.'s ready to bring forth the Baby Boom already in progress. Elementary schools went up about a mile, every mile in all directions. It was a veritable forest of new life all about us. It seemed like the world was black and white. I never remember in color. All my memories lack is Donna Reed and Robert Young.

Our neighborhood was built upon a WWI Army camp – Camp MacArthur – not Douglas but his father. All streets in our neighborhood connected to MacArthur

Drive. It seemed all the parents about us were in their 20's and 30's. Kids were everywhere. It was like the Munchkins in Oz. And we all grew up together. Very rarely did anyone move. They set up, dug in, and raised kids. Sammy, Mike, Arthur ( who ate his own scabs ), Cheryl, Carolyn, Ronny, Randy (twins), Ronny and Randy (brothers), Porky (aka Robert), Ruel, Jim, Fred, Donald (the thug), Ronnie (the thief), two kids – a brother and sister with deaf parents (Her name was Darlene. The boy thought I was hilarious.), all of whom could sign, the Downey brothers whose mother and father screamed continually, Don and David (the oldest among all of us), the Mahoney brothers Corky and Marvin (to be avoided), Jackie Bilbrey (who had no father – the neighborhood scandal), the Macauley brothers Bobby and Tommy, Bobby and Tommy Donallen (apparently Bobby and Tommy were popular names) and us – the Nelsons – Bobby and Tommy soon followed by Billy and Jimmy. And then there was my next door neighbor and pal, David Smith. Funny, but I never remember the adults or parents. They were the silent drones who disappeared early then rattled home. They worked so we could play. A Presbyterian church was six blocks south, a Baptist church two blocks east. The Christian church four blocks north. A Church of God one block west. Another two Baptist churches were 8 blocks north. Our Methodist church was far away – 2 miles east. A baseball/football field was 200 yards left out from the front door. Another field was 300 yards to our right. Another was two blocks behind us. Another six blocks north. Our elementary school six blocks north had 3 backstops. Each street had its own previously described scenario. Sometimes tackle football crossed neighborhoods and the tension was thick. Each neighborhood had its legends. Each elementary school its mythic tales. To get a “two below” game going in the street all you had to do was go outside and start throwing. The noise was a magnet.

It was magic.

It teemed with post-war life. Dreams were everywhere. My first grade picture looked like my sixth grade. Each grade had 3 classes. Every kid conceived from the winter of '49 through the spring of '50 in the six block square ended up in one of those classes at Lake Waco Elementary School. Few moved in those days. We grew and fought and played Dr. Pepper league, Boys Baseball, and Little League. We were Cub Scouts, Brownies, Blue Birds, and Boy Scouts all together. We swam at Lions Pool. We bought “sody waters” at 7-11 on MacArthur Drive. We followed our mothers to Scarmados and Piggly Wiggly on Herring Avenue. We watched our lives together.

Most of them preceded clear memories.

They were before memories.

It was called a “neighborhood.”

They are all *still* 10 and 12. They *still* live in my soul. The first impress of my memories. They are my blood.

This was the trunk of my tree. My blanket.

We moved my mother up here to Good Sam 4 years ago. We sold our house. We cancelled PL2-8833. It was like putting down your dog. Like pulling the plug on an old life. I took a rock from our back yard. It sits on my mantle.

## The Guy in the Tie

### Part 2: Family, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Rebar

After describing the ignominious nature of my conception, my birth unto the world and naming, as well as the commonness of my being numbered among the plethora of post-war progeny – I proceed to the nurture and contortions of my family.

We weren't as nuclear as the Walton's but close. "Like a bird who wanders from its nest is a man who wanders from his home." Proverbs 27:8. Someone must have preached that verse at sometime in the earshot of the Perry's and Nelson's, cuz they stayed close to mamma. We were on Wenz Ave. Three blocks east was great grandmother Mimi. Six more was Robert and Eula Perry my grandparents. Seven more blocks was Humphrey Hillard Neslon – "grandpaw" (the connotation forbidden to the above more cultured Perrys). Within this perimeter was Aunt Jimmy and Fat Uncle Ray Bible (my Daddy's 6 foot sister and her three hundred plus husband) as well as Aunt Netta and Uncle Falvy, then "Aint Annie" and Uncle Van (until 1960 then it was Uncle Alton, who had no teeth). Slightly north was Aunt Eunice and Uncle Dub (equally 6 feet, cigars and drunk frequently on Jack Daniels – Dub not Eunice – except for the 6 feet, that *was* Eunice), uncle Robert (alcoholic) and soon to be forsaken Aunt Juanita, replaced by Dorothy the thief who promptly died, then a third women (the swindler who cremated Uncle Robert immediately upon his death then clutched at his belongings like Gollum did the Ring). This woman's name could only be spoken if followed by a curse and an oath. Then Uncle Aubrey and Aunt Teresa - the Catholics – with 4 boys all who became priests and 3 daughters who didn't become nuns to our amazement. They were always well dressed having always come straight from Mass. Outside of Waco was Uncle Clyde, Aunt Reba, and Uncle Gorge in Abilene and Houston respectively.

Cousins? Like Rabbits! Donna Anice Paul Patricia Aubrey Philip Lawrence Mark Rosanna Regina Annette Joannie Ricky Larry Rodney Tammy Ried Rebecca Douglas Boyd Georgia-Lynn. Throw in Bob Tom Bill and Jim of "Aunt Bill" and Uncle Herbert ("Bill" being the childish ineptness of "LaVelle") and you have the gaggle.

We all knew who we were.

Our parents passed on our heritage like African tribal chanters. We knew Nettie Miller of Georgia had married John Logsdon who died on Christmas Eve of a heart attack in his bed – "he gave a deep snore and he was gone." John Logsdon and "Mimi" had Eula who met Robert Perry at a Sears & Roebuck in Abilene and married and came to Waco where they had four girls and three boys who became our parents. Grandmother Mimi and Grandmother and Granddaddy Perry were pious, hardworking, patriotic, enduring, God-fearing, Depression and 2 World Wars experienced Methodists and Baptists. They were revered by all. They never raised their voices. The kids revered them and acted around them ever after as though *still* children. These 3 Perrys were our rocks . . . our Rushmore . . . our patriarchs and plumb-lines. We were proud to have their blood in us. Granddaddy Perry was an old artist and craftsman. He was a floor finisher with huge knotty arms. He had a black paneled truck that hauled massive sanders that he would strap to his waist and rein them in and subdue them while they made wooden floors smooth as glass . . . then fill in the cracks then varnish them then polish. The smell

of turpentine today still sends me back 50 years. We touched his tools like Van Gogh's pallet and brushes. He would get tickled at my daddy's stories and laugh till he cried. Grandmother Perry smiled but never laughed. She was sober and, like her daughter that became my mother, she was restrained and always under absolute control. I loved her and feared her displeasure till the day she died when I was eleven. Hers was my first funeral. We grandkids sat like doves perched silently about her casket amidst low muttering adults and our wet eyed granddaddy. We all beheld this ominous new power – death – that could subdue this woman and make that man cry. My father had lost his mother to heart problems when he was a boy, just 15. Grandmother Perry's death was the only time I ever saw my daddy cry.

Daddy's father was named Humphrey Hildred Nelson. He lived 8 blocks from Granddaddy Perry but he was the *exact* opposite. Grandpaw could only be called "Grandpaw". He was a transplant from Corinth, Mississippi to Eola, Texas outside San Angelo. A dairy farmer who did whatever he could to stay alive – mostly catching catfish on a trotline and hunting doves and quail and squirrels. When the Depression came he and his 5 kids and ailing wife (myocarditis) piled everything in a freight car and came to Waco. They weren't just country, they were rural! The Perry's house was pristine, elegant, lovely of décor, furniture, art and fabric. Grandpaw's however smelled of Prince Albert (he rolled his own) and catfish guts. He was always in a wife-beater A-shirt with a stain. He was ruddy, red-headed, big, bony with big ears with hair on 'em with "tobakker" teeth and big gnarly hands. He was just like his 2<sup>nd</sup> son, my father Herbert. Grandpaw Humphrey lived in an old house with a screen door and fished with a cane pole on "minners" bought from the bait house next door. Then he'd rub on Off and head to the Bosque River. Me 'n Daddy 'n Bobby stayed in a shack down on the river with Grandpaw one night – my first night away from home. I had my first cup of coffee with him. Straight black. Rich. Made from coffee in a sock. Been hooked since. He taught Bobby to fish.

These were my Victorian influences. Mimi's father fought for Georgia in the Civil War. Granddaddy Perry was in the Navy in WWI. They connected me with who I was. They worked hard. Cared for their families and sacrificed. They buried their wives, and Mimi her husband. They were tough and enduring. I never heard an angry word or a curse word from them. They weren't educated, rich or famous. But they were great. They left me a standard and a long shadow. A high bar. When the 60's came in its arrogance – my grandparents mocked.

Men either live up to their ancestors or live them down.

How blessed this boy was on Wenz Avenue.

I had every chance to live like a king.

Still their shadows fall on me. Still I say, "What would Granddaddy do?" "Grandpaw must have been here." What memories they unknowingly crafted. My brothers and cousins still talk of them with reverent hushed voices, laughter, and bright eyes. They finished. I can finish. I long continually stronger each day to see them.

To be gathered to my people.

## The Guy in the Tie

### Part 3: Herbert & LaVelle (Red Skelton and Barbara Stanwyck)



Having disclosed my humble origins as well as the nobility of my ancestry, I proceed now to those 2 persons, yea fletchers (an ancient term for a maker of arrows), who notched and fitted this arrow – my parents.

My father, Herbert Nelson, dropped out of school in Eola, Texas in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade at the age of 12 in order to work full time and help support the family of seven. The Nelsons moved to Waco because a job opened on a dairy farm in Bosqueville just outside of Waco. He met my mother at a Piggly Wiggly as mentioned previously; she just 18 graduating Waco High, he being 28 – scandalous! They honeymooned in Marlin because that was as far as their gas coupons would allow in the war year of 1942.

LaVelle Perry, firstborn daughter of a floor finisher and his wife who treated their white haired, blue-eyed daughter (“Gold and lovely hair is hers” – epigram

under her senior picture in the Waco High annual, 1942) as tho she were Shirley Temple. She was all feminine. He was dairy farmer. No two more incongruent people ever married. They were a fascinating study. My brothers and I all have two dominate qualities – we all are outgoing, talkative and gab-gifted who like to laugh – Herbert. We are also all driven, unrelenting, quick to take offense and slow to forgive – remembering slights and vindictive; proud and stubborn – thank you LaVelle.

“Herb” was always the man picked to be the M.C. at any event – Cub Scouts’ Jamborees, Pinewood Derby events, Little League auctions, grade school Halloween Festivals. He loved to wear any hat at hand, off-center on his big, curly haired head. If you ever saw John Riggins for the Washington Redskins they were look-a-likes. He was 6’1” about 240 with skinny legs and a barrel chest, wavy black hair combed straight back...life of any party.

