

The Threads that Bind

by J. Michael Dumoulin

Prologue

THE OLD TOWER

*In an old tower under a canopy of trees
at the top of a hill, on a carpet of leaves,
I found a memory buried deep.
Like a prized chestnut or curious rock, it
lovingly emerged from my pocket.
The rushing sounds of a biting breeze
popped the thought in my head, I recall.
Just a park on a lane but it proved I was sane.
It wasn't a dream after all!*

A few years ago, my wife Rosemary and I traveled to Germany to visit our daughter Virginia. Like Virginia's grandmother Jeanne Marie had done 55 years earlier, Virginia had accompanied a military man to his assignment and was raising children with him in another country. Like I did when I was their age, my grandchildren were living on an insulated military installation in Germany, growing up among ancient forests and castle ruins, immersed in the guttural German language and a charming, manicured culture. Just as my father Staff Sergeant Charles Lucian Sr. had done more than a half-century earlier, Virginia's Army officer husband Jay returned from his temporary duties elsewhere with stories and souvenirs that eventually will become family treasures.

And just as my parents did two generations before, my daughter and her husband made it a point to explore their surroundings and they encouraged their children to find adventure, too. Before returning stateside, the family took weekend and holiday outings whenever they could: to the Normandy coast, to London via train through the Chunnel, to Berlin, Nuremberg, and Bavaria. Virginia and Jay gave their young sons Jack and Lucian the freedom to explore. They let the boys walk themselves to school, build forts in the wooded but safe spaces on base, and play free with their friends, secretly supervised by every other parent on the base. Exploration and a broader sense of place: the two go hand in hand.

For decades I've wondered if an image of castle ruins in the woods -- a wisp of a mental note that returns during quiet contemplation -- was real or constructed from inside a five-year's old imagination. Castles would show up in many of my early drawings and in the cardboard playhouses I made for my son, Christopher. The image came to mind whenever he and Virginia built crenelated cones of sand at the beach or when I would quietly sip coffee as I looked out into the woods from the third story balcony of our townhouse in Washington DC. Thanks to a visit to my boyhood haunts during that trip to Germany, I was able to put my castle woolgathering into perspective but like most answers, the visit only posed more questions. What about my other mental images? I began to see life-long threads of reoccurring themes in

those, too.

My guess is that while we're in the moment, we can't tell what's part of a thread or what's simple lint, even after years of practice. But after a lifetime of retrospect, validated by photos and what memories remain, some threads do become obvious. Unfortunately, most of us will never see the tapestry we create. That image is a gift we leave to others. We're in our own picture, after all, or to paraphrase one of my father's truisms, "We're all sitting at the table in our own plate."

Like me and my siblings Charles Jr, James, Charlette, and Robert, my daughter Virginia's two boys probably will grow up wondering which of their memories are real; which have been lost over time; and which ones never really happened the way they remember them at all. What will anchor the drifting realities decades from now will be the seemingly millions of videos and phone photos their mother and father took while they were on life's adventures. At least, that was my experience. I hope it turns out to be theirs, too.

1. Email to Rosemary and her Students

New York City, September 18, 2001

"Rescue and recovery work around the World Trade Center went slowly today. Rescuers don't want to cause cave-ins in case people are still alive in air pockets down in the rubble. But also, it has rained, which keeps the dust down but makes debris much heavier. The already tired rescue workers have to work that much harder to lift soggy plaster, wood, and other absorbent material.

"New York City officials are facing an incredible task. By now they have excavated about 50,000 tons of debris but are about to remove another 450,000 tons just to get down to ground level. That doesn't count what is inside the lower levels. They have to move slowly because the basement of the WTC was built like a plastic swimming pool sitting in a shallow pond. The "pool" used to have floors and braces pushing out to keep the walls strong. But these are gone. As long as there is enough debris inside the basement, the "pool" can't cave in from the pressure of the nearby Hudson River gut if workers remove the debris too fast or if the pool develops a leak, the basement will collapse inside itself, possibly causing another, but smaller disaster.

