

## An Autobiographical Sketch by Ron Miller

My life seems to fall into four quarters, the fourth of which I inhabit at the time of writing this. My first seventeen years consisted of my childhood and education through high school. My next twenty years were spent in the Society of Jesus. My next twenty years were spent in marriage and house holding tasks. My final years consist of a life filled with teaching and writing, my heritage years.

### First Quarter: Childhood and Early Education

I was born into a German-American family in St. Louis, Missouri on Easter Sunday, 1938. The Millers lived in an area my great-grandfather had established. Although my father was born in St. Louis, his birth certificate from the Evangelische Kirche was in German and his last name was spelled Mueller. My grandfather and his brother ran a paint and wallpaper store in downtown St. Louis. It was called Mueller Brothers. But people started throwing rocks in the window during World War I, so they changed the family name to the more English-sounding Miller.

Mine was an extended family. It was not uncommon on a summer evening to find around thirty of us Millers sitting outside, drinking lemonade (the adults would be drinking beer) and eating sandwiches and snacks. I never had a baby sitter. I would spend alternating Saturday nights with Grandma and Grandpa Miller (who lived across the street) and Grandma and Grandpa Klein (who lived just a few miles away). After dinner I would walk freely into the kitchens of my aunts and uncles and my grandparents, eating whatever treats they offered me. Evenings were often spent with Grandma and Grandpa Miller, playing dominoes or Chinese Checkers. At the end of the evening my Grandpa would roll his one cigarette of the day, read the German newspaper (St. Louis had eighteen of them prior to World War I but only one thereafter), and sip a stein of beer. I would join him for milk and cookies.

I heard German phrases from my childhood and I often didn't know that they were German until I used them with people who were not from my neighborhood. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents. Both of my grandfathers had workshops where interesting projects were always unfolding, a new cabinet or end table, a freshly varnished hutch. And both of my grandmothers had kitchens where treats were always close at hand. Every December I think back to what it was like to go up the stairs to my Grandma Miller's house and inhale the rich fragrance of fruit cakes, wrapped in cloths soaked in rum, filling large tin containers on the porch. The smells of bread baking and sauerbraten roasting are with me still. And sometimes, visiting my Grandma and Grandpa Klein, I would hear a noise from the cellar which meant that the stones were rolling off the boards on the barrels of sauerkraut that were marinating there.

Almost everyday I'd go shopping with my mom. Schwach's was the store where I would be given animal cookies as a treat. And then there was the butcher shop where my mom would pick out the cut of meat that the butcher would grind up as hamburger. And then on to the green grocer where a girl on crutches named Dorothy helped us pick out the

best fruits and vegetables. At home, my mom would have trouble keeping me from eating the raw hamburger, thus demonstrating my early fondness for steak tartar (Germans call it *Hackepeter*). When Dad came home, I always spent time with him, walking around outside and attending to whatever needed some work or just sitting together and talking about the day. We had a furnished basement (tile floor, juke box, and ping pong table); in south St. Louis that was called a Ratskeller. My dad and I often played ping-pong after dinner.

My internal map of St. Louis consisted of the north St. Louis Irish, the south St. Louis Dutch, and the Hill where the Italians lived. “Dutch” meant German, Deutsch, not Hollander. But because my mother was Catholic, though my father was Protestant, parish boundaries assigned me to the Catholic school where I was one of two “German” kids in the class. The nuns were all from Italy and most of the other kids spoke Italian and had parents or grandparents from Italy. Maybe all of this put me on a path to dialogue early in my life.

St. Louis in 1938 still had a southern feel. As a child I would sit on a hilltop and look down at a shantytown where African Americans lived without paved streets, electricity, or running water. They generally didn’t come to the area where we lived but if encountered on the sidewalk, they would step off the pavement, remove their hat, and lower their eyes. At the movie theatres, they sat only in the balconies. All that seemed normal to me.

I won a scholarship to the Jesuit high school and walked up the steps of St. Louis University High School in 1951. It was quite a change from grade school. Two hundred freshmen sat in the auditorium as the black-robed Principal, Father Schenk, went to the podium. I still remember that day. He told us that we were selected from 800 boys who had applied. He said that we were very lucky to have the opportunity to have a Jesuit education but he also warned us that our existence was precarious. If we failed to keep the rules or didn’t meet what the school expected of us in the classroom, hundreds of boys were waiting to take the seat we were occupying.

Despite this environment of discipline and hard work, I thrived. I had wonderful teachers for whom I am grateful to this day. I was in the honors track, which meant four years of Latin and two years of Homeric Greek. I was involved in numerous extracurriculars: the speech club, the yearbook, the theatre etc. My mind was opened to a world of knowledge. For the first time I came to understand the racism of our society and how this contradicted the teachings of our faith. Cardinal Ritter had integrated the Catholic school system, a decade before the Civil Rights Movement.

There was one African-American student in my class, Garrett Gray. I was class president and it was my job to find a place for our freshman picnic. I had a list of places to call but in every instance I was asked whether or not we had any colored students. When I acknowledged this, I was told that there were no openings. I went back to report to the class that I couldn’t find a place for the picnic. They were perplexed. But at that point, Garrett said he understood and offered to skip the picnic. But we found that

unacceptable. So I went to the Principal and told him that we were not going to have a freshman picnic because no one would accept Garrett. Fr. Schenk looked kindly at me and said in a gentle voice: “You did the right thing. Congratulations.”

