

THE ROOTS OF THE SIXTIES: PROLOGUE

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Lately I have been thinking about that most mysterious of decades, the 1960s. I not only came of age during that time (and lived through it), but I am old enough to actually predate the advent of the hippies and ended up serving as a welcoming committee to them. As would-be beatniks, folks my age were the natural older brothers and sisters to Sixties generation. I would like to explore this topic over several blogs. I understand this may well interest but a few of us, but who cares. We can share our comments and time together. Anyway, it is snowing outside today, and winter seems to be coming on.

Let's face it; most of us who lived through the 1960s are still trying to figure out just what happened. I know I am. And it is not just my fuzzy memory speaking, although I have that too. I find it hard to sort out what was happening culture-wise back then, like alternative 'everything' and what was just having a 20-something-year-old body. The two are not one and the same, yet they were for me and for many of you reading this. It is not like separating the wheat from the chaff here, because here there is no chaff. I came of age and found myself right in the middle of the Sixties. It is hard to sort all that out.

I see there are lots of books out there on the Sixties, but the few that I have picked up and browsed through don't do it for me. Theirs was not my experience. Of course, I came up in Ann Arbor Michigan, a very gentle but cosmopolitan town that back then probably had an inferiority complex compared to vortices like Berkeley and Cambridge. Today it seems to be the other way around. Ann Arbor has come into its own in the last forty years or so and no longer has to apologize to anyone. And I did not come to Ann Arbor for an education. I grew up in Ann Arbor. I was a townie and never knew anything else. Think about that for moment. Ann Arbor was never quite like the rest of the world.

I visit Ann Arbor usually several times a year, if only to see my grandkids. My wife goes much more often. I am not a traveler. I like it when the kids come up here where we live in Big Rapids, Michigan and catch frogs. These days when I am in Ann Arbor it takes twenty minutes just to drive across town, and if I have one phrase to describe the difference between Ann Arbor back then and now, it is "overly caffeinated." There seems to be a coffee shop on almost every corner and it makes a difference. Back then there was just one coffee house and that was Mark's Coffee House on East William Street, but for those of you who really have been around this town, the first "coffee house" in Ann Arbor was the Promethean on the other side of William Street from Mark's and about a block west, roughly where the Cottage Inn pizza place is today.

The Promethean Coffee House served (non-espresso) coffee and mulled cider (with cinnamon sticks!) and played jazz and old Shelly Berman comedy albums. Once in a while folksingers like Al Young would play there. This must have been in the later 1950s or very early in the 1960s. I went there as often as I could to just sit around, drink coffee, smoke cigarettes, look serious, and (most of all) hope that I would meet the love of my life. Nothing much really happened there aside from sitting around looking at each other, and after a while it closed. Still, for someone back then who was reading all of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and the Beat writers, this was as close as I could get to joining up with the Beat Movement. Unfortunately, that party was already almost over and I had to wait for the next wave, which was the Sixties and (I hate this term) the "hippies."

People my age automatically became the granddaddies (sometimes the godfathers) of the hippies. As it turned out, hippies were for the most part uneducated in the liberal arts, and even the worst beatnik wannabe at least knew jazz, classical music, and European literature, especially the poetry. I was perhaps overeager. I had read all of Dostoevsky (some 53 books), not to mention everyone else, like Sartre, Kierkegaard, Goethe, Proust, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Rilke, and the list goes on and on. I even read (as best I could) all the Loeb Greek and Roman Classical Library, and that is saying something. Unfortunately, it went in one ear and out the other. But the poetry and literature stuck. And above all I loved what the Germans call Bildungsroman, which roughly translated are coming-of-age books usually with a romantic yearning tossed in.

Examples of Bildungsroman include Goethe's "Grüner Heinrich," and his "The Sorrows of Young Werther," not to mention the super-romantic and devastating book "The Wanderer," by Henri Alain-Fournier. Does anyone remember that book? It killed!

For someone like myself, with no real past back in those days, everything was still very much in the future, too much so for my taste at the time. I wanted a little piece of that future right away and couldn't wait to be out there in the world living now. Even high school was too slow and I could not wait, so I never finished. I just left and my friend John Stanger and I hitchhiked across the country from Ann Arbor to Venice West (Santa Monica) California. We knew that if any of the Beats were left, they would be there, in North Beach, San Francisco, or in the West Village in New York City. As it was October, sunny California seemed much more inviting, so off we went. But that is another story in itself.

I was never any kind of academic student anyway, other than a student of life and living. I yearned to get out there in the real dirt of life and feel how it was, and I did. My mom tells me that I even played hooky from Kindergarten and that one day they found me standing at the edge of an excavation site watching the earth-moving machines. Mom! How was it possible that you let me alone like that? Yet this is what she told me. It was either kindergarten or first grade. Of course, I don't remember.

But I well remember the loneliness of being a teen and young adult in Ann Arbor. As one of five boys, we lived in a too-small house out at 305 Wildwood on the west side of town, so I moved out quite early on. Bedrooms there were at a premium and I was lucky enough to have one all to myself. That was the good news. The bad news is that it was in the basement. My dad built it for me and every spring and fall, when the rains came, a small river of water would flow in through the small overhead basement window, down the wall, under my bed (I had to keep my blankets up), across the entire floor, and out my bedroom door into the floor drain. It was damp and musty, but it was my room and I loved having it.