But privately there was a melancholy to him. He grew up afraid. He grew up in want and lonely when his mother was snatched by an unknown affliction when he was but 15. He saw Depression and war arise. He missed an education and any possibility to escape the life forced on him. All he had was his personality and a work ethic and a primal fear of life and hunger. He got on with the Civil Service and worked at James Connally AFB in Waco as a GS something or other. He and momma bought a maybe thousand square foot frame house in Waco that we lived in everyday of our growing years. We never moved. We sold the house only in the face of its last survivor’s immanent death.

But our mother and father discovered something in the 60's that changed everything – college scholarships. Education was the ticket up; Education took money. We had none. But we all had a talent. Herb and LaVelle made it their mission to exploit that talent and get us all to college. We all got there. We all got scholarships and degrees. I got two to make up for Bobby who quit to get rich, which he did. My parents had no friends, except a couple as old as their parents, Mr. & Mrs. Otto Braun. Except for one brief stopover from a co-worker, no one outside family ever entered our house. Only mamma had a hobby, gardening. They never had a date. They never read other than the paper. We had two vacations: to go to Galveston – cut short by Bobby's being backed over by a fellow in his Hudson, and going to Carlsbad Cavern to see the bats fly. Upon seeing we returned. Once we went to a drive-in to see *The Ten Commandments*. I can never remember eating out or in a drive through. I truly can never remember seeing them touch, kiss or say "I love you". They must've, but it, like them, was private. I found out later that the reason we diligently were sent alone to Sunday school is that in that hour, unbridled passion occurred in the vacated house. All four of us were conceived between 9:30 and 10:30 on Sunday mornings!

They had one master passion – 4 sons and their futures. Our good consumed them; our safety, our character, our success, our direction. Mother was the unchallenged Commandant. Daddy provided humor, money and upkeep whereby The Wenz Avenue Preparatory Academy could be made to continue.

In this respect there were never better parents.

I had three divinely ordained institutes in my life to shape me: athletics, Dallas Seminary and LaVelle Nelson. She was Rose Kennedy. She was the exact opposite of Herbert. She was quiet, secretive, controlled, witty but not demonstrative, genteel, meticulously clean, proud, stubborn, unflinchingly honest and moral, stoic, protective and yet unspoiling. Had she been a man, she would have been Douglas MacArthur. (The former camp whereupon our house was built, mind you was Camp MacArthur. We all felt MacArthur's spirit had been reincarnated in her. He indeed had returned.) She demanded of us and would not receive less. She bullied us to achieve what we were. She had maxims that were as immutable as the Tablets of Sinai written by the finger of LaVelle.

First...you lived with honor for the integrity of your name. Sin was worse than just sin. It was "trash" (her favorite invective). A sinful man was worse than a sinner. He was garbage. An evil woman was a "gutter snipe", far worse than a tramp. ("Gutter snipe" officially being a cigarette butt cast to the curb.) We felt no peer pressure from the sinful world any more than a doctor is drawn to pus. She instilled great pride in us.

Second...you did not steal and you never lied nor did you tolerate or fraternize with the human debris who did. (See the above.)

Thirdly...you never quit. Not starting was OK. Quitting was inexcusable. "Quit once you'll quit again and..." At this point she lifted up the specific names and families of the above #1. I quit once: seventh grade basketball. When I came home from school tho, I could not eat until I had run – first around our block (half a mile) and then incrementally 4 laps around – all weathers – then I could eat. If not, I was...see above again. I've never quit anything since.

Fourthly...you did not drink. She told us dark, morbid tales of Uncle Robert (firstborn of the Perry's) who had a great career as a printer (conscripted in the Navy to print the maps of invasions) and yet learned to drink and ruined himself. And he did. The tale was told over and over. Demon rum was unseen at 3116 Wenz Avenue.

Fifthly... the chief sin of life was unfulfilled potential. To have the chance to be somebody and fritter it away invoked the much-used invective "horsewhipped". Failure from sloth was not a Nelson possibility.

Sixthly...you put your name on whatever you did from making the bed to mowing the yard. Your name was all you had so you did your best. In sports you gave all-out effort. When I was 15 in spring training before my sophomore year, I played so poorly that a guy who had never played quarterback was playing ahead of me. It was the low point of my 15 years. Before the spring game, I sniveled out, "pray for me!" She said, "No, I won't pray for you! Why should God help you when you won't use the ability God already gave you?! You should be ashamed!" I thought, "Nasty old woman!!" I went out and scored 48 points and never sat a bench for the rest of high school.

Seventh was real simple..."Disobey and I'll light up both cheeks with a belt". Mamma was the disciplinarian. Daddy when irritated enough would get you in the bathroom where you couldn't maneuver and give you a sound flogging but mamma saw sin as a demon and she the exorcist and she would beat Hell out of you. There was nothing token in her beatings. You ran counter-clockwise as she held you with a left hand and with the right worked you. She never "beat you within an inch of your life" but you could see the end of your life at a distance!

Eighthly...family is all. We all had different talents. Bobby – trombone and business. He was the only one of the four under 6 feet. I was football and baseball. Billy was music. Jimmy was baseball and football. But all of us were encouraged, honored and rejoiced in. Any event – choir, operettas or games – we all were there and boasted of each other. We stood as brothers and family. When I would go play pick-up (ie. sand lot) baseball with older guys, Bobby would say "we got my brother". My younger brother was Billy who had petite mal "spells" and the medication would make him sometimes a little disoriented. He also had a stutter. Worst of all, he was a musician (certain death on Wenz Ave.), but still a natural athlete, but he was an easy mark to pick on. Mamma had a rule for me – "anyone hurts Billy you beat them till an adult stops you". Billy had to look out for Jimmy. One time Joe Nichols, our Scrooge-like neighbor, picked up Jimmy's baseball that went over the fence and wouldn't give it back. It lay pleading in his back yard. Daddy vaulted the fence in one stride and Joe Nichols came roaring into the yard – "Get outta' here!" said Joe. Said daddy, "I'm gunna get my boy's baseball!" Joe, a concrete man, threw a right and clipped daddy on the noggin. Daddy (and this is still recounted generation to generation around campfires and illuminated faces) he fetched him a blow upside his head and cudged Joe with an open right hand to the teeth, cheek, ear and gums sending his glasses akimbo lifting him from the earth and leaving him twitching on his hindmost parts.

Once Daddy and Bob were watching me pitch a little league game (Herb never missed). Daddy got on the umpire who then turned and told Dad he was gonna toss him off the grounds. The next day Bobby and a friend went to the convenience store where the umpire worked and the ump locked himself in the freezer till Bob left. Bob was little but tough. Getting run over by a Hudson will do that to you.

The hardest task of all time came to Nellie, Bobby's high school love, who was the initial invasion of our sanctity. She was the perfect invader. She would hit the door on Saturday morning from 1965 till '74 (when Teresa came in the second wave) – and we all, laying about like gluttoned lions on the savannah in our skivvies, our Fruit of the Looms, our high and tights – would flush like quail!

To the end we all took care of mamma and each brother who hit a low spot, each niece or nephew in need. And me, Bill, and Jim competed as to whose blood would go to Bobby when he had the disease that took his life. Jim won.

This was the woman who shaped us...daddy made us laugh...he left us a model – dogged, unflinching duty. He gloried in us doing what life kept him from. He loved baseball but never got to play. He just worked and survived. He told me one time he thought he could've written children's stories. I prayed with him to receive Christ just weeks before his death in '81. He loved to go to Flynn's Barber Shop on Herring Avenue and recount our triumphs to Homa, Bill, Billy Jean, and Earl – the white frocked barbers. But mamma shaped us like a kung-fu master who builds into your every thought and action. She rarely complimented. But her eyes glowed with approval and her smile danced in delight.

Her testimony was LaVelle-like and unglamorous. She trusted Christ when young because that was her duty. So she did it. She is the silent shadow that walks with me today.

I still hear her voice.

I still feel her eyes.

These were my parents.

## The Guy in The Tie

### Part IV: The Order of a Young Life - 3116 Wenz Ave.



3116 Wenz Ave.

Upon the explication of my origins and two preceding generations of my ancestry I move now to the foundations upon which my life was built. What gave order, meaning, boundaries, accountability and solidity to the life about to be erected.

The nation of Israel had ancestry in the Fathers and law in Moses. The cosmos made sense. Days began and ended in sacrifice at the Tabernacle. Weeks ended in an ordained Sabbath worship. Each

new moon or month had a sacrifice. The seasons had feasts. The religious birthday of the nation was at Passover. Yom Kippur was for national cleansing. Moral law was taught by Levites. Ceremony established heavenly forms and realities. The narrative of the Bible gave the meaning of history. Kings and judges were ordained to rule . . . one nation under God.

Israel was governed by divine truth just as were the sun, moon, stars, and planets. There was order. It's why dysfunctional kids are attracted to sports and the military. Why frustrated Protestants become Catholics. They want order.

I had order providentially conferred upon me. In the home, church, school, and sports. These were my foundations. My family had order. Up at seven. Breakfast, always. Fried eggs and bacon. Make your bed. Right, mind you. Comb your hair. Unblocked hair tapered in the back – short, off the ears, not like Elvis or the Beatles or any other pervert or Communist. Combed with Vaseline Petroleum Jelly. (Bill Flynn, our barber, once gave me a “long look.” I was promptly made to walk 3 miles to “Flynn’s” and re-do the “long look.”)

Dinner at 6:00 after Walter Cronkite. Monday: salmon croquettes with crumbs all over and onions (mama’s favorite fruit). Tuesday: round steak that one of us had to beat flat with a metal mallet. Wednesday: meatloaf with onions. Thursday: fried chicken. Friday: hamburgers. Still today I must have a hamburger on Friday night. Saturday: The worst frozen pizza ever. Cheese. We were allowed to watch “Flipper” during pizza. Sunday: left-overs from the previous week. Then Lawrence Welk and the The Walt Disney Wonderful World of Color as seen on our black and white with two channels, 10 and 6.

Daddy sat on one end of the table, the southern, Momma, northern most like the point of the compass. To her left was Jimmy then me. To her right Bobby then Billy. Daddy was always rebuked for eating his favorite part of round steak – the fat.

“Herbert!!” On Sundays nothing was scheduled. We usually attended Sunday School and every so often church afterwards. Coat and tie. Clip on. I would completely disrobe on the ride home save for pants.

I would get Sunday behind me because it was time for the Cowboys and the voice of Frank Glibber. Daddy would take his shirt off and lay on his back on the tile floor and go to sleep. One of us, usually Jimmy, would comb Daddy’s hair with a comb while he would moan, pontificate on life and lie. All picked up their plates and took them to the sink.

We had duties. The oldest cut the grass. The next cut the hedges – that was usually me. The next hand-trimmed around the trees. Jimmy would vacuum. Duties. Set in stone.

The two youngest slept in the double bed. Momma and Daddy slept in a queen size on the back porch. It seems odd now, but their bed . . . the TV and dinner table were in one area. Then it just seemed cozy. About 900 square feet. The one bedroom with a closed door was where Bob and I slept on single beds. Bob got married then Jimmy got the double by himself as Billy moved into my bed and I moved to Bobby’s. Bobby got Nellie. Order. Rules.

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter. The same decorations, food, and music on the “hi-fi” – our one luxury. We always had music. We had set stockings, Christmas baskets, and schedules for eating, then going to “Granddaddy’s” where the kids would do this and the adults that. Tradition.

