

On the Back Burner

I have always preferred sketchbooks with a black hardcover. Sometimes I have bought the big 11 X 17 kind and other times, when I felt like being less visible as I sketched in public, I used the smaller 6 X 9 size. My primary tool for drawing has been the favoured black Pentel pen, and when I could no longer find these, I chose an extra-fine point, permanent "Sharpee" marker. One of the perils of fine art has been and still is that as soon as you have mastered a specific medium, someone decides to discontinue the item because capitalist pursuits of profit say the product is no longer "marketable," and death comes to yet another fine art medium. For example, jet-black Wolff's and Conté carbon pencils, some of my favourite tools and ones I have been using for over fifty-nine years, have become virtually extinct. Except for a small number I have hoarded over the years – just in case. Somehow, however, I have managed to find a substitute but the originals have often been much better than substitutes. Nevertheless, I continue to sketch whenever I find opportunity.

A number of these black sketchbooks fill my shelves, where they remain as a mute testimony of my journey through life and the arts. In one particular sketchbook is the daily account of the weeks leading up to my rebirth in 1981. The experience of that rebirth in August 1981, left me with a hunger and thirst I had never known before. It seemed as if nothing else mattered, not even my art. I put away my pencils and paper, my canvas and paints. Any attempt to fill pages of a new black sketchbook were in vain. Instead, my hunger and thirst led to a high-speed trip through the Bible. Never before had the Bible, and a special book it is to say the least, that has survived skepticism, ridicule, and extraordinary scrutiny, been so fresh, so vibrant, so full of life. I devoured its pages. When I discovered audio and video teaching tapes by a cavalcade of preachers and teachers, I could barely find enough time to absorb all of them. Thoughts went through my mind as to how all this would affect my life as husband, father, businessman, and artist.

Life at home became a great joy. Tensions of anxiety and fear were rapidly fading away. A new season had begun; an old season had passed away. Alice and I found time to discuss all our new discoveries. We met with a small group of people who were experiencing the same hunger and thirst. We met as often as we could to share our lives. All of us became conference junkies, traveling to faraway cities just to catch the latest "on-fire" man or woman. It was a wonderful time of learning. It left no time to draw or paint, but somehow that did not matter either.

Therefore, I decided to make a deliberate effort to put my art on the back burner. I simply could not do both, art and spiritual growth. Yet, deep in my heart I knew that my art would one day experience a rebirth as well. The year was 1982, and not until five years later would I pick up a pencil again. When I did, the result was a renewed passion for drawing that eventually grew into a fulltime experience. First, however, there was what I have called "The Centre Years."

On a bright winter day in February of that same year, I stopped my car along the side of a country road. I had been to visit a client in Keswick, just north of Toronto. The fields were covered in bright-white snow. The sky was deep blue and high in the cloudless expanse hung a pale yellow sun. Just over six months had passed since my spiritual rebirth and it was beginning to show even at the advertising agency. Many noticed I was changed man, not that I was trying to convert anyone. Even the troubles we used to have over tight business finances vanished. Clients paid on time and we paid our bills on time. Next door to my office was the old and

beautiful Deer Park Anglican Church. We shared a parking lot with the church. Some of my staff were somewhat puzzled when my version of a "wet lunch" no longer meant wine and food, but instead I went next door to the church to be alone with my Creator and feed on His presence. To this day I have a suspicion that God had a hand in this, especially when He opened up doors of opportunity years before to buy Canada's oldest advertising agency and merge it with our company. My new and expanded agency took up space in the former agency's office building, a building which we also bought as part of the acquisition. And where was the new building located? You guessed it, right next door to the church on number 4 Lawton Boulevard in Toronto's St. Clair and Yonge Street business district. We owned the parking lot as well but on Sundays it was empty. The congregation was more than welcome to park there.

The meeting with our Keswick client had been a success. I had secured another major contract and not only was the weather bright, so was the financial outlook for that year. As I drove back to Toronto, I suddenly felt a matter press so hard on my conscience I could not bear it any longer. Somehow, somewhere, I felt a growing sense that I was to leave the business world and enter the world of fulltime ministry. Advertising I knew, but I had no idea about what was commonly called "ministry," meaning a fulltime occupation of teaching and preaching.

