

## 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.