

## TEETHBRUSH LESSONS

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Probably more than 20 years ago, Randolph-Macon Woman's College sponsored a program to honor the retirement of a political science professor, Ernie Duff. Master of ceremonies was Charlie Gibson, TV host for Good Morning America 1985-1995. He began some of his TV news broadcast career here in Lynchburg on WSET while his wife taught French at Randy Mac. He started off answering one question before it was asked—"Yes, she is as nice in person as she appears on TV," referring to his GMA co-anchor, Joan Lunden. Then he asked a series of questions. Hold your hand up if you know who the CEO of IBM is? A few hands were raised. CEO of General Motors? The CEO of General Electric? A few hands went up with each inquiry.

Then he asked—"How many of you had a teacher who made a difference in your life?" My hand went up along with everyone else's. As Charlie continued a talk about the importance of teachers, I started to remember the summers of 1958 and 1959.

"We think Jeffrey and Corbie (my older brother) should repeat the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades." The school counselors made this recommendation because, as they explained in a condescending tone, "your W Va schools are so poor." This was the summer of 1959. Our family had just moved to St Petersburg from Vienna, W Va. We would live with my maternal grandfather Lute B. "Pop" Hartman until our new home construction was completed. Mother had taken us to Mirror Lake Junior High School for pre-school registration. Well, if W Va schools rated 50<sup>th</sup> among states, Florida would be 49<sup>th</sup>(Alaska gained statehood 1/3/1959; Hawaii 8/21/59). Mother was the first member of her immediate family to graduate from college (Marshall). She taught Home Economics. She suggested that the school test us rather than have us repeat the grades. So, on the first day of school, instead of being held back, brother started 8<sup>th</sup> grade while I began 7<sup>th</sup>.

It was the first time I changed classes at different times during the school day, and the last period of the day found me ascending winding stairs of a turret arriving at a class titled "Exploratory Languages." "What is this? Some kind of advanced English?" As the new boy, I asked that aloud to no one. "No." Over the year we would study Latin, Spanish, French, and German with a quarter of the year devoted to each language and a final exam covering all four. Our teacher, Mrs. Heinselman, was magnificent. Two things were notable: First, even though Pop Hartman only had a year of college, he remembered his Latin and we both enjoyed going over my Latin homework together. Secondly, after this early introduction I never got less than an "A" in any foreign language I studied (which included 4 years of Spanish, 2 years of Latin, and a year of Russian for the Bachelor of Science 2<sup>nd</sup> language requirement).

Some further biographical background.

The year before, Mother, my brother Corbie and I spent the summer in St Pete with Pop Hartman, who had become a widower the prior year. At this time (1958) no W Va boy would be caught dead wearing shorts. Black T-shirts and blue jeans were the uniform of the day. Movie theaters and restaurants advertised a new luxury— air conditioning. With no friends, and dressed in sun-absorbing black clothes, outdoor play and exercise were nil. Brother and I watched TV (Bob Barker’s Truth and Consequences a favorite. Part of the show involved a contest to identify a city from the clues—“I killed one man two weeks ago, and another one last week, but at least I was well dressed.” Got it? Sin, sin, nattily dressed--Cincinnati).

Brother and I fought some, and ate, ate, ate. A daily treat was a trip after dinner to air conditioned Lang’s Ice Cream Shop for a hot butterscotch sundae. The results were predictable. There is a picture of me sitting on the beach looking like a crewcut Buddha. I was 4 foot, 6 inches tall, weighing 130 lbs. I was a chunk who had gotten too large for his current wardrobe, so Mother took me shopping for a pair of pants at Montgomery Wards where the overweight youth department was kindly called-- the Husky Boys Department rather than the Fat Boys Department. We chose a pair of khaki’s.

At my age (11) I still asked mom what I should wear the next day. “You know, Jeffrey, you look so good in your new slacks, just wear the same pair tomorrow.” She never hinted that she was choosing the only pair of pants I could get my chubby body into. Somewhere there is a combined “Mother-Teacher of-the-year” award with June Wilson’s name on it. She would wash and dry my one pair of slacks at night after I had gone to bed, ready for the next day.