"Safety of the rescue workers is the City's number one priority at this point. Officials don't want the list of injuries to go any higher. More than 400 people are in hospitals at this point, including many rescuers. On this day, New York officials raised the number of missing to more than 6,000 people. Because it was the World Trade Center, there were always large numbers of international visitors inside the complex. Earlier lists had no way of including all these people but now, a week later, countries are providing names of people that never came back from business trips or vacations.

"Some of the buildings next to the WTC are apartments, so many people haven't been able to go back home, and many never will. For some, hotels have become home. When I finish my night shift, part of my routine is to go up to my hotel's top, 35th floor for a cup of coffee and some juice before going to bed. On this day, I overheard one man talking to a stranger in the elevator on the way up to the lounge. The man, staring at the wood paneling past the stranger said in a matter-of-fact but quiet voice, that an artist he knew had opened up a new studio in the Center just that week and never made it out. Up in the Hospitality Lounge a number of people just like him sit and stare out the window every day, some dressed in what I would describe as very casual attire...almost their pajamas. It's like they are still in shock.

“Eventually, of course, some residents will begin to return to their homes in nearby buildings. Water, gas, subways, cell phone calls and electricity are all beginning to flow again. But it will take a long time before everything truly becomes “normal.” More than 12,000 businesses were impacted by the attack, which destroyed 10 percent of Manhattan’s office space. As of this day, small aircraft still have to stay away from the John F. Kennedy Airport and the Holland Tunnel, which connects Manhattan with New Jersey, remains closed to all but the rescue crews. The doors of twelve schools in the area are still closed and no one knows when they are expected to re-open.

“To compound the problem, visitors have stopped coming into New York for fun and entertainment. The news reported that six Broadway plays have closed. Tony, our hotel maître-de, told me that two nearby hotels shut down rather than carry a full staff and an empty building. Yesterday, my hotel laid off 50 of its workers and the hotel expects to have to furlough another 30 by the end of the week. Tony said he had been working double shifts since the attack and now would have to fill in for other jobs until management can bring the staff back. He said he has a cot in the baggage room but hasn’t changed his underwear in days and that he has a rash in the most uncomfortable of places. It’s amazing how people will share their most intimate thoughts with you at times like this if you’re just there to listen.

“My Defense Coordination Team and FEMA in general are still supporting the city’s Search and Rescue teams and will support them until the mayor declares the rescue phase of this operation to be over. We figure that he won’t do that until the police and fire departments have exhausted themselves to the point that they can truly say they have put every ounce of their energy into the effort and in their minds all hope of finding any of their comrades alive is gone. Cadaver-sniffing dogs and their handlers are working eight-hour shifts, but such dogs can only work about two hours before they are completely desensitized and have to take a long break. So, the work proceeds slowly.

“Primarily, FEMA is helping coordinate a rotation of mortuary, emergency management and hazardous material and decontamination teams. They are helping assess damage to all the buildings near the WTC and providing “incident stress” programs for the searchers.

“As an Air Force liaison, it is my job to help the Army help FEMA. Our Defense Coordinating Element arranged to house, feed and provide transportation for the Search and Rescue teams gathering at McGuire AFB. These are the rescue teams using the Holland Tunnel. On this day, we arranged for FEMA to use Stewart Air National Guard Base in the Bronx to stage mortuary teams. Military steel experts, called Master Breachers, have been training rescue teams how to carefully break apart steel girders and we are arranged for military communication teams to bring in radar, infrared and ultrasound equipment to help locate people. The Navy’s large hospital ship, the USS Comfort, continues to serve as a cafeteria, laundry, floating hotel, counseling center and clinic for the rescuers.”

2. Earliest Memories

When your father is a professional photographer and you have grown up among libraries of photo albums, home movies, and stacks of slide trays, it is difficult, looking back, to distinguish genuine memories from second-hand remembrances gleaned from black and white or faded color images taken of you and your young siblings.

