THE WHITE BOOK OF LIFE

DALLAS WIEBE
THE WHITE BOOK OF LIFE
OTHER CHAPBOOKS BY DALLAS WIEBE

The Sayings of Abraham Nofziger:
A Guide for the Perplexed, 2004

The Nofziger Letters (with
Pamela Baillargeon), 2005
THE WHITE BOOK OF LIFE: TWO REMINISCENCES

by DALLAS WIEBE
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The White Book of Life,  
a Reminiscence

When I was growing up on Logan Street in Newton, Kansas, in the late thirties and early forties, there was, across the alley from us, on Duncan Street, something called "The McGee Potato Chip Factory." It was called a factory, but it wasn't what you would call your industrial complex. It was more on the order of a garage with two shacks tacked on the back. In this factory, the McGees, who were from Arkansas, manufactured potato chips so they could prosper. They hired neighbors and other local people to do the work and they paid them slave wages, like five and ten cents per hour—without any benefits. This unorganized and non-union help very early in the morning peeled the potatoes, sliced them, fried them in hot oil and sacked them so Mr. McGee could haul the chips to the doggoned grocery stores and the diddly-poop restaurants.

The McGees, who were hard-shelled Baptists, had two sons; L.B. and Ival. L.B., who was always called just "L.B.,” played the cornet and was a year ahead of me in school. (I played the violin.) Ival was much older than both of us and still lived in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Once Ival came for a visit. Although Mrs. McGee made a great to-do about it, the visit was unremarkable except for Ival’s wife; she was not the kind of lady to lead you in the paths of righteousness. She was the first painted lady I ever saw, or, at least, remember. She wore high heels that were like stilts. Silk hose that glistened in the sunlight. Tight skirt. Fur cape. A foundation garment that stretched from her kneecaps to her armpits. Bouffant hairdo. Five hundred gallons of perfume.
Lipstick smeared from ear to ear. And, most fascinating of all to me, plucked eyebrows. I cringed when I imagined the pain it took to get those eyebrows to arch almost to the hairline.

After Ival and his "doll" had gone away from us, there was, for me, a lingering curiosity. It was the name "Ival." Finally, one day, I couldn't resist any longer and I asked Mrs. McGee how you spelled "Ival." She looked at me with her unspotted Baptist eyes and said, "Well, I swan. You mean to tell me that you don't know to spell "Ival?" I said, "No I don't. Jiminy crickets, that's why I asked." She said, "And here I thought you were a bright boy." And I said, "Well, I don't know how to spell "Ival." She said, "Well, you spell it the way everyone else spells it, capital O r v i l l e." I thought, "Judas priest, how was I to know that?" Years later, after a Ph.D. and all that, I realized that I was, at that moment, introduced to the great philosophical problem of appearance versus reality.

I never knew what "L.B." stood for until he graduated from high school. His name was on the list of graduates and it was an unremarkable "Leo Bartley," which I could spell.

L.B. and I had a friendship based on his one—the only one I knew about—secret sin. He smoked cigarettes. He smoked Lucky Strikes that came in green packages with the red spots. That was before "Lucky Strike green has gone to war." Of course, L.B.'s parents did not approve of his smoking so he did it in secret.

We had, by the alley between Duncan and Logan Streets, a building we called a "tool shed." There weren't many, if any, tools in it. It was more an enclosure to keep rain off pieces of metal that had no use. And there were in that same tool shed some downspouts laid across the joists. That's where L.B. hid his cigarettes and matches. My job was to see to it that no one found those cigarettes. It was necessary to be vigilant because ever so often we engaged in an activity we called "straightening up."
"I wish Patches were our dog," said R. "Please, Father, may we buy another dog?"

"And was Patches your cat?" asked Father.

"No, child. Rusty was our cat, and Father said Rusty was his pet."

"But we have a new pet, Father," said R. "Have you forgotten about Patches the dog?"

"Of course not, child," said Father. "But Rusty is our new pet."

"And Patches was a dog," said R. "I wish we could have another dog like Patches."
this activity we moved the unidentifiable pieces of metal around so that we could walk through them. There was no aesthetic intention or effect in our activity.

