

A PERSONAL WORD OF REMEMBRANCE

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(On the occasion of the presentation of a Memorial Plaque in memory of her father, Bishop Laress John Birney, at Marsh Chapel, Boston University, Saturday, May 16, 1981)

What a joyous day this is for me--a day I've hoped for and looked forward to for quite a few years!

I have been asked to share briefly a few childhood memories of Boston University School of Theology, and I would like to give you insight into my father's work and thinking--since none of you knew him. I will read what I wish to say that I may stay within my allotted time.

My father, Laress John Birney, and my mother, Laura Close Birney, were born on Ohio farms. They thought it a great privilege to have known farm life. My father loved the fields, the woods, and all living things. He even thought the snakes were beautiful creatures. (There were no poisonous varieties on the farm.) He taught me when I was a little girl not to fear them. My grandfather did not share his admiration for his pet snakes, and I have been told that when my grandfather would find a garter snake in a pocket my father suffered dire consequences.

My mother once told me, though my father never mentioned it, that at some time during his teen years he had a deeply moving spiritual experience at the altar of the little Pleasant Valley country church near his home. I wish I knew more about this, but it must have been powerful for it did determine the course of his life thereafter.

After graduation from Scio College, which later merged with Mount Union, my father came to Boston and graduated from the School of Theology in 1899. After various pastorates he became Dean of the school in 1911.

The school was then located at 70 and 72 Mt. Vernon Street, on Beacon Hill. The Thayer brothers--wealthy bankers and merchants--had built the two buildings and lived in them. They were bought by Boston University in 1886 to house the Theological School. Brick dormitories had been added in the rear on the property that extended through to Chestnut Street.

We moved from Malden to an apartment on the second floor above the class rooms. Many reminders of the Thayer mansion elegance remained. Our rooms were very large, high-ceilinged, and the fireplaces had hand-carved mantels. There were huge floor-to-ceiling mirrors with wide gilt frames, and a dressing room panelled in bird's-eye maple. An impressive curving mahogany

staircase led from the first floor to our apartment. One of the libraries in the school was panelled in walnut. The reception room on the first floor boasted a large crystal chandelier, a marble mantel, and hand-painted Italian designs on the walls and ceiling.

I have happy memories of the nine years we lived in the school. I was quite small in 1911 and my very first memory of Boston University School of Theology is of sitting on the floor in our living room struggling to tie my shoelaces.

I remember Christmas Eves, the rows of lighted candles in our Mt. Vernon Street windows, the rows of candles in all the other windows up and down the street, the snow outside, the singing of the carolers on the hill.

I remember many of the professors who taught in the school, and the parties my parents gave for the students. Certain Theologs were my favorites. They brought me candy, and as I grew beyond the very small-child stage they took me for swan-boat rides in the Public Garden and on expeditions to the Franklin Zoo, and the Arboretum.

I remember Sanders, our black janitor, who was very popular with everyone. One of his duties was to ring the bells for the change of classes. There was a song the students used to sing on various social occasions that ended with the words, "Sanders, won't you ring that, Sanders, won't you ring that bell!"

Every so often in the evening there would be considerable noise in the nether regions above the second floor: shouting, running, much laughter and so on. My father would smile and say, "Well, the Theologs need to blow off steam again!"

I must say that in that school I grew up without the slightest race prejudice. I took for granted the students of many races and colors I saw in our apartment, and in the school: men from Africa, India, the Philippines, China, Japan. I distinctly remember how shocked I was in later years to discover that there is such a thing as race prejudice.

And that first chapel! The Roswell Robinson Chapel was named for my father's friend who gave a considerable sum of money toward its construction. It was begun in the spring of 1914 and finished in the fall of 1915. It was built on the vacant ground (once my play-yard) between the school and Chestnut Street, and could be entered from 72 Mt. Vernon, as well as from Chestnut. The building still looks much the same from the outside, though it is now an apartment house.

I watched the walls of the two lower floors and the chapel rise higher and higher all those months until finally the roof was on. During that time drawings of these clerestory windows and the Good

Shepherd window in the balcony appeared in our apartment propped against the wall behind a window seat. I remember my father standing in front of them, studying them. Every so often a drawing or two would change. This seemed to go on for a long time. Then they all disappeared, and one by one these windows made by Charles J. Connick Associates were installed in that first chapel. I thought it the most beautiful chapel in the world with its high stone pillars, Gothic, beamed ceiling, the wonderful wood carving brought from Belgium, the fresco of the Christ over the altar, and these glorious windows. As I grew older I determined that when I married the wedding would take place in Robinson Chapel. This dream came true on a lovely, sunny, warm October day.

Well, this is quite enough about my memories. Now, to consider my father.

In 1918 during World War I many of the Theological students were in uniform. My father came to feel that he, also, must "do his bit for the war to end all wars." That was the thought at the time. The school granted him a six months' leave of absence from spring until fall and my father sailed on a troop ship for France as a member of the Y.M.C.A.

My mother and I stayed at our country home during those months. One October night I woke up and became aware that my mother was in the room. I heard an odd sound. I was frightened and whispered, "What's that?" My mother said, "Someone is throwing gravel against the screen." Then we heard a voice: "Won't someone let me in!" "It's your father," said my mother. We rushed to the window and there in the moonlight stood a tall man in a khaki uniform looking up at us. There was no more sleep in that house for some hours. Wartime security had prevented our knowing when he would return.

