

Testimony: To Glimpse the Sublime (Part 1)

Robert Beebe

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Rbeebe52@yahoo.com



Norwich, Connecticut, ca. 1960



I stood atop my seat in the sturdy mahogany pew amidst the multitudinous congregation of the United Congregational Church as it sang The Lord, Our Father in thunderous unison. At my left was my mother, dressed in a long velvet skirt with matching vest over a fluffy yellow blouse and capped by a yellow dress hat. Her eyes fixed intently on the hymn book in her hands, she joined in the singing with her low shy voice. On my right, my older sister's clear confident soprano nearly drowned her out. Standing on my toes, I strained to look over numerous rows of people to the pulpit. There stood an old man in a long black robe, hand waving in air, leading the congregation in the singing. Flanking him were various other men similarly dressed. Beyond them, along ascending steps, stood the throng of men and women who formed the choir. And behind them all, its smooth chords flowing in and around the voice of the congregation, rose the gleaming copper pipes of the huge organ.

Suddenly the singing stopped, and people all around the spacious chamber settled back into their seats. I felt my mother's large firm hands grasp me

on either side, picking me up and setting me gently down on my seat. I looked up at her softly smiling face as she brushed my rumpled little suit. A hush had fallen over the congregation, broken only by an incessant string of muffled coughs. I became aware again of that permeating odor of mahogany so peculiar to that church. Then, with the first words from the pulpit, the people of the congregation lowered their heads as one. And so they remained as he alone spoke from his elevated position at the front of the church. The tone of his voice flowed from a low drone to a high-pitched tone and back again with

incredible ease, charged with far more passion and energy than I had heard from anyone else. My eyes wandered about the chamber, from the mysterious dark recesses far in the front to the tall narrow arch-shaped stained glass windows to the intricately carved white wooden balcony overlooking the congregation and straight up to the rafters of the vaulted ceiling. I could feel the eternally cold pew against my craning neck as I gazed skyward in wonder.

With my eyes fixed on the ceiling, the minister fell silent. The eyes of the congregation rose as mine fell. As I was turning my head towards my mother, a chorus of angelic voices descended from above. Following my mother's uplifted gaze, I raised my eyes to the balcony where a heretofore unnoticed cluster of children, their heads and white-draped shoulders just visible above the railing, were singing Carry Me to Heaven, O Jesus!

* * *

Norwich, 6 years later



"Hey, you guys! Let's go up there! You've got ten minutes to get down here for breakfast," my mother hollered from below.

"Oh boy," grumbled my brother, rolling over in the adjacent bed.

In utter warmth and comfort, I lay still in my bed, knees near my chest, blankets drawn up under my chin. Another Sunday! And with it came the obligation to drag myself out of bed and dress for Sunday school. On some Sundays my brother and sister and I were excused from this painful exercise. The presence of visitors, work that needed to be done around the house or in the yard, or some other contingency could provide the relief. But this week it had been made clear to us that we'd have to go. Only bad weather could have saved us. I looked out the window above my brother's bed. The sky was a perfect baby blue.

"You boys are being awfully quiet up there. Don't let me have to come up there after you." My father's husky voice this time.

Not one to take my father's threats lightly, I threw off the covers and set my feet on the cold floor. Before stepping out into the cold hallway, I turned to look at my still recumbent brother. Cocooned in his blankets with his back to me, all I could see of him were brown tufts of his hair upon the pillow.

"You'd better get up!" I warned.

A dull groan emanated from the bed. "In a couple of minutes," was the muffled reply.

I shrugged and turned left into the bathroom. With toothpaste in one hand and toothbrush in the other, my thoughts dwelled on the next two hours - being with people whom I saw only at church and knew hardly at all, feeling guilty about my irregular attendance, and the numbing ritual of lesson and prayer. Paste on brush, I scrubbed my teeth roughly until they bled. Oooh, how I hated Sunday school! It was during these minutes of preparation that my desire not to go reached intense levels. What I would have given at those moments to avoid being thrust into that alien world and remain in the familiar surroundings of home. How I would have rather lounged around reading the newspapers or spent time with my friends!

