

# The More Things Change ... Hope Springs Eternal

by [Steven R. Sabat](#) (October 2022)



*The Window 2, Odelon Redon, 1920*

**Some years ago, in the** midst of what might now be called early midlife (middle age seems to have been extended by decades in recent years), I was asked to join some Georgetown University faculty colleagues on campus to greet a group of generous and mostly middle-aged alumni, on a sultry summer Washington, D.C. afternoon close to dinner time. One colleague was a Jesuit professor in the Theology department, another was the Athletic Director, and I was the third. We were to represent, Spirit, Body, and Mind respectively, thus reflecting aspects of the Georgetown University ethos. Being a Psychology professor, I was chosen, for better or worse, to represent "Mind" in the group. By the time my turn came to speak words of welcome and appreciation, I noticed that most of the guests and speakers had already availed themselves of generous helpings of wine and hors d'oeuvres. The lubrication, if you will, was fortuitous. I began by saying, "When we reach midlife, many of us come to believe that things were better in the good old days and the world is now going to hell in a handbasket." After pausing while I noted the smiles and knowing nods of most of the alumni I said, "As a professor in the Psychology department, I am here to tell you...that they were and it is." and the group erupted in laughter.

I recognize this observation as not being laughable at all, but quite common among many in our midlife years. Thus, the laughter that greeted my "astute" observation was perhaps a combined response of self-reflection and recognition on the part of the alumni who were returning to campus and recalling what the narrator of "The Lone Ranger" television program called, "those thrilling days of yesteryear". What follows are some stories, some episodes, from my own "yesteryears" coupled with stories from decades later that illustrate in some ways three seeming "truths": One being that, as the French saying goes, "The more things change, the more they stay the same",

another being, "Things were better in the good old days," and the third being, "Hope springs eternal."

## **Episode 1**

The first episode occurred when I was in high school. Long Island City High School was a neighborhood school whose students were tremendously varied intellectually, ethnically, religiously, racially, and politically. For example, our boys' soccer team won the New York City championship a number of times when soccer was rarely played by children in this country. Our team was comprised of boys whose parents were from Europe (Germany, Greece, Hungary, Poland, etc.) and these boys did grow up playing soccer.

In those days in New York City, grades 7, 8, and 9 took place in a Junior High School so that High School consisted of Grades 10, 11, and 12. Going to high school meant going to a new school in sophomore year and often that meant not knowing many people at the start. Such was my experience. Thus, when I walked into the cafeteria that first week, I saw precious few familiar faces. One familiar face belonged to Robert, who was a year ahead of me and who attended the same junior high school I attended which was where I first met him. Robert was a relatively bright student whom I knew only superficially but that was enough to render him familiar in a sea of faces I did not recognize at all and so, given that there were empty seats at the table where he sat, I sat down on one and said hi and we caught up some.

In the next days, four other guys arrived at that end of the long table. One was another familiar person, James, who was from Panama and dark skinned, whereas Robert was white and of Irish descent. James was also a year ahead of me, and I knew him slightly from junior high because James and Robert were in the same class back then. Next was Marlon, another white guy

who was known to Robert and also a year ahead of me. In short order, it became clear that Marlon was on the school's "honor roll" and also a proud member of the American Nazi Party who, in the subsequent days, brought with him all sorts of items related to that fact, such as the Nazi party's newspaper or magazine, called "The Stormtrooper." Marlon had a friend, a rather chubby, jocular, Italian fellow who was essentially Marlon's "Mussolini." And finally, another white fellow, Joe, joined the group as he knew the others. It was clear that Marlon despised black people and Jews. He was not demeaning in any way to James, whom he knew through Robert and, at this early point in our acquaintance, Marlon did not know that I was Jewish. Robert joined Marlon in harboring a loathing for black people as did Joe, but James was somehow acceptable to them as well. I was relatively direct with Marlon about his Nazi leanings and beliefs, from time to time saying something like, "Marlon, you're a really bright guy, so how is it that you believe that Nazi horseradish?" He didn't really have an answer but chuckled as if he'd been "seen" in a way. It took some weeks before Robert revealed to all that I was Jewish. At this point, Marlon already "knew" me in a way, seemingly respected my intelligence, and he never said one word that was demeaning about Jewish people, although he did make clear his loathing of Blacks and Polish people. There was a student of Polish descent, Max, at the other end of our cafeteria table and Marlon taunted him from time to time, such that the rather large and strong Polish boy had to be restrained by four other students while Marlon laughed derisively. I told Max on a number of occasions that Marlon was "playing you like a violin". Unlike Marlon and Robert, Joe was hardly bright but was rather vocal about his antipathy toward Black people.