When L.B. wanted to smoke, he came over to our tool shed, got out his cigarettes and lit up. While smoking, he usually sat on the chopping block that we used to cut off chickens' heads. This block was part of a tree trunk, about a foot wide and about two feet high, with slits on top with chicken feathers stuck in them from where we decapitated our fryers. To protect the secrets of his heart, L.B. never left any cigarette butts lying about. Before he went home, he threw the butts into our chicken pen where they disappeared.

In an old Kansas phrase, "it wondered me" that Mrs. McGee never smelled the smoke on L.B. or noticed the chicken blood on the scat of his pants. There was an explanation.

Mrs. McGee's name was Bertha and, of course, we called her "Big Bertha." She wasn't big. By the time I was in the sixth grade I was taller than she. The only thing big about her was the black bags under her eyes, which, I knew, just sure as shootin', came from her worrying both night and day about sin in this world.

Mrs. McGee, who always wore white raiment, was, I found out many years later when I read Freudian psychology, what you call your basic "anal retentive." This is a person who is obsessed with fecal matter, with dirt, ordure, and is, therefore, in that curious logic of psychologists, obsessively clean. Her little house was immaculate, that is, unspotted. The dollies were always starched and in place. Her antimacassars were the same. L.B. slept on the back porch on a cot. I think the only dirty thing that came into her house was me.

Because of her obsession with cleanliness, I understood why she didn't smell the cigarette smoke. Her house was the first house I was ever in where they burned incense in the bathroom. There
was also in the bathroom—which, by the way, I was never allowed to use—hung on the inside lip of the toilet stool, a wire soap rack with a bar of Lifebuoy Soap in it. As a result, the whole house smelled of Lifebuoy Soap and that’s all you could smell.

I used to go over to McGee’s on Sunday afternoons to read their funny papers because they got the \textit{Wichita Beacon} and we got the \textit{Wichita Eagle}. I also went over there on weekdays to listen to radio serials. My parents didn’t allow us to listen to them. L.B. and I used to lie on the front room rug and listen to “Terry and the Pirates,” “Little Orphan Annie,” “Captain Midnight,” and “Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy.” While we listened we played Fiddlesticks, also called Pickup Sticks, and competed to see who was going to get the stick with the purple ends, a stick that counted twenty-five points.

One day while we were listening to Annie, Daddy Warbucks and Punjab, Mrs. McGee came into the room and cried out in a loud voice, “Boys, come here. I want to show you something.” We got up and went in to see what had come to pass in the living room. We stood by Big Bertha. She put her left arm around L.B. and her right arm around me and said, “Boys, see that picture on the wall?” We looked up and, lo and behold, there on the wall was a picture that Mrs. McGee had just put up. The picture was a rectangle about two feet wide and about three feet long and it was the picture of a left eye. The picture was drawn so that the eye seemed to follow you wheresoever you went in the room. Mrs. McGee spoke, “Boys, see that eye?” And we answered meekly, “Yes, we see it. We see it. We can’t miss it.” “Now, boys,” Mrs. McGee said, “that eye is the eye of God. It sees and knows everything you do. It sees and knows everything you think. It knows everything you treasure in your hearts. When you are born, God puts in a heaven a book for each of you. That book has a white cover and is filled with white pages. And those pages are all
cup half full of snow and the other half
water. There is a lake in the middle of the
mountains in which the snow melts. The lake
is called a river, but at the same time the

time of water under the tin cup on the
table breaks so that the cup is

One can explain this melting and freezing! Salt has such an

surrounding objects to allow

in it that it acts like a liquid when it melts;

that is, it is thinner; but in the case

of water, the ice is thicker than the

of water, which is about ten times as

long as a water's day does

the amount

happens when water freezes. When snow

forms as a water's day does

from some shape, but the shape

happens when water freezes. When

Freezing by Evaporation

Again each snowflake on the surface

of a snow-covered table, or anywhere

face when a water's day does not

longer, the snow will not increase;

Wilt the water fly up? What

of water, and the small

be a sheet of water under the snow.

how the crystal forms up to

1400.) Does street-sweeping

atmosphere? A rain drop in

weight, and the other

high center over the

street-sweeping (rounding here) when

pass from a cold spot a paper? All

can do is to change the form of energy.

