



-Then and Now-

Howard (Doc) Whitaker, Class of 1971

I will spare you the opening line of *David Copperfield*.

This newsletter is filled with old men's peans to how Columbia Military Academy molded them into their destiny as civic, military, and business leaders. It gave them lifelong friends, discipline and direction, a wonderful education, and an ethos around which to build their life.

I do not doubt those things are true. I concede that they are largely true for me. But my story is a bit different.

In small river towns in the early 1960's, people left the keys in their car, their doors, even their firearms, unsecured. Who would fault an enterprising youngster who could exploit this for his entertainment? Sadly, some did find fault and I found myself remanded to the Junior School at Columbia Military Academy. It was 1966. I was 12.

For five years, I remained refractory to whatever the whole 'discipline' business was about. In the beginning, I was not so much defiant as that I just didn't get it. The Commandant's Office and Ragsdale Hall were like Kafka's Castle. Each year my awkward perplexity hardened further into resentment. I was not sure what was wanted, but I clearly didn't have it. I didn't care for the chosen. And the chosen didn't care for me.



The academics were wasted on me as well. I know now that I was neurologically inaccessible any subject requiring sequential learning—math, languages, most science. By the second week every year, I was hopelessly lost and never recovered. My inability to grasp and retain anything only confirmed that I was, at the very least, foolish and ungrateful for the opportunities laid before me. I was a disappointment. Several frustrated faculty had no qualms using stern, frequently public words to tell me these things. Without the filter of adulthood, cadet leaders told me worse. Let's not even start about how bullying runs down the food chain. Five years is a long time in adolescence.

Despite their best intentions, CMA divines, good men like Colonels Gracy, Hart, Edison, Thomas, *et al.*, could never engage me. But there were some who could and did.

I liked words and sounds and rhythms. Walker McGinnis taught me that I could write words down on paper. Mel Black taught me that I could make those words come out of my mouth. John Rose diverted my attention with Anglican clergy poets—Swift, Donne, Herbert, plus T.S. Eliot—who would collectively come to guide my life more than anyone could have imagined. These instructors gave me the first and only "A" grades of my young academic career. Very few followed until graduate school. Everything else was Cs and Ds.

Ben Deutschman dug ancient, uncased Stromberg-Carlson sound components out of his closets. They were sparking, shocking, smoking beasts with vacuum tubes, exposed wiring, and huge transformers. These became my first quality stereo. The only "old Jewish guy" I had ever met, he filled me with exotic stories of Cleveland, Philadelphia, and New York City; circus bands, artists, and recording studios. Did you know that on the very day of my birth, a reluctant Frank Sinatra first sat down in a studio with Nelson Riddle and restarted his career? To tag along with this man to the Nashville symphony offices or to ASCAP was a trip to another world. Even now, when I sit for a performance of the Buffalo Philharmonic, he is right behind me. My son is named Benjamin.

The lovably cantankerous 'Momma (Pearl) Murrell,' LPN, had a daughter who returned to college mid-life for her doctorate in Special Education. I became the daughter's thesis project. Teacher, therapist, fierce advocate, parent. Jesus saved my soul, but Vivian Coffey (Tomlin) saved my life.

There was the retired, regular Army colonel battling late-stage cancer, who painfully tutored me in step-by-step algebra when the regular faculty refused to waste any more of their time. A West Pointer, the Army may have passed on William Booth, but he didn't pass on me.

It was an old insider, who in a drunken confession, called my father late one hot summer night in 1970 to explain the real reasons I had been passed over for military promotion going into my senior year. It had little to do with me. This was the way the world really worked. Lesson learned, again.

In fact, it wasn't the CMA Pantheon, but the detoured, misfit, closeted, failed, drunk, broken, and has-beens who taught be the most about character, courage, dignity, and honor. These were the real heroes. It was a theme which would present itself often in my life.

Yeah, there were a few friends. All you need is three or four. Through my junior and senior years, we would sit on the floor of a corner room in North Johnson. Smoking, possibly drinking, maybe worse. We could watch the commandant and elderly night watchman patrolling the campus. We were discards who raised each other the best we knew how.

