

## **Inspiration Through Ploughing** **Cordell Affeldt, July 16, 2017**

So there sat the question, awaiting my response: who or what inspires you, Cordell?

Well, of course, music came to mind immediately. Music soothes, as in my fifth grade songbook's "Flow Gently Sweet Afton", in praise of a quiet English country stream. Or music excites—as in the great swells of Stravinsky's "Firebird" filling the deep oval of London's Royal Albert Hall.

Nature is certainly inspiring—on a crest above Dawson City in Canada's Yukon Territory on the summer solstice, snow-capped mountain peaks stretching forever into the distance, standing with other chattering tourists waiting see the sun reach its lowest point—and then realizing that the talk, and then murmuring, had segued to complete, awed silence.

However, as these scenes flashed through my mind, I realized that neither music nor nature really nailed it for me. Music and nature *are* powerfully moving. Music and nature pull me again and again. So what's missing, Cordell? What more do you want for your answer to the summer theme?

Slowly, it came to me. I spotted what was missing for me: to what *end* are you inspired? For what *purpose*? I realized that I actually experience music and nature primarily as thrilling entertainment, but that I most value inspiration to action. That, in turn, led to my realizing that previous personal writing I've done, about several significant experiences that have reshaped my life course, would be my source for recounting to you that which has inspired me to action.

This morning I will share an event that affirmed for me that you can't plough a field by turning it over in your mind. Of several major life events that have taught me that adversity offers inspiration for action, I will share some of what I've written about my divorce.

### **FROM-----Don: An Unexpected Loss**

A cold Lake Michigan wind greeted us as we exited the Chicago theater where we had just seen the play **Equus**. My husband Don, a theater aficionado, had been looking forward to seeing the play for a long time, so I expected an animated review as soon as we walked out the door. Instead, there was total silence as he quickly headed down the sidewalk toward the parking garage.

My husband had so looked forward to seeing this new production of the 1973 play, **Equus**. He'd told me that it had strong reviews. The writing was powerful, the acting skillful. He followed drama and I appreciated that he'd gotten us tickets and turned it into a special evening out. Even though the performance had been more intense than I expected, even though the stabbing of the horses' eyes made for a bloody ending, I valued having this night together, immersed in theatre art.

“Don,” I called as I tried to keep up with him. “Don, what’s wrong?”

Don did not answer as he continued walking.

“Don, what’s the matter? Talk to me. What’s going on? I don’t understand.”

I continued behind him until he suddenly stepped into the dark vestibule of a shop long closed for the day.

“Is your stomach upset? Do you hurt? Don, come on. Please, I can’t help if I don’t know what this is about.”

His head turned side to side: no. I figured it must not be his stomach, or leg pain from sitting in the theatre. What could be hurting? Hands covering his face, he turned from me. I could see tears starting down my husband’s cheeks. His rounded back betrayed shoulders hunched in pain. His sobs grew in intensity and the stream became a flood. Wet spilled onto the thick gray wool sleeves of his winter coat. His wrenching crying continued, but without explanation. The large theater crowd had dispersed. Here there were no passers-by. We were alone, save for this out-sized distress.

I felt truly concerned. Should I be seeking out help? Frightened, I wondered if we would be able to get to our home that night, southeast of Chicago, in Valparaiso, Indiana. I tried to review the location of our car in the parking garage, assuming that I would be the driver for that hour long return trip. But what had brought on this sobbing? This was more than simple crying.

Don’s hand slipped inside his coat, fumbling to reach the pocket of his sports jacket. A neatly pressed white handkerchief emerged. The shaking shoulders slowly calmed. My articulate, precise, academically skilled husband wiped his face and stepped back onto the sidewalk, headed for the transit authority garage. My gold suede heels moved forward swiftly. I followed the mystery.

Don never explained. It took another year before I pieced together why he had broken down that night.

We had been married just ten years at the time [of the theatre incident]. Don was an instructor in the Philosophy Department of Valparaiso University. I taught fifth grade in the Duneland School Corporation at the southern end of Lake Michigan in northwest Indiana’s Porter County. In the months after our Chicago experience, our marriage became [overtly] strained. I reexamined events that eventually helped me understand the significance of Don’s intense reaction to **Equus**.

- **The story continues: A long wait for Don to return from the men’s restroom at Plymouth Plantation historic site in Massachusetts, Don unwilling to talk the rest of day, or to stop for any sightseeing.**

In April, Don told me that his academic Dean was pressuring him. Eventually, Don revealed to me that the Dean kept returning to a statement Don had made in a social gathering of students. To a guitar-playing male student he had said, “We could make beautiful music together.” I found the phrasing odd, but expected that Don would suavely and successfully parry with Dean Baeppler. It came as a surprise to me when Don abruptly decided to enroll in the University of Chicago Law School. He mailed his application within the final fifteen minutes before the mail truck left town, one day before the submission deadline.

That fall, I continued to live in our Valparaiso home. Don spent his weeks in Chicago, newly immersed in law studies, renting space from an investment broker he’d met while helping his recently widowed mother arrange her financial affairs. The downtown apartment wasn’t close to the University of Chicago campus on the south side, but it certainly was gracious and comfortable.