Most adamant were rules of submission to authority. Teachers, adults (“Yes sir, no sir”), law enforcement, lifeguards, clerks in stores, coaches, principals. An infraction or disrespect brought “the gaze” of LaVelle and a “trash” lecture that was far worse than a beating. Beds, yards, tables, foods, days of the week, TV shows. ( Andy Griffith, Dick Van Dyke, Rawhide, Disney, Saturday Night at the Movies, Bonanza, Lawrence Welk) All set in stone. Monotony? No, rather rhythm. Orbits. Predictability. Safety. Security. Routine. It defined us. You did not gripe about food. You sure did not talk back. You could wrestle a brother but you could not hit. You did not curse. Only Daddy, but a limited range. Periodically he would drop the “GD” bomb and momma would give him a tongue lashing about Hell where he was sure to go.

Surprisingly though we were totally unsheltered. Mom and Dad raised us rough. Favorite word? “Get up!” We had three huge walnut trees that we scaled like marmosets. Should’ve broken a hundred bones but we were on our own. We had an alley (remember those?). It seemed magical. No man’s land. Ripe for exploring. We were given freedom to go wherever our two legs and Huffy Flyers would take us. Somehow we never feared. We had no curfews. Just “be in before supper.” Lights went out after news. Prior? “Get your homework done.” And you did. Grades were not everything as long as a “D” never showed up. It got the gaze and a trash lecture. A “lazy trash” lecture. “F’s?” No one ever made one. Rumor was there was a 5<sup>th</sup> Nelson boy who made one. Rules. But freedom, within responsibilities and expectations.

I liked leaping off of anything high and sailing to the ground. First sofas then dressers then fences then off the roof then trees. Problem was by the time I was 5 I had a double hernia. Momma said, "we've got to get you an operation or your guts will fall into your crotch." No argument here. My sailing was over though.

The greatest tradition though was Saturday morning. Cartoons came on at 7 and I was waiting. I've never needed an alarm clock. Mornings always excited me. A new day. A day of achievement at my own pace. I've always loved the quiet and newness of mornings. Because "attainment" was everything to a Nelson boy to make something of his life - not just to be a success but for the pride of attainment. Mornings were the starting gun for a new day. But, back to cartoons. Saturdays were doughnuts. Momma did her shopping on Fridays. She came back from Piggly Wiggly with a trunk load of sacks. First you looked for the cookies. Hopefully, Oreos. Dipped in milk of course. After Oreos there were Keebler's fudge cookies, then Chips Ahoy. She went to Mrs. Baird's "day old bakery" so she always got a mess o' cookies. Also cinnamon rolls in those cellophane packages and other delights known only by sight. Also, Hershey's to mix with milk. And, ah yes - Dr. Peppers. In the bottles. Soon to be chilled. We were well fed. Indulged and not overly healthy. So far no Nelson male has lived past 68! But we die "happy and full of days." But all of us boys were waiting for Saturday morning. The TV was by our parent's bed so you had to turn it down low. But we four were connoisseurs of cartoons. Bugs Bunny, Looney Tunes, and Merry Melodies. True cartoons. Made in the 40's for adults before the movie started. You had to know history and current events to understand them. Bugs, Daffy, Yosemite, Tweety, Sylvester, Porky Pig, Elmer Fudd, Foghorn Leghorn, Coyote, Road Runner. Mighty Mouse was OK- after all - all the lines were in Opera. The Ant and Anteater were a take off of Dean Martin and Joey Bishop. Top Cat was a take off on Sergeant Bilco and The Flintstones on the Honeymooners. Once they got in to super-heroes though they became moral dramas instead of the absurd and just plain slapstick funny, and these were scorned by the true cartoon lover. We watched them with chocolate milk and cinnamon rolls washed down with Dr. Pepper. Somehow after an hour or so you were trembling with energy!

My greatest fascination though was books. They were instant transport. Doors to all destinations. From Friday afternoons until Sunday nights I was free to perfect myself as a quarterback (more on that later) and to expand my mind. The universe, history and people always held a fascination for me. I never hung out "with the gang" because "the gang" always appeared fruitless and useless. I would have brief trysts with hedonism, but never long term, because, quite simply evil was a waste of time.. . dissipation' as Paul said. (Eph. 5:18) It was counter productive to a Nelson's chief end - to develop oneself into "somebody" (a noble philosophy as long as you know what "somebody" should be). I loved to read The World Books. I skimmed them all, A to Z, looking for anything of interest. And I discovered at Lake Waco Elementary on our library day the fascination of biographies. Small blue-bound books on everyone from Davy Crockett and Zachary Taylor to Molly Pitcher. I read all I could and in so doing established a standard that would float above the vanity of the coming 60's I was about to embark upon. My favorites were the Jim Thorpe Story, I read it twelve times (I counted them), and the Knute Rockne Story. I also

loved to read of the history of the players in baseball's Hall of Fame. Days of ancient yore became my delight. I was never without a book. I remember a "duck and cover" drill where I read a book on baseball greats by Tom Meany while under my desk (never understanding why). I read "The Yankee Clipper" about Joe DiMaggio.

It's funny but I have three distinct memories of three thoughts that crossed my mind there in my early days. First, that there was something in my day terribly wrong. Secondly, I felt intuitively that the error began long before in the 1600's or somewhere (otherwise called the Enlightenment.) And thirdly that the Bible was infinitely distinctive from every other book and that by knowing it would enable me to evaluate all other knowledge. I was sitting behind the piano bench in my Grandmother Perry's house when that idea went through my mind as clear as a bell. I began reading voraciously in Genesis 1. I may have made it ten verses. But the thought was there. It would be picked up again about ten years later.

This was my home. It was all the cold, lying, chaotic, dangerous world was not.

But in one day it trembled.

It was at Christmas. Christmas could be dangerous because it involved the spending of money on "the boys." Money we didn't have. I found out later that Mama would get a loan for Christmas. Daddy's retort was that all he got "was an apple and harmonica" when he was a boy. One thing Daddy was scared of was want. He never forgot it. Mama was indulged. Daddy went hungry. Granddad Perry had a job and profession. Grandpaw Nelson did not. Christmas could throw gasoline on that spark of disparity. *His* claim of her being wasteful. *Her* use of the word, "Bosqueville!"

All I remember is the sight of Daddy out of control with pent-up anger and the frustration of a wife that had become his mother. His right hand was raised up and trembling to strike. She faced him with those blue eyes that could be as cold as icicles hanging from a power line. "Just hit me! And I'll be down to that divorce court." The "D" word had come to our house.

I remember myself saying over and over "quit yelling!" I remember Bobby throwing himself between them saying "Daddy! Daddy!" It quieted. It went away. Underground. Things were quiet. I was nervous about Christmas ever after.

I went to the backyard. I climbed the fence and went to the alley. Alone in no man's land. It was where I would go after reading a biography of Daniel Boone or the like. I crawled deep into the underbrush beneath a huge 30 foot shrub. I crawled back where I could not be seen. I crawled back where the sun did not shine. Where I knew no human had ever been. I sat in silence far from anger. My world was shaken. As when Grandmother's death violated my world, something had violated my home, the home on Wenz. But I discovered something. I could pray. I could ask for miraculous things. And I discovered something else. Nothing and no one finite could be fully rested upon. Not then, not ever.

## The Guy in the Tie Part V: Red Brick



It was called “The Church That Was Built in a Day.” On January 11, 1911 (i.e. 1-11-11) a fistful of Methodists built a wood frame Methodist church on the west side of Waco as Waco stretched west from the Brazos River. And they built it from 8:00 to 8:00 in one day and had services that night for 40 people. Methodist industry indeed. Herring Avenue Methodist Church would serve the burgeoning western population of Waco. Floor finisher Robert Perry and his family of eight moved to Herring Avenue amidst the new schools and close to the new Hillcrest Hospital. The Church Built In a Day became the Perry’s church until it closed its doors in the 80’s. All the Perry’s were married there and some buried there. The

Nelsons, being grafted into the more religious Perry’s would attend there by the LaVelle decree of 1942. All four Nelson boys would there be moistened on their hairless noggins at birth, confirmed at 12, marched forward to communion at the kneeling rail in sport coats and bow ties, chewing no gum, silent.

This two-story red brick structure with a 1920s white two-story house next to it purchased for the teens would be my spiritual framework for the next (so far) 64+ years. For a denomination plunged into a fast splitting concession to theological liberalism whose preachers were so anemic that I can only remember two cogent sentences -- (“Sometimes you just want to say ‘I love ya God!’ ” and “Those who say Job is just a myth are from the devil!”) It did amazingly well. After my family, Herring Avenue Methodist formed my structure.

This was a church built by men and women most all from the 1870s onward. When it was built, some in the church could have remembered the Civil War. In those days a church was not a church until it had “boots on the ground.” Meaning a permanent structure. I have to admit that when Denton Bible started with those from WWII and others now retired, we had the same idea. Until you were permanent, paying for road cuts and fire hydrants you were just fly by night. No one took you seriously. You had not started a church until you built. You were just in process. I’m afraid I still feel that way. The church must have substance. The building burns your bridge. You are there to stay. You have permanently committed to the community. Boots on the ground.

The adults of Herring Avenue were like great statues. They were old... serene... dignified. The Greatest Generation. They were victors. The men all wore hats. The hat rack was when you came in the doors. The women all wore dresses. They were all memorable and recognizable, always there, stable, permanent. Points of reference. Standards of value. Incarnations of the faith I had only heard of. They sat in the same places. They sang the same songs. They gave me peace. The songs were

ancient and had stood the test of novelty. We had stained glass at Herring Avenue. Not painted glass, mind you, "stained." You couldn't see out but light could shine in like a prism. There were identical stained windows along the wall... all had lilies with the names on them of the ancient dead. I remember that no matter how dark and gloomy it was outside, the stained glass was like a bright Saturday morning inside. The church had a history. People of its past, preserved in stained glass, and giants who walked its halls in my day.

It's odd but most kids will talk of the preaching they heard in church as kids but I can't tell you but a sentence or two. What I remember was the echo... the solidity... the resonance. We recited the Nicene Creed - I had it memorized by high school. At the ordered time we sang the Doxology - "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" ... Then the Gloria Patri - "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost..." We did a responsive reading and I (a crack reader from early on) experienced the oral reading of scripture. We dressed for church. Mother wore high heels and a hat, often white gloves. Daddy wore a suit. Four boys - four clip on ties. We sat in silence. No one left the service for anything. No one spoke. Even at my confirmation when at the front and Donna White yakked, her father merely lay down his handkerchief. I thought it was part of confirmation - "Let us now yak."

When you sat down there was "silent meditation and confession of sin." So said the bulletin. After the pastoral prayer we all prayed "even as our Lord taught us to pray; Our Father who art in heaven!" I had this memorized also (as did all my generation!) Then the choir ended the prayer with "Hear our Prayer O Lord." We stood and sat as a well-oiled squadron in perfect timing.

