

Geoffrey S. Whitney

Dr. James Hepworth

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Blue Hair and Discipline

When I was fourteen my father, a Captain in the U.S. Army, received orders to Forces Command Headquarters at Ft. McPherson in Georgia. It was his duty to follow these orders and it was my duty as his son to go along. I was expected to say goodbye to a house I liked on a street I liked in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a town I very much liked. In addition, I had to leave a girlfriend that I really liked. Every year to a year-and-a-half we had followed Uncle Sam's orders from one U.S. Army post to another, and up to this time I had enjoyed the adventure and the travel. We lived in Colorado for a little over two years, however, and two years was just enough time for me to forget that I was an Army Brat. Before I could do no more than call Kendall and profess her my undying love and devotion, the Whitney family had been crammed into the Toyota Land Cruiser and was headed southeast. Four miserable days later I was in a new state with a new attitude. I was a sulky teenager with a plan for revenge.

I made up my mind to buck the system, to blame Dad, to blame the Army, to blame the world for all the things I was forced to leave behind in Colorado. Someone had to pay, and as perverse as it sounds, I decided that someone had to be me. In true teenage fashion, I began to plot my own down fall.

Upon our arrival in Stone Mountain, Georgia, I was enrolled in Clarkston High School. At Clarkston I found a venue and a battlefield for my rebellion, and I wanted to show the world what it had done to me by disrupting my life. When opportunities presented themselves I started

skipping classes, smoking cigarettes, and drinking beer, and I also began a short and notorious career as a shoplifter. I thought that I was doing rather well as a rebel. What I didn't know (or think about) was that every rebellion usually exacts a terrible price that most rebels have to pay. .

One day while we were ditching school, I took a dare from some friends. It was not just any dare, but one worthy of recognition in the annals of stupidity. I wanted a skateboard. K-Mart had a skateboard. K-Mart also had a garden shop with an open door right to the parking lot. The dare was to ride K-Mart's skateboard right out the back door. I made it half way across the parking lot before I got clothes-lined by store security.

After a two-day stay in juvenile detention in the Decal County Justice Center and a three day suspension from school for skipping, I returned to Clarkston High to find myself the subject of some notoriety and the brunt of more than a few jokes. I was officially labeled The Stupidest Kid in the School. By the end of lunch time I just wanted a hole to hide in. By the last period of the day, I was ready to slit my wrists.

My last class was English with Mrs. Betty Ellington. Mrs. Ellington was the oldest woman I had ever seen without a cane, a walker, or a wheelchair. Complete with a beehive of blue hair on top of a prune face that never let her forced excuse for a smile reach her steely and beady eyes, Mrs. Ellington was the picture of the consummate school marm. Even Mrs. Ellington's clothes were severe in their starched formality. The chain that kept her glasses in place somehow never seemed to even swing when she moved her head.

I noticed a lot about Mrs. Ellington on that first day back in her class including the way she nailed me to the wall with a contemptible glare as I tried to slide into my desk unobserved. I also noticed her tone of voice, and I knew that her words were for me and me alone.

“Students,” she said with a tilt of her head as she stared directly at me over the rims of her glasses, “please stand and recite The Slogan.” My skin speckled in goose bumps from the knowledge that the capstone of my humiliating day had arrived and there was no escape.

“Geoffrey,” Mrs. Ellington drawled in a slow southern twang that conflicted with a gravelly pitch an octave too high for comfort, “come to the front of the class. You will lead us in The Slogan until I can be sure that you understand its meaning.”

I don’t remember learning much in the way of English or grammar in Mrs. Ellington’s class, but I do remember The Slogan:

“If every student was just like me, what kind of class would this be?”

For the next two weeks I led the class in reciting The Slogan at both the start and at the end of each class. When I was not saying The Slogan , I was writing The Slogan. This routine only varied when Mrs. Ellington replaced some words in The Slogan with other words, i.e.. “student” with “citizen,” “class” with “country,” “citizen” with “father,” “country” with “family.”

Because of Mrs. Ellington and The Slogan, I learned that I was part of a very big picture and that the cost of being self-destructive was a price that everyone had to pay; worse, I also learned that I had no right to make others pay that price. And finally, I learned from this experience that reacting to outside forces is far less productive than adapting to them.

For all I know, Mrs. Ellington was just a mean old lady from the Old South who wanted to humiliate an uppity Yankee kid from Colorado. I hope not, though. In the years since my sweltering days in Mrs. Ellington’s class room I have tried to remember “The Slogan” and in doing so to remember Mrs. Ellington as well.

The other day in preparation for writing this essay I pulled out my yearbook from that year at Clarkston High and found her picture. It surprised me to see that not only was Mrs. Ellington smiling, but that she had also written me a little note: “Geoffrey, be true to whom you want to be and you will always be true to who you are.” It is funny now that I have had some time to think about it: I don’t even remember asking her to sign my yearbook.