I will read part of a letter written in Paris, October 1, 1918, to the trustees of Boston University by the Divisional Secretary of the Y.M.C.A.: "I wish to take this opportunity of expressing to you my appreciation of the splendid service rendered by Dean Birney during the heavy fighting period following the attacks of September 12th and 13th. Through the greater part of a week he remained in one of the villages which had been recaptured from the enemy, extending the services of the Y.M.C.A. to all the troops in the vicinity. In spite of the fact that the village was under constant and heavy fire, and that men were being killed and wounded in it, he remained at his post until compelled to vacate it by military order. His courage and noble spirit stimulated the morale of the troops. I write because I feel certain that you will never know of his bravery from the Dean himself."

And had this letter not been written we would never have known. My father did not mention the incident.

Years later I knew an older man in New York who had known my father in France. He said to me, "I don't know a thing about your father's preaching, or what kind of a dean or bishop he made, but I do know that he could certainly drive a truck over a blacked-out road filled with shell holes." My father had driven food and supplies to the boys in the trenches, and it had to be at night.

Concerning my father's work in the Theological School Dean Albert Knudson wrote, "To Laress Birney we owe Robinson Chapel as well as what may be called the new Boston University School of Theology which was largely his creation [later moved to his campus, including the chapel windows]. But it was not simply his contributions to the material equipment of the School that made us and the whole church his debtors. From the depths of his being . . . there flowed a stream of sympathy, of affection, of earnestness and of devotion, the like of which one does not often see. . . These qualities made him a great pastor, dean, and bishop . . . The men whose leader he was during his deanship have testified that he was one with them in their struggles, and their burdens, their sorrows, and their successes. . . . It was the redemptive Christ whose spirit he was always seeking to incarnate in his own life."

In 1920 my father was elected a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He had feared this might happen, and at the time it caused him considerable grief. He had hoped to continue as dean of his much loved school. But since he was elected on the first ballot he felt he was obligated to accept the will of the church. He chose to serve in China because he believed he could be of greater service there than in this country.

China in 1920 was a new and fascinating change for the three of us. We lived in Shanghai in the French Concession. I went to the Shanghai American High School, then came home for college. I wish I had time to speak of the wonderful trips I remember in what was really old China.

My father was the Bishop for the Central China and the Kiangsi Conferences which meant constant travelling. In 1932 it was necessary for my father to retire. He had worked very hard, and he hated to leave China. However, he had acquired tuberculosis, an almost incurable disease in those days. My parents came home to live in Pasadena.

At the 1932 General Conference in Atlantic City Handel Lee, one of China's stalwart Christians and a close friend of my father, spoke these words: "In his twelve years in China [Bishop Birney] visited the remotest corners of his area travelling by sampan, sedan chair, wheelbarrow, and walking over roads that were almost impassable. He has been the embodiment of spiritual love, a living example of true Christianity. Wherever there was real need, his ready hand was there to help. He gave his whole heart

and would without reserve to the work in China. So completely did he identify himself with our troubles and difficulties . . . that he came to be regarded as one of us, our Bishop, although his skin was of a different color and his speech in a different tongue. Yet he spoke a language that we all understood, the simple language of love."

Following my father's death in 1937 I went to Pasadena to be with my mother for some weeks. Letters began to pour in from all over the world. It took my mother over a year to answer them. These I have now, and they will go to my children.

Those letters were a revelation to me. I had always thought of my father as very special but I had never fully realized how many people believe in him, trusted him, and really loved that man.

Since then though the years I have read his journals, notebooks, diaries, papers, and I have come to understand that my father was very keenly aware that those who try to follow a growing life of the spirit forever walk a razor's edge. Even though a safe way has been provided, because of our human frailties there are pitfalls, hazards, dangers.

I find references in my father's writings to, I quote, "Not living one's knowledge," "One's insincerity or hypocrisy driving others to despise Christianity," "Talking too much about one's higher life leading to spiritual pride and sense of superiority," "The self crowding out the deeper life," "The will to control and dominate others." The cults of today? Always the razor's edge.

But there are also references to, I quote, "the necessity to find the deeper gifts of the spirit in order to avoid living a poor, pale, thin, struggling Christian life without much fruitage and harvest."

L. L. Dunnington, one of my father's students, wrote the following in 1955:

"When Dr. L. J. Birney was dean of Boston University School of Theology, he wanted each boy to have an overwhelming experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit. He used to go into beautiful Robinson Chapel each year before school was out and pray all night, holding each of us up, one by one, before the Eternal Presence.

"Never will I forget one such morning. As we filed into the chapele, an invisible Presence, powerful and soul stirring, swept over us and we were stilled by a deep peace. It was a cleansing, uplifting, and overwhelming experience.

"I cannot but believe that that same Spirit Power would come into more lives more often if we were to pay the price Dean Birney used to pay each year."

Such was the depth of spiritual commitment, understanding, and motivating power of the man we honor and remember in this chapel today: Laress John Birney.