The Laws of Falling Bodies

This is only one part of a

morning, the face

rain begins to

street-sweeping (rounding here) when

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street-sweeping (rounding here) when

pass from a cold spot a paper? All

can do is to change the form of energy.
blank. Now every time you do something evil or think an evil thought, God puts a black mark in that book and when it is filled you die.” I thought, “Holy mackerel, I’ve got a whole library of those books already.”

That message scared the holy beejesus out of us and we took it to heart because we walked in the council of the Dragon Lady. That message behooved us to watch our thoughts and our language. We certainly didn’t want to be walking home some day, think an evil thought, fill up that book and fall down dead and smash a cornet or bust a violin. I surely didn’t want to be taking eggs our from under a hen, get pecked, say something untoward and fall down dead in the chicken house. It so happened that just about that time we were learning about women and starting to hear what were called “dirty jokes.” But when we heard the jokes we tried not to laugh because we knew if we laughed we could die laughing. If you said, “If I should die before I wake,” that was a serious thought because who knew how many black marks you got for what you dreamed? Who knew what score you got in your sex-filled dreams in your sleep?

Mrs. McGee’s message became a great problem because certain situations in life inevitably called for expletives, that is, swearing. There were times when it seemed necessary to speak in vain. In fact, as we got older, it led to a kind of game. The game was to swear without getting any black marks in that book of life. A language system evolved to deal with our problem. It was a language system that was community wide. It was a rigid system that allowed certain things to be said. The system was almost like taunting the threat of that white book in heaven. You could, for instance, say: by golly, by gosh, by gum, by grab, by dogs or by doggies. You could say: for crying out loud, holy mackerel, holy beejesus, Judas priest, gee whiz and jiminy Christmas. You could say: goldarmed, dadblamed, dadgummed, doggone and dratit.
The word “hell” presented a particular problem. You couldn’t tell someone to go to it, but you could say “go to heck.” You could say, “Get the heck out of here,” “What the heck are you doing?” and “What the sam hill is going on here?” You could say, “Go to 7734 upside down.” You could say: hell’s bells, hell’s fire, come hell or high water, a snowball’s chance in hell, to hell and back. One phrase that gave us a problem was “Going like a bat out of Hell.” But, by gosh, we took no chances. We said, “Going like a bat out of Jerusalem.” Each person I’m sure, found his own way through the valley of the shadow of swear words.

I teach literature at the University of Cincinnati and one of the writers we all have to deal with in one way or another is Dante Alighieri. His main work is called The Divine Comedy. The Comedy is divided into three parts: “Inferno,” “Purgatory” and “Paradise.” Most readers read only part I, “The Inferno,” or, if you want to take a chance, “The Hell.” In the first part, Dante is led through Hell by the Roman poet Virgil. As they travel along, Dante speaks to those whose white books filled up and are now suffering eternal torment. He tells stories about them or the sinners tell their own stories. Dante sees people eternally eaten by worms, eternally burned in fire, eternally upside down in ice. He sees horrible punishments for sin and most readers are appalled by the scenes, or, at least, frightened. Most readers and critics see it all as a great work of the imagination.

But I was never impressed by these tortures. The first time I read “The Inferno,” I thought, “Crime in Italy, he’s left out the worst punishment ever meted out to mankind. If Dante really wanted to punish those sinners, if he wanted to make them suffer the worst possible ordeal, he would have had them, forever, milking cows by hand. Nothing could be worse.”

Cows are about the dumbest animals ever invented. Probably dumber even than turkeys. They have habits that are
unexplainable. When they walk in from the pasture, they walk in a
certain order. They use one path for a while and then, without
reason, change to another one. They enter the barn in a fixed order
and stand in a certain order. No one dare disrupt those bovine
patterns.

When milking cows, you sit on a small stool on the cow’s
right side. The stools have three, maybe two or maybe just one
leg. You have to squat on the stool, hold the milk pail between
your legs, and hunch over in a fetal position in order to squeeze
the udders. You are always in a vulnerable posture. The situation
of the milker is important because cows have the habit when being
milked of waiting until you have about a half bucket of milk and
then urinating or defecating, by golly, in torrents. While that
excrement splashes all over you and into the milk, you have to
jump up and try to get out of the way. You also have to say
something.

