

Choose Your Heros (and Villains) Wisely

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Introduction

This sermon presents no moral lesson other than the title: most stories of life have no specific morals. And the story, as I will relay it, is sordid: much of life is more sordid than we wish to remember it. But without the sordid details there would be no moral imperative. Without the sordid details life would be uninteresting. The story, as I will tell it, is true; I will make it clear when I am speculating and indicate the events lead to such musings.

Uncle Dick

When I was a lad in third grade, my family moved to a small town in Georgia: Carrollton. The town scenically rests in the southern most county of Appalachia. It is 60 miles from Atlanta (this was a long way in 1964) and it has largely been preserved as part of the rural south. My family moved here from Chicago, via Calgary, Alberta, and experienced some of the most profound culture shock that we had ever known. After having been a salesman for various mattress companies, my brother Jimmy returned there, reared his children in Carrollton, and he has had a successful furniture business there for most of his adult life. It is an idyllic location.

In small southern towns, one is expected to go to church. The Carrollton Presbyterian Church was very much to our liking. Its minister, Richard Flynn, was a handsome bachelor, I would say in his early 40s. My father admired him since Dick embodied a compassion for the down-trodden people of the community.

When my matriculation in the public school system was unsuccessful, my father called upon Uncle Dick to find me a better situation. A private school, affiliated with the Presbyterian church, was located a few miles out of town on an old farm estate. I moved from the segregated public school to a school in which liberal arts and educational enrichment were taught from the first grade upward. The students at the new school were also lily-white, but our economic backgrounds were indeed as diverse as they could be. It never was clear to me

who among us was on financial support. I don't know how well off my own family was at that time, but I do know there were children both far better off and far worse off.

Reverend Flynn was Uncle Dick since he had help rear the only son of his widower brother, Emory. Emory Junior's mother was an heiress who suffered an accidental death shortly after Emory's birth. Because of his late mother's wealth, Emory grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth.

His Uncle Dick, however, was a holy man — a second generation minister. Both my father and Rev. Flynn's successor would describe Dick as the most Christ-like person whom they knew. His most significant worldly possession was a white 1964 Pontiac sedan with red interior. I think it was a Bonneville. He often wore a light grey suit that resembled the one Sean Connery wears in *Goldfinger*. It matched his thinning hair.

The campus of the school consisted of a mansion up the hill from a small lake, a pasture uphill from that, and a science building at the top of the hill. Once when Uncle Dick was showing the campus to my father, my brothers and me, a donkey was standing in the pasture with the most enormous engorged penis that one could possibly imagine. Yes, the donkey appeared to be standing on five legs. Uncle Dick was saying to my father, "What a marvelous beast!" My libidinous father could not see the donkey for its dong. I presume he was jealous. My brothers developed a host of obscenities in regards to bestial acts. These are still found among the vernacular. The name of *that* video game did not start out as "Donkey Kong."

There have since been suggestions that Uncle Dick was not merely a bachelor but that he may have been gay. I have no evidence to that effect, and the town was replete with gossip. If he were gay, then he was likely living in a repressed mode. He could not have maintained a relationship in Carrollton without having been caught.

After-church suppers at the manse were interesting affairs. The spinsters and the widows would have a Sunday dinner waiting for us after service. The food was unfamiliar to our northern palettes, but ultimately I came to enjoy the Sunday dinners at the manse. Uncle Dick lavished the children with attention. After dinner, my father often joked with my brothers about the spinsters trying "to get their hooks into Uncle Dick." I asked him about marriage once, and Uncle Dick told me that he had never found the time. The answer suited me since I often witnessed Uncle Dick's ministry during the week — driving throughout the county and helping this person or that. I recall a pair of hags who reeked of whiskey and chewing tobacco; before driving me home back to the church that school afternoon, Dick has traveled to the most remote dirt road in the country to also deliver them to the church. I don't know what their problem was, but they embodied the witches of MacBeth. Today I have nothing but pity for their plight.

Roy English

When we first visited the manse, I met Roy English. He was a border with Uncle Dick. My first impression of Roy was that he was a Boo Radley sort of person. That impression was

not so wrong, and in another sense it was not so right. Among the adults in the community, it was Roy who exerted the most influence upon me, but his influence was intellectual. Yet, Roy had a secret that was darker than any of you are imagining now, and it was a secret that I did not come to know until I was well into my teens and long after I had moved from Carrollton.

It is natural to speculate upon the relationship that might have existed between Dick and Roy. From what I have learned in the subsequent years, I am not innocent of those speculations. There was a point at which Roy moved out of the manse and into an apartment adjoining the science building up the pasture from the main campus. I vaguely remember that there had been some falling out between Roy and Dick.

Roy English was our science teacher in third, fourth, fifth, and part of sixth grade. He was nothing if not a nerd. And his nerdiness gave me much to admire about him. He used a hair cream or pomade such as Vitalis or Brylcreem on his black hair in an era in which these were quickly going out of fashion. His thick cotton long sleeved yellow or blue shirt always had its top button buttoned. He wore his brown trousers above the paunch. (Imagine Billy-Bob Thorton's character in *Sling Blade*, but instead of a mental deficiency, Roy suffered from intellectual curiosity.) I never recall him being at the Presbyterian church, and I never recall having seen him in a tie. I think he was a Baptist. In Carrollton, who you were was defined, in part, by your church denomination. Roy also was a bachelor.

