A Change of Heart

A PERSONAL AND THEOLOGICAL MEMOIR

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The 1930s

Prairie Dawn

Dust Bowl Beginnings

Jackson County. The flat land made me aware of the big sky. From the top of the water tower you can see for miles. My childhood was spent in a small town in the short grass country of Oklahoma. The town of Altus sits in the middle of windy wheat fields and silently grazing cattle.

Nearby are ancient granite mountains in the distance that turn purple in the late evening sun. The Navajo Mountains are about six miles away to the east and the Quartz Mountains fifteen miles to the north. The Oklahoma red granite mined there is the oldest and finest anywhere.

Before statehood this was fertile grazing land for nomadic Native American tribes like the Comanche and Wichita, who once roamed these plains looking for buffalo. Finding and collecting arrowheads was my first venture into the world of discovering that ancient hidden world. I felt the privilege of holding a bit of history in my hand.

During the frontier years from 1866 until statehood in 1907, six million Longhorn cattle rambled through our county grazing on prairie grasses all the way from Abilene, Texas, to Abilene, Kansas, on the Old Western Trail. Our family acquired the deed to some property that touches the slopes of one of the Navajo Mountains where the North Fork of the Red River meanders south as if it were looking for Texas. It became a place for family retreat, natural wonder, conservation and

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exploration for turtles, wildflowers, and an occasional porcupine.

Altus was as far from the centers of power as you could get in Oklahoma, hidden away in the extreme southwestern corner of the state. The dirt roads in the county were often impassable after the prairie thunderstorms. After World War II a few were asphalted. Many nearby towns that were once thriving have virtually disappeared. Only a few lonely remains of farmhouses still stand. Many rural churches and schools have almost vanished as well, and some are used for barns or storage.

Everything in Altus was within walking distance. It was an eight-block walk to get a haircut downtown and a three-block walk to the park, tennis courts and high school. Beyond that was a sea of wheat fields and cattle ranches.

No one famous or wealthy lived in my hometown. They were farmers, laborers and small-town folk. Life was not easy, but the love we had in our family felt like all we needed. We did not think of ourselves as restricted or left behind. This was the center of the world so far as I was concerned. We lacked nothing essential.

Everyone knew that if they were going to make something of their lives, they would have to do it for themselves. No one attributed success or failure to a person's environment or external causes. They assumed that most outcomes were due to the effort of the person or lack of it. If someone messed up, we would more likely ponder how a hurtful habit might be a lesson for us to avoid.

A "can do" spirit was what most clearly characterized that independent and confident small town. But the lack of rain and an abundance of dust depleted farm incomes. That led to many homeless men on the move looking for odd jobs. Strong and good men on the road to somewhere would knock on our door needing food, but they were always willing to work for it. Even though they were on the move, all we needed to know was that they were persons who had fallen on hard times and were hungry. We never turned any of them away. My mother would always find something to feed them, usually what we would be eating that day.

They were not asking for anything more than leftovers or a cup of coffee or a few crackers or bread. I never remember them asking for

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money, probably because there was almost no money circulating. Often business exchanges occurred by bartering goods or services. Mom often reminded me that each one of those people in need was made in God's image. They were people portrayed in the movies as hobos, but we never used that word. I knew they were hardworking people who couldn't pay their mortgages and had to leave good farms as the banks were foreclosing on them and disrupting long-laid plans.

Dust storms were a regular part of my childhood. I can still smell and feel the looming approach of a thousand-foot-high wall of heavy gray dust rolling in unexpectedly. We would all run inside to try to seal the windows with newspapers we attached by pins and masking tape to keep as much dust as possible out of the house.

We conserved and reused everything. In that sense most everyone in our town would have been considered ecologically minded by necessity, but without any fancy words. We carved many of our own toys. When the rubber on the slingshot broke, I would look for an old inner tube and a tree branch to start over and make a new one.

