

Auld Lang Syne

*11-28-2016 By Harry Zirkelbach
Stars and Sun date 34619*

As a child Auld Lang Syne, and various mispronunciations, was sung by family and friend, especially at the change of year. Classmates, other friends, joined in with gusto without concern for meaning, or its author. Except for this coincidence, one pal was our Bobby Burns, who never claimed awareness of the origin, meaning of the narrative, though he was inclined to cry at year's end too.

Life begins in a cocoon, heavily protected. Then birth, shock, the question "who are all these people", then hunger; and you know the progressions of "I wants", "me's", until finally that awareness of "others".

Did that begin with a sibling?

Yes each has danced to a different script.

Then that change. Off to school, teachers changed yearly. Facts dolled out in pieces, suitable for teeny minds.

Years later choosing a High School in Erie, Pa. finishing the Eighth Year, Catholic Grade School. The Public School choice, a two step dance; one, year of Junior High (9th Grade, all were technically Freshmen), two, High School, grades 10, 11, 12., (Sophomore, Junior Senior.) Or the sole Catholic High School, Cathedral Preparatory school for boys, forever PREP, all four year, all classes same small building.

I now realize that someone looking like me, chose Prep. It would not seem a wise choice. While qualifying as student, the idea of study, unwelcome. Prep had room for 200 boys in four grades. Freshman class of 100. That should have been a clue.

Somewhere in the next three years most were outed, for the graduating class seldom reached thirty. But at thirteen, who looked further than the hope for a adventurous tomorrow.

What has this to do with Auld Lang Syne? Little. Only this statistic; in four years of survival at Prep, that teaching faculty was male, excepting one nun, Sister Cornelia.

A teacher who loved her subject, the English language. She never had us open a book written by a Scotsman, Irishman, German, Russian, Frenchman. They had not written in her English.

Sister Cornelia was no greater than male teachers in their topic. But she taught in the language we spoke every waking hour. She became our window in learning to think.

She was effective in this, leading me to think, the essence of education. No more Jack Armstrong, Tom Swift, Jack London, but her heroes of long ago, Macbeth, King John, Hamlet and Laertes, all men of Shakespearean friendship. We read his plays with her, dictionary at hand, learned to love language as she did. Sister was elderly, small, burst out of her Habit with enthusiasm we found contagious, compelling.

Had she said, "When I speak to Shakespeare," we would believe. Quick of mind, praise, never a harsh retort. There were no dumb questions. Her class, first of the morning after Mass, our delight, as she wrenched replies from these developing minds.

A fact I would learn to appreciate years later, which she surely recognized immediately; there were no budding geniuses for her to energize, but a hundred eyes of plodders to be encouraged to use their minds, understand the meaning, beauty in the most simple passages of her heroes.

A celebrated week-day hour of joy, not just at year's end.