The sermon was sonorous, monotone. The voice rising and falling like someone doing a preacher imitation. The Bible was not much used, much less explained. The first impassioned sermon I ever heard was when I was 22. The first exposition was when I was 23. Somehow though it fit in. It seemed when in the presence of God there should be nothing human or enjoyable in a human voice and that mortals should suffer weekly for the voice of man. Church was penance. The sermon mercifully ended in 20 minutes. Then he gave a "call to Christian discipleship." It was a Methodist altar call. I always felt real embarrassed at watching the pastor walk down from the pulpit and stand alone like before a firing squad. No one moved in all the years I attended. Then the choir sang a round of amens as the pastor walked to the back to shake your hand for showing up. But somehow I knew that this was where God met with me, with my family and world. Funny, but what I remember the most was the people. We were not taught by college kids but by businessmen, coaches, veterans, and older women. Mrs. Pawnee Martin, Wayne Gardner, Bruce Hiatt, Victor Sharpe, Mr. Anderson, Miss Hernandez ("stay out of those smoking rooms") and a woman who did not shave her legs accompanied by a daughter of the same persuasion. Some things you don't forget.

They were solid... staunch... sturdy. They had dignity. The world outside was slowly beginning to dissolve. I watched it in sound bites from Walter Kronkite and caught glimpses in magazines. But inside Herring Avenue United Methodist church there was order and authority. God, pastor, men in hats, ladies with decorum,

Sunday School teachers, parents, and kids... i.e. the four Nelsons. Funny but all these things that the 60s chided the adults about (60s kids being so brilliant) were the very things that made my life steady. Herring Avenue was an island in a world slowly going mad. It was a people frozen in their time, unimpressed by new untested voices. They were the living among the walking dead. And I was vaccinated. As much as I explored the 60s I never bought into it because I had grown up in one world and was thrust into another. I wasn't fooled.

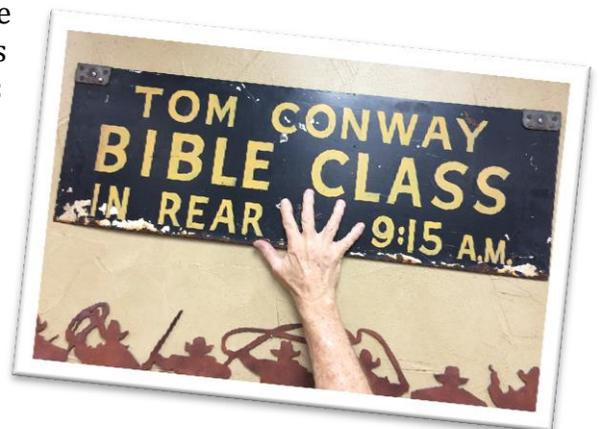
The most revered of all the Herring Avenue men was Tom Conway, a lawyer who was part of the builders on January 11, 1911. His wife was named Juell. They taught the couples class, the most popular study in the church. He had a sign under the main church sign that said "Tom Conway Bible class in rear." All revered him. He and his wife sat in front of us and just to the left. Mr. Conway had a lung problem of some sort and a bad wracking cough. I watched him continually. He fascinated me. He dressed his best. He cared for his aging wife. He sang from the depths of his heart. He read the responsive readings and recited the creeds with his soul. All with that wracking cough. He never knew I was there, watching his every silent move.

"Tom Conway is a fine man," said momma. The only adulation I ever heard her give to non-family.

In 2010 I was eating at Saltgrass in Lewisville and my attention was caught by a sign on the wall. "Bible class in rear." I thought that's really good that Saltgrass advertises their bible study that meets here. Then I read closer. "Tom Conway Bible class in rear."

It's a rare moment when I am struck dumb.  
This was one.

Saltgrass like many restaurants decorates with retro paraphernalia from various sources. When Herring Avenue sold its building to another church group in the late 80s the Herring Avenue material was scrapped. Some buyer for Saltgrass bought and used it on the Lewisville restaurant décor. After 45 years my eyes were reunited with a childhood icon. I asked the manager if I could buy it. He said he wasn't sure. I told this story in church and a passel of loyal folks went down there for Sunday lunch. They made him an offer he couldn't refuse. (I don't want to know!) I was presented with the sign at the evening service. It's on my wall in my study at the church. It's my greatest treasure. Often before I go out to preach, I touch it, and connect once again to who I am. To something handed down from the church built in a day. I'm part of something bigger than me. I carry on a tradition of the Word of God. Tom Conway was a fine man.



## The Guy in the Tie Part VI: Elementary Ideas

We did not have gangs in Waco but we had schools. It began at age six as Waco moved west from downtown – suburbia – the grade schools, junior high and high schools began to pop up like mushrooms. It seemed like people stayed put in those days, so most of the people in first grade with me were in high school with me. The 2<sup>nd</sup> grade girl I kissed at eight, I kissed



later at 18 as the Homecoming Queen. (More on that momentarily) Mountainview, Cedar Ridge, North Waco, Gurley, Lake Waco, Dean Highland – all elementary schools who made it their task to raise the Baby Boomers. Lake Waco was one mile north from my house. We all walked. Like a sci-fi movie, the children all exited around 7:45 and began moving like the walking dead to Lake Waco; all with lunch boxes. Remember? Mine was Roy Rogers. I shot it with my bow and arrow so it was not to be confused with another Roy Rogers.

I remember at age six our first meeting with our principal. His name was Dr. Nolan Estes who later presided over the Dallas Independent School district. We called him “Clark Kent” because he was a dead ringer to Superman’s bespectacled alter ego. I can still see him. Superman was our principal. We walked in dread before the X-ray vision of the Man of Steel.

All grades were divided into three classes. The rumor had it, and it certainly appeared true to the unbiased and naked eye, that the classes were divided into the gifted, the average and the criminal. It seemed like I began gifted and in time ended up average though never descending into the criminal.

Six teachers I had. They had no idea of their impact. “Elements” are the basic building blocks of what is real; what is true. “Elemental” is thus the basic framework of all that follows. “Elementary” school and Elementary teachers may be, after parents, the most important people in the world because they shape the grid, the window by which life is interpreted for the rest of a person’s life. Numbers, colors, objects, types of persons (tall, short, wide, big, relationships. If a person becomes a Cambridge scholar he will operate with the alphabet, words and numbers – “the elements” – that he learned at six. Elementary teachers confer the tools of mental building. Parents the morality. The church confers morality’s context. My teachers, five ladies and one war veteran, ranked with parents, church, coaches and seminary profs in building the constructs of my life. They

were the most vital of missionaries. But they more than taught – they shaped and nurtured and protected a young boy.

Miss Abate, a Lebanese woman, dark and Sophia Loren-like beautiful, was my first grade teacher. I broke the inside lining of my thermos full of milk by dropping it and poured out its now murky contents into the trash can. A metal trash can and it rattled and all eyes turned and I felt myself burn with self-consciousness. Miss Abate said quietly, “We don’t pour milk into trash cans but in the sink.” Never poured milk in a trash can since.

Miss Irvin was my second grade teacher. She had begun teaching when Texas was under Spanish rule. She had taught my brother. She was a single lady devoted to children. She had four teeth that set at a 45 degree pitch right in front of her mouth. It was in her class I had my first stirrings of primordial passion in my romantic intentions toward Tisa Concilio. She was a ballerina even at seven years old. A dancer who took lessons. The year after Miss Irvin, Tisa went to Houston to train with a professional dance teacher name Miss Swayze. She had a son named Patrick who danced with Tisa. People said he did quite well.

Back to my awakenings of passion. I had never kissed girl and decided I had to kiss Tisa or perish in my own consumptive consumptiveness. How to do so? I knew how –  
I would lie!

I knew Chris Kattner had a crush on Tisa as did any mortal man. She was a 3’ 5” Helen of Troy. I approached her mounted on my bicycle for a quick departure. Told her I had a message from Chris, stole my kiss, lost consciousness in pure ecstasy then fled like a bandit to forever ruminate on the blessedness of the memory, taking an oath of eternal celibacy.

Problem was the next day. When you’re young and consumed with youthful ardor you never really think ahead. The next day doesn’t cross your mind. Miss Irvin said, “Come with me.” We went outside. The conversation being of my romantic exploit, but I truly cannot remember what was said. My soul and mind crawled back into a dark spot of my psyche. I may have assumed a more assertive alter-personality – I believe I became Lance or Randolph and spoke with another voice. Anyway it’s a blur and I escaped – branded forever.

Ten years later Tisa was nominated for Homecoming Queen and it came down to her and a girl name Helen who looked like a super model. The word got out that a ten year anniversary of “The Kiss” was at hand. I was The Captain. Tisa was the Queen hands down. It was a Hallmark movie. I kissed her again in front of 5000 people.

The third grade was Miss Miller, who by spring semester became Mrs. Thompson. There was a fellow who was dirt poor in our class named Everett Emory and he was real slow and wasn’t sure how to do “school.” We had a test and Everett sat beside me. I remember he always wore the same faded red plaid flannel shirt. So what I did was help Everett out by giving him the answers. He was real appreciative. Miss Miller, however, pulled beside me and said, “Actually this is a test and you’re not supposed to give others the answers.” Says I,

“Really?” Says she, “Uh-huh.” Says I, “Sorry Everett.” A lesser lady could’ve done a lot of damage but she didn’t. I’ve always, though, been on the lookout for Everett Emory.

By the time I was in the fourth grade John Kennedy had come to power. He figured out we were all fat so he started the President’s Council for Physical Fitness and had us all running. Lake Waco began having “track and field” meets. We all had to line up and run the 25 yard dash. It was here I made the greatest discovery since Tisa Concilio. I was fast. The years of avoiding LaVelle’s beltings had given me quick feet and for 25 yards I was like a Quarter Horse. After 25 yards my whiteness kicked in and I’d get passed. They timed me at 3.9. I broke the four second barrier as a 10 year old! But most of all everyone saw me win. I felt the exhilaration of bursting ahead and being first. It was exhilarating and my teacher, Mrs. Loyd MacMahon, who went to school at a place called Howard Payne, gave me a pat on the back and said I was fast. She was tall and dark – sun tanned, outdoors dark and a tomboy because she would run with us and play kickball with us. Her husband had played basketball at HPU and was ten feet tall (seemed like). She had us play “bean bag football” and brought out a real football for us to throw and kick and I showed myself to be downright PRODIGIOUS. She said with her bright flashing smile and gleaming eyes behind her horn-rimmed glasses, “Tommy, you are a natural athlete.” She taught us to play Red Rover where you had to break the chain. Again I excelled because of the might of my mightiness. She entered me in the track meet on the open field behind Lake Waco. I won first in the 25 yard dash and this was among a bunch of elementaries. I was in heaven because of this woman. She believed in me and made me feel special. I would have run through a wall for Mrs. Loyd MacMahon from Howard Payne University. I lived for her praise and her smile.

Fifth grade was my hardest year. All I ever had to say was, “I went through nine months of Miss Hall.” 5’11”, 205, black horned rims, unsmiling, yea, never smiling, bitter at not being a Mrs., dark, black haired, scowling, a former guard at Dachau (the later point actually was rumor). I remember her holding Linda Chapman up to open ridicule for flirting with the boys and Linda challenged her (“I do not!”) and Miss Hall threw the discussion open to the floor for her affirmation. We all instinctively rallied to Linda in our silence – even though she was a flirt – but we all knew “that ain’t right.”