Weekends together in Valparaiso were less gracious. Our arguments grew in frequency and intensity. Mostly, I posed questions and Don dismissed me. When he did engage, he could out-argue me on any point. His knowledge of Latin and Greek from his Concordia Senior High pre-seminary studies had brought him an extensive vocabulary. Ministers in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod are solidly prepared academically. Don’s rhetorical analysis skills were honed further during his Masters in Philosophy program at the University of Chicago. I felt myself gamed, but I didn’t know how to effectively counter. On Sunday evenings, I looked forward to the time when Don would get in the car and leave for Chicago.

- **The story continues: A trip to Mexico for a friend and me, airfare and lodging all paid for by Don**
- **A late night fight after discovering Don still up, and drunk**

A phone call came to mind, from the previous year, while Don was away for his first year at law school in Chicago. A college friend had called to lovingly attune my awareness. Ann shared that her husband had revealed to her that he was homosexual. I was taken aback. I knew him well. I was friends with Dave before I became friends with Ann. I thought such behavior only happened in distant locales, the participants removed from ordinary society. I had dismissed her suggestion that I consider the possibility that Don was homosexual.

A year later, our big, yelling fight prodded me to reconsider. Over that fall and winter I pieced it together. A story devised to explain meeting his new “roommate”. An attempted sexual hookup with a male student. Abrupt enrollment in law school, avoiding further inquiry by leaving University teaching. A tryst in a public restroom and a day’s driving to savor the experience. A surprise Mexican vacation for me, to free him for a week-long assignation with a man.

I agonized over what action I should take. Should I leave him? Divorce would announce FAILURE. I anguished over the prospect of caring for a home and financial affairs all on my own. Should I confront Don and expect him to stop seeing men? It was 1976. *No one* ever talked about this phenomenon. The word “gay” did not exist in common vocabulary. AIDS was

unidentified. Rock Hudson was still viewed as one of the manliest of male Hollywood stars. History's timeline shows that the American Psychiatric Association had only that year voted, by a small majority, to remove homosexuality as a mental illness.

- **The story continues: my pre-internet public library research, yielding almost no materials of any use**

Don rejected my suggestion that we see a marriage counselor together. So I went myself, several times. I was shocked when the counselor inferred that the marriage problem might not be my fault alone. What should I do?

Don offered an answer. One July weekend he unexpectedly didn't come back to Valparaiso. His "roommate" told me he didn't know where Don was. The better of our two cars was gone. I was scheduled to leave for New York City, as a delegate to the July 1976 Democratic National Convention. Through the influence of the political arm of the Indiana State Teachers Association, I had been chosen to play a part. This would be the first time in history that organized teachers participated as delegates to national political conventions. Under other circumstances I would have been ecstatic.

- **The story continues: my delegate role was exciting; at home: numerous pre-convention calls from candidate campaigns; in NYC: rambunctious state caucuses, celebrity photo ops, jam-packed days.**

Texas Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, the first African-American woman to deliver a convention keynote, spoke powerfully on the need for national community, a speech of enduring distinction. Senator John Glenn of Ohio, former astronaut, was the other keynoter. The DNC presidential nominee was chosen early, former Georgia governor, Jimmy Carter. He, in turn, selected as his vice-presidential running mate, Minnesota Senator Walter Mondale, a protégée of Hubert Humphrey. The convention focus was on presenting party unity, given the Democratic losses of the two previous presidential elections. Everything felt promising and wondrous.

Except inside me, where I could not stop my steady stream of worry. Despite the rapid pace and excitement of each day, I fell asleep only after exhausting a string of imagined homecomings. Would Don be there? Would he have changed the locks so I couldn't get in? I called my parents in Wild Rose, Wisconsin to alert them that I might need help on returning home to Indiana. I didn't tell them about my mouth. Inside my lower jaw a canker sore was spreading aggressively. The shallow, enlarging lesion stung bitterly when touched by salty or acidic food. I resorted to a diet of vanilla milkshakes.

- **Story continues: on returning home, we met in Chicago for dinner out on our 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary, at which I delivered my decision**
- **Don took me to an all-male dance club before taking me to my car, strengthening my will**

- **I did it, on December 23, 1976. Without expectation of any future joy or satisfaction, I was inspired to go it alone, for emotional survival. Don was my inspiration; divorce was my action.**

The reason why Don wept after leaving the Chicago theatre production of “**Equus**”? When I saw the play again on Broadway, thirty-six years later, I understood. It is about homosexuality. I hadn’t understood the direct meaning for our marriage. Don had wanted me to raise the topic. He had cried because I was too naïve to do that work for him.

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Within less than a decade for me: divorce; over a weekend, the unexpected death of the president of the Indiana State Teachers Association, bringing an abrupt job change for classroom teacher, outsider vice-president me; move immediately to Indianapolis, for my new, full-time executive role; after five and one-half years in the public eye, return to classroom teaching; reclaim my home from renters, totally redecorate the house; sell it and buy another, this one in Pennsylvania; move to the new state, start another new job, on staff for the Pennsylvania State Education Association. Four years later, the diagnosis of a brain tumor, with medical salvation through neurosurgeon Dr. Roger Ostdahl, a member of this congregation. The decade gifted me with several opportunities inspiring action!

I’ve learned that inspiration may come sneaking into your life. It may come cloaked in pain and confusion. You may not recognize it at first. Your examination may need to go so deep that the hurt compounds. But you can’t plough a field by turning it over in your mind. In the midst of your troubles, finally you’ll spot a narrow point at which you can begin to change your situation. You will see a foggy path through the mess. You begin step, by step, by step. Your steps will accumulate. You will make progress.

I’m not recommending going looking for misfortune, but I’m here to tell you, adversity offers inspiration for action.