

July 26, 2015
(May Letter)

Hi Samantha

It's been ages since I wrote my last letter but it means that there are many stories to tell since I have been doing a lot of travelling since then. But first I want to tell you how much I enjoyed the letter you sent in your may letter - about your time at the United Church conference.

It sounds like you had a very busy and full time. Your comments on change seemed particularly timely since you are going through some big changes in your own life at the present. Do you find them scary? I remember going to university for the first time in 1961. I had graduated a year early from school since I had been in the "accelerated program" at school because my grades were good. This meant I completed grades 9 to 12 in 3 years rather than 4. It also meant that I was very much on my own at UBC since only a few of my friends from the graduating class were there. It took me a long time to get up enough nerve to join one of the many student groups available at the university, but I'm glad I did.

One of the first ones was UBC radio – as I mentioned in a previous letter. There was a student radio station at the campus and I joined to learn how they functioned and to see if it was fun. Within a year they gave me my own radio show so I broadcast music and talked about it (along with various announcements) for about 2 or 3 hours a week. I was also asked to provide play-by-play announcements at the UBC basketball game. It was particularly scary, but I seemed to do okay. Joining the radio was a great choice since I learned about how a radio station worked, I increased my own skills in announcing, and I got a bit more confident about joining groups. In addition I met some interesting people.

I also joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM). This was a group of students who were interested in Christianity, but weren't necessarily Christians. We had a few Jews in the group and plenty of agnostics. What brought us together was our concern for social justice. It was a group of people who opposed war (especially the Vietnam War that the USA was fighting at the time), nuclear weapons, racial discrimination, and other issues of the day that were similar to these. We organized meetings, went on marches, and had teaching sessions related to these issues about how best to deal with them. This included "teach-ins" about civil disobedience and how to behave in a demonstration.

I remember how important Ghandi's teachings were at that time. He argued that if one was going to violate an unjust law it was important to accept the punishment for it rather than get upset if you were fined or put in jail. The point, he argued, was to accept the consequences of your actions and by doing so, show how unjust the law is. One of the more influential movie clips at that time was film shot in India where workers were demonstrating against an unjust business owner. They would march into the business grounds and as they did so, they were clubbed by security men hired by the company. As each person was beaten and was knocked out or otherwise injured they were carried back to a first-aid station that had been set up by the workers and a new person would fill in their place in the march. No-one showed anger at the security people as they beat the workers and none of the workers fought back in any way. You can see a dramatization of it from the Gandhi movie via: https://youtu.be/y1DHNoHxB_c.

This was particularly effective since the press were there and showed the movie clip around the world. In the end, the company capitulated and improved the working conditions and salaries for the workers.

There were plenty of demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the segregation of African-Americans (we called them "black people" in those days) along with "ban the bomb". In Canada we also had, demonstrations against the Bomark missile on Canadian territory. This was a USA missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead

that was being installed on Canadian bases. We were pleased to eventually learn that the government promised not to load nuclear warheads on the missiles in response to the Canadian protests.

Most of the demonstrations did not create change on their own, but they all contributed to change over the long term. It's sort of like the demonstrations these days against those things that are contributing to global warming. Each of them has not had the effect of shutting down the oil sands production or cutting back on fossil fuel use, but the combined effect has got some governments taking action to do something about it (unfortunately, not our federal government, however!).

The other good thing about my time in SCM was that I met Fran there. I actually met her father first since he was teaching a seminar that I attended at the group. I was surprised and pleased with the approach he took to Christianity and to understanding life so it started me thinking about these things in new ways. He didn't get hung up about morals and about interpreting the bible in only one way. Instead he encouraged us to learn about how it was written, by who, and for what reasons, then to figure out how to make sense of it in our own way. This was an exciting approach for me since I had found too many inconsistencies and contradictions in the traditional approach to the bible - and they left me confused and skeptical. To look at them in their historical context went a long way to reducing the confusion and as I investigated further, I found it to be interesting and enjoyable. That's why I eventually took some courses in religious studies.

When I first went to university I didn't know what I wanted to take. However, I did well in math and physics so I enrolled in science to start. After about a year in physics, I changed to chemistry since I found that the teaching of physics was boring - and the labs were even more so. This was unfortunate since physics was on the verge of some very exciting breakthroughs in both large-scale research (astronomy, etc.) and in small-scale work (e.g. quantum physics).

I took chemistry with my math for a few years, but then (as I mentioned above) I got interested in issues of justice and history so I switched to English and Religious Studies. By the time I graduated with my BA, I did so in these two topics. In my final year of university, however, I got thinking about graduate school and was disappointed by the things that the graduate students in English were doing. For example, they would work for years trying to figure out what an author "really" meant by what he or she wrote. This didn't interest me.

In my final year, I took my first sociology course and I really liked it. The topic brought together my interest in justice and history with some very cool insights about how societies worked. One of my professors that I remember at this time was Kaspar Naegle. He taught a course on social deviance that considered how important other peoples' responses were to those who were different (like mentally ill people) - and how those responses often ostracized the individuals and just made their condition worse.

As a result of this interest I applied to the sociology department for admission as a graduate student even though I only had one sociology course. Fortunately, my grades were good so they said I could get into the graduate program if I took some undergraduate sociology courses along with my graduate ones. This sounded great to me, so I became a graduate student in sociology, getting my Master of Arts degree in that topic, then later, my PhD.

I feel that I might have changed my mind many more times since then, except that I got a job in sociology, got married, and had kids. Besides, teaching sociology was great because I was able to choose any topic I wanted within that discipline. I would never have guessed at that time that I would become an expert in rural development! ...but that's a story for another day.

Love,

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(26/07/2015)