### Second Quarter: The Society of Jesus

I knew early on that I wanted to be a teacher. And I couldn't imagine any better ones than the Jesuits. So I began to think about joining the Society of Jesus after graduation. Several of my classmates were doing this and thus it was, on August 8, 1955, that some thirty of us entered the seminary in Florissant, Missouri. The context of my life in that country seminary for the next four years stood in sharp contrast to what my friends “in the world” were doing in the mid 1950s. There were no phones, TVs, radios, newspapers. We each had a small cubicle with a curtain for a door. There was a bed, a desk, a chair, and a small closet but no rugs or curtains, no pictures on the wall. We had two books, a Bible and a dictionary. We had two cassocks, the black robes that we wore. Most of the day was spent in silence. The first two years were spent largely in prayer and manual work, maintaining the large seminary that housed some three hundred people. The second two years were devoted to the study of Greek, Latin, and English literature.

In 1959 we moved to a seminary on the campus of St. Louis University where we continued our studies. I earned a BA in philosophy and an MA in philosophy, as well as a church degree in philosophy, a PhL. We were then assigned to a Jesuit high school where we had the opportunity to get back down to earth. I was sent to Denver Colorado to teach at Regis High School and these were marvelous years. I still am a friend with some of the students I taught at that time. I began my theology studies in 1965, earning an STL (Licentiate in Theology). I received a scholarship to study in Germany and spent a wonderful year there, completely falling in love with the country that I understood so easily, because of my German-American background.

I was accepted for a PhD program in philosophy at Northwestern University and returned from Germany to travel to Evanston Illinois in the fall of 1970. I lived at a nearby parish and absorbed myself in the challenging courses. Philosophy was changing at that time. Courses in symbolic logic were appearing and I began to feel alienated from the classical philosophical traditions that I had loved for so long. I changed my major at this point and entered the department of Comparative Religions. Here I found my true intellectual home and began to study the similarities and differences among major spiritual traditions. In the course of this, I experienced more and more cognitive dissonance with my Roman Catholic tradition, and this led to my leaving the Society of Jesus in 1975, the same year in which I founded Common Ground as an embodiment of my new interreligious faith.

### Third Quarter: A Householder's Life

I met, courted, and married a woman who had a seven-year-old child from a prior marriage. Within the next three years we had two children of our own. My son, Jim, is now 31 and lives in Los Angeles. My daughter, Carrie, is 29 and married; she and her husband and my grandson, Evan, live in nearby Vernon Hills. My children were and are

a blessing beyond compare but the marriage became increasingly difficult. Judaism sees divorce as a terrible thing and says that the altar in the Temple weeps when there is a divorce. But, at the same time, Judaism speaks about “Shalom ha Bait”, the peace of the house. If there is no prospect of “peace in the house”, then divorce is better than perpetuating a marriage without peace. When Carrie left the house to begin her college career at DePaul University, I realized that the time had come for my wife and I to part.

#### Fourth Quarter: The Hermitage

I found an apartment in Highland Park. It faced a courtyard, almost like a motel unit. It reminded me of Thomas Merton’s hermitage at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. So I called it “the hermitage” and moved in to begin a new stage of my life. I was free now to have friends over frequently and to learn to cook a dinner for a table full of hungry college students. My life was free now to devote myself completely to my work. I wrote five books within a few years. I increased my lecturing outside of the College.

At the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1993, I heard Dr. Hans Kung say that there would be no peace among the nations of the world until there was peace among the religions of the world. But there would be no peace among the religions of the world until there was dialogue among the religions of the world. And there would be no dialogue among the religions of the world until there was correct understanding of those religions. These words were like a revelation to me. They opened out to me the path I felt called upon to follow in this final quarter of my life. It was a path that included my work with Common Ground, my work at Lake Forest College, and all the other lectures and talks I would give, as well as all the books I would write.

These three steps define almost everything I do now in my day-to-day life. Correct understanding of the world’s religions—how important that is, especially in regard to Islam, the most misunderstood and maligned religion in the western world. Dialogue following that understanding—this is the challenge I take to all those I teach or speak to from now on. I conduct dialogue sessions in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims learn too understand one another and the important role they play as America’s three mainline religions. Peace among the nations of the world—that can only happen when these first steps have taken place. In today’s paper I was reading about President Elect Obama’s plan to increase dialogue with Muslims. I see him as the leader who can take us in the direction about which I feel so passionate.

I am grateful now for every day with the possibility it gives me to work for these goals. I am proud of the continuing work of Common Ground, a center of interreligious dialogue and understanding that has grown from its beginning in 1975 when it was no more than an idea in my mind. I am proud of Lake Forest College and its new Islamic World Studies program. The recently established major in religion gives us even more opportunities to increase student understanding of religious diversity and the challenge of learning how to embrace it. I am proud to work with the Niagara Foundation, a vital center of Muslim dialogue with American society. I am happy to be on the board of Hands of Peace, an organization that brings teenagers from the Middle East (Palestinian

Muslims and Israeli Jews) to dialogue with American teenagers who are Jews, Christians, and Muslims, for a two-week program in July. Follow up meetings take place in the Middle East every month so that the process does not end with the program. My dream is that one day the Prime Minister of Israel and the Prime Minister of a Palestinian state will shake hands and sign a peace agreement and that both of them will have met when they were teenage participants in Hands of Peace.

At seventy years of age, I find myself happier than I have ever been. When Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was asked to speculate on the feelings he might have when he faced death, he said that he would like his last words to be "Thank You". No words better express my own feelings at this time.