Except for short trips to Mexico and Puerto Rico, all of my military active and Reserve

assignments, both permanent and temporary, had been stateside. But my father, Charles Lucian, Senior, traveled the world as a United States Air Force airman recording on celluloid whatever he was assigned at the time to document. In the late 1950s, he covered rocket launches at Cape Canaveral where we lived. In the 60s, he documented Presidential visits to Germany, but also famine relief in the Congo, and state visits of dignitaries in the Far East. Judging from the abundance of 16mm film outtakes and 8x10 inch glossy photos, my father spent the 1970s, the height of the Cold War, recording test flights of new aircraft designs at bases around the U.S. His twin lens Minolta Autocord camera was never far from his side. Whether he was on-duty or at home at supper time it seemed he was always taking photos. My mother, Jeanne Marie, a former Air Force flight nurse, shared his passion for taking photos, more I think because it gave her an “in” to my father’s obsession than as a creative outlet for her otherwise clinical personality. “Just one more shot!” became the family battle cry.

Over time, the family photo library grew to include cropped but unsorted photos stashed in closets and a garage packed with albums and boxes of film canisters. As kids, we loved going through it all again, and again, and then again with our friends. We set up the family projector, with its round plastic carousel of invariably backward-facing or upside-down slides. We would take from the closet a long cardboard box and slide out its blue metallic projection screen. With a nail-on-chalkboard like screech unique to the old Kodak cylinder, we would unfold the projector screen’s three legs, hook the retracted, spring-wound screen to its telescoping square mast, and raise the giant white sheet as if we were castaways on a raft setting sail for the nearest island. For a large enlisted military family of modest means, reminiscing was as rich a recreation as any expensive vacation.

So, in retrospect, it is hard to sort genuine memories of childhood happenings from pictures taken by my parents of those happenings, cropped, composed, or otherwise dodged-and-burned and brought out into the light from the bathroom they had converted into a darkroom for the evening. First- or second-hand memories aside, the events did happen and looking back at some of them now more than a half-century later, I can see foretelling and foreshadowing of motivations, early personality pivot points, proclivities, maybe even prophesies.

Among my parents' photo albums, I found black and whites of my mother, my older brother Charles Junior, and my 18-months younger brother, Jim. We stood on the Florida beaches looking up at rocket launches through metal chain link. Okay, so these memories came from a photo album, but if they were only photos in a book, why even today when I see them do I smell the crisp salt air and taste the aluminum of the fence? On those same beaches are pictures of my mother in her one-piece bathing suit, a scarf tied around her head, watching her children dig moats around sand castles at the waters edge. But instead of nostalgic bliss, these idyllic images remind me of a recurring dream I had as a child, a nightmare where I’m pulled out into waters over my head; tumbling in the undertow, unable to swim. In one album is a photo of a kindergarten-age me sitting proudly on my bike the first day I learned to ride it. But if this is just a photo memory, why do I know the bike was red? Why do I remember the two older girls not in the picture, strangers but neighbors, who made it their mission to keep me upright as I zigzagged along the sidewalk around our apartment building on a bike without training wheels? In a black and white photo of us children picking cherries in an orchard, I can vividly remember the bright red fruit and light green leaves framed among forest green shadows deeper in the thick foliage. I remember marveling that those cherries tasted just like the ones in our neighborhood by my school. And when I see the photo of my brothers and me belted into the seats of a Boeing 707 airliner, my mother smiling in the aisle, standing with my baby sister in her arms,

why do I distinctly smell a mixture of JP4 jet fuel and barf bag?

Is this confluence of senses simply coincidence? Sifting through my parents' vast photo legacy makes me wonder, are these just random bubbles of deeply buried memories, brought to the surface and ignited by visual cues? Or are they the Cosmos' calling cards to future decisions? Regardless, many of these early photographs seem to share themes I've found woven into my life ever since: space and rockets, the Air Force, parents and family, the kindness of strangers, small miracles, inner nightmares, even beaches, vineyards, and castles.

