

Ouroboros
June 2017
Buenos Aires

Don Thompson - New Faculty Retreat

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

Joseph Campbell - The Hero With a Thousand Faces



d.t. - risk taker - age 4

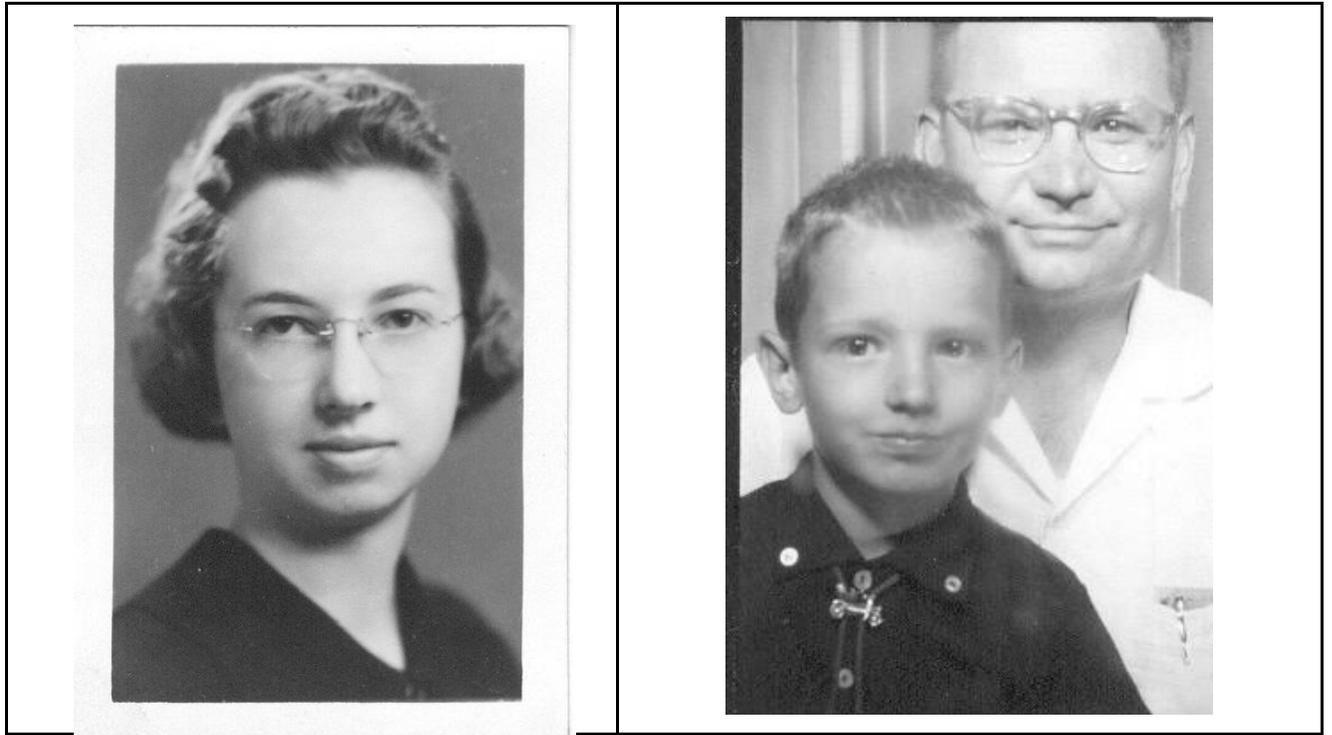
Son, the world needs preachers. Dad, I don't want to be a preacher; I love mathematics. That's my life, my world. Fortunately, the pressure was off, my oldest brother became the minister - in the Disciples of Christ - and I went on with mathematics, physics, and music - my greatest loves. This was my *Refusal of the Call*. Stay tuned, though, because I did return. Let's go back and see how this could have possibly happened.

I grew up in suburban Chicago, the youngest of three boys - my oldest brother became the minister, my middle brother the mechanical engineer - and, as an adolescent, I was swept up in football, french horn, Latin, and my faith journey.

My father was a Christian Church (Independent) pulpit minister, preacher, a fundraiser for missions (Christian Missionary Fellowship) and advocate/fundraiser for American

M.Div. scholars who wanted to complete their education by studying under Käsemann, Küng, and Schleiermacher in Tübingen, Germany. He saw me as a preacher. I declined, and it took 23 years for me to get back and rediscover that I AM a minister. I mentor students and colleagues. I study theology and philosophy. I am a follower of Jesus Christ and a lover of God's world of ideas.

My parents were and are my heroes: My mother nurtured my love of music, my patience and my love of the hesychastic interior life. My father nurtured my love of ideas, theories, and abstractions and he modeled Christian service. I became what he was never able to become: a college professor in the Classics (he read and wrote Greek, Latin, and Hebrew) whose life is now centered in the Great Books.



