

I Look to His Way and It is Higher Still

Terry Kelleher

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Kelleher and Thomas, Greensboro, NC.

To most of the contributors to this volume, the subject is Thomas Berry. But to me, he is Uncle Brother. I am the fifteenth grandchild (out of forty-five) and ninth niece in the large, extensive Berry family of Greensboro, North Carolina. To our family, he has always been Uncle Brother (well, there are also his self-created monikers, “Otto, Ye Olde Hermit,” and “Cousin Will”). He was a shadowy presence during my early years when he served as a military chaplain in Germany. Indeed, in the first years of elementary school, some of us thought he *was* German. His distinctive voice and, to us at the time, “foreign” looking face were so different from any other of the relatives, we assumed he must be foreign.

Gradually he became more of a regular presence in Greensboro during the summer and academic holidays, where he would set himself up in Grandma’s dining room with a typewriter and more books than we had ever seen outside of a library. But it was during my freshman year at a small Catholic women’s college in Chicago in 1968 when he took on the pivotal role that changed my life forever.

Overwhelmed by the challenges of college life in an urban environment during that tumultuous period in recent American history, I happened to be blessed by the fortuitous timing (November) and location (Chicago) of that year’s annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion where Uncle Brother was scheduled to deliver a paper. He made the time to take me to lunch, to the Art Institute, and then back to his hotel room where he proceeded to read his entire paper aloud to me. I hadn’t a clue of what anything meant, not a clue. But something about the whole situation lit a fire inside me. Here was someone who spoke of “profound” things and took me, an eighteen-year old, seriously enough to assume I could understand them. That day was to be the beginning of a long and valuable journey with him through academic studies and life itself. He would never be a teacher of mine in a formal academic setting, but the extent of his informal tutelage cannot be measured.

After this meeting, we struck up a correspondence by mail. He wrote to me, speaking in large, cosmic terms, both of the terrifying things that were happening in the world, of so much that was destructive to the human spirit. but also of the great possibilities. He cautioned against remaining aloof from the dark side or running away, but rather encouraged me to face and directly experience what needed to be done. He was more optimistic, in a Teilhardian sense, that great things, “stupendous” things, were happening in the midst of all the darkness. He spoke of our mutual good fortune that we had a place like Greensboro to repair to periodically but that it was not good to remain there.

With his advice, I transferred the next year to Manhattanville College just outside of New York City where I began a program of Asian Studies

that involved Chinese language studies and cultural studies of China and India. In addition, I could be near him. He was nothing if not intellectually restless, and he expected the same in me. About a year after arriving at Manhattanville, he decided that I should learn Sanskrit in an independent study with him. His logic was that if he could do it, so could I.

In his inimitable style, he one day handed me a Sanskrit dictionary, a grammar book, and a copy of the Bhagavad Gita, and off we went into the wild blue yonder of Sanskrit study, me trying my hardest to keep up with him.

His primary influence on me, however, lay in Chinese studies. He impressed upon me so deeply with the profound contributions of the Chinese in understanding the basic spontaneities within the heart/minds of human beings, the relational qualities of things that extend from the human to the “total order of things.” Indeed, I made up the acronym TOOT as an abbreviation in the drafts I made for my papers in college and graduate school, having been so convinced of its centrality in Asian studies. His insights into the Chinese have continued ever since to shape my thinking. It is the part of his wide legacy that I have had the strongest sense of mission to pass on to my students.

He continued to open up the wider world for me after college. If not for him, I might never have pursued post-graduate studies in quite the way I did. I would have never studied at the East West Center in Hawaii for my masters in Chinese literature or spent two summers studying and living in Taiwan with a Chinese family. And if not for him, I would not have gotten through the long and arduous process of doctoral work at Columbia in Chinese thought.

As much as he nourished my mind and spirit with his ideas, he was also exceedingly generous with his time and even financial support. From time to time, and without fanfare, he would send me money, “a few coins that came his way that he didn’t need.” And sometimes he cautioned, “No need to mention this to the folks at home.”

His Riverdale Center for Religious Research opened around the time I began my doctoral studies at Columbia University. There was constant excitement there as an incredibly broad range of people from all areas of academic study and ordinary life passed through. He had a library there that was of so much value to me. He made the Center available to me for R&R from the noise and hectic nature of New York City. The conversations, the meals, and the music in the famous “porch” that overlooked the great oak tree and the Hudson River—all presided over by his warm presence—these were what precious memories were made of, these were the intangibles that made my work with him, and so many others, so meaningful.

While so much of his legacy lies in his ecological, “geo-logian” work, his small but important contribution in Chinese studies should not be

overlooked. He offered a new translation to one of the cardinal Confucian virtues, *ch'eng*. Instead of the standard one of "sincerity," he translated it as "authenticity," being exactly who one really is. I use it in my scholarly work, as have many leading scholars.

Well, what do you know! Of all the baby girls available when my husband and I adopted our daughter from China in 1992, the one assigned to us had been given the name of Ch'eng by the Social Welfare Center where she spent her first months. Wow, I thought. How fitting! How wonderful! The only girl among the seven girls being adopted in our particular group with a philosophical rather than a more overtly feminine name! I recognized the TOOT at work here, directing this child to me: a Confucian-named daughter for a professor of Confucian studies, and one named for what my dear uncle has always considered the most important Confucian virtue of them all.

I can never fully express my gratitude for all I owe him: my life studies, my family life (did I also mention I met my husband through him, too?) but I will make a feeble attempt by quoting the appreciative remarks of one of Confucius's disciples of Confucius's influence on his life:

"Yan Yuan sighing deeply said, 'I look up to it (his Way) and it is higher still; I delve into it and it is deeper yet. I look for it in front, and suddenly it is behind. The Master skillfully leads a person step by step. He has broadened me with culture and restrained me with ritual. When I wish to give it up, I cannot do so...' (*Analects* 9.10)