I think these problems of milking cows are why I could never
drink milk—and still can’t. When someone would set a pitcher or
bottle of milk on the table, I would always look at it and think,
“You got to be kidding. You think I’m going to drink that? You
got to be crazy. Heaven to Betsy, there’s a foreign substance in it.”

Cows have an appendage called a tail. These tails have at the
end a tuft of wiry hair. All sorts of foul matter collects in these
tufts. While being milked, a cow likes to switch that tail that is just
the right length so that when she switches her tail it strikes the
back of your head and the tip of the tuft wraps around your head
and snaps you right in the corner of your right eye. When she does
that you have to say something.

Cows also have the habit of waiting until you have a full
bucket of milk and then raising the right back hoof and kicking the
bucket and knocking it over just for the hell of it. When that
happens, a clean heart and a right spirit aren’t of much use. What
you do is jump up, kick the cow as hard as you can in the stomach and say, "Why you doggoned, dirty son of a gun. What the sam hill you think you're doing? Keep your goldarned foot down or I'll by gum kick the living daylights out of your dadblamed carcass come hell or high water for crying out loud." By our calculations you could say all that and not get one black mark in that white book. You could say all that and not fall down dead right there, which you didn't want to do because if you did the cow would urinate and defecate on you and then stomp on you and kick you a few times just to rub it in.

And that's the moral of this story. It's Big Bertha's moral, and she was, by gosh, right. The moral is that if you watch your language and your thoughts you won't fill up that white book. The moral is that if you keep your thoughts pure and your language clean you'll end up with 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1000 yoke of oxen and 1000 she-donkeys—and you'll live to be 140 years old.

* * *
ARE YOU GOIN' TO BE IN TROUBLE NOW.
May Baskets
(A Reminiscence: Summer, 1983)

The thing I remember most about growing up in Newton, Kansas, in the 1930’s and 1940’s is that I was always in trouble. I remember that in my earliest years if I walked past a horse or a cow tied up to a post the horse or cow whispered, “Let me go. Let me go.” If I walked past a pen full of pigs, the gate said, “Open me up. Open me up.” When I walked down the street, all the air in all the tires on all the cars and trucks cried out, “Let me out. Let me out.”

I suppose my being in trouble so much was the reason my dad often said, “Son, you’ll never amount to nothing.” He said that a lot and I gave him good reason to say it. It wasn’t until I was in the fifth or sixth grade of grade school that I found a response. About that time, whenever dad would say, “You’ll never amount to nothing,” I’d reply, “Anything, dad. Anything.”

I’m convinced that my problems began with an evil influence early in my life. And I think that evil influence was May baskets. May baskets were usually made of what we called “construction paper.” They were little baskets in the shapes of cones, squares or in a four-holder configuration. They were pasted together with paste made from flour and water. A little handle was pasted on. On May Day we would put flowers and candy in them, take them to the houses of friends, put them on the porch, knock on the door, yell “May basket” and then run and hide.

So May baskets in and of themselves were an innocent, if not admirable, custom. And even if anonymous, they were signs of endearment. But May baskets became a source of trouble for me because of the fact that we had a horse standing in a pen out
behind our house. The horse added a whole different dimension to the custom of May baskets. The temptation was too much. On May Day, I and, usually, a couple of my cousins would take our little baskets out to the pen and wait for our mare Nancy—not a horse, of course—to deliver a fresh load of road apples. We would then load up our baskets, always preferring, of course, the four-holder types, cover the manure with spirea blossoms and deliver the baskets to our neighbors and relatives. We felt a kind of duty to deliver what came packaged for our amusement.

For instance, we had a neighbor who lived south of us on Logan Street. West side between Seventh and Eighth Streets. Near the big red brick house, the Hudson house, where we never saw any people. Our neighbor was a schoolteacher and I remember one May Day we delivered one of our baskets to her porch while she was entertaining a whole lot of other schoolteachers. All ladies. Miss Akers came out on the porch after our knocking and yelling, picked up the basket and said, "Oh how sweet." She carried it in among the teachers, lifted up the spirea blossoms and took it right out the back door. We, hidden behind a car across the street, laughed wildly at our wit.