When we got back home one month before school started, Mother said, “Jeffrey, I know you missed riding your bike all summer. So what I’m going to let you do is, after breakfast, take off on your bicycle and ride all day. Don’t even bother coming home for lunch.” Wow! Thanks, Mom! Wonderful! Off on my own all day! Psych! In the late 50s, in our small town of Vienna, W Va, a child could do that safely. If the youngster had problems, an adult would help them, not harm them. So Mom’s diet plan literally had me riding my butt off. No threat here of an eating disorder related to self-esteem damaged by parental criticism of a child’s overweight condition because my mother-teacher made it clear that I wasn’t overeating, I was under exercising.

So I was already experiencing teachers who were making a difference. But what was with the disparaging remark about W Va schools and education?

**Introduction:** In the late sixties many of my pre-law fraternity brothers were majoring in political science. What was “Poly-Sci”? It seemed like an oxymoron. But today, politics and science are inextricably linked in pandemic-induced discord regarding mask mandates and vaccinations. One fraternity brother was an economics major. He had the ability to explain everything ultimately as a cash flow problem. I understood why they called Economics the dismal science. Today in the midst of COVID fatigue it may seem that everything is dismal. In the past you were to avoid talking politics or religion at social gatherings. Now we probably should avoid talking about politics, religion, or science. And who wants to engage in “legitimate political discourse” like the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection?

But this is the last SPHEX talk this year and I would like us to lighten up. So after some W Va jokes, lets focus on teachers, W Va education, and mentors.

**Jokes**—“Teethbrush” is the answer. What is the question? Why is it a good thing the toothbrush was invented in West Virginia? Because, otherwise, it would have been called the teethbrush. When people learn you are from West (by God) Virginia, they love to share jokes like these with you:

Why is Forensic criminal investigation in W Va so difficult? Because there are no dental records and the DNA is all the same (in-breeding slam). How is a tornado in Oklahoma similar to a divorce in W Va? Because in each case someone is losing a double-wide trailer. The best thing about being from W Va is being **from** WVVa—no longer there. I was born in Charleston and lived in Vienna, just outside Parkersburg. Five of 75 years residing in W Va.

We W Va natives probably don’t find these jokes as funny as others do when they present a disparaging attitude about the Mountain State—you know, “Almost Heaven, Mt Mama.”

**Teachers**—Our family is loaded with teachers. A great, great grandfather was school superintendent in Clarksburg, W.Va., Mother was a teacher, Sandra is a teacher—having taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade and geography at Seven Hills, and daughter Melissa is in her 24<sup>th</sup> year teaching first graders in Atlanta—having two bouts of mild COVID infection. One definition of doctor is “teacher.”The prevailing method of learning in medicine was “See one, do one, teach one.”

At the opening parade of the W Va State Fair in Lewisburg children looked in awe at a 7 foot tall young girl, in a long coat walking with the high school band. She reassured them, “I’m not really this tall; that’s not just me.” She acknowledged she was —**standing on someone’s shoulders**.

Years ago as editor of LAMlight, our Lynchburg Academy of Medicine newsletter, I invited our members to share stories about their respective mentors and teachers. Whose shoulders did they stand on? Physicians Mike Perry and John Mott Robertson were students under Tinsley Harrison at Alabama Med School. He was founder and senior editor of the classic *Harrison’s Textbook of Medicine*, and many of the Dukies were influenced by Eugene Stead. These were

national and international icons of medicine. Our late SPHEX member, Dr. Stuart Harris, gave a paper on Dr. Francis Moore who taught Stuart surgery at Peter Bent Brigham in Boston. Locally, many of us stand on George Craddock's shoulders. In my case I stand on the shoulders of Wilbur Burger and Bill Massie as well as Dr. Craddock's.

Now while I present several people who had a **W Va link** in their education, please think about teachers or mentors who influenced your life, whose shoulders you stand on, and who stands on your shoulders.

**Katherine Johnson:** The movie *Hidden Figures* introduced me to Katherine Johnson (8/26/1918-12/24/2020). In her book, *My Incredible Journey*, her West Virginia roots are chronicled. I wondered about the teachers who influenced her.