December 1970

After my first semester of college, I traveled with my parents to Tübingen, Germany to visit the scholars who were studying there. Along the way, my father suggested that we take a car trip to Ulm - to see *Ulm Minster* - the tallest church spire in Europe, towering 530 feet high. Impressive? Yes. But what left an indelible impression, one that still echoes inside my soul, was our unplanned side trip to the Dachau Concentration Camp. Barracks, Gas Chamber, Crematorium Ovens ... The picture of a room of just shoes, exterminated prisoner shoes - that's what I cannot forget.

My eighteenth birthday had occurred just 30 days prior, so selective service was on my mind, as it was with all 18 year old males in the U.S. I determined a course of action after the Dachau visit - to be a conscientious objector - status 1.O. - unavailable for any military service. It was so obvious - Jesus demands that we love one another - *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.* (Matt. 5:43-48, Luke 6:27-28).

Paradoxically, when my draft lottery number came up - #316 - a virtual guarantee that I would NOT be drafted, it didn't matter. This was an imperative move. It was a matter of my conscience and of my faith.

I bought the Conscientious Objector handbook. So, I submitted my request for conscientious objector status to the Selective Service Administration. Of course, I was turned down. That was routine. So, I appealed and had to appear before my draft board in Chicago for a hearing. It was an intimidating experience with very difficult questions in a smoke filled room occupied by veterans and military personnel. God was with me. God spoke through me. Six weeks later, I was granted 1.O. status. I felt that God was calling me to follow him, to obey, and that He had brought this about. It was not a popular decision even within my home church congregation, but I felt God leading me down this road. Nixon was bombing Laos, but I wanted NO part of war, no matter the cause. I could follow no other path.

Rebirth at age 40

Nancy & I took our two sons Peter and Kyle (ages 8 & 6) to Florence, Italy in 1992-93 for the Pepperdine International Program. I taught Statistics, Probability, Business Calculus, and *Math for Poets*. The power of being in the birthplace of the Renaissance was this: I was reborn.

It was a 15th Century immersion in the midst of Da Vinci, Botticelli, Giotto, Savonarola, Michelangelo, Donatello, Brunelleschi, and Dante. It became clear that I was simply not well educated. I was too narrow. Mathematics was just not enough. After eight months of travel to England, France, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Greece, Germany, Holland - soaking up all of the art, history, literature, music, food, and inspiration of the world that had been humming for centuries before the U.S. had existed, I woke up. I fell in love with Italy and decided that something had to change. I needed to break out of my cocoon. I returned to Malibu, resolving to find my road. In the fall of 1993, I subsequently applied to teach in the Great Books program (I am the only one in the history of the program who actually had to submit a dossier and be interviewed for the spot - I get it. They thought I was crazy - delusional.) I waited until December 1993 to find out that they accepted me. Hooray!

In January of 1994 I started a sabbatical at Hughes Research Lab next door. I found a research partner for Bayesian Networks and Artificial Neural Networks - Wojtek Przytula, a Polish solidarity movement survivor who once taught at MIT. He was a senior scientist at HRL, specializing in the use of AI on problems with automotive and satellite applications. We wrote eight papers together and were best friends. Our greatest common love, though, was the Great Books and his devotion to Catholic thinkers and spirituality. He read and recommended Richard Rohr, Thomas Keating, and Anthony de Mello. Wojtek was my *starets*, my spiritual mentor. We are the same age, but his spiritual wisdom was voluminous. I don't think any of this would have happened if we had not connected through Plato, Aristotle, Dante, and my passion for Great Books. He knew I would be starting to teach in the program in the following September, so he effectively tutored me in preparation. We remained research partners for another fifteen years. The Great Books sustained our friendship. I began to include de Mello meditations in my classes. I was blissful.

I returned to the classroom in the fall of 1994, and began to teach Great Books. I have not looked back. This is home. Yes, I still do mathematics and I look at that part of my life as essential, but ... not enough. Not big enough. The life of the mind and the life of the spirit are much more. The Great Books has done more to open my eyes and my appetite for learning than any other life experience. I was reborn. I now see that this had been my calling all along. My dad's voice came back to me. This would become my ministry. It is.

Ouroboros - My Return



I am back to my beginning, a beginning that my father proposed and predicted when I was 17. Ouroboros has occurred, it just took 23 more years, and my father was not around to see it happen. So, at age 40, I returned to the words my father spoke - ministry, obedience to God (not to my father, he was only the messenger from THE FATHER) - and this has brought me full circle, to full *at-one-ment* - atonement. I have accepted the call from God. I have become a minister. I teach the Great Books and spiritually mentor students. I bear witness to them of what God can do in one's life. I serve God, no one else. Now it all makes sense. I can and do follow my bliss, God's bliss.

My advice: do not WASTE the gifts God has given you or miss the bliss of being who God has made you to be - bless God and bless others - all for his glory.