

The Nicest Guy I Never Got to Know

Life has shown me that most of us have qualities that others might appreciate if they ever got to know us. I'd loved to have gotten to know Prince Hamlet's boyhood mentor, the king's jester, Yorick, who was "a fellow of infinite jest and most excellent fancy; whose flashes of merriment were wont to set the table on a roar.. He has borne me on his back a thousand times." said prince Hamlet,

And who wouldn't have loved to hang out with Sir John Falstaff, "Plump Jack," as he regaled the patrons of The Boar's Head Tavern with impish reasons why we should addict ourselves to sack: "which ascends one to the brain, cleansing it there of all the mean and cruddy vapors, filling my mind with nimble and fiery shapes."

As his drinking buddy, Bardolf, lamented when Sir John died, "I know not where some ere he is, whether heaven or hell I care not-I just want to be where he is."

As Walt Whitman put it while musing over the dead body of a young soldier in the Civil War hospital where he had been helping out: "It may be if I had known him I would have loved him."

This brings to mind an electronics instructor at NDSCS I never really saw enough of to get to know: Grant Unkenholz. Some info about him filtered through to me over the years, but only now, now that he has passed into the heavens, has enough info come down that I truly wish I could have at least had coffee with him a few times. But because the tech staff occupied Horton Hall the arts and science staff, Haverty Hall, that never happened.

I first learned that Grant was teaching over in Tech. from his bright and lovely daughter, Gwen, who brightened a few of my English classes. Also, his

students in my Tech English classes, stood out because Grant had not poisoned the well against English by implying they were courses they really didn't need. That made his people far more teachable than kids from some of the other tech disciplines. But aside from that, our paths never really crossed. Then as fate would have it, my sweet wife befriended another of Grant's lovely daughters, Cathy, who also goes to our church. That's how Grant's obituary finally revealed how many interests we shared.

We both loved nature- fishing, hunting, camping and bird watching was a shared hobby as well, but he took it much further by building houses for wood ducks and bluebirds. I gasp at the fabulous coloration of male wood ducks and have used their plumes often for tying trout flies. Moreover, I was born on "Bluebird's Day," according according to The Old Farmers Almanac, but none of my boxes ever housed any bluebirds-just starlings and sparrows.

Also, grant was an accomplished carpenter who loved recycling old buildings, using their wood for many inventive projects. I'm a failed carpenter who can't drive a nail for more than four beats before I bend it sideways. One-eyed men abuse nails, but I did save some of the beautiful gray wood from my uncle Roy's sagging barn before it slumped into oblivion. I used it to mount fish on.

One of Grant's pursuits that I feel a bit guilty for not trying was the promoting of Gideon Bibles. As a teacher, I likely could have done that, but I reasoned excuses not to. And I hear that Grant liked to tell Ole and Sven jokes with Norse accent and all. Me, I like Henny Youngman one-liners, but my Yiddish accent suffers.

Lastly, Grant has given me another reason to visit Riverside Cemetery where he has put up many blue bird and wood duck houses. Now I can pay my respects

both to the Tweedts, Beth and Tony, and to Grant by way of the tweets from his bluebird houses. Still, I wish I could have gotten to know him better. Soon, perhaps, I will.

Gene Pinkney/ for the Daily News/ 23-08-27-