We didn’t have a track meet that year with other schools but we had an inter-class meet. All the 5<sup>th</sup> grade competed with themselves. We had a new race – the 100 yard dash! An Olympic event. I was a legend. I had never been beaten by a Lake Wacoan. I eyed the event with calculation, surveying the host of competitors longing for my crown. David Tenberg? Nah! Carl Chandler? Nah! Brown Smith? No way! Kenneth Teichelman? Get serious! It was mine; in the bag.

The gun went up. Kids were solid along the asphalt service road for 100 yards. Especially Karen Reagan – every 11 year old boy’s fantasy – who was in my class – cheering for MOI!

Bam! My first gear was legendary. I broke like Seabiscuit. A veritable blur, legs like a high gear egg beater. No one was even in my side view – 2nd gear and I accelerated. At 30 yards my wrangler blue jeans all the following crowd could see. But at 50 yards something

happened. I discovered I had no 3<sup>rd</sup> gear. My short legs had wound out at 50 yards. I had exceeded my limit, victim of native anatomy. Rick Morin ... a no name ... an unknown ... a dark horse. But with long legs and a long stride, he passed me effortlessly as Karen Reagan screamed on my left, "G o o o o T o o o o m m m y y y !!!" I like Lancelot dug deep for my Guinevere but to no avail. It simply was not there. My crown was wrenched from me, victimized by the late bloomer. I was over the hill at age 11! Second place for the first time. I went home and listened to my brother's Johnny Horton album, wallowing in melancholy. Fifth grade and I would never be 1<sup>st</sup> place again. A 10 year old Phenom victimized by puberty.

Sixth grade was my senior year of primary. Glory before the slime of being a 7<sup>th</sup> grader in junior high until I could mature to 9<sup>th</sup> grade where I could then go to high school as a sophomore and be slime once again.

But sixth grade was a turning point in my life because of a man. His name was Wade Herring from Macgregor, Texas, who flew bombing missions in WWII. He was big, dark, and hairy with thick forearms. He was all man. He made us compete in *spelling*. You had to write the spelling words, not just correct, but you could make no mistakes that had to be erased. It was more than correct – it was a "perfect paper." You got an extra point. I was pumped up for spelling. I *had* to impress this combat pilot. We also played "Arithmetic Baseball." We divided into two teams. You would compete against your comrades and Mr. Herring who would race with us. The one at the board who won would send a runner to first. Lose three times and the inning changed. Four wins and you moved in a runner. There was something about a male teacher. A big physical hairy male teacher – *no one* wanted to disappoint him. We also on that year had The Waco Relays. Each grade school entered an eight-man quarter mile relay team. It meant you had to pass the baton eight times – every 55 yards. I can *still* tell you the team which was from all three 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes ... eight boys. All other schools, about eight elementary schools, were competing with kids I had competed with in Little League since I was eight. The meet was at Paul Tyson field – the high school stadium – on a gen-u-ine cinder track with a crowd of screaming kids (Karen Reagan again!). We had practiced on the recess field of Lake Waco relentlessly for weeks. Mr. Herring was the coach. Over and over we worked on the baton passing. I ran the 8<sup>th</sup> and anchor leg. I could imagine nothing worse than being ahead when I got the baton and then losing it for dear old Alma Mater. Lake Waco and Mr. Herring had lost the year before because a villain named Paul Thompson dropped the baton. The 12 year olds running against me – seven of them – all looked like puberty was setting in. The gun went off! Carl Chandler to Mike Dick to Fred Campbell (we were ahead) to Rick Morin. Yes, the one who snatched my crown one year earlier to Ken Teichelman to Timmy Moore to David Tenberg to MOI! I got the baton with a 15 foot lead at least. My blood was pure adrenaline. I ran like a scalded dog knowing that the pubescent with their body hair and secondary sexual characteristics were baying at my heels like dogs. Believe it or not I heard the voice of Karen Reagan in the stands – déjà vu like – screaming, and I saw Mr. Herring holding the string at the finish line yelling "Ruuuunnnn !!!" We won! I don't know how far ahead I was cuz I was running from a fire and certain eternal ignominy.

Mr. Herring also did something else for me. He would referee our touch football games and saw that I had a really good arm. My right arm was the beast of burden that I rode to college. Mr. Herring said, "You know, you could get a college scholarship." Somehow that was key to my future. And he believed in me. I went into secondary education with a hope – a hope that Mr. Herring placed in me.

And he did something else – he modeled the love of his wife. He had a little bitty wife named Alice and he treated her like a queen. He spoke of her and to her in a way that was truly kind and gentle and he was treated with great respect by her.

And he did something else hitherto unseen. He read aloud to the whole class. "Penrod and Sam: by Booth Talkington. Funny funny funny. And "Savage Sam" by Fred Gipson. Thrilling thrilling. I had never seen a man do anything cerebral or literary. Mr. Herring held us in his spell. When he got to the shoot out scene between the posse and the Apaches his voice took on an edge. And, when the Texas Ranger Burn Sanderson yelled at young Travis, "That's layin' em in the groove!", Brian Rogers in our class literally bounced up and down in his chair in pure excitement.

I never forgot the power of a well read story.

This was my structure and "elementals." These were the people that put it in my life ... that formed my grid. They no doubt have forgotten me. I haven't forgotten them.

I marvel continually at God's providential and common grace to Herbert and LaVelle's second son. My junior high and high school years tend to run together but each year of elementary was an epoch in my life.

My concrete was set up. The frame was raised.

## The Guy in the Tie VII: Tough Streets

“Son I grew up on tough street.  
End of the street. Last house on the left.”  
Joy Brown when asked how she was doing.

I was nine that spring and playing for the Optimists, my Boys Baseball team that finished second to the hated Cosden Oil, a team obviously stacked with coaches sons from the rich kids’ side of town.

At this point grant me a digression as I establish the historical context of the narrative . . . once my rabbit has been chased I shall return to our hero.



Boys Baseball was played in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade after ones entrance into organized baseball in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade called Dr. Pepper league that you played in blue jeans and flannel jerseys on a field without a fence and red wrap-around batting “helmets” covering the ears that made you look like a college wrestler at best. At worst you looked like a Mousketeer. But Boys Baseball was the real deal played in complete cotton uniforms on the legendary Waco Little League complex of four fields at Lions

Park, the Valhalla of organized baseball, with gen-u-ine simulated baseball shoes with spikes made of rubber so’s we would not rip each others flesh with our flashing steel. But mostly, Boys Baseball and Little League (4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grades) that followed were umpired by paid “men in black” who were not volunteer fathers but highly skilled professionals who made 20 bucks a game. Parents and passer-bys came and went as Lions Park was in the heart of expanding Waco. The three little league fields were all together like a three-ring circus so kids from all schools and ages would roam between them drinking concession stand DP (official Waco drink), eating giant pickles and watching classmates. The games would be replayed in elementary the following days and more important – the Waco paper reported the games! A writer named Hollis Biddle did the write-ups. My point is that it was for no reason that Waco was selected as the state headquarters for Little League.

Little League was divided into Northern, Western (my league), Midwestern, Northwestern, and Southern Leagues. Each had its own elementary schools that fed into it. We all kept up on leaders in home runs, batting average, won/lost records

and strike outs (for pitchers). The column in the paper was the first thing you looked for on the Monday mornings it came out. When the paper hit the porch I was out the door. Where did I stand!? Six weeks. Twelve games. Then “all stars!” Each league would pick 15 kids and two alternates. Then inter-Waco war began. In 1955 a Western League all-star team went to the regional finals to decide who would go to Williamsport for the Little League World Series. They lost in the final game to Monterrey, Mexico on a legendary bad call on William Kirkland – a play at home that is still recounted in Waco through gnashing teeth. Those 12 year olds that year were recounted like martyrs, saints and holy men.

You “tried out” for one of the six Little League teams in your area. Each team had 15 players; five tens, five elevens and five twelve year olds. Which meant only 30 kids from one’s age group were chosen by the six coaches to be able to compete. If you didn’t “make it” you had to go down to the Minor League teams. A step down. They played on lesser kept fields a mile from the complex. Fields without fences. And not for Steakley Chevrolet or Duncan Buick or Rountree Olds or Gibsons or Williams Drug but rather for muffler shops or bail bondsmen. “The minors” was a fate worse than death.

This was Little League, played with Wacoans surrounding the fields standing at the fences, smoking Camel no filters (and these were the women) and speculating on whether a kid had the talent to “go on.” My father was one of those “rail birds.” He loved it. All four of the Nelsons played.

I now return to the narrative of  
the career of the nine year old . . .

As the pitcher on opening day of the 1959 season I looked down the long 46 feet (Little League distance from the mound to home plate) between myself and my diminutive catcher Mike Bradsby. My initiation into big time Waco competitive sports was about to begin.

I now digress to another digression subsequent  
to my previous digression to which I had previously returned.

I had an arm (hose, gun, cannon, wing, rifle). Those who played sandlot continually on Wenz St. and its environs all could hum because we had learned *HOW* to throw. As the right arm swings backward or reaches backward the knuckles stay upward and the ball is held downward. To “roll” the ball upward makes you throw the ball like a dart or (God forbid) like a girl, sissy-like . . . , “putting” the ball like an eight pound shot put. But when the hand stays on top of the ball, the arm becomes catapult-like when it comes over the top. Boys on Wenz threw like grown men in boys bodies.

Thank you. Digression completed.

As I got ready to deliver my first pitch in the big time, my signature wind-up showed itself, a-la Juan Marichal of the San Francisco Giants – left leg skyward, reared back like a long bow ready and bent to release. The ball flew home with a wicked hiss and cracked the catcher’s mitt like a .22 report. Rail birds swore. Women fainted. The opposing bench came to their feet as one. Tisa Concilio kicked herself. An arm had been unveiled the likes of which Boys Baseball had not previously seen. The truth is, I felt all eyes. For just a moment there on field #1 at Lions Park, I was *somebody*. And I discovered something else: Baseball was the great leveler. The guy from Wenz could play against the rich kids all things equal for six innings.

I had found my life ... my purpose ... my reason for living. Sport had become my existential purpose, my philosophy. I was nine but I knew what would be my focus for the next 13 years of my life. Baseball was natural to me. Every team I was on – the Optimists, Rountree Rockets (10-12), Westview Village (13-15), Waco Richfield and Holts Sporting Goods (16-18), all won. Six titles and one State Championship. Twice we went from last to champs in one year. As a matter of fact I was offered a professional contract in high school from the Cincinnati Reds but I turned it down on the spot because it would not lead directly to college. LaVelle had drilled it into us that any true success had to go via college. Football offered that. But baseball gave me my first taste of, well, whatever success and popularity gives you. Here was something that could outlive me. “There goes Tommy Nelson; the best that ever was.” Sports could outlive me.

