
Paul Spike

Paul Spike, a son of Robert Spike, wrote the following letter in October 1976 on the occasion of Howard Moody's twentieth anniversary as senior minister at Judson Memorial Church. It is one of several letters exchanged between Paul and Robert Newman. Bob Newman's letter on the same occasion is included in the section on "The Judson Student House." Both letters are reprinted here by permission of Paul Spike and Robert Newman. _____

My first memory of Judson is the way it used to taste: a musty, plaster-laced, damp grit somewhere up on the back of my tongue. I must have consumed several pounds of Judson as I learned to walk on those linoleum floors, to roll down the marble steps on West 4th Street and slide down the banisters inside the lobby. Then I remember the way the gym used to smell on Friday afternoons in the winter after the NYU basketball team finished a week of practice. What was basketball? Whatever, it smelled pretty lousy. Next I remember the view from our apartment on the second floor of the Student House. Especially Frank's barber shop on the other side of Thompson Street which was always full of well-dressed Italian gentlemen who often arrived in Cadillacs which they left double-parked in the middle of the street. They never seemed to get any tickets. And the green shanty on the corner of Thompson and West 3rd where an old man sold the best lemon ice in the Village. Next door was the strip joint with its pictures of girls who seemed to have silver shoelaces sprouting out of their breasts. I think it was my mother who told me that these silver shoelaces were called "pasties" and were New York City laws. The strip joint didn't really open until long after my bedtime. But on a hot summer afternoon I would pass by its open door, bound for a lemon ice, and the stale beer fumes would make me dizzy on the sidewalk.

MACARTHUR AND MCCARTHY

I remember watching General MacArthur's parade arrive in Washington Square from the roof of the Student House. None of us on the roof were supposed to cheer. And I have a weird memory of waking up at 5:30 a.m. and turning on the television thinking I was going to see another Department of Agriculture filmstrip on the Modern Farmer. Instead I got a fuzzy picture of plumes and sashes and swords. Then this enormous diamond crown was lowered onto some girl's head: Queen Elizabeth. There was the night when I wasn't allowed to stay up with my parents and their friends to drink beer and watch Adlai Stevenson win the election. I didn't want to miss all the fun. In the morning, I knew I hadn't. Later there was somebody named McCarthy on television every afternoon—was he the same guy we'd watched from the roof?—who didn't seem to cheer my parents up at all. I didn't begin to fathom McCarthy, but I knew for sure that Ike was a jerk. And all my teachers at St. Luke's knew I knew it too.

STICKY BUNS AND FRIED BOLOGNA

The Student House had a cook named Betty who was the color of worn cordovan and very nice. She cooked delicious sticky buns but my favorite was her pineapple upside-down cake. We didn't eat with the students but upstairs in our apartment. My mother was a good cook and I especially liked her fried bologna which we were allowed to have for both lunch and dinner. On Sundays my father would cook western omelets, after we got back from church. Except for one Sunday every month which was "pot luck": everybody in the congregation would bring a macaroni casserole or some cold cuts and we'd eat off paper plates in the back under the balcony. The congregation in those days was around forty persons, quite an improvement from the eight or nine persons who used to come when we first arrived.

I was one of the few kids around Judson in those days. Later more families started to join and at times there was even a Sunday school, but it never lasted very long. The kids were too many different ages, too snotty, and volunteer teachers were not all that easy to

find. I remember Doris Todd as a very fine Sunday school teacher who used to let us run around in the gym with a basketball that we didn't know what to do with and couldn't have if we had.

A FUNNY SERMON

At one time, for a few months, there were two sisters who used to come to church every Sunday although their parents never attended. I was captivated by the elder sister, she was about nine (I was six). We used to sit together in the front pew during the service. I only remember because of one morning when my father began his sermon with a joke. It must have been a fairly good joke because the entire congregation went a little haywire for several minutes, laughing like they were at a party. I could tell that this response had pleased my father. (It had also impressed my girlfriend.) Unfortunately, I concluded this was the best way to show one's appreciation for a good sermon. As my father tried to wind down from his opening joke into the relevancies of that morning's text, each time he paused at the end of a sentence, the silence was filled with the hysterical guffawing of his son. I hadn't gotten the first joke, though I had laughed like hell. There was no reason to think I should be getting all these other jokes as well.