One day in the cafeteria, a Black student walked past our table and Joe said, "Reggin." I said, "What?" and Joe repeated, "Reggin." I asked, "What does that mean?" and Joe replied that it was "Nigger" spelled backwards. Of course, I was struck by this brand of ignorance (although I wondered how

long it took Joe to figure out that spelling) and quickly said, "If you really believe in that racism, you should stand up proudly and just call the guy 'Nigger.' Or are you afraid to do that because you know that if the guy heard you, he would kick your ass all the way to Cincinnati?" You could almost see the smoke coming out of Joe's ears as he wrestled with the truth of my comment, trying to find a way to respond. If Joe had one more neuron in his brain, he would have had a synapse and so he finally turned to the Nazi, Marlon, for help. Whereupon, referring to me, Marlon said, "He's right."

## **Episode 2**

Thirty years later, I was a Psychology professor at Georgetown University. Among the courses I taught was the introductory course, General Psychology. Although most of the students in the course were in their first or sophomore year, there were some junior and seniors in the course as well. One of the seniors in the class that year was Billy Markey, a very bright, thoughtful, sensitive, service-oriented person who came to my office from time to time to chat. On one such occasion, we began talking about a current topic in class—heredity, intelligence testing, and racism—when he brought up something that troubled him. He told me about his three housemates and how the four of them had a friend, Alan, who was Jewish. The other three guys often referred amongst themselves to Alan not by name, but as "the wedge" ("The wedge is coming over tonight", for example) and Billy did not understand what that meant until he asked, whereupon they informed him that "wedge" was Jew spelled backwards (wej). Billy was deeply upset about that and that's why the story "came up" in conversation.

It was the spring semester and Passover and Easter were approaching. Alan observed the kosher dietary laws for Passover and Billy's housemates referred to those items as

"Wej food." Interestingly enough, as Billy told me, one of the housemates was Iranian but said he was Egyptian because he didn't want the anticipated "backlash" he expected. Another housemate was Italian, was enrolled in Georgetown's School of Business, and said that upon graduation he intended to drop the vowel from the end of his last name because, "It will be better for business." The third housemate was Latino but passed himself off as Miracle Whip and White Bread because he feared discrimination.

This episode stuck me on a number of different levels. One was the odd irony that the "perpetrators" of this way of thinking (calling Alan "the wej") were, themselves, afraid that people in the world would look upon their own ethnic heritage with another version of the way they thought about Alan. Still another was that Billy's housemates had taken Georgetown's required courses in Ethics and Theology, were living on a campus wherein the idea of "Woman and Men for Others" is a living part of the ethos and they still retained their antisemitic views. The humanistic values surrounding them in their courses did not "lay a glove on them" even though they passed examinations in courses wherein they should have come to understand that antisemitism and its variants are irrational and unacceptable as is racism in any form. And finally, Billy's housemates' use of the term, "Wej" reminded me of the boy, Joe, at my high school cafeteria table so long ago, who used the term, "Reggin." The more things change, the more they stay the same it seems, and the world is going to hell in a handbasket, but in this respect at least, things were not "better in the good old days."

Simultaneously, though, there was Alan who was openly, authentically, living his Jewish heritage at the oldest Jesuit and Catholic university in the United States, where Jewish students comprise fewer than ten per cent of the undergraduate student body. And, of course, there was Billy and the deep anguish, innocent disbelief, and righteous indignation that he

conveyed in eloquently recounting the story of his housemates. He thought his housemates were his friends and never before imagined that they could harbor the kind of thinking that was foundational to the Holocaust. There was something pure and admirable about his character in all this as he related literally coming face to face with beliefs he thought to be reprehensible. His anguish was palpable as he spoke and I listened with rapt attention. As his Professor and as a human being, I recognized the privileged position I occupied as well as the honor of being trusted enough by such a fine young man as he revealed all this to me. And so, I told him the story about my experience in the high school cafeteria to show him that I connected deeply with him and could understand his reactions in my own way through my own experience. We saw "eye to eye" in that moment, especially when one considers the observation that "the eye is the window to the soul."