One of our favorite stunts was to tie a string of some kind to the basket, hide in the dark, let out the string as the basket was carried into the house, jerk on the string and dump the contents of the basket on the front room rug. Usually the trick didn’t work because the person taking the basket inside would close the door on the string and that was the end of that.

We succeeded once, as I remember. There was an Unruh family who lived on east Seventh Street and they had three sons, all older than us. The oldest of the three was named Robert and was not too swift. We delivered our basket to their porch in the darkness. We knocked, ran, hid. We had kite string attached to the basket. Robert carried the basket in and did not close the door on
DISCONTINUED

BASKETS

KNOCKED

DARK

AAN

HID
the string. We could see that he had set the basket on their dining room table. We worked our string slowly towards our hiding place until I heard Robert yell, "Hey, come back here." The basket fell off the table and I thought he was yelling at the basket. Until Robert and his two brothers, following the string, came out the front door onto the porch. Then it was fear and panic time and a melting away into the darkness.

For some reason, we especially liked to give our baskets to pretty girls. We always gave one to the Blickenstaff girls. We always gave one to Geraldine Goerz, who was terribly aloof and terribly pretty. I examine the idea no further.

Some people say that this world is ruled by divine wisdom. You'll understand, I'm sure, when I tell you that as a child I was already skeptical of that idea. It was hard for me to believe that divine wisdom would put me, a mare and May baskets at 917 Logan Street. Not to mention a couple of cousins who, like me, were "troublesome." I figured for years that something had gone wrong in the genetic code of our parents. Perhaps a chromosome was missing. Perhaps the genes got mixed up. What I did know was that whatever had gone wrong it had gone wrong because my parents had once lived in Oklahoma.

My life of trouble continued, as if naturally, when I went to school. I was expelled from class the first day I went to Kindergarten. My teacher was a Miss Wedel. She was an outstanding conductor of rhythm band. She was a dedicated crayon sorter. I remember well how she had us take naps on throw rugs. We'd put out the rugs, lie down on the floor, she'd put on "Waltz of the Flowers," or "Valse Poupée" on the old windup Victrola and then she'd patrol the little sleepers, walking so close by your head you could count the eyelets in her orthopedic shoes. It was she who on the first day of Kindergarten said to the class, "Class, does anyone know a poem?" I raised my hand. I knew lots
of poems. Miss Wedel said, “Dallas, would you like to share your poem with the class?” I said yes and recited, “Sally Rand lost her fan./Don’t you look, you nasty man.” I was told to leave the room. That was just the beginning.

How or why I knew that poem I don’t know. I suspect, though, that I learned it from Kermit “Buddy” Unruh. He was considerably older than me, but when I was four, five and six he always paid special attention to me. He tossed me in the air, swung me around and carried me on his shoulders. I used to go looking for him when I needed some entertainment. He called me “Moon” because, he said, my face was so round. He teased me and told me funny things. He, as we used to say, “looked after” me. He liked to teach me things I didn’t understand. He knew I was an avid student and it amused him to get me to say things that I shouldn’t say because I didn’t understand what I was saying. Some of the things he told me I didn’t understand until I got married.

In the fifth grade at Roosevelt Grade School I had a teacher named Miss Edith Ericson. She was to me the first really beautiful woman I had ever seen. I was in love with her and certainly never intended or wanted to hurt her. I remember the perfumes she wore. I remember that she wore tight clothes so that you could see the outline of her foundation garment that stretched, it seemed to me, from her kneecaps to her armpits. I remember that when she leaned over to help you with your schoolwork her breast pressed into your shoulder and made concentration difficult. I remember that once I forgot to take a handkerchief to school. My nose was dripping. Miss Ericson lent me one of hers and I blew me nose in it in pure ecstasy.

We also had a neighbor boy named Herman Umbaugh. He was my age and in my class at school. Hence, in Miss Ericson’s class also. Now Herman was probably the least educable person
I’ve ever known. He couldn’t learn anything, it seemed. I used to try to help him with his studies, but trying to explain long division to him was like trying to explain nuclear physics to a fence post. Even when his mother whipped him, which she did a lot, it did no good.