But it was four years later that a major shift came. I was 13 and all the elementary schools in my part of town emptied into the tributary of Lake Air Junior High. Guys I played against in baseball now became my classmates. My base of acclaim had widened considerably. There was no junior high baseball but there was football! Of course, in Texas, football is darn nigh cultic so junior high school groomed you for high school. We had no youth football in those days. You learned it playing “tackle” on the sandlots and “touch” in the streets. I was always the quarterback. Because God, I believe, providentially put a man in my life to insure it. He was our next door neighbor whose name was Ralph Smith. He worked for a new place in town called Word Records, a Christian music and publishing company. He belonged to an exotic group called Baptists and they went to Highland Baptist about six blocks away. They went every Sunday morning, and on Sunday nights to what they call Training Union. Ralph and his wife Pat never cussed or did any evil and they used to give our family these Bible stories on record albums. I listened to them in fascination and learned them all. Ralph was a little wiry athletic guy who would actually run and throw the football with his son David. When they would throw in the street I would burst out of the house to get in on it because Ralph would boast about me to all in earshot and continually encourage me. He gave me my first nickname – “Stormy Tormy.” I’m sure this old saint prayed for the Nelsons next door. And through him I found that I could throw a football just like a baseball. Plus I had a real touch. I could fire it or float it. So in every sandlot game hence, I was the QB. Thank you Ralph.

That being said, on our first day of football in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Lake Air Junior High, when Coach Barton Rhea said “get in two lines” and called for all to go down ten yards and cut inside, and then made the call, “who thinks they can pass?” – my heart got right in my throat. Every mate of mine from Lake Waco, Wenz Avenue, and Western Little League looked in my direction. I waited while other pretenders to the position flung ducks at the receivers, drawing scorn and the retort of Coach Rhea – “someone else.” The cry continued to mount from my homies in stage whispers, “Tommy, get in there.” Coach Rhea looked in the direction of the whispers and said, “Go ahead.” And with that I made the decision that began the next nine years of my life and shaped me until today and until the grave. The decision that with parents, church and school formed my habits of adulthood – the pursuit of football . . . down the tough streets.

“Ready, hut!”

I dropped back five steps like I had done a thousand times in my backyard imitating Bobby Ply, Don Trull and Ronnie Stanley (Baylor QB legends) . . . a thousand times sending Billy down and around the pecan tree in the backyard, then hitting him on the break.

The 13-year-old receiver made his break and I fired a strike right through his hands, off his sternum, that landed five yards away. The endorphin explosion was more so than my mound debut at nine. All the team marveled. Coach Rhea walked over and said something to Coach Steve Springer.

Receiver after receiver ran his route and I zipped strike after strike. The coach then had the best athlete on the team, Carl Chandler, run a “go” pattern. I laid it up like a butterfly, right in stride. I had found my ticket to why I existed. Football.

Football was essentially different than baseball. Baseball was our national pastime. Football was war. Football was an African youth killing a lion as a rite of manhood. Football was my rite of passage as a male. From that moment my life, like the tide, moved from September till Thanksgiving, to the off-season of training, to Spring training’s competing for the next year’s starting role, to summer’s preparation for September, then to two-a-days in mid-August. School, church, family, social life, breathing, all took a distant second to my total focus on football and the skill of passing. It was a joyful experience.

The Lake Air Leopards were 4 – 2 in my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year. Four and two in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year. Third place finishes. By my 9<sup>th</sup> grade year we were five and one beating all the Waco teams for the city championship, upsetting University and Tennyson whom we had never beaten, losing only to Temple Lamar. It was heaven—champs! Best in the city!

There was something euphoric about dreaming of something wonderful and focusing all effort, planning and discipline toward that dream – of being *The* leader and exhorting all my mates to supreme effort and *doing* it.

In high school the river grew larger as the tributaries of Lake Air, Tennyson and some transfers from North Junior High all fed into the river of Richfield High School; The Richfield Rams.

I won the job as starter on the sophomore B-team. In the first four games we were 4 – 0 and I had thrown eight touchdowns. But the varsity QB, Bobby MacDowell, broke his collarbone and I got called up to the varsity to play back up if the 2<sup>nd</sup> team QB got hurt. I stayed there the rest of the year, never playing in a game but practicing with the big boys.

I started all three years of high school as the varsity shortstop. I was honorable mention, then second team all district, then first team all district. We won the district two years and tied for it with Temple my senior year. Starting every game for three years was a tremendous thrill. But my heart was football. Baseball was just fun and keen competition. I also played for the best coach of my life – my baseball coach Ed Knipper.

My junior year in football I broke my wrist in my first start against Sherman and missed the year. I trained the off-season with a vengeance because, as I understood, any scholarship was riding on my senior year. I felt I had been robbed twice.

Before the year started our coach for nine years at Richfield retired, and a legend became our head. John Vasek of the catholic power Waco Reicher came to Richfield as head. He had already won a state title. We called him “Papa V” and I became like his son. Before the year he said, “You’re my boy.” He drew the best out of me. He was hard. We were unbeaten going into our seventh game with undefeated Temple and Paul Tyson Stadium in Waco was packed. That night I ran into a paradigm shift. His name was Brad Dusek of Temple. Three years later he was on the cover of Texas football. He started three years for Temple and won the district three times. He was All-State and chose A & M out of a million scholarship offers. His father was the head coach of Temple. He started in basketball, as a catcher in baseball, and won the quarter and high jump in track. The best natural athlete I’ve ever seen to this day. He was 6’2”, 195, and could fly. I could not compete with him. He was literally out of my league and everyone else’s. He QB’d at Temple, played fullback at A & M and linebacker for the Washington Redskins. He beat the bajabbers out of us; 44 – 14. I scored in the last minute on a quarterback keeper and Dusek speared me in the ribs when I crossed the goal line. The ball went one way, my shoes another, two fillings another, my lungs still another. I got up to see if I was naked.

I faced a hard fact. There was another level to this game. There was just a chance that no matter how I worked, lifted weights, practiced and drilled, I just *possibly* might NOT have the tools to go on. I stuffed this unfathomable idea deep down and

went on. I got my scholarship from a place known for jazz, basketball and partying named North Texas State in a place named Denton.

But those years from the Dr. Pepper League through high school and into college football – 13 years as an athlete – shaped me and were the most providential of years. It sounds haughty but I must say it: that I had a distinct edge over most of my peers. It has been said that in the absence of the American father throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century that unless a boy has been an athlete, a soldier, or a farmer, he has not learned the tools of life. Interesting that in 2 Timothy 2:4-6 Paul mentions the same three as standards.

- I learned to envision a dream, then plan, then initiate, then to discipline myself – to sacrifice day by day and persevere through pain, injury, and adversity to pursue excellence.
- I learned to say no to my body, to fear and discouragement.  
– To buffet my body and make it my slave.
- I learned to honor the rules ... the code of conduct.
- I learned to be a team man responsible to all for my faithfulness.
- I learned to perform to my very best and to maintain poise no matter the score.
- I learned to get up when continually driven down and broken hearted.
- I learned how to do disciplined acts with no immediate recompense.
- I learned to submit unquestioning to a coach, my authority.
- I learned to make a total commitment to excellence.
- I learned how to lose and fail on the path but to continue to get up and finish the race. It's called perseverance.

Years later I would face the long race of marriage, fatherhood and being part of a church plant – the hardest thing I've ever done. I would face pain, disappointment, loss and failure but always had to get up, listen to The Coach and press on. I did because I learned as a youth to finish and never quit until the clock ran out.

I'll tell you something pretty arrogant but I'll just be honest. Whenever I go to speak anywhere – fraternities, churches, The Pentagon, to a seminary, to the House of Representatives, to whomever – and when they ask as to how I want to be introduced, I say . . .

- I've pastored since '77 at one church.
- and helped to start the church with Mel Sumrall.
- I've been married since '74 to one woman . . . and we love each other.
- I've raised two sons who are in Law Enforcement.
- I graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary and,
- received a Bachelor's from UNT.



**JOINS EAGLES** — Richfield High School quarterback Tommy Nelson has signed a football letter of intent to attend North Texas State next fall on a football scholarship. Nelson is 6-1, 180 and was the quarterback on coach John Vasek's first Richfield team this year that posted a 5-3-2 record. Nelson is also a three-year letter winner in baseball at Richfield.

But I also say “tell them I played four years as a scholarship athlete in Division I college football.” Less than 300 boys in Texas every year get scholarships to Division I college football. Far less than 300 finish and graduate. I did. After I speak – no matter where – some fellow will come up, take my hand, hold onto it, look me in the eye, smile and say “I played, too.” We share a moment. We did something few do.

We were athletes. We grew up hard.

I was 18 and I was about to walk into a threshing machine.

## The Guy in the Tie Part VIII - The Boy Crashes

I wasn't supposed to be in Denton. I was supposed to be in College Station. My high school coach loved A & M. I was recruited at A & M. Coach Lloyd Taylor of A & M loved me. I was awed at A & M. But my high school coach knowing that my hero in 1969 was Joe Namath – like every other 18 year old QB – gave me a pair of white Puma football cleats after the first game. But Coach Gene Stallings of A & M didn't like Namath or his shoes so I got nixed. I also would have had to compete against the best recruiting class of quarterbacks in the Southwest Conference. They would have run me off in about an hour.

At Richfield we had a junior running back who went to Baylor on scholarship and a fullback who came to North Texas running behind a tackle who played at Houston and tight end who went to Stephen F. Point being we ran the ball – I-formation, flip-flopped offensive line, lead back, I-back, option right and option left – and when on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 9, I would throw to one of three slow white receivers. Any passing talents would be seen only sporadically. All that to say, nobody recruited me but A & M and North Texas and A & M dropped me over my shoe selection. But NTSU gave me a full ride. They also threw the ball 40 times a game. I got my scholarship. I was a potential talent.

But like most 18 year olds I had never been away from home. My parents drove me north in mid-August for two-a-day workouts far from Herring Avenue, from Lake Waco Elementary and Wenz Street. Far from my foundations. Denton looked like the end of the world.

I had no car so my parents dropped me off at Clark Hall where the team ate. The next day would begin two-a-days. I got out of the car and standing on the steps was one of the top five defensive players in the history of North Texas. Cedric Hardman was 6'3", 260 pounds and ran a 4.5 forty which was wide receiver speed. He was the largest human my 18 year old eyes had ever seen. He was the first black man I had seen that could be called "teammate," integration having never caught up to Waco Richfield. I had played with boys. This was a man, also a black belt. He wore a tan zip-up jump suit, unzipped halfway down because his pecs wouldn't fit. His nickname was "Big Nasty" or sometimes just "Nasty." The 49ers drafted him number one, but he flourished, as one might expect, as an Oakland Raider. He had a mouth full of gold teeth and narrow evil eyes. He wore a pith helmet. He said, "Freshman have you had yo suppa?" I was in Waco no longer. I wanted to curl up on the ground and say "I'm a woman."

That night I went to bed in our dorm for two-a-days called The Quads, as Kerr Hall wasn't ready for occupancy. That night I was slumbering away when I was awakened by someone in my room that I assumed was an upper classman. He began talking about how he would take care of whatever I needed and so on and so forth. There was something about him that made my "Spidey Sense" tingle because this guy was getting a little too close. He saw me starting to stare hard and questioning and he promptly exited. I sat up on the edge of my bed and thought "I'll be danged! I do believe that was a gen-u-ine per-vert!!" And then "I've been in this city eight hours and I have done been approached by a bonafide de-

generate!!” The longer I sat the madder I got. Too many paradigms shifted for one day! As I sat there though I heard a noise, then noticed the doorknob turning. That no-count had done come back to my domicile. I should have let him get through the door but I was white hot with what an 18 year old is white hot with when another man crosses what should not be crossed. I said “COME 'ERE!!!” And took off for the door. I discovered someone faster than Big Nasty. The pervert disappeared into the night with an 18 year old freshman who had been on campus for eight hours standing on the steps of the Quads in his looms, swearing vile oaths concerning pounding one about the lips and thorax. “So this is Denton!”