I had not shared my feelings about leaving the business world with anyone, not even Alice. The feelings were so new to me I just did not know what to do with them. However, instead of anxiety and fear, these new and unfamiliar feelings brought a sense of freedom and excitement. I sat on the hood of my dark blue Camaro and pondered the sky, the sun, and a vast blanket of snow. I don't know how long I sat there, but my thoughts seemed to drift endlessly. Then I spoke some of the most peculiar words I have ever spoken. Throwing caution to the wind and not really knowing if anyone was listening, I said: *"God, you know I am Dutch. If that is you, and you want me to leave the business world and enter into the ministry, I would like to have three confirmations."*

From my childhood I remembered an ancient tale of Dutch captains who established their rule over the merchant ships in their charge, by repeating a special request three times. If the captain said it three times, whatever he spoke became *scheepsrecht*, or "ship's-law," that is, by captain's right, a new law on the ship while at sea. Sitting on the hood of my Camaro that cold but bright February morning, I asked God to make it absolutely clear I was "hearing a call." So, I asked by the ancient Dutch custom, for three confirmations.

Within a period of two months, three clear confirmations made my calling *scheepsrecht*.

I was to leave the business world and enter into the ministry. I told no one of my peculiar request because I wanted the confirmations to be pure without anyone tampering with my request through persuasion, self-fulfilling prophecies, Dutch maritime tradition, wishful thinking, and others who "wanted to help." One of the confirmations came from Bernard Warren, a trusted friend and colabourer with whom I often shared my thoughts. His ministry at *Bezek Centre* in Campbellville, Ontario, was a quality work of the Spirit and Bern's counsel was much sought after. The other two confirmations came from people and places I had never met before, people who became part of a carefully, or should I say divinely orchestrated course of events that even took Alice and I on a roundabout trip to Virginia Beach in the United States only to witness the whole affair come to light afterwards during a speech I made to the University of Toronto's Women's Alumni. At the time I was president of the Toronto Amsterdam Twin Cities Association and I was often asked to speak at official functions. It was during one such special meetings of the women's alumni when I met Marguerite Pellman. She was an accomplished musician and she had been asked to play some Dutch music to commemorate the event and as an

introduction to my speech. No sooner were Marguerite and I introduced when we discovered our common hunger and thirst in areas beyond music, Amsterdam, and the Netherlands. We both shared a passion for God. Imagine the conversation that actually took place word-for-word and as best as I could remember when I first met Marguerite.

"A pleasure meeting you Mrs. Pellman."

"Call me Marguerite and the pleasure is mine."

"I'm looking forward to your presentation, Mr. Verstraete, but I confess I had a rather difficult time to find appropriate Dutch music to introduce you."

"Why is that Marguerite?"

"Well, every time I looked through my books all I could find was sacred music."

"That's fine with me," I had replied. "In fact, my wife and I just returned from a trip to Virginia Beach and all we did was listen to sacred music while we drove the distance."

"Oh, are you a Christian?"

"Yes, I am."

"Are you one of those 'born-again' Christians?"

"Yes, I am."

"Are you one of those 'Spirit-filled' Christians?"

"Yes, I am!"

"Oh praise the Lord."

"Why?" I asked, looking around to see if anyone had heard her exclamation.

"Because when our alumni president asked me to play for you I refused," she continued. "Then God told me to play for you because He wanted me to meet you. So I phoned our president to tell her I would play for you after all. So now tell me *your* story."

In the short time we had before the evening started I told her of my spiritual journey and that Alice and I had just returned from visiting CBN, Christian Broadcasting Network in Virginia Beach, USA. I had wanted to see for myself what a large broadcast ministry looked like, being so familiar myself with the advertising and media industry. I was simply curious. When I contacted CBN they were excited and very hospitable. They gave me a royal, in-depth, behind-the-scenes tour, while Alice joined a studio audience during one of their broadcasts which was being taped at the time.

"I suppose that is why we *had* to meet," said Marguerite with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because my husband is the Canadian Director for the Christian Broadcasting Network, and I am sure he'll want to hear your story."