Sometimes my little brothers would raid my room and find my little stash of Playboy magazines hidden in the ceiling cubbyhole. That was no good. And my mom finally cracked down on all the snakes I had in my room and throughout the basement. I had been a naturalist ever since I was six years old and I had all kinds of snakes in cages. Does that make me a nerd? This was before nerds.

And my snake collection included poisonous copperheads and really big rattlesnakes. Unfortunately from time to time a snake or two would (somehow) escape and be loose in the house. It was usually one of the large whip snakes, which were big but harmless. Well, they

could bite. Mom really hated them the most and we would go on an extended hunt until it was found. Not all were found. At the bottom of the basement stairs, down where I lived, mother had placed one of my snake-handling sticks. People who went down there always grabbed that stick before venturing farther into any basement rooms, not that they knew how to use one.

Once mom panicked when she found what she thought was a large snake along the top of some cupboards up near the ceiling. Everyone came running and it turned out to be a huge snake skin that had been shed there. Who knows where the snake was by then. If you really want a scary thought, imagine my two-day bus ride from Dallas, Texas to Ann Arbor, while on the floor, between my legs, that coated card-board like container was filled with snakes in cloth bags, including a copperhead and a couple of rattlesnakes, one of them quite large. I am glad they didn't rattle and all of that. I would have been hitchhiking home.

I do remember one very real scare when one of my rattlesnakes got out of its cage (again: somehow) and was sitting right on the pillow next to my bed when I came home. There was no overhead light in my makeshift room, but only a lamp by the bedside. I had to cross the room in the dark (basement, remember?) to turn that light on. As I did that and blindly reached through the darkness for the lamp switch I heard or felt something as the rattlesnake struck out. It swooshed by brushing my sleeve. I didn't get bitten, but it did bring to an end that kind of ridiculous freedom.

My mother, as all the rest of my brothers would agree, was a saint and one of the most understanding and compassionate beings I have ever met. She would have to be with five boys (a basketball team as my dad always said) to raise. Anyway, the poisonous snakes had to go. It was not long before I moved out of there and I believe my younger brother Dan took the basement room. I was the oldest and he was next in line. I was gone and out on my own. I liked that.

In the beginning, before I left for good, I would come back home, at least for spells, and just as likely as not I would bring some friend of mine that needed a place to stay with me. Mom never said no, but like one of those dogs that adopt another dog's puppy as her own, she just took everyone in and for considerable time periods at that. Of course, who could appreciate this at the time. It was just 'mom', and it had always been like that. I don't know what dad thought and I have little to no memories of his reaction to any of this, other than when it came to these things mother was the boss. Anyway father was often none too pleased with me.

I never managed to get the traditional father's blessing until very late in dad's life, mostly because I was not a businessman like he was and liked he wished I would be. I could not make money and I was not into formal education. There is no doubt that I was the black sheep in the family and have probably misled all of my other brothers, more or less, one by one. Mother never deserted me, but she did say that she did not like me much one time. Of course, I did not like me much either sometimes and was very stubborn and could be a total PITA at the drop of a hat. I did not take direction well and could not yet direct myself either.

Socially, all my early life (especially with girls) I tried to fit in, to go along and get along. I desperately wanted to mesh socially and just be one of the guys and most of all to appear attractive and desirable to any of the girls, and in particular to those chosen few. But that never really happened either. I had no idea then how square a peg I was in the social milieu. No idea. I am reminded of a real story someone told (I would credit them if I knew their name) of watching a line of cats walking across a farmyard all in a row with their tails raised high, and at the end of the line (and not far behind) was one skunk (tail also raised high) trying for all its

worth to just fit in and march along. Well, I was that skunk, but I didn't know it then, and hoped against hope it was not so. It was. Ultimately we have no choice in these kinds of matters. Destiny will out.

Today, as a father of four who never even babysat his kids for the first 21 years or so, I can only imagine what my mother and father felt when I abruptly quit high school and set out on the road hitchhiking for the west coast as a would-be beatnik. Mom must have trembled for my welfare or was she glad to see me go? The former I am certain is the case. Did I mention that I was frequently a PITA?

Back then, as I have pointed out, there were no hippies and for that matter it was not even the Sixties when I studied up on the Beat Movement. All that I knew is that I was at last out of boring, boring school, on my own, and free to experience for myself what I could only read about and imagine in the books of Kerouac and poems of Ginsberg. As mentioned, the Beats were very educated in the liberal arts, often self-educated. They were not academics, but amateurs in the truest sense, in love with literature, music, and all the arts. That is what I deeply wanted as well.

Although it was 1960 when I lived in Venice Beach, it was not yet the Sixties as we call them now. Rather, it was still the dying remnants of the Beat Movement that beckoned me, which in no way really foreshadowed what was to come next.

Those of us who came up idolizing the beats turned out to be at the forefront and leaders of the Sixties movement, at least at the onset. As my friend John Sinclair likes to say, it was the beat-educated pre-hippies that taught the hippies about the liberal arts. They had not had the training we had and would not have the time we had to thoroughly read the literature, study the art, woodshed, and all of that. But the hippies did have the good sense and politeness to defer to those of us who did know this stuff. We were immediately the de-facto leaders, but we never were regulars in that army. We were the officers coming from another time and with dreams the hippies never fully would grasp. We were looked up to, but we never considered ourselves hippies. We were hippie tutors.

That's enough for now. Let me know if this resonates with any of you and if you want to explore this further.