Teenage experiments in alcohol and pharmacology were aided by similar cells at Castle Heights and Harpeth Hall. Black-market trading flourished. A Tennessee Driver's License at the time was little more than a small form printed on grey green card stock. A little skill with an IBM Selectric, a razorblade, and a Xerox machine could produce credible fake IDs encased in plastic. (I copied a lot of band music on the machine in the business office.) As it turned out, alcohol and pot were way too discoverable by their odor. Parents' medicine chests and bedside tables were ripe for discreet harvest. Eventually, we moved on to blotter acid. Stick it in a book; carry it in your wallet. Shakedown could never find it. They didn't even know what they were looking for. Apparently, Janis and Jimi didn't want our company in the hereafter; we all survived.

When bullshit is the only thing you have, you become a master. Despite abysmal SATs and laughingstock grades, I weaseled my way into American University. Some pretty non-standard reference letters from Coffey, Rose, and Deutschman undoubtedly helped. Bored with college, I graduated in two and a half years and ended up—wait for it—on the Baltimore City Police Department. Amazingly, I carried the handcuffs on my belt rather than wearing them on my wrist. This was decades before David Simon's *The Wire*, but you get the idea. Two years of inner-city Baltimore scared me so badly that I ended up running a garage and wrecker service in the rural North Carolina mountains for the next seven years. I spat in the woodstove. I married. I had children. The story should have ended there with a quiet, redeemed life.

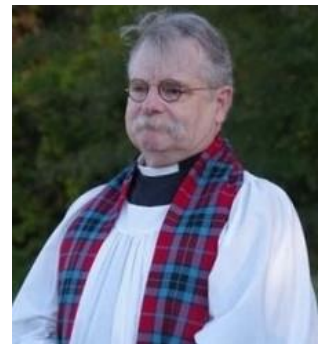
It was probably Teresa of Avila who said God draws straight with crooked lines. At age 33, I ended up in seminary.

I have now been an Episcopal priest in clinical practice for well over 30 years, serving in office, hospital, and parish settings. I consult for religious issues in psychiatry. I am a pathologist. I work with things like trauma, religious psychopathology, personality disorder, religious abuse, self-injury, suicide, murder, and misconduct.

In the 20 teens, I ran consultations with churches on the east coast. In the 20 aughts, I was department head of a large state psychiatric hospital where I served on the governing body, taught, and chaired the ethics committee. Before that, I maintained a successful private practice and consultancy for most of a decade. Somewhere along the line, I completed a doctorate and collected a trunk full of clinical certifications. I taught court mandated divorcing parenting classes for 18 years. I helped develop early in-home family therapy interventions for at risk children. I taught on the conference circuits for chaplains and psychiatrists. I deployed with the American Red Cross for the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks and another NGO for the Tri-State Crematory incident.

I am a worker priest and poor peoples' pastor. Theologically, I skew toward Hebrew prophets and the Sermon on the Mount. I am looking at my fourth generation of bishops and their retinues, and my third generation of psychiatrists. I have past or present alliances with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, Integrity USA, and organized labor—including the Industrial Workers of the World.

I do not write to sing *old lang syne*, nor to whine, or settle scores. I only wish to mark this down. This: I am not unique. Not all bellhops grew up to play golf, join civic luncheon clubs, and follow SEC football. We will probably not join you to shoot sporting clays at reunions. There were a lot of us who did not fit the mold at the time, and we do not fit the mold now. We represent CMA as much as the rest of you. I am grateful for my time behind the iron fence. I doubt I would have survived my local public high school. But, gentlemen: bless your antagonists, for they make you who you are.



Doc Whitaker is a bookseller and beekeeper in Scottsboro, Alabama. He and Mz. Kay are both retired. Returning to his river rat childhood, he serves as a towboat chaplain with the Seamen's Church Institute for the Tennessee Valley and upper Tenn-Tom Waterway.