Dad purchased a set of small leather-bound books containing the shortened versions of classics such as Hamlet, Rousseau and the ballads of Robert Burns. One of them was Emerson's *Self-Reliance*. I read it at an early age, maybe ten. Because of Emerson's book, self-reliance became a key aspiration in my search for character.

Despite everything, I considered Cypress Street the world's best place to be. Still do. We were on no main route and seldom locked our doors. I saw pictures in the newspapers of soup lines in the cities. We much preferred to be in dust-coated Oklahoma than in a Chicago food relief line or a crowded Hooverville camp in California.

The gentle warmth of family. Almost every kid on my street came from a close-knit family at a time when family meant everything. My family's small red brick, steep-roofed English cottage had two bedrooms, but to us it always seemed to have plenty of space for everyone. We had hideaway folding beds for visitors and family. On holidays the house could sleep as many as seventeen. That was good because we had an extended family that stretched from Tippecanoe County, Indiana, to Las

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Cruces, New Mexico. I was among the youngest, near the bottom of the pecking order, so I was often consigned to "sleeping at the foot of the bed." I was always happy to be a small kid in a large family.

My small world was my big family. My identity stemmed out of theirs and I wouldn't have been me without them. I remember my childhood much like William Butler Yeats described himself in his early days in Sligo as "a boy with never a crack in my heart." I felt complete as a child, lacking nothing important. And I learned that delayed gratification was part of every worthy endeavor.

Growing up, I was intrigued by the stories told around our fireplace about my grandmother's grandfather, Elijah Walker, who was the first merchant to set up a small trading post in Northern Alabama to buy and sell foods, tools and goods among the Creek Indians. Even more exciting were Civil War stories about my great-grandfather John C. Oden, whose military record shows he was captured four times in battles that ranged all the way from Richmond to Natchez. Each time—either by release or escape—he returned to his own unit, led by Colonel Thomas Bluett, after whom my grandfather was named and later I was named.

My grandmother Sallie Elisa Walker rode into Arkansas on a Conestoga wagon. Just after the Civil War, while she was still a young girl, her pioneer father, Andrew Jackson Walker, gathered up his growing family from around Talladega, Alabama, and set out for the West, where they hoped to mine for gold or find tillable land.

After several days on the road, as the wagon pulled up to the ferry on the Tombigbee River, there was a horrible accident. When the wagon tipped, Sallie's brother Thad fell off and was crushed by the wagon wheel. Grieving, the family stopped to mourn and bury their little boy. Sallie did the only thing she could do; she climbed back in the wagon and with her heartbroken family headed due west on the rough roads toward Little Rock.

From there they headed south to Clark County, where some of their Alabama friends and family had settled. In November of 1876 they arrived at the village of Amity for what they thought would be a short stop. Heavy snows began to fall and they could not continue. They stayed in

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Amity, which became the ancestral home of the Oden family. Sallie grew up and fell in love with my grandfather Thomas Oden, the son of a Presbyterian minister. Their marriage united two evangelical Christian traditions which would influence their family from then on: Cumberland Presbyterian and Wesleyan Methodist.

My grandfather Clark, my mother's father, was a railway man all his life. About the same time the telegraph was invented by Edison, my grandfather landed a job delivering newspapers on board the Indianapolis and Bellefontaine Railroad, which led to his learning telegraphy and eventually to his life as a railway agent. He moved his family from Pendleton, Indiana, gradually west to assignments in the Texas Panhandle, then to Nevada and finally back to Oklahoma.