For Katherine Johnson it started with a nuclear family that valued education. Her father, Joshua McKinley Coleman, had no formal education, but he inherited a farm 7 miles outside White Sulfur Springs (WSS), and he was economically independent when serendipity brought Joylette Roberts Lowe to WSS. She had attended Ingleside Seminary, Burkeville, Va. built 1892 to educate colored girls. She came there to experience the healing power of the spring waters for a complicated diphtheria vaccination infection. They married and Creola Katherine Coleman was born 8/26/1918. Growing up, she remembered her father often telling her, "You're as good as anyone in this town--but you're no better."

She loved her elementary school teacher, Rosa Leftwich, and Katherine skipped several grades through 7<sup>th</sup> grade. There was no high school for blacks. So in 1928 her father sold the farm and moved the family to Institute, W Va just outside Charleston so the 4 children (Katherine, the youngest) could attend W Va Collegiate Institute—later named W Va State College.

The school was built on land initially owned by Samuel I. Cabell, a white slave owner who had 13 or 15 children with one of his slaves, Mary Barnes. Does the name Cabell ring any bells? According to Katherine Johnson's book, he was connected to the Virginia Cabell family which included politicians, military generals and a former governor. He is not included among the Cabells mentioned in Jim Elson's book on Lynchburg. Was he the red haired bastard at the family reunion? He was murdered July 18, 1865. He had his will set up to protect Mary, who changed her name legally to Mary Cabell, and to protect the children, one of whom sold the land for the school in 1891 when the state created the W Va Colored Institute under the Morrill Act.

The Feb-March 2022 issue of Forbes contains an article reviewing unequal state funding since 1987 of HBCUs (historically Black Colleges) like W Va State College vs white land grant schools. W Va State College is underfunded by over \$504 million.

Katherine started college there at age 15. Her father could not find work locally and returned to the White Sulfur Springs area where he had contacts; commuting on weekends to be with the

family. Siblings worked doing odd chores, while mother, an accomplished seamstress also took in ironing usually for white clientele, to make ends meet. The family did this for ten years till all four children completed HS and four years of college. During the Depression all family members did odd jobs at the Greenbrier Resort to feed and clothe the family

Katherine's 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Rosa Evans, challenged her—"You have to be better today than you were yesterday." "What do you know today that you didn't know yesterday?" Rosa's husband, James C. Evans, was the head of the mathematics dept. He had a master's degree in engineering from MIT. Angie Turner taught algebra and geometry. She had a PhD from University of Pittsburgh. Sunday Night Chapel included guests such as—Paul Robeson, George Washington Carver, and W.E.B. DuBois. Booker T. Washington lectured often at the school and gave the first commencement address.

This Incredible faculty included Carter Woodson who earned a PhD in History from Harvard—2<sup>nd</sup> Black to do this—1<sup>st</sup> was WEB DuBois, and William Waldron Claytor with a PhD in Math from U of Penn (3<sup>rd</sup> Negro in America to earn math doctorate). Claytor created a special course—*Analytic Geometry of Space* for Katherine as the only student and told her,"You'd make a good research mathematician."

In 1938, as part of a program to desegregate WVU's graduate program, she became the first Negro female, and only Black on WVU campus. She did not return to campus a second year because she married Jimmie Johnson and from 1940 through-1952 she was a young homemaker raising her family. By serendipity, while attending a sister-in-law's wedding, she met Dorothy Vaughn and began working for NASA predecessor NACA (National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics) in June 1953. The rest is history depicted in the movie *Hidden Figures* and her book.

**Homer Hickham:** One night in October, 1957 (Sputnik launched Oct 4, 1957), 14 yo Homer Hickham, and several friends watched Sputnik fly across the night skies. For America, this was a wakeup call—the space race with Russia had begun. One member of Homer's Rocket Boys group, O'Dell, was less inspired—"Russia can have outer space—we've got rock and roll."

Homer lived in Coalwood, W Va. His father was the mine superintendent. Being raised in a coal mining town, after high school most of the young men were expected to work in the mines. A popular goal was to "Go up Morgantown—up to the 'U' (WVU)"after high school. But resources for college were tight. An athletic scholarship was one way to escape a future working in the coal mines which Homer's older brother, Jim, managed with a football scholarship, but Homer was no athlete.

In contrast to Katherine Johnson's family, there was no emphasis on further education by Homer's father—it was assumed that Homer would work in the mines. But Homer's mother, Elie Hickham, knew a coalminer's life was not part of her son's future hopes. She was a

resourceful woman who had individually invested skimmed savings over several years in stocks via an advisor in Myrtle Beach. She reassured Homer that he would be able to go to college; she would have the funds to send him.

