

## **When the Wheel has come Full Circle, Celebrate**

I had the chance to feel like a teacher again this past May weekend, when my lovely wife, Audrey and I got invited to Diane Bakko Lee's Celebration Of Life at the big revamped barn on Crooked Lane road near Colfax ND. Mark Lee, Diane's lately widowed husband, asked me if I would read my eulogy celebrating the joy I had having Diane, Mark, Barbra Jordheim Blilie and many other illustrious students who made my first year of teaching at Walcott High such a golden time.

Many things impressed me at that memorable reunion. Mostly I was impressed by the great traditions that were preserved in those little Norwegian towns of Walcott, Colfax, Abercrombie and Kindred that made up the Wild Rice conference hosting all the sports and high school activities; also, the little churches, the salt of the earth, hard-working citizens I got to rub shoulders with as I experienced living in my first real ghetto.

I had lots of Scandinavian culture to absorb, and I wasn't even that crazy about lutefisk, but luckily, we were Lutherans at the time, so I got to sing in the choir with Diane's brother Dale, her father, Arnold, and her uncle, Arvid --all great choristers. And I got to sing with them again when I got hired at NDSCS and rejoined Bethel Lutheran, the church Audrey and I got married in. (She's a Wahpetonian). Ironically, a number of my Walcott students showed up later in my English classes at Science, where Dale Bakko, Brent Larson, Kristie Erickson Berg and others reminded me of the Walcott happy days.

Speaking of connections, I was astonished at the number of people who showed up for Diane's commemoration. That in itself told me how greatly loved Mark and Diane were and what a truly great marriage they were enjoying before Diane's tragic departure. That is also true of Diane's great friend, Barbara, Jordheim Blilie

who I mentioned in my eulogy. She and her husband Dennis are also clearly enjoying a great marriage --both looking ten years younger than their age. Marriages of high school sweethearts can work as these two great ones prove.

All in all Diane's "celebration" was a huge re-connection for me with the circle I began teaching at Walcott and ended reading my eulogy at the Crooked Lane barn. Standing in front of that congregation was probably my last chance to feel like an English teacher again after a twenty-year separation due to my very challenged hearing. As usual, I wandered off my carefully prepared script and had fun joking around and harking back to the kind of light-hearted atmosphere I enjoyed in my classes. In so doing, I totally forgot to read perhaps the best poem I was going to share with the group, so I'm including it here.

"Passing the Graveyard"

I see you did not try to save/  
The bouquet of white flowers I gave,/ So fast  
they've withered on your grave/

These human bodies that we wear/  
So change by every 7<sup>th</sup> year/ That in a new  
dress we appear/ Limbs, spongy brain and slogging heart/  
No part remains the self  
same part.

You've slipped slow bodies in the past/  
So why should we be so aghast/ You've  
thrown off the whole flesh at last?

Why does it hurt the heart to think/  
Of that most bitter, abrupt brink/  
where the low-shouldered coffins sink?

Let one who loved you think instead/  
That, like a woman who has wed,/ You  
undressed first and went to bed.

(Andrew Young)

That poem is read with amazing power by Dylan Thomas in his album, "An Evening with Dylan Thomas," and its message for Mark is clear, that though

Diane may have gone to *sleep* before him, she is looking forward to the day he rejoins her again. From there, their adventure will have just begun.

By the way, the beautiful huge barn the Larsons have established on Crooked Lane road proved to be the perfect venue for Diane's celebration, and I'm quite sure it could be rentable for other memorable occasions.

Gene Pinkney for the Daily news 23-05-21-