3. Five Senses

Once the Boeing 707 landed in Germany and my father began his new assignment, the family photos (and my memories, coincidentally) started to record a much larger world. Beaches and brothers continued as running themes, with my new sister added as subplot, but the landscape had broadened. A different country and cultural norms, visits to my father's family in France, and starting elementary school made for a much, much higher vantage point.

At first, our troop of two adults and four "kinder" rented the downstairs flat of an off-base apartment. The landlord and his family often would enter the apartment unannounced to visit, much to my mother's displeasure. According to family lore, the landlord's daughter was a recent Miss Germany contestant and Mom was sure the girl had her eyes on my father. Under a little pressure, Charles Senior soon arranged for new quarters, this time in military enlisted housing on Wiesbaden Air Base.

The on-base military compound where we lived was both insular and accepting. Although the complex isolated American families from the surrounding German culture, within the retreat there developed a safe community of friends who became surrogate family. At five years old, I tunneled through low bushes and trees that burrowed into the hedgerows between the nine-plex apartment buildings that stair-stepped up the side of a rising hill. By age six, I was riding first my scooter, then taking my bike, a half mile up the hill to a shaded park at the far end of the housing complex. There, among the oak and chestnut trees was a centuries-old stone water tower, nestled in an enchanted forest that surely housed elves, rogue thieves, and was the birthplace of Rapunzel. Forty years later, I went back to the old neighborhood and wondered how our parents could let young ones like me wander so far from home. I have concluded that in the fenced universe where we lived, overseen by an army of at-home mothers continually looking out the window at the slice of children scurrying below, our parental oversight, though invisible, was complete and absolute. I'm convinced, too, that this freedom among innocents to explore and play did more than any organized preschool could to open our minds and prepare us as receptacles of new ideas and new experiences in the school years to come. And come they did.

My only two memories of kindergarten were my first ant bite on my first field trip and my terror at being chosen as the lead pilgrim in the Thanksgiving Day play. Both memories were so traumatic that they color my attitude towards ants and performing in front of an audience even now, well into my retirement years.

Kindergarten aside, it was a second-grade assignment that I cherish as one of my first educationally-formative lessons. If I could remember my teacher's name, I might try to thank her, but it's likely she's long since passed away. The weekly assignment was simple: on our blue-lined pad of writing paper, using a wooden ruler and a pencil, we would draw four lines to divide the top page on the pad into five

roughly equal columns, then label each column for the five senses: see, hear, taste, smell, and feel. Mrs. Whatever-her-name-was would then take us outside, sometimes to the shaded playground, or maybe the field that separated the school from the air base's main gate and highway. If it was raining, we might line up on the benches under the covered walkway where the buses unloaded. She would sit us down, our pads in our lap, our pencils at the ready. She would demand silence, and then ask us to write down under the appropriate titles what we could see, hear, taste, smell, and feel. The lesson lasted only about 15 minutes, but to me, living in a chaotic and noisy house of yelling boys and a crying baby, the silence was magical, the exercise of all five senses exhilarating. Through these sessions I began to associate color with smell, sound with texture, and taste with temperature. I always expected to feel an ant crawling on me, but one never did. My father would not have remembered much about my early school years. He was constantly traveling but he would always return with something marvelous to show for it. His missions to Africa added hide-bound drums, ebony face masks, and small animal sculptures to the living room décor. Silk-painted portraits of Japanese geisha girls hung in the halls for years and over-sized teak forks and spoons decorated the dining room wall, courtesy of Thailand. After one visit, a five-foot tall strand of bananas appeared in the kitchen and hung there until my mother insisted, he ripen the fruit in the basement.

As intriguing as these items were to a six-year-old boy, they were nothing compared to what would inevitably follow a few nights later. After nearly every mission, my father would invite his team members and their wives over for after dinner cocktails. No couple had to travel far: we all lived together in the same complex. With everyone's children in bed or with a sitter, the men would begin to describe their trip. Details of the military flight and layovers, tales of the crews' adventures, sights and misadventures, were usually humorous, sometimes frightful, but always fascinating to a young boy listening unseen in the hall shadows.