

The Short Bloom of a Wallflower

by [Reeve Chudd](#) (July 2024)



Abschied, August Macke (1914)

In the fall of my senior year at Ernest Pyle High School in Sorenson, Indiana, I ended up in the principal's office for my first and only time. Basically, I led a very boring life up until I left home for college. I had decent grades, but I wasn't popular or prominent; I was neither a member of student council, nor writing for the student newspaper nor an athlete on any sports team. My interests were reading science fiction,

playing with my dog, Steve, and listening on the radio to the nearly daily defeat of my hapless Chicago Cubs. Most of my classroom time was spent in silence in the back row of each classroom, emulating invisibility, praying to be ignored by my teachers. I was petrified about speaking in front of my peers. Nevertheless, here is how I came to be sent to the principal's office after a confrontation with that horse's ass, Mr. Archibald Dilworth, my European history teacher.

"Now, I'd like to move on to my favorite historical figure: John Calvin," Mr. Dilworth told our class with a smirk indicative of his superiority complex. His mean pedagogical method of humiliating his students at EPHS made him detested by both students and parents (they referred to him as "Dull-Worthless"), but I believe that, in his twisted mind, his condescension was intended as a challenge to motivate his students. Perhaps because he was incapable of enlivening the subject of European history for his pupils with anecdotal tidbits or intriguing comparisons to current culture, he instead resorted to treating every student's utterance in his class as the ruminations of a simplistic moron. Possibly, after over 35 years teaching the same subject at a rural public high school, being childless, unmarried and, I believe, friendless, his life had spiraled into festering resentment.

"Can anyone tell me *anything* about John Calvin?" No hands immediately were raised.

Although most of us, now in our senior year, kept up with our homework assignments for this tyrant, the rest of my classmates shared my fear of being called upon in this class. Mr. Dilworth pointed to Lydia Posner, one of our better students, beckoning her to reply.

"John Calvin was a French lawyer in 16th century Switzerland. He played a major role in the Protestant Reformation in Europe," Lydia sheepishly answered.

At first, Mr. Dilworth's eyebrows raised, which could have signified surprise, but most likely showed his wicked glee at encountering an opening for his bile. Then his face went slack in a glower of disappointment. With his best pomposity, he uttered, "How insightful, Ms. Posner. Brilliant, simply genius parroting of the introductory sentence from your history book. I would imagine you're mentally exhausted from such intense cogitation." He surveyed the rest of our class and inquired, "What else?"

Finally, his gaze fell on Mike Gardner, our eventual valedictorian, "Mr. Gardner?"

Even Mike, destined to attend the University of Pennsylvania, had a slight tremor of anxiety in his response: "He wrote about predestination, that our eventual eternal life was fixed even before we were born, even before God created humanity."

"And what," Mr. Dilworth replied as he looked at the vacant stares of his students, "does that mean?" With no responses, he decided to share his interpretation. "I guess that you troglodytes need to be spoon-fed what Calvin espoused, but any cursory study of the Bible would show multiple sources from which he derived his theology. Very, very simply put, God chose some of us for salvation after death and others for damnation."

Mike Gardner raised his hand, and Mr. Dilworth, whose face showed the slightest glimmer of hope that his best student might further contribute to the discussion, called upon him, "Yes, Mr. Gardner?"

"It sounds like John Calvin believed that we're just puppets in this life, with no influence possible upon the destiny of our immortal souls through our behavior on earth." Mike was a devout Catholic, a former altar boy and a leader of his church's youth group. He believed deeply in the opportunity for redemption of the soul offered by Jesus.

"That oversimplifies Calvinism," Mr. Dilworth replied. "This is not a religion class, and I will not waste our time debating whether Calvin was a seer or a lunatic. However, I will add that a sounder interpretation is that John Calvin believed that if a man is one of the 'elect,' then his righteousness in life is similarly pre-ordained."

As I mentioned, I avoided attracting attention in class with the same resistance as I did for a dental appointment or a vaccination, but at that moment, I desperately wanted to know if my reticent life would, nonetheless, attain eternal bliss. I slowly raised my hand.

Mr. Dilworth, obviously shocked to see my volunteering for participation, responded, "Well, well, Mr. Budnik. Nice of you to join us. What scintillating inspiration can you share with us?"

Ignoring his sarcasm, I replied, "Did Calvin believe that we can find out if we're 'elect'? I mean ... before we die?"