The man could tinker! He took a bit of organ keyboard and wired it to a sequence of lightbulbs so that when you pressed the keys the lights would light. I was told that he designed and built the relay system of school bells for classes in the junior high school. His design accommodated the class bells for three schedules. None of the schedules occurred on the hour, but the timers were all sixty minute timers. He had a photo in our science lab of a lightbulb having been hit by a gun shot. He has designed the rig for the photo — strobe light, timing, shutter speed.

He would rig a van der Graff generator so the girls with page-boy hair cuts would have their hairs on end. The weight of the hair on long-haired girls could not be overcome by the static charge. At that time, I wore my hair in a crew-cut and was immune to the effects of that static charge. He would coil us up in a magnet and run thousands of volts through us (low amperage), and florescent lights would glow in our hands.

We first learned of black lights. Our newly laundered shirts would glow in the dark. The phosphorescence was induced by compounds in the detergents — the ones that made your clothes whiter than white and brighter than bright.

In Roy's science class we learned to blow glass birds. He had built a natural gas high-heat burner from pieces of an old Kirby vacuum cleaner. We started from glass pipettes, which we had learned to cut, and we learned the regions to heat, blow, and bend. They were very pretty — some of the best art a youngster could have made.

We played with electrical circuits and relays. We learned how the analogue switches worked in the telephone systems. We learned of valence electrons, the formation of compounds, the process of distillation, and a myriad of other wizz-bang science topics.

Roy made his morning coffee on a Bunsen burner in a Büchner funnel and high grade filter paper. We developed experiments to measure the relative tars in cigarettes, having a respirating device rigged on the chemistry apparatus.

Our exam in the chemistry unit was the following: we were given 10 unknown compounds — all clear colorless liquids, some poisonous — and we were to do a series of chemical tests to identify them among a set of twelve possible.

Roy had a photo lab built into his science lab. We learned how to process photos, from camera to print. He always had a desire for the lab to be entirely light-proof. I don't know if he was joking or not, but he did ponder the effects of a totally black room upon a cat.

Roy was fond of Halloween pranks. To help us understand current flow, we made home-made scare sticks: a pair of D batteries wired to a flashlight-bulb embedded on a black stick about two and a half feet long with a round wooden frame at the top which contained a light that shone behind a paper sheet with eyes drawn upon it. The sticks in the night were little ETs who could stare into the windows of the neighbors' kitchen and frighten the young mothers.

Almost all of my understanding and appreciation of science came from Roy teaching us how to do things. Had I stayed at this school, I would not have been surprised if we had learned the electron shell configurations by the end of seventh grade. We were well on our way to learning how to simulate the German enigma coding machine. Roy would have certainly helped us build them. We would have had virtually uncrackable codes. The delights of children!

After Thoughts

What is the effect of eating carrots on your ability to see in the dark? Well if you have a dark room, and you have a student population of ages ranging from 8 years old to 12, you can measure it. Get information on how many times a week the children eat carrots, put each child in the darkroom, and shine an image on the wall of increasing luminosity. Measure the amount of time it takes for the child to see the image. That is how I remember the experiment. Only after his death, did I come to believe that Roy had any sinister motives in its execution. However, if he exposed himself to me, it was in the dark. I never saw such a thing in that darkroom. There was no heavy breathing, no sound of pants buckles, no touching. Roy never did anything untowardly with me nor to anyone else that I knew at that time. This was a point in my life at which Roy had an opportunity to succumb to his weakness. He did not.

One of the upperclassman, the brother of my classmate, disliked Roy. But Steve disliked several people. It was no wonder. Steve's mother died when Steve was quite young, and I never once recall seeing Steve's father sober. Frankly, I wonder if Steve has stayed out of jail, or indeed if Steve is a sober adult. Steve and I disagreed on many things. Roy was one of them.

Roy's Death

It is told that several years later, long after I moved from Carrollton, Roy used his photographic lab to produce pictures of his naked students. In Carrollton, I suppose that they would have said, "Nekkid." Apparently the evidence existed. Roy committed suicide. It is said that he injected gasoline into his vein and upon being in convulsions shot himself.

As an adult, I am of the opinion that the only real sexual perversion, beyond abstinence, is pedophilia. Even in the mind of someone like me, who adored and learned so much from this man, I continue to be shocked.

There are certainly plausible fictionalizations of the story that I have told. One could create salacious details in the relationship between Dick and Roy, and one could imagine a spinster almost catching them. A hyper-moralist could mold the story to his own ends: linking homosexuality to pedophilia. And even though in my own confused telling of the story, I have lead you to such conclusions, I say here and now these conclusions are wrong.

First and foremost, the Reverend Richard Flynn spent his life helping people in his community. His sexuality, or lack thereof, did not define him as a person or as a community leader. His grace and eloquence from the pulpit and his care for us, the children, was ample manifestation of his goodness. Second, Roy was a marvelous teacher. I would love to list here all the amazing things that he taught us. The most important thing that he taught us was curiosity. He used to say, "Curiosity killed the cat, and I don't want a bunch of dead cats around here." Maybe his own curiosity about children's sexuality was what killed him. I was not a victim, and so I ask that he be forgiven.