I spit the toothpaste out into the sink and washed out my mouth with water. After wiping my hands, I returned to my room. The lump in my brother's bed hadn't budged.

"Hey Gary, you better get ready for Sunday school," I admonished him, "or you'll be in trouble."

No response.

Feeling playfully aggressive, I walked softly over to my brother's bed, leaned over him and jostled his body.

"Hey c'mon, whaddya think ya doin'?" he whined as his arms and legs flayed in vain attempts to push me away, in the process rumpling the blankets into total disarray.

"Well, get up then," I smirked, easing up and walking away, satisfied at having disrupted his little heaven.

"I'll get up. Don't worry," he retorted curtly as I shuffled into the closet. I rummaged about in search of my blue tie with the gold anchor imprinted on the front.

I soon heard my mother's irritated voice from the doorway. "Gary, will you get up and get dressed? It's almost ten-thirty!"

My brother moaned. Peering out from the closet, I watched him turn over slowly to look at my mother. In a pitiful nasal voice, he responded, "I don't feel very well, Ma. Can I stay home today?"

What! Not feeling well? Why, that little faker!

A look of skepticism crossed my mother's face.

"Not feeling well, huh?" She strode over to his bed. Sitting down on it, she placed the back of her hand on his forehead. "You don't seem to have a fever."

"But I feel really awful, Ma. I can har'ly breathe an' my throat's pretty sore." His face took on a sickly expression with his eyes half-closed and his mouth half-opened. He wheezed slightly through his nose. My mother scrutinized him as my brother played his act to the hilt. Finally, she pulled herself up off the bed.

"All right, but you're staying in bed all day. I'll bring you up some orange juice after I get Bobby squared away downstairs. Let's go, Bob. It's getting late."

My dressing had been brought to a standstill by the little scene. I stood in the closet's entrance in my underwear.

"Your father and I have to go to New London this morning, so Mrs. Johnson will be taking you and Deborah to church. She'll be here at ten-to, so let's go," said my mother as she hurried out of the room.

Picking my pants up off the bed, I glared at my brother as his face broke into a grin.

Princeton University, 6 years later



Princeton University Chapel

The lamplight reflected off the wet road in ever changing patterns as Jane and I walked along. A cold, moist early spring breeze battered our reddened faces. We walked in silence. My hands dug deep into my coat pockets while my chin pressed against my collar in a protracted attempt to fend off the chill. Jane walked more freely, Bible in hand, her straight brown hair hanging uncovered over her loosely fitting white raincoat, seemingly unaffected by the weather. We'd just finished a long conversation/lecture/sales pitch on the message of Jesus Christ, and its wake found me lost in thought.

Jane lived in my dorm one floor below my roommates and me. Frail, timid, but surprisingly strong-willed about her beliefs, she "witnessed" frequently for her Lord like any good Christian. Although turning off most people in the dorm, including my roommates, a few like myself were receptive to her. Ironically, although repulsed by religion since childhood, I found myself intrigued by what she had to say. Perhaps, having gotten away from the dry routine of attending church during my childhood, I now felt confident enough to approach the subject in my own way. My thoughts dwelled often on spiritual matters and, when Jane came in my direction, I jumped at the chance to talk to her.

I was amazed. Through countless conversations, her enthusiasm never waned. Answering an endless series of questions, she guided me through the passages of the Bible. My mind easily grasped the contents, or so I thought. Yet, her unbounded delight and unquestioning faith in God suggested something more, something I was missing. I had received Christ's message. Why was I not rejoicing and giving myself up to Him as Jane had years before? Why did I not feel the irrepressible urge to go out and spread the "good news" to the world, or at least to my roommates?

Jane's explanation: I had to start associating myself with other Christians. See how they lived their lives of faith. Then I would understand. After an unrelenting stream of invitations from Jane, I finally consented to give it a try and go to a Bible study meeting.