Inspired by the Sputnik sighting, Homer and several friends became Rocket Boys (the movie title *October Sky* is an anagram). They started the Big Creek Missile Agency studying, building, and testing rockets. The teacher who made the greatest difference for all the Rocket Boys was Miss Freida Riley, the science teacher at Big Creek High School. She obtained special textbooks and taught them the calculus involved in rocketry.

At one point the boys got a company machinist, Mr. Bykovsky, to do some special rocket related work. When Homer's father found out, as punishment, Bykovsky was transferred from the shop to the mines where he died one night in a mining accident. Homer felt responsible, having solicited Bykovsky's help which put him in harm's way. Homer decided to stop the rocket building project. But Homer always remembered Miss Riley's reaction when she heard this. She told him "When you don't like a job, you *especially* give it everything you've got. If you stop building your rockets, you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

Heeding her words, the Rocket Boys continued their work on rockets, won the National Science Fair, and all were awarded scholarships to college—Homer going to Va Tech and subsequently a career at NASA and success as an author.

Freida Riley, born 1937 in Squire, W Va. developed Hodgkin's Disease at a bad time regarding effective chemotherapy. She was an alum of Big Creek HS herself, returning there to teach chemistry and physics. When Homer saw her in 1961 after his 1<sup>st</sup> year at Va Tech, Ms Riley was taking summer classes at WVU "so I can teach better." She was proud of Homer and expected him to do well at NASA. When Homer replied, "I'll keep doing my best," Ms Riley said, "Do better," which Homer said summed up her philosophy in two words. When Homer inquired about her health, Miss Riley said she was going to fight the Hodgkin's as long as possible and, "they'll have to carry me out of my classroom." Freida Riley died 8/5/64 from Hodgkin's Disease. An award was started in her honor sponsored by the Christopher Columbus Fellowship Foundation and administered by the Partnership for America's Future. The Freida Riley Annual Award goes to an educator who overcame adversity or made an enormous sacrifice to positively impact students.

**Anne Spencer** (Feb 6, 1882-July 27, 1975) What a contrast—the nuclear family of Katherine Johnson compared to Anne Spencer's family. Her father, Joel Cephus, had black, white, and Seminole Indian ancestry. He and her mother, Sarah Louise (Scales) came from neighboring plantations. Sarah was 16 years old when she gave birth to Anne Bethel. The parents were both strong-willed. Sara never took his last name.

He moved the family to Martinsville in 1887 and opened a saloon. Anne was precocious and Joel had her come to the saloon, parade around and show off her wit to the men who would throw copper pennies to her. The final breakup was precipitated by the “tragedy on the barroom floor” when Sarah, always disapproving of 4 yr old Anne’s presence at the saloon, showed up at the bar one evening to take Anne away. Joel grabbed Sarah and spanked her in front of the men. That was the last straw. The separation of her parents, Anne mentioned in her Notebooks, was “the first realized tragedy.” Joel went to Illinois and eventually to California where he established a prosperous business.

Sarah left Anne with a friend in Winston-Salem, Mrs. Clark, while she went to Bramwell, W Va where a brother Nathan lived. Her mother wanted to find employment before bringing Anne there. Brother Nathan and the Negro mine workers lived in the outskirts of the town. Bramwell, nestled in a curve of the Bluestone River, had a number of millionaires and a population of about 250 made up of coal mine owners and operators. Anne’s mother wanted to place Anne in one of the best black homes in town—not in the Negro families on the outskirts. So after a year she brought Anne to Bramwell as part of the barber, William T. Dixie’s family. The barber served only white clientele. Anne adjusted well and had several friends including Elsie Brown, a white neighbor’s daughter.

I first heard of Bramwell when my mother talked about her Kappa Delta Sorority sisters at Marshall. She kept up with sisters nicknamed Pinkie (strawberry blond), Clarkbar (radiologist in Roanoke), and Brownie (Katherine Hewitt Barringer from Bramwell) who showed up the first day of classes at Marshall in a brown suit; ergo her nickname. Bramwell now has an Anne Spencer hanging bridge and a Hewitt hanging bridge for pedestrians.