A week later Alice and I had coffee at the home of Ross and Marguerite Pellman in the east end of Toronto. Both Ross and Marguerite were retired and in their retirement years they devoted their lives to blessing others on the same spiritual journey. Ross was a retired lawyer and Marguerite a retired teacher. When coffee had been poured in cups, we began to share all that was happening to us. We all got very excited. Alice and I were encouraged to take our steps of faith together as husband and wife. Then Ross Pellman spoke prophetic words he could never have known because I had not told him. Nor had Marguerite known anything about that part of the journey, when I asked God about three *confirmations* for the call to ministry.

Ross said, "*you shall have the Christian Communications Centre* (the name I had given the ministry) *for God wills it for His people.*" When he spoke those words, I felt dizzy and my heart felt as if it were actually skipping. I had never heard a prophetic word spoken over me, nor was I particularly familiar with "the prophetic," as people called it.

Later, in the car, I asked Alice, "was *that* a prophecy?"

Alice knew about this thing called prophecy.

She said Ross Pellman's words were a prophecy.

What made the whole event particularly sweet was the fact that while we drove back from Virginia Beach, on April 28, 1982, we were forced to make an unexpected stop in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, because the weather had turned absolutely foul. Torrential rains and threats of snow and ice made driving perilous. We got a room in downtown Gettysburg at a Holiday Inn. That night, unable to sleep soundly and while Alice slept peacefully, I had a vision. I had never had a vision before, nor did I know what visions were. Dreams I knew but visions I did not. Imagination I had plenty of, but this was different. The difference was that when I woke up from my troubled sleep the vision continued. Not knowing quite what to do, I grabbed my sketchbook, a trusted companion on all my travels, and sketched what I could see. What I saw was a large, square teaching centre standing amidst fields of trees. I knew it was my second confirmation but it scared me so much I closed the sketchbook and except for Alice, I did not share its contents with anyone for over two years.

Ross and Marguerite Pellman were the icing on the cake. I did not tell them about the vision, which coincidentally came in Gettysburg, the birthplace of American freedom, to herald the birth of a vision for ministry and my road to personal freedom.

Needless to say, the ride home after our visit with the Pellmans was filled with a great sense of adventure.

I waited a week before I told my partner Joe that I was leaving our business partnership. Although shaken and upset because our partnership had been such a fruitful one, he respected not only my decision to leave but also my decision to enter the ministry. I promised him I would take eight months to make my departure smooth and that not one client would be affected. Alice was as excited as I was and together we somehow knew the road ahead, although completely unknown to us, would be filled with the greatest adventure ever. In September of 1982, I said goodbye to my partner and staff at the agency, as well as to a large number of clients I had served over the years. Some understood; some did not. Surprisingly though, everyone respected my decision and wished me well. A month later, on October 4, 1982, the doors to the Christian Communications Centre opened full time as our fledgling ministry began to take steps towards its teaching mandate.

But, there was no time to contemplate my journey in the arts. Ahead lay a unique season of my life, which perhaps one day in the future, would provide more than enough strength and creativity to pick up any pieces of my fine art life with a renewed zeal and passion. When that finally happened eleven years later in 1993, I discovered another miracle. I had *not* grown "rusty" with age nor did I lose any of my artistic abilities, a claim most frequently made by the "experts," when they speak those infamous words: "*Use it or lose it.*" Those words may very well be true in a world of reason, but they are not true in God's world of faith. Instead, I picked up pencil and brush as if no time had passed at all, and as if I had never put them down. Nor did need to make up for "lost time."

However, there we stood, in the fall of 1982, ready for a big adventure.

With three confirmations, I knew my calling into ministry was real and secure.

God had said it three times and it was now *scheepsrecht*.

I also knew that putting my art on the back burner was ok. I was convinced God would look after those artistic details in years to come. He did "big time" when we made our family and ministry move to British Columbia in 1993. Even though in 1987, I had picked up brush and

pencil again albeit sparingly six years *before* our move west and five years *after* I had put the whole *art-thing* on the back burner. OCA Instructor, David Campbell, had invited me to participate in the Wednesday Evenings Life Drawing course at the college, “because,” he said, “the students will appreciate a fine arts graduate in their midst to see for themselves what classical drawing looks like, and I am too busy to demonstrate.” David and I had known each other since our OCA years in the mid-sixties. However, not until British Columbia and with my spacious Gabriola Island studio, did I return to fulltime fine art. Nor did life in the studio interfere with my calling to teach. Somehow, over the years, and by God’s grace, the two, art and ministry, have been wonderful partners.