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QUESTING

Sometime after I moved my permanent home to Smith Mountain Lake I had a phone call from a local resident there in Franklin County asking if I was the Carey Brewer who played the bass tuba in the E.C. Glass High School band back in the early forties. When I allowed that I was indeed that person, my caller identified himself as a fellow bandsman whom I had knowⁿ quite well and asked: "How in the hell did you get to be a college president?"

Well, I knew this was a rhetorical question, but since our paths had seldom crossed during the past 45 years, I really felt I needed to explain how the hell I did get to be a college president. After all, we had palled around together and had been very close friends before going our separate ways into military service. I didn't try to tell him anything there on the telephone but we did agree to talk about it some time, which we never did.

Since then I have thought about this more in terms of why rather than how. The how of it is pretty straight forward in retrospect. Unless you win the lottery, it's easy to retrace your path along the career ladder, one step leading to the next. Wherever you end up, that is how you got there.

On the why side it is much more interesting, it seems to me, partly because sometimes we can't explain why we do things, but mainly because why involves motive.

Early in my career my objective was to become a college teacher. (Before that my chief goal was to get out of the military and get into college!)

In my quest for the appropriate college teaching credentials I encountered new experiences causing me to adjust my objectives from time to time, leading to a quite different career pattern, including a lengthy period of Federal service as well as a college presidency.

Like the Man of La Mancha, my questing became my career. (His quest was for a chivalrous mission; I merely assumed that my quest was noble, if not also chivalrous!)

As a matter of information, returning to my home town and assuming the presidency of my alma mater was never an objective but I was pleased and honored beyond words when that opportunity came to us.

Looking back, I can see how my experience at that point in time would recommend me for leadership in higher education, but the thrust of my career then was not in that direction.

In any event, with the rumblings of student unrest beginning to be heard on that distant campus at Berkley, California, within a matter of months - or a year perhaps - we all learned that no experience was sufficient preparation for institutional leadership in American higher education in the mid-nineteen-sixties.

Needless to say, my quest was greatly enriched by the issues we were privileged to deal with during the next few years!

A few months ago the program chairman of the Smith Mountain

Lake Lions Club asked if I would speak at one of their Club dinners. He said they would like for me to talk about some of the amusing events of my college presidency. I laughed and told him it would be a very short talk.

I guess it was amusing when the young co-ed roller skated across the platform at commencement ---

Or the time I presented a student's diploma to his dog ---

Or the time 50 students clad only in their towels assembled on my front lawn protesting a lack of hot water in the dormitory--
-- But for the life of me, I can't remember anything really amusing about the 200 or so faculty meetings I attended!

Quite seriously, I will always view my college presidency as the most meaningful phase of my professional career, but my earlier career was probably more exciting and was certainly meaningful. In other words, my main quest, if we can call it that, was most certainly the presidency of my alma mater, but there was a before and there is an after.

At Lynchburg College I was in the focus of things because of my office. I had a high profile on campus and in the local community. My friends and acquaintances were generally aware of where I was and what I was doing.

In my earlier career, both as a graduate student and in the Federal government, I was on a larger stage where the limelight was mostly on others. Throughout that period there was something of a "reflected glory" from time to time when you had an opportunity to work with people in prominent positions. That was an

interesting aspect of that experience.

But, more interestingly, the people who influenced me the most were not always the most prominent. And several key breaks in my career apparently were purely accidental (maybe I mean incidental!)

One example came early in my career as an intern in the U.S. Library of Congress when the head of our research service, Dr. Ernest Griffith, directed me to stop whatever else I was doing and go search through the resources of the Library for citations to everything written on a particular subject. Delighted at this rare opportunity to prove my mettle and be of service to the big chief, I went to all of the guides and directories, the card catalog files and clipping files in search of the material he was seeking; but, lo and behold, my search was fruitless and after two long days I reported back to my chief that I had failed him. Much to my surprise (and relief) the director explained to me that he merely wanted to verify a negative finding. He thereupon showed me a manuscript he had in preparation for eventual publication in a professional journal. In that manuscript he had written, "Nothing has been published on the topic of" such and such.

(I can testify to you tonight that in the intervening forty years I have never, ever written or stated that nothing has been published on a given subject!)

I learned a valuable lesson in that exercise and I think the experience may have profoundly influenced my future. About six months later Dr. Griffith called me to his office again and asked if I would be interested in applying for a fellowship for graduate

study at Harvard University.

The rest, as they say, is history. Dr. Griffith arranged for me to be interviewed by Dean Cherrington during one of his trips to Washington, an application was duly filed, and I was eventually selected to receive a Lucious N. Littauer Fellowship. Since Betty and I were without independent resources, we were fortunate that this carried the largest remuneration available for graduate study at the University.

The following September we moved to Cambridge on what was to become a two-year leave of absence from the Library of Congress.

At Harvard I had the great good fortune of coming under the tutelage of Professor Arthur Holcomb, who introduced me to a former student of his named John F. Kennedy, then serving as U.S. Congressman for the District adjacent to the University and in which Betty and I happened to reside. (So, before he was my President, John Kennedy was my Congressman!)