Mrs. Dixie, the barber’s wife, was an avid reader and Anne began to pick up words and phrases as Mrs. Dixie read aloud from books and magazines brought home from the barbershop. Anne said “I cut my literary teeth on this stuff; yes, *this* is where I cut my literary teeth.”

But by age 11, Anne had never been in a formal school. Contentious correspondence followed with Joel threatening to come to Bramwell and take Anne back to Illinois if Sarah did not get her enrolled in school.

During a church service Sarah heard about Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg. In September 1893, Sarah registered Annie Bethel Scales at Virginia Seminary in Lynchburg. Although she started with rudimentary language skills, she became a favorite of the school’s president, Gregory Hayes. She evolved from a tomboy to a scholar by the time she graduated at age 17 after 6 years at Seminary. She and Edward Spencer were classmates. She taught school in W Va and was courted by several men but married Edward Spencer May 15, 1901.

Around 1917-18, settled in Lynchburg, she was involved with a human relations committee which affiliated with the NAACP. James Weldon Johnson was an official traveling to different places setting up local chapters. Lodging was always a problem. His first visit to 1313 Pierce Street was probably the most significant event in starting Anne's published writing career. He showed some of her poetry to H. L. Mencken, and it resulted in her first published poem in Feb 1920—"Before the Feast at Shushan." She was 38.

Almost as famous as her poetry was the list of personalities she hosted at Pierce St. Very similar to the celebrated black leaders seen at the West Va State Sunday Night Chapel years later when Katherine Johnson was a student there. I consulted our new SPHEX member, Nina Salmon, regarding Anne Spencer's educational background. She, Sandra, and Hugh Jones were on the AS Board. For years Sandra devoted countless hours maintaining AS gardens and house. Do you remember the weather the day of Barack O'Bama's first inauguration? It was freezing cold and I joined Hugh and Sandra at the house checking to see if any pipes were frozen.

**Vivian Pinn**—was our SPHEX annual program speaker several years ago. She was born 1941 in Halifax ; grew up in Lynchburg attending segregated schools. She received a BA from Wellesley College 1963; MD from UVa in 1967. She was the only female and only minority in her class. She was the first African American Female to chair an academic pathology department within the US. In 1991 she was named Associate director for research on women's health at NIH. She retired in 2011 from NIH. She is now the Senior Scientist Emeritus at Fogarty International Center.

Willie Clark and his wife were my patients. He was a science teacher and civil rights activist; and Dr. Pinn was a prior student. He was remembered fondly by Dr. Pinn as a teacher who made a difference. It was a pleasure to have them as our guests at the dinner. WVa connection? Dr Pinn's father attended W Va State College.

**Conclusion:** Now aren't you ashamed to tell those W Va jokes? But more importantly I hope this talk helps you recall special teachers and mentors who made a difference in your life. Historian Henry Adams said, "A teacher affects eternity: he/she can never tell where his/her influence stops." How do you pay it forward? What elements were important in your education? A nuclear family that valued education? A teacher or an individual that taught or mentored you?

"W Va" lesson? It's not where you start that counts, but where you finish. How you start, however, may be of some relevance. Consider this line from William Wordsworth's poem *My Heart Leaps Up*—"The Child is father of the Man" or Alexander Pope's line from *Epistles to Several People*—"As the twig is bent the tree is inclined."

How has this sort of relationship been affected by the pandemic? During these two years of the pandemic, has it afforded different opportunities? Different projects? There was a student who

went home during the London epidemic. Over two years he studied gravity, optics, calculus and developed 3 laws of motion—Isaac Newton. What’s in your pandemic?

Physician burnout was a frequent topic in medical journals for the past ten years with a worsened problem due to the pandemic. It is a problem for almost all health care providers and teachers. An artist friend, experiencing painter’s block or burnout, keeps a post-it on the corner of her easel that reads “Lucky to be an artist.” Duke Med School asked alumni to write a short statement for the graduating med students. Anticipating the potential for burnout in their post graduate education and internship, resident, fellowship training, and practice, I suggested a post-it on the computer screen—“Lucky to be a physician.” I recommend a similar post-it for our teachers—“Lucky to be a teacher.” A post-it is not super glue. It won’t last forever. I believe our teachers who make a difference will maintain this sentiment on renewed post-its—but it becomes more difficult.

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