Grandfather Clark was a loyal union man with lengthy seniority in the Brotherhood of Railway Workers, which at that time was among the nation's strongest labor unions. Granddad's most prized possession was his official railroad time piece, his round Hamilton watch, which he kept in his vest pocket on a gold chain. Since human lives as well as reliable arrival schedules were at stake in the railroad business, he lived by the clock. His passion for railroading was passed on to all his family, especially to his two sons, both of whom became university teachers in fields related to the technology and history of railroads.[1]

I inherited this same love of the railroad. I often would go down to the Katy station in Hollister to visit with my grandfather at his busy railway office. I remember the special sound of an almost nonstop telegraph tapping out Morse code. Through the incessant hum of dots and dashes, Granddad was the first in town to learn of wars, elections, tornadoes or the St. Louis Cardinals' scores.

My father was born in 1895 on an eighty-acre farm near the Caddo River in Arkansas. When I visited that old family farm as a kid I came away with touching memories of how my dad had grown up on the frontier. There was a small frame house which had at its center a red brick fireplace with crackling cedar firewood I can still smell burning. My grandfather built that house with his own hands.

In his smokehouse I got a sense of how the pioneer family had lived,

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by preserving with salt brine the pork or beef they had raised or the fish or fowl they had hunted. I watched my tall, lanky grandfather Oden feed the stock with alfalfa feed he himself had grown, and draw fresh, cold water with a rope and bucket out of a well he had dug and an improvised pump he had installed on his own back porch. My grandfather was a hard scrabble farmer who played the fiddle and talked politics with a quiet, wry wit. My dad and his brothers and sisters along with their parents worked this farm, repairing their own tools, planting and mowing, and living largely within a bartering economy.

I have wondered what might have prompted a Presbyterian farmer and his Methodist wife to name my father Waldo Talmage Oden. They used to read by candles they themselves had made from beeswax or animal-fat tallow. Possibly they read somewhere about Peter Waldo, who was the medieval preacher who founded the Waldensians, or Reverend T. DeWitt Talmage of the Brooklyn Tabernacle, who was the leading Presbyterian holiness preacher of his day.

Dad was the first one in his family who managed to get a higher education. His Latin teacher in his Arkansas one-room school thought he did well enough to encourage him to become a lawyer, which he did by pressing further westward into Oklahoma. He attended the University of Oklahoma Law School in its earliest years, graduated in 1920, and then went on to the University of Chicago Law School. After passing the bar, he settled into his law practice back in Oklahoma. He in turn assisted all of his brothers with their education.

For ninety years there has been an Oden Law Firm in Jackson County led by my father and brother Tal, continuing a firm that had been founded before statehood. When asked what he did, my dad would answer drolly, “Just a country lawyer.” But I found out he was one of the best when I saw his trial record. He went to the courthouse almost every day and litigated cases for clients in trouble, many from small farms.

As a boy I spent many hours around my dad’s office watching him do his legal work and seeing him help people from all sections of our community. Dad’s county seat law firm served all layers of society and every

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aspect of the human condition. Lacking cash, clients would often barter for legal services with chickens, cattle, mineral rights and garden products. From the back seat of a courthouse bench I watched my father reason with judges and juries, settle disputes, defend mostly underprivileged clients and embody the rule of law. I also relish the memory of my father checking the conditions of seeds or roots of his maize crop, singing tenor in church or reading into the late evening a thick maroon-covered mortgage history of a client's property.

I treasured my time at Dad's office. I liked the smell of the leather of the books, the quietness and the invitation to learn. Thick books were on every wall, floor to ceiling, protected by glass enclosed bookcases. His most valuable possessions were his books. I loved to tiptoe into his hushed library and spontaneously read on any random page of any of his weighty volumes of the *Corpus Juris.*

Mom completed Dad in so many ways, bringing joy and confidence into our home life. Throughout my life I saw my mother face economic hardship, wartime conditions and tests of character that always seemed to make her stronger. She could be tough, but in a most gentle way. Her childhood was spent in Amarillo, Texas, during its boisterous cowhand days. She told us that some of the ranch hands would ride into town on Saturdays shouting and shooting their guns into the air, but her parents always kept her safe in the house until they had gone.