We approached the building where upstairs the weekly meeting was to be held, its dark Gothic shape set against the moonlit sky. My already smoldering apprehension began to flare. Jane, sensing my anxiety, smiled gently at me.

"Don't worry, Bob. Everybody's real friendly," she reassured me in her soft, shy voice.

I nodded knowingly. Observed from afar, those in the "God Squad," a name colloquially applied to the group, seemed to radiate an unceasing confident happiness, almost to the point of snobbery. It was this apparently unfettered happiness and my inability to comprehend it which lay at the root of my feelings of apprehension.

We reached the outside entrance at the end of an arched passage and stepped inside. The large downstairs room, replete with stuffed chairs and sofas and a plush purple carpet, was quiet. As we ascended the wide stairway, I could hear voices filtering down from above. Turning on the intermediate landing, I could see several people standing in an open hallway, evidently just outside the room where the Bible study was to be held. Three guys and two girls - all quite well-dressed. The guys wore slacks or corduroys, the girls knee-length dresses. Colorful, but simple. As we reached the top of the stairway, they broke their conversation to greet us.

"Ah, Jane," hailed the tallest boy. He had black bushy hair and a rather gaunt face. "I see you brought a friend."

He smiled at me warmly.

I shifted my feet uneasily as Jane looked at me brightly, then back at the group.

"Yes, this is Bob. He'd like to participate in our study tonight," she said proudly. I looked into their smiling faces, shaking hands all around.

"We're happy to have you, Bob," said the tall one. Bill was his name, dropping a hint of a drawl this time.

"Where are you from, Bob?" inquired one of the girls sweetly.

I looked into her inquiring eyes, staring out at me from behind the brown horned-rimmed glasses set on her plain pale face.

"Uh, Connecticut," I responded hesitantly.

"Oh, we have someone else from Connecticut. Wayne Gordon," she informed me, casting a searching glance into the meeting room.

I followed her glance and met a host of faces staring out at me through the doorway. I had very quickly

become the center of attention, it seemed. Promptly, I swung my head back to face my next questioner. My discomfort heightened. In the subsequent minutes I caught small snatches of conversation floating in from the other room. Their contents suggested that Jane had mentioned me to them previously. Irritated at this realization, I glanced sidelong at Jane, who was engrossed in a discussion about a biblical passage with the pale-faced girl. Finally, upon a call from within, we entered the long rectangular room. Uneasily, I took my place with the group.

Princeton, one year later



Out through the large wooden doors floated the undulating choral sounds of a hymn. The open doors invited me in. Two young men stood watching the service through the left entrance into the nave from the dark and dank vestibule. They took no notice of me as I paused for a few moments to unbundle myself from my winter garments. Through the right entrance, scores of pews marched in impeccable formation to the chancel at the opposite end of the church.

It was not my first visit to the Princeton University Chapel. Its neo-Gothic structure and immense inner chamber were familiar to me. However, none of my previous visits were made with the design for which this one was intended.

My association with the Christian group over the past year had not filled me with the love of Jesus Christ. Indeed, my relationship with most members had become strained as the evidence of this fact grew with my invidious questioning of their beliefs. My refusals to eat my dinners with them instead of with my secular friends or to attend Sunday afternoon Bible studies and Sunday evening services only sustained my status as a spiritual outsider. The group had come to be what Sunday school had been to me as a child. Whether it was the group's fault or mine, I felt stifled rather than liberated with its members. Its spiritual message was being choked by the pressure I felt to conform to its rituals. I had concluded that my search had to be made alone so I would not be distracted by the beliefs and experiences of others. Recalling the awe and wonder I had felt as a young boy sitting in church services with my mother, I had come to the chapel seeking to recapture those feelings.