A slowly growing sardonic smile grew on the teacher. He stroked his chin as if to feign deep ratiocination. "I have read that some enlightened souls have had revelations, whether in dream or vision, which, when confirmed by certain elders of their church, leads them to that conclusion. In other words, their destiny as one of the 'elect' may have been revealed to them."

Mercifully, the bell rang, ending the period. Mr. Dilworth rushed to speak as we all rose to leave: "Be ready Monday to discuss chapter 12 in your textbooks," he blurted out, and then quickly raised his voice to overcome the din of chairs and desks being moved, "And for those of you with enough brains to be curious about town politics, the Town Moderator election debate will be held in our gymnasium at 2 p.m. on Saturday."

Sorenson, Indiana, was not large enough to have a full, paid

municipal administration. We had a volunteer Town Council, with the Town Moderator acting as the chief Council member. That weekend was the Council meeting wherein the three candidates vying for Moderator were to have a debate. It was no coincidence that Mr. Dilworth notified his classes about the event; he was one of the candidates.

Several of us decided we had nothing better to do with our Saturday afternoon, so we decided to attend, hoping that we could score some points with Mr. Dilworth if he noticed our attendance. About 120 folks filled the gymnasium risers as each candidate made his ten-minute pitch. The candidates were timed in their remarks by the Town Clerk, Jim Lawrence. Barney Lockhart, who owned and ran the local Ace Hardware store, was first, and his repetitious but disjointed delivery was in sharp contrast to the dramatic, enthusiastic, well-reasoned and expertly delivered remarks subsequently delivered convincingly by Mr. Dilworth. It was obvious that Mr. Dilworth had a total command of the town issues, and his preparation and articulation were far superior to poor Barney's meandering. I was further impressed that Mr. Dilworth uttered his last word in chorus with the call of Mr. Lawrence's "Time!"

The last speaker was Tadeusz ("Tad") Polansky, the town's only chiropractor. Poor Tad was obviously suffering from stage fright, and he spoke at such a slow, stuttering pace and paused so many times that I am certain the entire audience, along with me, wanted desperately to blurt out a finish to his thoughts in order to accelerate the completion of each sentence. So focused was I on my annoyance with his presentation that I don't recall a single position he took on any issue. It was utter torture to listen to him, a veritable assault on our normal speed of thought. What's more, he proceeded to ignore the warnings of the Town Clerk and continued his blathering even after a loud "Time" was uttered by Mr. Lawrence, and even when, about a minute later, the Town

Clerk yelled "Tad, your time is up!"

Finally, the most frustrated among us, Mr. Dilworth, who was thus far sitting with arms folded and sporting a sneer of indifference, rose from his chair on the podium and yelled, "Sit down, you dumb Polack!"

In response, there was a loud gasp from the crowd. The population of Sorenson, Indiana, was about 80% people of Polish descent, including my own father and, consequently, me. I looked at my classmates and put my hand over my mouth, for fear of laughing out loud.

Tad responded to this final insult by merely saying meekly: "So, vote for me." He sat down while Mr. Lawrence announced the debate's conclusion and told everyone to return to the gym on Tuesday morning, when voting would begin at 8 am sharp. Mr. Dilworth then made a hasty retreat from the event.

On Tuesday evening, the election results were posted at the Town Hall by Mr. Lawrence. Mr. Dilworth came in dead last in the tally. The number of his supporters wasn't even close to Barney Lockhart, who finished second to Tad Polansky.

The following Wednesday morning, we were all seated in our European history class when Mr. Dilworth entered after the passing bell rang, looking obviously dejected.

That's when I casually remarked, "I guess that, this morning, you're not one of the 'elect,' sir."

His eyes looked as if they would explode out of his head. "Go to the Principal's office immediately, you disrespectful imbecile!" he growled.

Our principal, Mr. Stevens, suspended me for the remainder of the week. My parents grounded me for a month. When I returned to campus the following Monday, the news of my impudence had spread far and wide, and popular classmates who'd ignored me

entirely were patting me on the back as a hero. I'd like to say that I remained popular, but my ill-gotten fame lasted about a week before I returned to my normal nonexistence. I never uttered another word in Mr. Dilworth's class, and I received a "C" grade in his class, though I thought I deserved better. Then again, perhaps my grade was predestined.

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Reeve Chudd is a retired trusts and estates attorney living in Carmel, Indiana. In his youth, he wanted to be writer, but he wasn't prepared to sacrifice eating for his art. Today, his four academic degrees, along with \$4.55, will purchase a grande latte at Starbucks.

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