One day in the fifth grade, Herman and I had permission from our parents to go downtown after school and get some shoe boxes. Why we wanted them I don’t remember, but we used shoe boxes for just about everything. We set out after school to go west up Broadway to the stores downtown, but after we crossed Magnolia Street, right by the school, Herman stopped and started writing something on the sidewalk. I walked on until I noticed him writing behind me. He yelled at me, “How do you spell ‘Ericson?’” I yelled back the spelling and we went on downtown. I thought no more about it.

The next day when we came to school, our principal Mr. Hagen, who also taught sixth grade, came into the room and asked all of us to write our teacher’s name on a piece of paper. Deep foreboding rippled through my hands as I wrote that lovely name down. After the papers were collected, the whole class was taken outside and shown what was on the sidewalk. There on the sidewalk was written, “To hell with Ericson.” I was sent to the principal’s office and accused of writing that on the sidewalk. I denied it and was accused of lying. The next thing I knew, I was hiding behind the spirea bushes and watching Miss Ericson knock on the door of our house to tell my parents that I was going to be paddled.

The next day after the punishment, I saw Mr. Hagen on the playground at recess. I went up to him and I asked him what made him think that I had written that on the sidewalk. He grinned at me and said, “You were the only one in the class who could spell your teacher’s name correctly. The others couldn’t even come close.”
The first time I got in trouble in seventh grade in Junior High School, I was sent to the principal's office. The reason I was sent was that I laughed at the wrong time. My seventh grade English teacher, a Miss Schmidt, asked the class if anyone knew the name of a great painter. Someone answered, "Vargas." I thought that was hilarious and was told to leave the room. When the principal Mr. England came into his office, he looked at me and said, "We've been waiting for you, Wiebe."

I decided about this time that I'd had enough of being inadvertent. It was time for calculation. Enough of that stumbling around with May baskets, dumb poems, sidewalk graffiti, useless laughter. We did not pick on Mr. Scott. Herb had been gassed in World War I and had lost a lung. We sat and watched him try to cough up and spit out his good one. No fun there. Nor did we target Mr. Allbaugh. With a name like that he had enough of a burden. Miss Whitted was out because when she walked down the street the bulldogs ran for cover. Our target was Miss Betty Landers, our Latin teacher. She was a wonderful woman who was also plump, had a good sense of humor and couldn't see down in front of her because of her thick glasses. She had the teacher's habit of pointing at you when she was upset with you. She'd point her forefinger, her thumb straight up, the other fingers curled under, as if her hand were a pistol. For instance, I remember her cocking her right hand, pointing at me and saying, "Dallas, what are you doing?" I said, "Nothing." She said, "I can tell by looking at you that you're up to something. Now I don't know what it is but whatever it is I want it stopped immediately."

One of our favorite tricks was to squirt water on her chair and wait for her to sit in it. Because of her thick glasses she couldn't see it. Once she had sat down during a class she never got up again. We sat there trying not to laugh and read Caesar and Cicero and watched her soak our water into her girdle.
We also thought it clever to ask her riddles that suggested off-color answers. We made up the riddles and had no answers for them. Before class we’d decide who was going to ask the question and decide what the question was going to be. So when Miss Landers, sitting in her dampness, asked if there were any questions, I’d raise my hand and say, “Miss Landers, what did one rooster say to the other rooster?” She’d cock her right hand and point and say, “I don’t know and I’m sure I don’t want to hear it.”

I remember well the spring of the year of 1948 when I was to graduate from Newton High School. I had been hoeing in our garden at the corner of Ninth Street and Logan Street. I was resting. I sat on a pile of hedge posts that my dad had hauled home. He always, it seemed, had a trailer attached to his car and he hauled home everything: rocks, used shingles, bent nails, the Santa Fe railroad. As a result, we had a backyard full of junk. Every so often we would move it around, that moving around was called “straightening up.” When Mr. Hinton bought the house next door at 913 Logan, he put up a woven wire fence around his backyard. I thought it was to fence in his Chow dog. I realized later it was to keep out our junk. I several times asked dad why he was collecting all that junk. It was, I suppose, the kind of question that would be asked by a kid who was never going to amount to anything. My dad’s answer was the same, “You never know when you might need it.”

