

Boys

Before it was sold a few years ago, I would from time to time take myself off to a weekend retreat with other men from a variety of religious denominations (I have none, really) to Our Lady of Hope Center, one of the many absolutely beautiful monasteries and retreat houses here in our valley that lies along the Hudson River. Our Lady had been built long ago as a Minor Seminary, a school for adolescent boys who planned to enter a real seminary after high school. Sort of holding tanks for the religiously inclined, the Minors were boarding schools meant to “protect young men from the contagion of the world.” Myself, I enjoyed contagion at that age.

At night we men slept in the boys' old dorm rooms, each with twenty or so beds, small pallets not truly made for comfort. We didn't mind. Though in our forties and fifties and older, we bantered after the lights went out, kidded each other about our small faults and told jokes until mostly everyone dropped off to sleep. Then, someone would fart and we'd be at it once more until ten minutes had passed and we were again quiet, happy youngsters drifting off to dreamland. For forty-eight hours we were boys again, with open minds and hearts edged with laughter.

After a greasy breakfast in the morning, we'd begin a hard day's work on what I suppose was for each of us our path to maturity. The world had conferred the title of Adult on us years before, but we saw it as a hollow honor, a scarecrow figure without the spiritual dimension we sought for our lives.

The wonderful thing about our quest was that each of us had his own ideas about sensing the evanescent. Each of us was open to hearing about another's quest, but none of us were interested in anyone's credo.

We were like a group of men in a dream I had in

my twenties. Crossing a bright green pasture, we came to the edge of a wood and entered on a path we hoped would take us to a refreshing waterfall we had heard about and wanted to explore and enjoy. I felt awkward and bit guilty, thinking I should be busy with men's work, something more serious than rambling through the countryside on a summer day. Then, I looked around and saw we had all become boys.

An intriguing object lay ahead, just off the path and next to a tree. It seemed a marvel and totally captured our imaginations. I could see only small areas of it in my dream, never the whole. Its bright metal parts and latches and gears and small wheels appealed to our young boy hearts, more so than a treasure chest of gold and silver. But when we began to excitedly speak of it, I found that none of us saw exactly the same thing. Wondering what the object was, we began to guess who made it and what it was used for and how it got there. Anyone's opinion was fair. Some ideas were serious, some quite funny and we found ourselves laughing both in agreement and disagreement. We'd seen nothing like it before. No one claimed any special knowledge of “the Wisdom,” for that's what we began to call the object, because boys name things with words that sound important and with phrases that pop into their heads. Of course, some boys were adamant about the purpose of the Wisdom, but it was recognized that none of us knew for sure.

When we had conjectured long enough and the sun reached its zenith high above us, it was time to get on with our journey. No boy thought to take the thing for himself, to own it and keep it on his dresser or next to his bed at night like a favorite baseball glove. It was somehow apparent the Wisdom belonged where we found it, by the wayside on the journey, always there for anyone who would see it. It seemingly had nothing to reveal, but instead The Wisdom awakened our wonder, and certainly our delight. And in its presence, we were boys again.

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