Everyone who heard my mother's voice felt her warmth. She took quiet pleasure in performing unnoticed random acts of anonymous kindness. To her final days she was forever hosting, caring, listening and serving. Still she beams her lightness into my dusky evenings, showering her special form of glory on me. I don't ever recall a speck of guile or despair in her character.

I was born in the fall of 1931, when the Dust Bowl was just beginning and Hoover was president. Those were the difficult days between the Crash of 1929 and the election of Franklin Roosevelt. Since there was no hospital in Jackson County except for a small clinic in Dr. Allgood's house a block away, I was born in the smaller of the two bedrooms of our house.

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I showed up as little brother to a very bright big brother (Tal) with round glasses who would become a lawyer like our father. Later a little sister (Sarah) would appear who would have to be strong enough to contend with two big brothers. Happily the three of us have stayed very close over the years.

At five I was finally old enough to become a Cub Scout. Tal had already earned his First Class Badge and had his eye on getting a whole sleeve of merit badges. Each step required a difficult task and an examination providing proof of having learned something useful. I followed the Cub Scout Motto, "Do your best." We learned to tie knots, camp out, cooperate and tough things out. I memorized the Scout law, which says "A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent." These ideals have never been erased from my consciousness.[2]

I entered Mrs. Highsmith's kindergarten the same year I became a Cub Scout. Mrs. Highsmith had converted a double garage at the back of her property into a place for preschool education. We learned about getting along together, singing, nature, numbers, game playing and truth telling. In the rhythm band I got to play the sticks. Others more fortunate got to play the tin whistle, drums or ocarina.

My next school, the Old Washington School, was a far cry from Mrs. Highsmith's garage. Built at the time of statehood, its creaking stairs symbolized the passing generation of original Jackson County pioneer settlers. A four block walk from my house, the school was to me an awesome building of bright red brick looming high above me, with its soaring Victorian ceilings and heroic pictures of Washington and Lincoln. Its most conspicuous feature was an out-of-the-window second floor fire escape—a long tube-like slide plunging down to the dirt playground at a 45-degree angle. In my classroom on the first floor, we envied the luckier older kids upstairs who got to go down the slide during fire drills.

My teacher, Miss Peetry, was young, warm, considerate and, yes, beautiful. She made everything at school interesting. I fell in love not only with learning but, in a six-year-old's way, with Miss Peetry. My world there was fun, safe, wholesome and nourishing. My best friend

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was a reserved kid in overalls named Ralph Blaine, whose shyness matched my own. It was good to have a friend who could understand my quiet ways.

A house full of music. As the son of an Arkansas country fiddler, Dad always desired a house full of music. This is what he discovered in Mom, a woman with a heart full of music. Throughout my youth the house was always pulsating with music of all kinds—classic, country, hymns and popular songs. We had music students in our living room almost every day with Mom guiding countless five-year-old fingers through the first steps of Haydn and Mozart. My mom especially reached out to talented young African American students, some of whom went on to college music degrees and became professional musicians. I enjoyed seeing the proud faces of parents who came into our living room to hear their children's recitals.

Everybody in my family frequently played instruments, sang harmony and put together skits. We all learned early to read music, understand rhythm and improvise chords. All three of Mom's sisters were musicians, and every summer they made a train trip to Chicago for music lessons. My grandfather provided harp instruction for Louise; violin for Mary and Catherine, piano for my mother, Lily, and flute lessons for Dave and Ira. Grandfather Clark owned the first movie theater in the village of Duke when the earliest silent movies were being shown. Duke Theater combined live music with those films. It was a stage for amateur performances and homemade vaudeville entertainment. His daughters performed as "The Clark Sisters," with my mother at the keyboard.