Billy graduated at the end of that semester and travelled to Africa to work in support of people in desperate need. We remained in touch for years after that and a photograph that he took of an African eagle in flight hangs on the wall behind me as I write these words. In a sense, Billy Markey is with me to this day. Although it may be true in some respects that the more things change, the more they stay the same, it is also true, as demonstrated by Billy and Alan, that hope springs eternal.

### **Episode 3**

When I was in high school and college, there were students who played on varsity teams such as baseball, basketball, soccer, and track and field events. In those days, the NBA would not hire a player until four years after his high school class graduated. That changed in 1969 when the American Basketball Association changed that rule for the benefit of "financial hardship" cases. Spencer Haywood was an exceptional high

school basketball player, a star on the 1968 Olympic basketball team at the age of 19, who began attending a junior college in Colorado and then transferred to the University of Detroit in 1968. His mother was trying to raise ten children while picking cotton in Mississippi and Haywood decided to turn pro. He met the hardship criteria of the ABA and was drafted by the Denver Rockets of that league. He was Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player the same year. Eventually, after a lawsuit against the NBA went to the Supreme Court, the NBA agreed to a settlement and Haywood joined the Seattle SuperSonics and played well for a number of years, an All-Star four times. Later in the 70s, he became addicted to cocaine and that disrupted his career for a time. Eventually, he recovered and rebuilt his basketball career and his life in the years ahead.

In the subsequent years, given the "Spencer Haywood Rule," highly talented college basketball players have turned pro after one or two years of college, during which time they "showcase" themselves for the NBA. "One and done" became something of a "saying" among many male college basketball players to describe the way they related to their "college years."

In the 1980s, Georgetown University's men's basketball team became nationally ranked and went to the NCAA finals three times, winning once in 1984. The star players on those teams, with one exception (who was "encouraged" to leave the university), graduated from Georgetown in four years. Years later, it became more and more common for some of the basketball players to exit quickly from Georgetown and attempt to enter the professional ranks. To some of them, going to college had little to nothing to do with getting an education (tuition free), but mainly as a ticket to the NBA. The idea of a "student-athlete" was becoming an oxymoron in many cases.

One such person was in my General Psychology class in the first semester of his first year and he showed rather



conspicuously how little he cared about learning, although he was able to explain to me in great detail how it was the case that the first NBA contract one signs is not the most important one. The most important one was the second contract. I did not know that. I learned something new and have not forgotten. When he missed classes due to the team's travel schedule, I worked with the academic counselor of the men's basketball team to arrange extra classes for him so that he could learn the material he missed. He never showed up for any of those extra classes, never called ahead to cancel, never uttered a word of apology. When I contacted the academic counselor about this student-athlete's rather disrespectful behavior, she explained that she spoke to the student and was now able to tell me that "He simply forgot." Oh. He simply forgot. As it turned out, he predictably failed the course miserably. He was drafted by an NBA team after his sophomore year. Unlike Spencer Haywood, he never made an NBA All-Star team and did not have a distinguished career as a pro, but bounced around from one team to another. He did make a lot of money, however.

In the past five decades, many universities have increasingly become something of a minor league system for the NBA and NFL. In that sense, things were indeed "better in the good old days."

#### **Episode 4**

The women's basketball team at Georgetown was never in the NCAA finals during my days on the faculty. In the same class as the above student who cared little about his coursework, there was another student on the women's basketball team, Alexa Roche, who was from Bellmore Long Island, New York. When my Dad was in the U.S. Navy during WW II, he was stationed in Bellmore for a time before we went overseas. Alexa was having difficulty in our General Psychology course and she came to my

office regularly for help with a deep and palpable sense of purpose. We worked together to develop her study skills and ways to manage her time efficiently so that she could complete assigned readings easily. Her academic counselor was actively involved in working with the two of us. Regarding her experience on the basketball team, she indicated to me with sadness that she was "relegated" to playing mostly defense rather than being a "force" on offense. I asked her a few questions and learned that she had no knowledge of Bill Russell. So, in addition to spending time with her working on approaches to studying, preparing for exams, and time management, I introduced her to Russell who was (to this day) the greatest defensive force in the history of college and professional basketball. It was Russell who was crucial in making the Celtics into the perennial champions they were, winning eleven NBA Championships (eight in a row) in his thirteen years with the team. Alexa's strong work ethic and keen intelligence changed her level of achievement in our class from desultory to outstanding and she came to take great pride in playing defense on the basketball team. Years later, in what was her senior year, I heard from the Coach of the team who told me that I had been named the team's "Honorary Coach for a Day." I still have the (now well worn) tee shirt the team gave me that day.