My father didn't seem to notice but he did cut his sermon short and announced the next hymn. As the first strains of whatever it was began to rise in a crescendo of hungover voices, my father stepped out of the pulpit and, leading the singing, came forward until he was standing above me. "Shut up!" he hissed. I have never been so surprised in my life. I think he was afraid I was going to whoop right through all the prayers.

BUMS IN BROOKS BROTHERS SUITS

My father's office was a good place to visit after school, if the door was open. If it was shut, it meant he was working, "counseling" it was called. I would wait outside and talk to his secretary, Evelyn Poole. Her husband Bob was actually Santa Claus and visited the Student House every Christmas Eve. When my father's door eventually opened, I would hurry inside and waste no time suggesting that what he really wanted was a Good Humor Toasted Almond bar.

He usually agreed and would send me into the park with enough money for two. But sometimes my own panhandling would be interrupted by the appearance of a shabby representative of the Bowery. Standing in the doorway to my father's office, these old men would begin to whimper, shuffle their feet, and mumble what was left of their stories. I doubt if it has changed much even today. My father would listen and then take them back into a room which was full of old clothes. Donated by a previous generation of wealthy Washington Square Baptists, there were piles of worn Brooks Brothers suits and thick overcoats from Saks, many of them in perfect condition. In fact, my father always wore an overcoat selected from this pile. For years, Judson dressed the bums on the Bowery in true Madison Avenue style.

The Judson Youth Center was the headquarters for the toughest, craziest kids in the Village. My father spent a good many of his mornings down at the Centre Street courts testifying about their characters and arranging their bails. In return, these kids taught me how to make a proper fist and how to shinny up No-Parking signs. I passed this second lesson on to my brother John, who was so good at it he couldn't pass a No-Parking sign without immediately climbing it to the very top. Unfortunately, it took him a little longer to master the art of climbing down. I remember some anxious family scenes with my brother, barely three, growing panicky and tearful clinging to his No-Parking sign above my mother's outstretched hands.

I remember the Rouault exhibition which [Robert] Newman and my father organized in the church. They had ripped out all the pews and built plywood and plasterboard stands to display the somber prints. A television crew arrived looking for filler for that evening's news and later I was absolutely amazed to see my father's head growing inside the lighted box as he told the interviewer that, no, he saw nothing "sacrilegious" about transforming a church into an art gallery. As I recall, there was some anxiety in our living room that evening as to whether or not the Baptist City Mission Board would agree.

Finally, I have a vision of my own room in our apartment on the second floor of the Student House. It had once been a dentist's office in the old Judson Clinic and the floor still had the fittings for the dentist's chair which made it spooky enough. But then I remember

all the nights I lay in the dark listening to the nightmare sirens and the squealing tires and the voices of angry drunks on West 3rd Street. And all the nights I spent trying to catch my breath as my father held my head over the hot steam of the vaporizer. I had pneumonia four times in the Student House; twice they had to call an ambulance and take me to St. Vincent's in the middle of the night. And I remember bad dreams about someone trying to stick a bomb under our apartment door, about prowlers outside my window on the fire escape, about hypodermic needles wrapped up in an old rag and jammed behind a radiator in the church. I don't think I could say that I had a happy childhood at Judson. For one thing, there were hardly any other children and all my friends were, like Newman, many years older than me. We were always poor; everyone was. That didn't bother me, but it bothered my parents, and *then* it bothered me. I was happiest when I was surrounded by adults, when people were drinking and laughing and flirting, like the time the entire congregation (about 25 people) got together to paint the church and everyone got loaded on gin and Tom Collins mix. I still remember how good that awful sour Collins mix tasted and how I understood that such a taste was incredibly special and bound to make you giddy. Little did I know that some of my friends that afternoon were soon to be described as "beatniks" in *Time* magazine. Little did I understand that it was gin, and not Collins mix, which made everyone else act silly. So little did I comprehend that I actually thought I was an adult, too, not a child. Twenty years later, it makes me sad.

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