So I was sitting there in the spring of 1948, sitting on that pile of hedge posts that we might need if we were going to put a fence around Harvey County. I sat there and looked out at those rows of peanut plants that would never bear any peanuts, the rows of carrots with the tops eaten off by rabbits, the grapevines that would never have any grapes. I sat there, sweating, my hoe in my hand, and looked at all those weeds and thought, “Dallas, it’s time to do something about your life. If you don’t get going soon you’ll
never amount to anything."

I considered my options. I owned no land so I couldn’t be a farmer. I didn’t have a car and a trailer so I would never have any property. My voice had changed so I couldn’t be a singer in Las Vegas. I had too many pimples to be a movie star and I was too old to make May baskets. I sat there and looked at those doomed vegetables, the triumphant weeds, the Bermuda grass choking out our sweet potatoes, and I decided to become a schoolteacher. I knew I had relatives who were decent and honorable schoolteachers and I knew I had relatives who were indecent and dishonorable schoolteachers and I figured I could fit into one of those categories.

When I graduated from Newton High School, I went to Bethel College in order to enter my profession. I was happy in the idea of being a teacher until I took my first “education” course. It was called “Public School Administration.” It was taught by M.S. Harder. The “M.S.” stood for “Menno Simons.” After the class was over, I decided that that wasn’t what I had in mind.

After I graduated from Bethel College, I went to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and got an M.A. and a Ph.D. in English and American Literature. Since then I’ve taught for some twenty-five years in universities, the last twenty at the University of Cincinnati.

And you know what, friends? It’s funny how your past is never far away. It’s strange how immediate the events of the past can be. It takes but a little nudge and suddenly you can relive what you haven’t thought about for years. And that’s what this reminiscence is all about. Your past cannot be avoided. It’s always there. I’ve taught for those twenty-five years or so and, you know, when I teach a class I never sit down in a chair. I still get nervous when a student raises his hand to ask a question because I know someday some student is going to say, “Professor Wiebe, what did
one bull say to the other bull?” I know that nowadays when a student calls you “Professor” or “Doctor” he is being sarcastic. I know that nowadays if the students want to tell you to go to hell they don’t write it on a sidewalk and they don’t spell your name correctly.

All this came to me in the spring of 1983. It was a Thursday, about 6:30 in the evening. I had had a hard day teaching. I had lectured on *The Sound and the Fury*, *Go Down, Moses*, *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. I was very tired. I packed my briefcase and left my office in McMicken Hall. I had to go to the bathroom so I went into the faculty latrine and sat down in one of the stalls.

On the door of the latrine stall, just at eye level when you were seated, was a graffito. It was about me. I was quite accustomed to seeing my name on bathroom walls at the University of Cincinnati: “Dallas E. Who?”; “Why can’t Professor Wiebe take a coffee break?”; “The Big D. sucks.” But the new graffito that I saw became one of those nudges that brought back the past. I read the graffito and suddenly my cousin Wesley and myself were riding our bicycles through the water in the dip at the corner of Duncan and Broadway. Once again I was walking on east Seventh Street past the big, red brick houses where you never saw any people. Once again I was standing on east Eighth Street and watching Herman Umbaugh set himself on fire. Once again I was riding our mare Nancy bareback down east Ninth Street, me with just swimming trucks on, me showing off for my sisters, riding fast, me seeing a car coming around the blind corner from Logan Street, me feeling the mare stopping abruptly, me sliding down her neck and me falling off and the mare running over me and leaving a hoofprint on the inside of my right thigh, and me sliding on my back in the sand, and me oozing blood and pus from my back for a week.
Once again I could taste mom’s cheese pockets. Once again I ate Aunt Adina’s ham salad sandwiches. Once again I sat and listened to Aunt Louise telling stories on and on and on. Once again Aunt Evelyn looked over the right top of her glasses, clucking her tongue a few times and said, “Oh Dallas, Dallas.”