Alexa Roche showed me that hope springs eternal.

## **Episode 5**

Unlike the men's basketball team, the Georgetown University football team has not been in the NCAA/national television limelight in the past five decades, but the young men who play on the team do work very hard and there is no "one and done" mentality about them. They, like their counterparts on the university's male and female track teams and crew teams, as well as the women's field hockey, basketball, volleyball, and

lacrosse teams, were student-athletes in the true sense of the term and they consistently worked hard in my classes and did very well (For example, Brittany Sonnichsen was a star on the women's volleyball team and went on to become an accomplished dental surgeon).

One student-athlete in the 1990s was enrolled in my Physiological Psychology course, known to be very demanding as it included philosophy (the mind-brain problem for example), neurophysiology, neuroanatomy, and psychology. Learning neuroanatomy and neurophysiology clearly requires a certain amount of memorization of structures and pathways within the Central Nervous System on a macro level as well as on the micro level of neurophysiology and neurons.

Billy Ward's failing grade on the first exam brought him to my office. We spoke for a time about his other courses and during our conversation he expressed surprise about my knowing that he was the quarterback on the school's football team, saying that most faculty members don't even realize that "we" have a football team at Georgetown. When we got around to talking about his exam, I knew clearly where he was having difficulties and that it was precisely in those areas that required memorization.

I asked him how many offensive plays were in the team's playbook and he said "about a hundred." I asked him if he knew all those plays and what everyone on the offensive unit was supposed to do on each of those plays, and he said he did. I expressed my surprise that anyone could learn all that information and hold it in memory and lead the team on the field and he said it took some work but he did it. That was all I needed to know.

I was now speaking to him both as his professor and as a person who understands that sometimes the last "ingredient" we need to succeed is the confidence of a person whom we respect—something that reminded me that "The more things

change, the more they stay the same” because that was true in my own experience during my graduate school years. I looked at him, our eyes and minds meeting, and said, “If you can learn all those plays and what everyone on the team is supposed to do on each of them, then you certainly can learn the material in Physiological Psychology.” That was all he needed to hear it seemed, because from that point on he did beautifully in our class.

Almost twenty years later, Billy wrote to me and told me that he had been teaching in a private high school for a decade and a half, that he never forgot that conversation we had in my office, and that he had had that same kind of conversation with students of his own. In addition to teaching, he had a private counseling practice working with individuals, couples, and families. He is doing well and doing good.

Billy Ward showed me that hope springs eternal.

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When I look back at these episodes in my one and only life, I can see evidence in support of each of those three “truths” I mentioned at the outset of this essay. It is possible that it is true that “the more things change, the more they stay the same”; it is just as possible that “things were better in the good old days”; it is just as possible that “hope springs eternal”. That students can teach professors has been true in the past, as long as professors are open to learning from their students, open to meeting them as human beings, making valuable memories with them, and through whom they may “cheat death,” as it were. Those things can remain the same over the centuries, even as other things change.

Some things were, indeed, better in years gone by. I think of my old neighborhood and how children played outside after school without any adult supervision and how we learned to compromise and mediate among ourselves when a debatable

situation arose and how three generations of people could be living in the same small community and be neighbors who knew each other's name. Yet, in this country, the "good old days" also included slavery, that institution that Ken Burns called our country's "original sin". Thus, not everything was better in the "good old days". Such bromides are essentially nuanced and it is important, I think, that we recognize the signal importance of nuanced thinking, especially in a time when polarization and "easy answers" have become rampant.

Finally, it seems that as my age has become capturable in one sense by increasingly large numerals, the idea of hope for the future has become poignant and meaningful in new ways. I would not have spent the vast majority of my life as a professor teaching young people and engaging in research if I thought that doing so would have no positive effect whatsoever on the future of even one person on this planet. Therefore, it seems to me that at the foundation of much of this life, if it is to be lived with any joy and meaning at all, is hope – essentially "flying on a wing and a prayer". That feeling of hope, however, has been strengthened, validated as it were, by my encounters with any number of authentic, genuinely kind, principled people who, as you can gather from this essay, continue to demonstrate the idea that hope springs eternal.

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