I walked quietly into the nave. The scattered congregation, perhaps filling half of the church's capacity, was standing and singing Glory to the Highest. I slipped into an empty pew near the back among other sparsely-populated pews. Peering down the center aisle, the density of the people increased as my gaze approached the front. The hall was long, narrow, and steeply-vaulted, its framework constructed entirely in a grey concrete. It was dimly lit by two rows of chandeliers running the length of the church and by several small floodlights shining earthward from the apex of the ceiling. Thick columns reaching to the sloping ceiling lined the outer edges of the pews on both sides. Behind them, untouched by direct light, stood more rows of pews where a few isolated individuals sat.

There were two podiums. The higher one, the pulpit, faced the congregation from the left. The other looked across the chancel from the right. The choir stood in the recess between them. Behind the choir stood a modest altar over which loomed a huge stained glass window. A cold draft pervaded the expansive structure.

The hymn having been sung, the congregation seated itself noisily and awaited the commencement of the sermon. The chaplain, a tiny figure with white hair and wearing a scarlet robe, had ascended to the pulpit and was turning some pages, presumably of the Bible. Presently, he cleared his throat and spoke, his voice amplified by a microphone, welcoming the congregation and visitors to "God's house of worship." There I sat, listening not so much to his words but to the tone of his voice. I tried to feel the ambience of the church, searching for those elements which had so impressed me thirteen years before, trying to infuse them again with that mysticism they had once possessed.

But the aura and wonder did not return. Although physically larger, the interior of the chapel would not become the literal embodiment of "God's house" as the nave of the United Congregational Church of Norwich had been to me. The vaulted ceiling obviously reached only a hundred-odd feet above the floor, not to the heavens. The darker recesses of the building contained only people, if anyone at all, not saints or devils. And the voice bellowing forth from the pulpit was not God's, but merely the chaplain's, assisted by a sound system. Everything which formerly had radiated a lustrous spirituality now revealed nothing but human vulgarity.

Browns Mills, New Jersey, two years later (1975)

"Do-be-do-be-doobee-doobee, do-be-do-be-doobee-do," I chanted melodiously as I bounced my brother Gene's two-year-old daughter on my knee. She laughed in her high-pitched voice, displaying her recently acquired set of off-white teeth. Her big round eyes gleamed.

"A-gain!" she insisted, rocking back and forth. She pushed me playfully on the chest.

"Oh, no," I begged off. "Uncle Bob's tired." I put on an easily mustered expression of fatigue.

Not to be denied, she bounced herself emphatically on my knee. "A-gain! A-gain, Unca Bob!"

"All right, Kelly. One last time."

With that, I "do-be-doobeed" several more times, finishing with a flourishing toss high into the air and setting her down gently on the hardwood floor. She gurgled happily as I pushed myself out of the chair to go into the kitchen.

The clock over the sink read four o'clock. My brother and his wife ought to be back fairly soon, I thought. We were to have dinner before I was to accompany my brother to evening church service. After a period of several months during which he suffered from long spells of depression and turned to drinking, he had "found Christ." His conversion both interested and disturbed me. Although glad to see him in good spirits, I recognized his vulnerability and feared his being attracted to more fanatical religious elements. As for myself, the circumstances had brought me back to those old familiar arguments that address themselves to one's fears rather than to one's hopes. Feeling once again the social pressure to join - to conform - I was convinced more than ever that his road should not be mine.

Kelly's giggles tore me from my thoughts. I stepped to the doorway and smiled. Sitting in the middle of the floor, she was clapping her hands joyfully and staring at the far wall. There, a newly hung silver cross, gleaming in the sunlight that was flooding in through the picture window, had entranced the little girl. I remained leaning against the doorway, marveling at her unaffected enjoyment and appreciation of beauty. My mind contrasted this to the sometimes confoundedness of adults, and their habitual ignorance of nature's - God's - simple gifts. That delighted child, like my younger self, sat closer to the Divine Spirit than others older than she. Unencumbered by an awareness of the meanness of the world into which she had been born, she was capable of seeing clearly the beauty of the things that touched her senses. Witnessing such rapture, I regained the hope of one day transcending this world and glimpsing the sublime.

To be continued...