

To Walk With Others

William Van Til

My moment that made a difference has to do with a decision by a quiet man. In his office the quiet man wore his hat pulled low over his eyes as he sat barricaded against the world behind his desk in a publishing house on Fifth Avenue. We'll return to him later.

You know me, if you know me at all, as an educator. I know me, if I know me at all, as both a writer and an educator.

I was born at that point on W. Lloyd Warner's scale where the upper-lower class meets the lower-middle class. My father was a building trades worker, then a foreman. My education began in the elementary grades at Public School 15, New York City. Somehow the principal, Miss Emily Curry (of whom you have never heard), encouraged the nobody I knew myself to be to try my hand at creative writing. I didn't understand why she did until years later during my moment that made a difference.

After my high school graduation at sixteen, the dream of being "a writer" persisted, despite dead-end jobs in building construction as an office boy, a materials checker, and a carpenter's laborer. I registered in hopeless night schools for hopeless courses taught by hopeless teachers to hopeless would-be writers. Naturally I wrote nothing publishable. After two years, I began to dimly apprehend that to write well a person had to live. He had to know something and do something.

Those were the dear dead departed days prior to loans and scholarships when the custom was for low-income boys to "work themselves through college." So I did Columbia College, English major, Mark Van Doren as advisor. Contemporary Civilization I and II, discovery of the social sciences, the depression, the New Deal, college graduation. Then no job in "journalism." So I fell back on some insurance I had taken out--the minimal education courses I had taken during my senior year. New York State soberly certified me for teaching, though I was totally unequipped.

I learned to teach the hard way--in a reform school which had no books, no paper, no pencils, no course of study, but plenty of delinquents. I survived. A year later I came to Ohio State University School as a teacher of social studies and English. I found teaching terrific, particularly the wide-open experimental teaching of my brilliant and individualistic colleagues in University School. Emotionally and intellectually, I became hooked by teaching. But I still wanted to write. I wanted to live in two worlds.

Partly for the sheer joy of living and partly for something to write about, I traveled one summer by foldboat, a canoe-kayak, on European rivers with my wife and Paul and Janet Weinandy. I wrote sketches about our travel; they were unpublishable. Back my wife and I came the next summer before the lights went out all over Europe with the opening of World War II. This time the long cruise was down the brown Danube, blue only in

Johann Strauss' overactive imagination. That summer and through the following fall I wrote steadily on a book about the Danube flowing through fascism.

The odds against acceptance of an unsolicited manuscript of a book by a twenty-six-year-old unknown in the depression decade were astronomical. I did not know that. But had I known, it would have made no difference. I had to become a writer; the necessity devoured me. Charles Scribner's Sons was the Valhalla of young writers of the time, so I sent my manuscript, unsolicited and without an agent's blessing, over the transom to this publisher. In Valhalla, editor Maxwell Perkins was the chief Norse god. Perkins, a literary legend, had edited Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald and had nursed along the titanic Thomas Wolfe.

Scribners kept my manuscript for what seemed an incredibly long time while I agonized. Life is terribly real when you are twenty-six. In retrospect it wasn't long, only three weeks. Then I was invited to come in for "a conference."

Which brings us back to the moment that made a difference.

They ushered me into the office of the quiet man with his hat pulled low over his eyes--the great Maxwell Perkins. He sat barricaded against the world behind his big desk. He was surpassingly kind. But the economic problem of publishing, the gathering war clouds in Europe, the probable reluctance of readers to accept a travel book combining the joy of river cruising with the grimness of social observation of fascism. Yet there would be a final editorial meeting tomorrow and Scribners would let me know the outcome. But I shouldn't expect. .

After I left the office, I don't know how long I walked through the afternoon and into the night swallowing the bitter fruit called rejection. Years later, though it was only the next day, the telephone rang and I answered. It was no underling notifying me; it was Maxwell Perkins.

Never have I heard such happiness for another human being as there was in the quiet man's voice. He said, "We've decided to publish your book." Somehow he knew what it meant; in his own way he had been walking with me through the afternoon and into the night. The essence of being a great editor like the famous Maxwell Perkins is to walk with your authors. The essence of being a great educator like the unknown Miss Emily Curry is to walk with your students. Young though I was at twenty-six, I understood. Even now, much older but little wiser, I try not to forget.

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