Professor Holcomb knew that I was planning to return to Washington and he graciously told "Jack" Kennedy and me that we should stay in touch.

A year later Betty and I became marginally involved in Kennedy's campaign for the U.S. Senate and when we returned to Washington we kept up with Senator Kennedy's activities and eventually did some work in his campaign for the presidency. As I recall, I prepared two position papers on topics falling within my field.

During the presidential campaign I was on the staff of the

Joint House-Senate Committee on Atomic Energy. After the election I was appointed to serve in the Executive Office of the President, an experience which profoundly influenced my life.

While in Washington I came in contact with many notable individuals - elective, appointive and career professionals - but the exposure to President Kennedy naturally had a far greater impact than any other single influence (not counting that of my wife who has shared my career from the very first day we sat next to each other in an undergraduate biology class at Lynchburg College!)

I was never a close associate of President Kennedy, but in the course of my work I enjoyed working with some of his inner circle, several of whom I had met or known at Harvard.

You will recall that President Kennedy never had a chief of staff. Actually, he was careful not to have even a pecking order or any indication of relative status among his principal staff. The only organization chart printed during his presidency consisted of a circle around the president and spokes leading directly to each staff assistant.

Larry O'Brien handled congressional relations, Pierre Salinger was the press officer, Ted Sorensen was in charge of domestic policy and all speech writing, Kenneth O'Donnell was in charge of the president's appointments, Fred Dutton was secretary to the cabinet, McGeorge Bundy was national security advisory, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was a major policy advisor. Beyond these were another half dozen or so whom Schlesinger was later to describe as

"all-purpose New Frontiersmen."

This was a brilliant group of individuals, each in his own way. I was acquainted with Schlesinger and Bundy, who were on the Harvard faculty. Actually, I had been a student of Bundy's and he had helped me obtain a research grant to tide me over the summer between my two academic sessions at the university.

My immediate boss was Ed McDermott, who had managed the Kennedy campaign in Iowa and was a statutory member of the National Security Council. I was McDermott's executive assistant and carried a dual responsibility as Director of Emergency Plans and Readiness, a position deriving from the National Security Act of 1947.

During my tenure I had occasion to work with Salinger, Sorenson and Dutton. I also had a single meeting with Attorney General Robert Kennedy (dealing with an immigration matter), but otherwise I was never in his company.

As a matter of information, I joined the Administration too late to have any involvement in the Bay of Pigs fiasco and I was present during the Cuban missile crisis, which was the most exciting experience of my professional career. The most devastating experience was, of course, the loss of the president to an assassin's bullet.

If the nation was shocked by the assassination of President Kennedy, you can imagine the impact we felt in the Executive Office of the President and throughout the Administration.

My first reaction was disbelief. Let it not be true! Maybe

it's only a wound!

Then I was gripped by the cold reality of his impending death and our loss as a nation.

In my role as Director of Emergency Plans and Readiness, I immediately telephone my assistant in charge of our underground relocation headquarters and directed him to prepare for the worst contingency, in case the assassination was part of an international incident.

After that we simply watched the drama unfold as it was reported by the television networks.

My office in the Executive Office Building faced the West entrance of the White House from across the parking lot so we were usually aware of the officials going and coming during the working day. Interestingly, on the afternoon of the assassination there was almost no one using the West Entrance. Time seemed to stop.

My most vivid and lasting impression of that fateful day was the dense fog that settled in around the White House late in the afternoon. When the outside lights came on only the outline of the building could be seen.

I don't remember any conversations with other staff workers that day. We were so stunned, we seemed to just keep our thoughts inside.

In the hours, days and weeks that followed we shared President Kennedy's funeral experience and also shared the nation's focus on the new president as Lyndon Johnson was sworn in and moved into the White House.

The contrast between these two individuals is well known and need not be described here.

The change-over in the White House and the Executive Office of the President was a fascinating experience. The most notable new arrival other than Johnson himself was a former Johnson associate from Texas named Bill Moyers. (I think he had been Johnson's pastor, but haven't checked this out.) In any case, it seemed at the time that Moyers just showed up at the White House and offered his services to the President.

For reasons of continuity, and in the national interest, all top White House staff were asked to remain and each agreed to do so, but it was only a matter of time before all the Kennedy staff would move on to positions outside the government. During the interim Bill Moyers emerged as the President's principal advisor and the others found themselves with less and less to do.

I was not high enough in the organization to feel personally threatened and I had excellent standing with the two Congressional Committees I had served with so I knew I was still needed and that whatever I did would be meaningful, but there was always the question of whether the specific circumstances of my position would be congenial or attractive.

Throughout the Administration an interesting phenomenon was produced by the pattern of Presidential appointments following the 1960 election. In most cases Kennedy campaign supporters had filled the top positions in the various echelons and the number two positions were given to erstwhile Johnson campaigners. (This had

been done, we were told, to ensure that all key Administration officials would be compatible with each other and at the same time the Johnson people would be rewarded in almost even numbers. At that time there were 1200 policy positions requiring appointment by the President.)