An inauspicious beginning to the next 46 years and counting . . .

That freshman year we were 0 and 5. In the next years two-a-days I broke my wrist and got redshirted; missed the whole year. The next year I got super crossways with our QB coach and lost what confidence I once had. I started two games. Lost 'em both. But what was worse, I lost other things more than games and self-confidence. I lost the innocence I brought from Baptist tinged Waco and my rudiments of schooling. Waco was still dry. Denton and NT was a drug capitol. We had two players who grew marijuana, most used, and some sold. Our best running back as a sophomore was lost to us as a junior because of his stay in prison for being a professional thief in his spare time. I had never seen drugs before NT. Dallas was also nearby and forays into the club scene, hangovers, and guys tossed in jail were common place. Our best defensive end was shot and almost killed after our freshman year. Sexuality, while almost secretive in high school was put on public display in college. Conquests were the buzz in groups of two or more. North Texas was ideologically a universe away from Waco. Things instinctively honored in Waco were objects of contempt in Denton. The 60s barely touched Waco – no more than hair and bell bottoms – but at NT there was protest and anger and discord. Plus, college sports are a world away from high school. High school is the last time one plays sports for “sport” or the joy of competing. In college you perform for the scholarship and coaches intend to leave and move up. College is more often than not a step down from the “good ol’ days.” And North Texas had continual tension in its athletic department. Odus Mitchell had coached at North Texas for 20 years. When he retired, the thought, yea consensus, was that his former NT football players and former assistants would take over the reins. It didn't happen. The job went to a Stanford assistant coach named Rod Rust. He, for some reason, had to coach with the staff handed to him. The tension, subterfuge, discontent, and bitterness were felt by all. Plus integration had arrived in the South. It caught up to North Texas. NT for years along with Houston and West Texas had signed Abner Haynes, Joe Green, Ronnie Shanklin, Spider Lockhart and on and on because the Southwest Conference would not. That changed by '69. No longer did we get all the prizes among black athletes. We now competed with Texas, A & M, TCU, Rice and on and on. We had to sign the likes of, ... well, me. Losing followed big time. There was also racial tension that accompanied much of the 60s. Our team was peaceful but divided. My junior year we had a black boycott after the first game where our starting black quarterback, George Woodrow, was pulled in the first quarter for a white QB – Rick Shaw. The next Monday no black player showed at practice and demanded a meeting with the head coach to resolve things. We finished 3-8.

Are you depressed by now?  
It gets worse.

Because it was not simply that my circumstances and environment began to degrade and decay but I did. I found that without these external structures of family, school, church, and coaches I really had no true conviction, character, morality or relationship with God. I was a shell ... a shadow ... a noise ... Once it was just me alone, I was nothing. I started smoking. I had no idea why. I only say it now because my mother has passed away and I can come out from the closet! I messed with pot. I got drunk. I kept whiskey above my ceiling panel. I found myself in Dallas bars. I found that I was essentially no different than any of the worst of my teammates. My grades were barely a C. I was adrift at sea, tossed.

I saw the Jim Plunketts, the Archie Mannings, the Joe Theisms and I could tell that no matter how good I was I could not be that good. I had no plan B. I did not know who I was apart from football. I had no identity. I knew what Tommy Nelson did but not who he was. I was dead. Confused. Sad. Hopeless. Embarrassed. Ashamed.

By God's providence He provided me a family that gave me a safe house. I met a girl that became my girlfriend for four years. She was not born again (or she would not have dated me!) but she was from a family of Southern Baptists from Bridgeport, Texas. Her father particularly was a strong born again war veteran. His daughter was moral and had convictions and thus we stayed morally pure for four years. Her family kept me from drowning in despair. Our union wasn't meant to last but the impact of her father affected me for the rest of my life.

This is who I was in 1972.

At night I would take long walks and just think. Sometimes I would walk to the IOOF cemetery on Eagle and Carroll Street. One thing about a cemetery is that it's quiet and private. I thought and looked for answers I could not find. I had run out of strength, wisdom and character. I needed help from the outside.

I needed someone.  
It was the midwinter of 1972.  
Light began to break.

The Guy in the Tie  
Part IX The Dawn's Early Light

Every saved man has his Damascus Road. His road to Emmaus. His encounter with God. As Paul said, God was "pleased to reveal His Son in me." "In me" mind you, not just "to me." Paul knew about Jesus and was versed in the Old Testament that spoke of His coming but Paul was darkened until the God who spoke light to the world would move over the deep and darkness of Paul's heart and say "let there be light." And so was my story. I knew of Christ, had memorized the creeds and praises of Him. I had celebrated His nativity and death and resurrection but I had never met Him. God would slowly bring me to term even as I kicked against the goads.

First there was a man that I watched for over two years – W. C. Spiller of Bridgeport, Texas; my girlfriend's father, a Baptist deacon. This man was full of joy, integrity and love for all men. He was the delight of his wife and three children. I had never seen a man – at least a man up close – that was truly possessed of God. He was the first man of whom I said, "I do not have what this man has and I would love to have it."

Secondly, I wrote two letters. One to Paul Bear Bryant of Alabama and the other to Billy Graham – two men that seemed to be the most successful of men. I asked them both what they would counsel a college sophomore who was confused about life. Both wrote back. Bear Bryant thanked me for my interest but said a coach of one team could not counsel a player of another team. He was no doubt concerned that we would knock 'Bama out of their title run. Billy Graham wrote me and said that many collegians were confused at that time and the reason was their alienation from God and that was because of sin . . . and that was as far as I read. I threw the letter away. I wanted nothing to do with God and repentance. I don't know what else I expected Billy Graham to write about me. Changing my weight lifting routine!? Point is, I knew I needed help and change. I just wasn't sure how.

A third thing happened a little earlier that impacted me in a very subtle way. I stumbled across two men my own age that were the real item type Christians . . . another breed . . . one I had never seen before. I posted on a bulletin board that I needed a ride to Waco and back. Two fellows from what was called the "Baptist Student Union" got back with me. A group I had never heard of. I know in retrospect now that they were two truly born again men. When they pulled up at Kerr Hall they got out to put my suitcase in their trunk – something new. Their conversation was chaste and they actually talked about God as though He were real and active in their lives. When we stopped in Waco they got out and took out my bag and refused my money because Waco was on their way. They were my age and yet they were better men than me. I knew that the reason had everything to do with God. They knew Him. I remember having a distinct sense of envy because of the peace and purpose they had. No doubt when they stopped to eat they mentioned the fellow named "Tom" who rode along with them maybe that he might have seen or heard something that God would use on his heart. Then, I'm quite sure they forgot that the event ever happened. That was 45 years ago as I remember.

And then a fourth thing occurred. A fellow in a red plaid shirt knocked at my door. A fellow from Fredericksburg, Texas named Jim Kothman who worked for an organization I had never heard of named Campus Crusade for Christ. He asked if he could take a survey and then share a pamphlet. I sensed "religion." So I said he could share the survey but not the info because I had to go somewhere. No answer could have been more providential. Because Jim Kothman asked me a question from the survey – "What is a Christian?" – my answer was "someone who keeps the ten commandments." Jim simply asked as we went to the elevator, "You think that is what a Christian is?" Meaning, there was a chance that I could be wrong about the ultimate question of life. In all my learning could I be wrong on the ultimate issues? But in my genius I only let Jim ask the questions – not provide the answers. It was like someone saying to you "So you think your plane won't crash? All aboard!" His silence was roaring in my ears.

Shortly after this I found a magazine. I still don't know how I found it. It was from Athletes In Action – a ministry of Campus Crusade. I began reading the magazine primarily because it was so excellently done. Everything about it was top of the line. It also had an article on power lifting routines. But as I kept reading I came to a brief "testimony" by a Stanford linebacker named Terry Pape. He spoke of his emptiness and walking at night wondering if there was any ultimate meaning. He spoke of calling out to God and of the amazing peace he found. I was drawn to that article and read it over and over. It was as if I sensed that somewhere in Terry Pape's story was my answer. I unknowingly, inadvertently memorized his testimony.

There was a hound of heaven pursuing me. Do you know what I think? That Mimi had, before her death, prayed for her granddaughter LaVelle and her babies. That Mrs. Loyd MacMahan had prayed for the salvation of her 7<sup>th</sup> grade students and Mrs. Pawnee Martin for her junior high students. I think Ralph Smith had prayed for "Stormy Tommy" and Jim Kothman, men from the BSU, and the Crusade staff that worked on its AIA magazine had prayed that God would bless the seeds they sowed. I'm certain that Mr. and Mrs. W. C. Spiller prayed for the flailing young man whom their daughter was dating.

I was on the edge, teetering . . .

I had that winter gotten a ticket . . . hard to believe . . . and I paid it. After paying it I was on my way to the stadium and I ran a stop sign, or rather slowed insufficiently. Anyhoo, I got another ticket. We had an assistant trainer named Red who said the city attorney sometimes was merciful to NT athletes to which I hence fled to him. It turned out he was a strong evangelical Christian man who listened to me then said, "You know Tom, speeding is one thing but a stop sign is another. That's rather blatant." Then he said, "are you involved with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes?" My answer was that ... yes, I was very familiar with the FCA but I wasn't involved. Both statements were true but after my answer I felt this strange feeling that I was totally alien to the God of whom I was speaking. That I had an assent but no true relationship. I was empty.

This is where I was in the cold winter of 1972. Morally I had begun to move back toward what I knew was right. I had even begun reading a book on an elaboration on Proverbs called "Words of Wisdom" sent by Billy Graham. I was seeking.

I went to eat one evening then headed off to do something or other before I returned to my dorm room at Kerr Hall, room 42B. When I did return to my room, I opened the door and my roommate Rex, a defensive end from Houston Cyprus-Fairbanks, was propped against the headboard of his bed with his 6'7" frame stretched out. Sitting backwards on a chair was a small fellow with dark hair. He and Rex were talking pretty seriously about something.

Rex said, "Tommy, meet Jerry Cook. We're talking about God."

The Guy in The Tie  
Part X The Awakening of the Waco Boy

Jerry Cook was a Navigator, the twin brother of Terry Cook who served as the Director of College Ministries for the Navs. Like all Navs, he was zealous for the Great Commission and personal soul winning. God had sent Methodists, Baptists, Word Publishing, Crusade, AIA, Billy Graham, and the BSU so it would only seem right that the Navs take their shot. I was under siege by heaven's legions.

Jerry had literally walked around Kerr Hall previously and prayed that when he went in to knock on doors and share the gospel that God would open doors to men's hearts. For some reason my roommate, Rex Humbarger, let him in and they began a conversation. I arrived shortly after and Rex introduced me. I sat on my bed with a textbook to study and lo and behold their conversation was about the very things that I had been questioning and seeking and puzzling over for the last few months.

