

THE JOURNEY

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The following is a presentation I was honored to present to the Edward Douglas White Catholic High School Class of 1975 at the occasion of their 40th Class Reunion, held at Ducros Plantation House in Schriever on Saturday, October 10, 2015. While certain parts relate solely to those lucky enough to have attended E.D. White in 1970s Thibodaux, LA, I believe it expresses universal truths, as well. I hope you enjoy it.

We are gathered here tonight to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of our graduation from Edward Douglas White Catholic High School. It's wonderful to be among friends, some who I haven't seen in forty years. Remember when we listened to Roger Daltrey singing, "Hope I die before I get old?" Now it's more like Paul McCartney and, "Will you still love me when I'm sixty-four."

Forty years! Can you believe it? Sometimes it seems so long ago; other times, it was like yesterday.

Forty years. So much has happened in those decades. As some of you may know, I write historical fiction. World events are important to me. I could go on to list the many things that has happened, both here in Thibodaux, Louisiana and around the world, since that day in May of 1975 when we walked on stage to receive our diplomas. But I'm not going to do that.

It has been my privilege to know an extraordinary woman. Albertine Prezlin Leche, my great-grandmother, was born just up Bayou Lafourche from here in 1879, the year the automobile was invented. She lived all of her 103 years in Thibodaux, the last twenty or so across the street from St. Joseph Catholic Church. In her lifetime she saw the creation of electrical power and the telephone—in fact, she was one of the first telephone operators in Thibodaux. Women got the vote and the Civil Rights movement. She saw vaccines and heart transplants. Radio and movies and television. Vegetables in stores year round. Humanity went from the dunes of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina to the Sea of Tranquility, and by harnessing the energy of the atom, discovered unlimited power and the means of destroying all life on this world. She saw two world wars and countless hurricanes. She was witness to the best and worst of mankind.

It was during my E.D. White days that I asked her about that. The wonders she had seen! Surely that made an impression upon her.

It did, she agreed. Air conditioning was nice. But then, she turned the conversation back to the things that were of interest to her. Her life at her beloved Coulon Plantation with her late husband, John Leche. The dozens of families she had known. Her long-gone friends. And the pride she had for her grandsons and great-grandchildren.

Now, Albertine Leche was not a simple woman, as anyone who knew her can attest. Her mind was as sharp as a tack up almost to the end. But in my arrogant teen-aged youth, I did not understand why she didn't want to talk about those great achievements and monumental events. I was too young to understand the wisdom she imparted.

My first clue came years later with the birth of my son. It was then I saw the great purpose of life: the continuation of humanity and passing down of the accumulated knowledge of the ages to the new generation. In other words, growing up and raising children. It was then I saw that life truly is a journey.

Our parents were our first guides along the Journey. The lessons they imparted, the examples they presented, set us upon this trip.

Our faith is a guiding light in the darkness.

Our years at E.D. White are not something apart—some unique event. It was an important waystation on the Journey. Those years—five for most of us, fewer for some—helped create who we are. The knowledge offered by our teachers was part of that. But just as important, if not more so, were the interactions we shared together.

Certainly, we can talk about the singular events, the great successes, and tonight we will. Making the playoffs, traveling to Mexico City, winning the state championship. Homecoming, Sweetheart, Prom. Rings and Graduation. All of that is indelibly engraved in our minds.

But these wonderful things were not all E.D. White contributed to prepare us for the Journey. It's the small things, the people we knew.

Hanging around the Astrodome, waiting for Home Room. The girls pulling down their skirts, worrying about Sister Marie and her ruler. The guys playing cards. Turning in your homework notebook to Brother Linus. The agony of fifth period, wondering if the day would ever end. Mrs. Donnes sweetly asking you to be quiet in the library.

Sweating on the football practice field. Marching band during a cold rainy game. Pep squad, dance squad, cheerleading. The school's first girls' teams. Prep Quiz Bowl, National Honor Society, Key Club, 4-H. Trying to decide what to wear to the Prom. Wondering if she'll say yes.

All of this made us who we are and prepared us for the Journey.

We are not meant to go on the Journey alone. Some of us found their spouse at E.D. White. Others of us discovered their companion of their future lives elsewhere. Some of us took more than one try. I found mine on a blind date in a little café in Covington that no longer exists.

We all know the Journey is not easy. E.D. White helped prepare us for this. We all suffered pain, pressure, and disappointment, as well as joy and satisfaction. We thought nothing could be so bad as sitting at home without a date, or anything better than beating Vandebilt Catholic. We learned better, haven't we?

In the forty years since E.D. White we discovered life was nothing like we thought. Most of us are not doing what we thought we would. Some have traveled far, others have stayed close to home. The children grow up and leave, yet the Journey continues.

We start thinking of the legacy we will leave behind. What kind of parent were we? What kind of spouse? Co-worker, boss, mayor? Will we leave our family, our home, our community better than we found it?

For some, the Journey is over.

We have had setbacks and success, disappointment and surprise, tragedy and triumph, loss and growth, joy and sorrow, life and death. But we go on, reaching for that elusive Elysian Dream, that blissful place we all strive for, the goal of the Journey.

It was while writing this that I had another revelation. *The Elysian Dream is not just the goal of the Journey, but is also the Journey itself.*

It is why the Journey is filled with joy and hardship. Nothing worth having comes easy. For it is along the Journey we discover the things that make life worth living. The people we love. The places we've seen and the experiences we've had. Our work and our hobbies. The simple pleasures we've enjoyed. The delightful moments that are the snapshots of our lives. Our families, our friends, and our faith.

So, tonight we celebrate another waystation on the Journey. We will stand around and talk and laugh, and perhaps shed a tear. When tonight is done, we'll lie to each other, promising to stay in touch. We'll try, but we all know the demands on our time from families and careers. That's all right, after all. For tonight itself is a milestone along the Journey. Tonight is a part of the Elysian Dream.

Bruce Springsteen was wrong. Our time at E.D. White, as memorable as it was, was not our "Glory Days." Our Glory Days, our best days, are before us as we continue the Elysian Dream that is the Journey.

This is what my great-grandmother was trying to tell me so long ago.

Tonight as we laugh and converse, reconnect and reminisce, let us take a moment to remember those who could not be here and those who have left this world all too soon. And as we continue the Journey, let us appreciate the gifts and experiences that we've been given by He who made us. And let us pray that when the Journey is done, we all stand together again on the sunlit plains of the Elysian Fields.

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When not writing or traveling with Barbara, Jack attempts to play golf. A devout convert to Roman Catholicism, Jack is married with three grown sons.

Jack's blog postings—The Cajun Cheesehead Chronicles—appear regularly at Austen Variations.