With the elevation of President Johnson to the presidency, many top officials in the Administration found that their deputies had more influence in the White House than they did. This was of critical importance when it came to getting White House approval for policy changes, budget levels and personnel actions.

This phenomenon took on added significance because of the enduring personal hostility between Robert Kennedy and President Johnson.

Needless to say, there was a period of intense - and not so subtle - jockeying throughout the government. Even where changes were not made many times the situation had to be tested out.

In one particular case I was familiar with we found that an assistant director who had been invoking his "close personal friendship with Lyndon Johnson" at every turn of events, was on less than solid ground. The President knew him all right, but the man had been appointed to his position in order to keep him as far away as possible. He had been unwelcome in the former Vice President's office and he would be equally unwelcome in the President's office!

In most cases adjustments were made gradually and largely through normal turnover.

Some individuals, of course, were simply not acceptable to Mr. Johnson or key members of his staff, in which case they found convenient reasons to leave.

The most tragic casualty during the period that I was personally aware of was not a political appointee, but rather a career Army officer. This young man was the coordinator of transportation for the President and it seems that President Johnson took a personal dislike to him. You can imagine his plight when the President would tell him only at the last minute just where and when he would be traveling and keep him up all night waiting for an answer.

One day that officer came to me to see if I could get him transferred to my staff at the underground headquarters relocation center. He said President Johnson had just then ordered him to "stay out of my sight!"

That was one I couldn't touch with a ten-foot pole. I'm sorry I could not help him and I never learned what eventually happened to that young man.

Things had pretty well settled down by the time the search committee at Lynchburg College invited Betty and me down for a visit, but I must say we found the timing just right and we returned to the College enthusiastically.

Our quest brought us back to my home town as well as to our alma mater and the scene of our courtship.

We had not planned it this way but we were pleased that it happened.

The next nineteen-and-a-half years passed like a heart beat and our quest then moved in other directions.

Everybody here tonight is old enough to have given considerable thought to his own quest, and I think you will agree that questing is not a straight-line experience.

Also, I think "career" is much too narrow a word to describe a quest. Questing is our search wherever it takes us.

We hope and expect to be in tune with our quest at every stage of our lives, including our "careers."

Then, of course, there is always the danger of becoming consumed by our quest to the detriment of other valuable considerations in our lives, in which case the consequences could be quite serious.

Incidentally, in recent weeks I have concluded that Jim and Tammy Bakker are the superstars of the misguided quest!

(My previous nominee for that title was Ivan Boesky.)

Now, getting back to my old high school buddy, I guess I will have to tell him I really don't know how I got to be a college president but I'm glad it happened. Maybe I will just send him a copy of this paper.

ADDENDUM I

In the course of reviewing this paper my wife Betty suggested that I make it clear to you that our Kennedy association impacted only on the final three years of our Federal career. It was not just a fellowship to Harvard and a leap into the Kennedy organization. And she is quite correct. I started at the entry level in the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress right out of college. With two-years leave of absence for graduate study, I was on the Library staff for a total of seven years. Then I served a total of five years on the staffs of two Congressional committees, first the House Committee on Government Operations and then the Joint House-Senate Committee on Atomic Energy.

On the other side of this, I have always tried not to overstate my association with Kennedy. When I first returned to the College I had to keep explaining to people that I had not been "an assistant to President Kennedy." That was what Salinger, Sorensen, Bundy, Schlesinger, O'Brien, O'Donnell and Dutton had been.

Nor was I on the White House staff, which is the direct support group in the Office of the White House, including mail clerks, chauffeurs, secretaries and kitchen personnel as well as the Presidents' principal advisors.

Eventually I found it convenient to say that I worked in the Executive Office of the President, without trying to explain the exact nature of my position.

(If you want to be further confused you can see what successive editors of Who's Who In America have done to my resume during the past twenty-five years!)

ADDENDUM II

Most misguided quests are less dramatic, of course, and of little concern to those not within the orbit of the quest itself.

About seven years ago we had some casual discussion at a SpheX meeting concerning a quest gone awry. Some of you will recall the case of a community college president on the Eastern Shore of Maryland who dropped out of sight with little explanation and hardly a trace. The man's name was Jay Carsey.

There was a brief story in the Washington Post describing Carsey as a splendid institutional leader, popular with his co-workers and highly respected in his community. Why would a man in this situation simply drive off to his office one fine morning and keep on going?

At the time this was an intriguing story, made even more so by the comment of a friend who said, "If only Jay had chartered a plane, we all could have gone."

Now the full story has been told in all its tawdry detail, including the core facts of alcoholism and 14 unhappy years of marriage. In a book titled "Exit the Rainmaker" an investigative reporter tells us that Jay Carsey was escaping from himself more than anything else.

(Incidentally, for those who were wondering Carsey turned up in El Paso, Texas, where he had become co-owner of a beer joint. He now works for the local community college.)