- A brief parenthesis here. If anyone has spent any time at Denton Bible they have heard this story of my conversation. It was said that Charles Spurgeon shared his testimony hundreds of times from all angles. The marvelous thing about Christianity is that it is not merely joining a movement or religion or a mere assenting to a body of doctrine but having an encounter with God through His Son.

This having been said, Jerry asked my roommate if he was a Christian. My roomie said yes. He then asked him, "and what do you think a Christian is?" This was the very question that the Campus Crusader Jim Kothman asked me previously. Rex's erroneous answer was identical to my erroneous answer. "It's someone who keeps the Ten Commandments." It was then that Jerry asked a simple question of Rex (and myself listening in), "and you keep them?" Rex sat in silence as did I as the Lord was in His holy temple and we stood silent before Him . . . guilty. Jerry Cook then shared in a couple of sentences three ideas that turned my life 180 degrees and I have never been the same since. He said number one that the Ten Commandments were not given as a means of salvation but rather to show man that he could not keep the law of God. And secondly that the reason Jesus came and died was to pay for our sins against God's law and save us from our disobedience through God's forgiveness.

Eureka! The light came on. "That's why Jesus died!" "That is Old Testament and New Testament." "That is salvation." "That is God's grace." "That is the gospel."

But then he said something else. That a man had to *individually*, as an act of the will, ask Jesus into his heart and "receive" the gift of life. He gave his own testimony to Rex that I remember to this hour. He said he went into a shower and asked that God would let him live long enough to finish his prayer and that his prayer was, "Jesus come into my life and make me what you want me to be." That was it! One must personally yield to Jesus Christ and God would assume the leadership of his life.

Everything suddenly came together. The pieces all fit. *This* was why Jim Kothman paused questioningly. *This* was what Terry Pape found. *This* was what Tom Conway believed and Billy Graham preached. *This* was why the two BSU guys were different. And more important, *this* was the answer to my quest. It was GOD. I thought “if this isn’t true it should be.” All the pieces suddenly came together.

A brief flashback. As an elementary boy I used to love reading Greek mythology and my favorite character was Hercules and my favorite story, The Twelves Labors of Hercules, and my favorite labor was his cleaning of the Augean stables. Stable after stable of horses – horse after horse – a seeming impossible labor. But what he did was to divert a stream into the stables and the rush of the stream swept through in one fell swoop and the filth and stench was instantly gone. I had found my Hercules.

The funny thing is, is that I did not become a Christian then because I instinctive realized that to receive Christ was to yield all of one’s self to Christ’s sovereign control. I could not have Him *and me* at the controls of my life.

One of the reasons I am a Calvinist is that I experienced the need of God’s irresistible grace and of the deadness and mad irrationality of the human will. Left to me my pride said “no” to what my mind said “yes.”

And so Jerry left. The seed was firmly planted in one whom he did not even see. Jerry didn’t think much came of his witnessing but I and two distance men on our track team trusted in Christ. Jerry saw these men come to faith and trained them. One was Chuck Mork who became a Denton Bible elder and then started another Denton Bible plant in the Baytown area. The other was Tom Hess who became the Nav Rep in North Carolina at Fort Bragg. Both men have been faithful to this day. Jerry died about 15 years ago in Van, Texas of a virus that infected his brain. I called him just before he died and thanked him on behalf of myself, Denton Bible and anything else I had had my hand in. You just never know.

I went on my way with a sound intellectual understanding of the gospel but I never willfully submitted to it. Never that is, until God gave me the final push.

Prior to Spring training in 1972 I was throwing the ball better than I had since I was a freshman. It looked like the starting spot might be mine. But on a Tuesday in February (I can pinpoint the date that close) we had an off season seven on seven drill, meaning the QB, three running backs, tight end and two receivers go against the three linebackers and four secondary – also called a “shell drill” i.e. a passing/defending contest of offense vs. defense . . . a drill where all talents are put on display. It was a cool nippy day but not that cool but for some reason, still unknown to me – my right hand, my throwing hand, went numb? It felt like it felt only in freezing conditions. Try as I might I could not get my hand limber. Not my left hand or any other body part but only my throwing hand! I started pulling on my jersey thinking it was cutting off circulation but nothing I did helped. As a result I had no “touch” on the ball. It was like throwing cantaloupes at the receivers or better still it was like throwing large, dead game birds! The ball fluttered harmlessly and all I did was

chase down the safeties that picked me off. I stunk as few quarterbacks have stunk in the recorded history of stink.

I was sick. Broken. Beaten. Whipped. Hopeless. Defeated. Give out. Embarrassed. Humiliated. Ashamed. Discouraged . . . Yet enlightened and of a new resolution. The Hound of Heaven had won. The God of my memories and traditions had sent me a message – clear and deafening, that He would no longer be my album but the Living God. The coach gave us a brief talk after practice then said to take four laps – one mile – then head it in and he'd see us Thursday. I flew through the four laps. I took no shower. I jumped sweaty into my '66 Ford Fairlane and raced back to the dorm. I did not wait for the elevator but ran up four flights and to my room at 423B Kerr Hall . . . to the last place I had heard God's voice from Jerry Cook. Like George Bailey I ran back to the bridge where I had heard the voice of Clarence and I called out, "O God let me live again, let me live again."

I had memorized Terry Pape's prayer having read it so often and I knelt by my bed and said "God I have tried for all my life to make something of myself on my own . . . and I've failed . . . I give my life to You. Come into my heart and into my life and you make me what I should be. I give up. You take control."

I felt a peace. A restfulness. My life was now His. The next morning something was different. "This little light of mine" was burning like a pilot light that would soon ignite all of my existence. I found myself smiling . . . for no reason . . . like an idiot. I later came to find out that this was called "joy." No circumstances had changed. I clung to no physical expectations or guarantees of coming success. As a matter of fact I did not really know that I got "heaven" out of the deal even though I had a deep sense of being forgiven and "saved." But I had given the only "Someone" who deserved to be the "Someone" the total control of my life.

I sat in the dining room the next morning continuing my smiling for no reason. People looked different. They looked like me. Like fellow wandering sheep in desperate need of Christ to shepherd them. Each had their own "disguise of competence," but were all the same down deep and in need of compassion.

I instinctively picked up my Bible – like a babe that longs for the pure milk of the Word. No longer was it Sanskrit but it was God's set-in-stone communique to me. I read until I could read no more. Then soon return with an empty omer to the horizon of manna.

I prayed as I breathed. My heavenly Father and I were in constant communion. And something had changed within my heart concerning my moral duty. My conscience was turned on and enlightened to truth and my will seemed to have an enabling grace and a strengthening to obey. It was like I was born again and took on the likeness of God.

Sin was now personal, pungent, rancorous, offensive and cowardly. My conscience had been quickened. I no longer could be disrespectful, even to the coach I did not like. I no longer could be content with a half-effort in my schooling and my grades began to greatly improve.

I wrote my parents and thanked them both for their faithfulness in raising me right. I told them I had come to know Jesus as my Savior. My mother said, "But you've always known Jesus." Meaning "you were Christened, confirmed, and a church member," beginning a conversation that would continue for 40 years.

I began to attend church willingly, unconstrained, like a bird in migration to its home, like a salmon upstream. I, out of habit, went to a Methodist church though it happened to be steeped in a Bible-rejecting liberalism of the worst sort. I did not know what "liberal" or "fundamental" meant; only that I did not hear the Shepherd's voice and I knew in my soul that I would starve to death in that man-confined system. I walked down the street from my dorm on the next Sunday to a small, wood-frame Baptist church and heard a gen-u-ine sermon, my first, from a gen-u-ine Baptist, white shoed (1972 mind you), white belted, hair styled back from a Black and Decker blow dryer, fundamental, Holy Ghost preacher. He talked on the "not eros nor phileo but agape love of God." He said "And when I think of the nails piercing the Savior's hands then I understand the 'agape' love of God!" I said "ain't that somethin'!" I saw students there like myself. I thought previously I had discovered something known only to Billy Graham, Jerry Cook and me. But I saw this was bigger than just my circle – bunches of folks knew this! And I began to feel a growing confusion and indignation.

"Why had I not heard this until age 21?!"

"Who is responsible?!"

"Who silenced this message?!"

I felt a longing to avenge and rectify this wrong. And something happened that gave me an exceeding joy. Howard Moss, an offensive lineman from Killeen said to me, "What happened to you?" I enquired as to what he meant and he said, "You're happy. You're light and you're funny." What he had observed was simply the fruit of the Spirit of "joy and peace." I simply explained to Howard – a super smart guy even by quarterback standards – that I had received Jesus Christ as my Savior. As I explained my testimony I discovered that one idea was connected to multiple ideas and a comprehensiveness of thought came to me that was as if God were speaking through ME. I was the eel and the gospel was the electricity. I thought to myself, "That was about the most satisfying and significant thing I have ever experienced! I could spend a life of doing that!"

One day the hardest man on our team came up to me. His name was John Bowles, an offensive lineman from Virginia Beach, Virginia. He was the strongest man on our team and probably the one who would win in a brawl. He asked me one day the same question as Howard did. John was a Church of Christ fellow and said he'd been brought up in church. I explained to him that was good, but salvation was an individual commitment to and trust in Jesus Christ. This man became my best friend and best man. He still is. I named my 2<sup>nd</sup> born after him. I was his best man and in 2012 buried his wife Sarah who died suddenly of brain cancer.

More on John Bowles in just a moment.

But I had discovered in just weeks what would be the greatest joy of the Christian life – telling others of Jesus.

That spring was unbelievably sweet. Just me and God and my bible discovering each day first time truths never heard before. I went through spring training and it was the best I had ever played because football was relegated to the place it belonged and God to the throne where He belonged. I began to see all things clearly.

An interesting thing happened, however, in our Green-White inter-squad Spring Game. I QB'd the 2<sup>nd</sup> team offense to two quick touchdowns. I was red hot, on a roll. “The Tommy Nelson Story” was about to begin anew. Great Spring. All-Conference. All American. Heisman candidate. All-Pro. Football immortality.” And I jus’ wanna thank Jesus fer all His hep.” I could see it all now.

The Spring Game had no kickoffs or punting. Each offensive – defensive matchup went twenty plays. After my twenty we had scored on two eighty yard drives. Boom Boom. The next offense – defense went twenty, each QB fading in my greater light.

My ball again. Bam Bam option scramble Bam – down the field. I wondered who would play me in the Tommy Nelson Story (Newman? Too old. Pacino? Too short. Robert Redford? Yeah). I called a “2 open formation right 73.” I roll out right, pull up, throw back across the field to split end curling inside, if the linebacker drops back then go to the flaring running back. The linebacker chased the flaring back opening a clear land to the curling wide receiver. I stepped up and hummed a perfect strike – POW! Right in the numbers. We’re on the move again . . . when suddenly – BOOM!! A transformer blew up at the stadium and the game was plunged into total darkness. They could not repair it. The game was over – spring training was over on a high note. We sat around on the field waiting like scouts on a campout. I lay on my back at midfield looking into the stars wondering what “lights out, game’s over” might mean.

I had no idea of what had happened.  
But I had an inkling of Who.