Growing up in my family meant small fireside performances on many nights. While none of us in the immediate family chose music as a profession, all of us have been lifelong musical enthusiasts. Tal was good enough at bassoon while in high school to get an invitation to serve as bassoonist in the Oklahoma City Symphony Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Maestro Victor Alessandro. Now in his eighties, Tal still has a huge repertoire of sing-along songs, musical comedy, country and folk songs, and entertainment gigs for Valentine's Day dinners, family reunions, Rotary Clubs, and church meetings, available

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anytime for any occasion, always funny and ready at the drop of a hat.

It was through music that I first learned to reason. The reasoning process in music occurs through rhythm, melody, chords, progressions, transitions and grace notes. From a young age I grasped intuitively that I could apply musical modes of mental organization to anything else I studied. When I tried to explain this to others, I found them mystified, but to me its reasonableness was self-evident. Thanks to my mother I was playing a simplified form of Beethoven's "Für Elise" at five. As I grew I found every kind of music appealing, from Leadbelly to Shostakovich.

Growing Up

Finding purpose. At ten an epiphany happened to me on a summer night when my cousins and I were sleeping outdoors on blankets. As I lay on the grass looking toward the sky for comets and constellations, I found myself involved in a deep and puzzling thought process about *space*. I wondered what was beyond the edge of the universe. Really beyond. If the world was measurable, and we could imagine an edge to the universe, what could be "beyond"?

Then I wondered what might have happened before the earliest point in *time*. I wondered what "before time" could ever possibly mean, and puzzled about what might exist after the last moment of time. I realized much later that Augustine had already pondered this. Though I did not know that I was raising the question of the mysterious relationship between finitude and infinity, I recall how deeply affected I was by the twin mysteries of space and time.

In our family the day began with "Upper Room" devotional readings with our parents before breakfast. We always said grace before each meal. Scripture, prayer and thoughtful conversation were woven into the daily fabric of our family life. I memorized passages of Scripture like Psalm 1 and 1 Corinthians 13. These gems still return to my memory at unexpected times. We also gathered with Grandmother Oden in the living room just before bedtime to hear a passage of Scripture read, usually a chapter. Then we would get on our knees and pray. Grandmother began with fervent petitions for the family, the lost, the poor and the spiritual health of the nation.

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Dad taught the men's class at church during most of his adult life. I remember him on Saturday evenings pouring over *Peloubet's Select Notes*, a commentary for teachers. I still treasure thumbing through his leather Bible, tattered and underlined over many years of teaching, with some of his marginal notes still intact.[3]

All Methodists back then knew that everyone had a calling that would give purpose and meaning to their lives, but I wasn't sure what mine might be. With two musical grandfathers, a piano teaching mother, a barbershop quartet singing father and a big brother who was a musical whiz, it seemed to me at first that music might be my calling. At thirteen I set a goal of learning how to play every instrument in the orchestra (I did it—except for the strings). I began arranging quartet and orchestra scores on a small scale at age thirteen. As an aspiring composer I got a lot of practice at writing and arranging musical scores for quartets and singing performances, and by fifteen I thought that composing might be my calling. The idea of a vocation in ministry was first planted in my mind at about age ten by Brother Hiram Brogan, a retired minister in our church. Every Sunday he wore the formal dress of black tie and tails in the tradition of Southern Methodist ministers at that time. He always held before me the thought that I might grow up to be a minister. His school teacher daughter Bessie thought so too, but I assumed they were just being nice.

For a long time I was unclear about what ministers did on days other than Sunday. Then came the summer when I was invited to drive around the tobacco farms of rural Tennessee all day with my Uncle Thurston, who was making annual visits to his congregations as their Methodist district superintendent. That trip provided an exciting glimpse of parish ministry I had not seen before. Affable, jolly and generous, Thurston smoked good cigars despite Methodist rules. The day I was with him, he was traveling around his district to encourage those congregations to meet their projected goals, take care of each other and have some fun doing it. As I was warmly welcomed everywhere, I began to wonder about being something like him. Other times I vaguely imagined that I wanted to be a lawyer. Either way, all I ever really wanted was to end up with a house full of books.

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