Once again Buddy Unruh was teaching me, “Mary had a little lamb. She tied him to the heater. And every time he turned around . . . ” Once again I lay on my rug in Roosevelt Kindergarten and watched Miss Wedel’s orthopedic shoes go by and saw the six eyelets in each one. Once again I could smell Miss Ericson’s handkerchief as I blew my nose into it and felt ecstasy for the first time in my life. Once again I was reading Caesar’s Gallic Wars, Cicero’s Orations, Ovid’s Metamorphoses, in Latin, and wondering how our water felt to Miss Landers as she sat in it and soaked it into her girdle. Once again I watched Herb Scott cough up and spit out his one good lung.

Once again I was moving junk around in the backyard to try to make it look neat. Once again I was hoeing the wilting peas and the dead beans at Ninth and Logan. Once again I was unloading boards from dad’s trailer, all the boards stamped “A.T. & S.F.” Once again my cousin Warren Dean was handing me an egg and saying, “I bet you’re afraid to throw that at Miss Whitted’s house,” and after it was over his brother Marvin saying, “Boy, are you going to be in trouble now,” and me thinking, “Now?”

The graffito was in question and answer form. Q. and A. The question was, “How long does it take to let the air out of all four tires on Dr. Weibe’s beige Toyota Corolla?” There were four or five answers underneath the question. I remember one: “How long does it take for a grenade to go off?”

The graffito depressed me. I sat and thought about it. I unrolled some paper and held it in my right hand. I sat and thought about the depression and I realized that I wasn’t depressed because
PENCIL and CORRECTION PENCIL

rected the wording and corrected my spellings.

took out my

book and started reading again.
the graffito was about me. I was accustomed to that. I wasn't depressed because of the implied threat or because the students knew what kind of car I drove. I think I was depressed because my name was misspelled because I have a lifelong principle and still firmly believe that if you're going to gig somebody publicly you must at least spell the person's name correctly.

I sat there a while in my depression until a thought came to me. It was a thought that came from far in my past, so far in my past that it seemed as if it came from events that happened moments earlier. It was as if divine wisdom had said, "Dallas, sursum corda. Lift up your heart." The thought that came did lift up my heart. It made me want to get up and do my work, to teach my classes, to do what I had to do so that I would someday amount to something. I took out my pencil and corrected the spelling of my name as any decent and honorable teacher would do. I wrote under the graffito, "C-, D.W." as any indecent and dishonorable teacher would do. The thought that came to me and lifted me up was a very simple one. It was: "Thank God, thank God, these students don't know about May baskets."

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DALLAS WIEBE was born in Newton, Kansas, on January 9, 1930. He grew up there and attended Newton public schools, graduating from high school in 1948. He attended Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, and graduated in 1954 with a B.A. in English Literature. From 1954-1960 he studied at the University of Michigan, receiving his M.A. in Literature in 1955 and his Ph.D. in English and American Literature in 1960. His Ph.D. dissertation dealt with the fiction of Wyndham Lewis. He taught at the University of Wisconsin from 1960-1963 and then moved to the University of Cincinnati. After teaching for thirty-two years at the University of Cincinnati, mostly in the creative writing program in the English Department, he retired in January of 1995. He is now Emeritus Professor. His publications include two novels: Skyblue the Badass (Doubleday-Paris Review Editions, 1969) and Our Asian Journey (MLR Editions Canada, 1997). He has published four books of short stories: The Transparent Eye-Ball (Burning Deck, 1982), Going to the Mountain (Burning Deck, 1988) Skyblue's Essays (Burning Deck, 1995) and The Vox Populi Street Stories (Burning Deck, 2003). He received the Aga Khan Fiction Prize from Paris Review in 1978 and the next year a Pushcart Prize. In 1998 he was awarded the Ohio Arts Council's Governor's Award for Individual Artist. His stories have appeared in many journals, including Paris Review, North American Review, Epoch, Fiction International and others. His poems have appeared in numerous journals and he has published a book of minimalist poems entitled The Kansas Poems (1987). He was a founder and editor of Cincinnati Poetry Review through the first twenty-four issues. He is a founder and former president of the Cincinnati Writers' Project. Currently he is at work putting together an anthology of poems about Mozart and rewriting his unpublished book of short stories entitled Slapsticks.
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