

## My Life Story—in Stages

*Each year following Labor Day, retired ministers and missionaries in the Northwest Conference gather with their spouses for a 48-hour retreat at Covenant Pines in McGregor, Minnesota. We call it our CRIM Retreat (Covenanters Retired in Ministry). Usually during those days someone among us shares a brief account of their life story. It was my turn in 2005. The following, minimally edited to bring it up to date, was what I presented to the group.*

Several years ago, while listening one morning to the reading of Scripture in church, I was struck by the wording of Genesis 12: 9, which declares in the NRSV that “*Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.*”

What an appropriate description of life that is, I thought, for all of us. Thank about it in terms of your own pilgrimage, looking both backward and forward in time. The Abram who became Abraham was and is our father, not only in the faith—which he is and remains, thank God—but in the flesh as well. And he, it is said, “*traveled on by stages.*” I like that image, because I think it is true to my own experience as a human being.

One is reminded of Søren Kierkegaard’s profound and complicated book called *Stages on Life’s Way*, the purpose of which according to Emanuel Hirsch was not simply to offer “an exercise in biography.” No, Hirsch writes, Kierkegaard’s book “is the work of one who, out of his suffering and thought, seeks to guide a reader to a personal understanding of penitence and faith.”

My story is much like both Abraham’s and Kierkegaard’s—even if far less profound and influential. So in truth is yours. Our aim, therefore, in sharing story must always be like theirs-- to awaken in others the sense of our humanity that calls for constant repentance and, at the same time, continuing reminders of his image that both bind us to each other and point us back to him.

So, while I speak these few moments, journey back and forth in your own life experience, and recall there both your humanity--confessed and unconfessed sinfulness--and your own experiences of God’s grace that have awakened faith in him and love for him.

My story will center on four themes: **Nesting** (1930-1949); **Emerging** (1949-1955); **Ministering** (1955-1994); and **Retiring** (1994-present). The dates are somewhat artificial, for themes, like our years, blend seamlessly into one another. Yet they do describe for me the stages by which my life has unfolded from earliest years as a boy until now.

### Nesting

I was born July 9, 1930 at West Suburban Hospital in Oak Park, Illinois, nearby the old Austin Covenant Church where my father was pastor at the time, and our first floor apartment in the two-flat at 1045 Waller Street just east of Austin Avenue in Chicago.

Though barely 4 years old when we moved to the North Park Seminary community where my father was to teach, the Austin Covenant Church experience was formative for me in many ways, not least in terms of spiritual awareness. I recall specifically the Sunday evening services there, when just before father was to preach,

which was my signal to go to sleep in my mother's ample lap, Ruth Fredrickson, mother to Bill who later taught at North Park himself, unfailingly reached out to me with a piece of gum. "Got any for my brudder?" I'd ask, just like clockwork, to which she would always say, "Sure."

My first experience of God came in that very setting, where one Sunday night following worship I woke up somewhat surprised to be in my father's arms, looking past that face I loved to the high vaulted ceiling in that gothic sanctuary. As vivid to me now as it was vivid then, I sensed God's love in a special way, my place with his people, and an awareness of majesty that lasts to this day.

The North Park community to which we moved in 1934 became my primary nesting place from that time until I was 19 and left for Sr. College at Augustana in Rock Island. What remains remarkable to me in that Academic setting is how guarded I was by parents and church community alike from becoming a sophisticate, i.e. a chaser after images that so often entice ordinary people into submissions of one kind or another that are not of their own choosing.

I was, by my father's description, like "a wild March hare" as a boy, not a rebel so much as a rabbit--active, running here and there, joyful, full of life, quite unconcerned about combing my hair (which was ample and wavy, believe it or not!), in love with marbles and ping pong and baseball and basketball, and all the things a boy should be free to do to be a boy. And I was all these things, remarkably, in a community often under siege theologically and church politically.

My father and mother, bless them, never spoke critically to me of people who weren't sure they were orthodox--not to mention "saved." Totally involved in the life and work of North Park Church--Sunday School, Confirmation, Jr. and Sr. High League, Youth groups, and both Junior and Senior choirs--as well as on the campus at North Park Academy and Junior College, I was nonetheless so naive theologically that I didn't really know what terms like "Incarnation" meant until years later. Yet I experienced it intuitively in that community, surrounded everywhere by people who I knew cared for me as I cared for them.

I was not wholly innocent, however, for I did sneak off with some stolen change from mother's purse to take in a movie or two on Lawrence Avenue one afternoon, only to come home to a gentle query from my mother as to where I had been and how sad it was that the whole family had been planning to go out to a movie that evening--which was now impossible, of course, because it was, as she said, "just too late." I also snuck up in the garage rafters one day at 5049 N. Bernard Street to smoke a whole pack of Camel Cigarettes I had taken from my Uncle Joe Myhren when he was visiting from Sacramento. I thought he was "a real man" the way he smoked, until the cumulative effect of smoking that whole pack ruined both supper and that night for me. My wife might not even know about these things, though she surely does now. Why did I find it so hard to confess? Why do you? Why did Abraham? Why did Augustine?

### **Emerging**

Given all the busyness of those nesting years--like 8 hours a day playing ping-pong in Jr. College--I did not really begin to emerge as a student until enrolling in the

fall of 1949 at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. It was there, under the tutelage of a good roommate, Roger W. Johnson, and professors like Arbaugh and Celms in philosophy, Brohahl in history, athletic coaches like Lenny Karras and Vince Lundeen, and musicians like the organist McDermott, the choir master Veld, and voice coach Holmen that I learned the value of discipline. Ruth Holmen did not allow me to sing loud for one whole year until I learned true breath and tone control. I owe her much. And it was Arbaugh who taught me that to be a philosopher one had to learn philosophy's language—which he made easier for us by a booklet he had written called *A Philosopher's Table of Elements*. He was an expert in Kierkegaard and had done his doctoral theses at the University of Chicago on Mormonism.

Though I never had formal training in music (one day with a cardboard keyboard was enough for me when my friends called me out for a pickup ball game), voice lessons and choral work became and remain for me a major source of inspiration and spiritual growth. The boyhood experience of God's majesty in that Austin church years before fed into singing J.S. Bach's "What Can Life Be But a Shadow?" and Ralph Vaughn William's setting of "Lord, Thou Hast Been Our Dwelling Place in All Generations" (Psalm 90) in double chorus with Augustana Choir. Our tour one spring had us singing in all the great halls on the East Coast, including a few numbers in Carnegie Hall with Jussi Bjoerling and his wife. What a night!

Returning to North Park Seminary in 1951 I began preparing for a ministry to which I knew I was called as long as I can remember. Here I met Alyce in a Christian Emphasis Week seminar I was leading. Our first date was on November 3, 1951—tripling with Barbara and Paul Johnson, David Holm (later to become a Swedish State Church priest) and Carol Sahlin (now married to Bruce Magnuson of Hinsdale).

It was love at first sight for me and, thankfully, later for her as well. "She walks like a thoroughbred," my mother once commented of her at a restaurant in the early days. Indeed she did, and still does. Sharing ministry and music from those earliest days (she graduated from Music School with an associate degree in 1952) has been an incredible gift, not to mention her faith and hope and love—and, of course, her table and rye bread!

Moving to Middletown, Ct for internship in 1952 was also a very important stage in my emergence as a student minister. It still amazes me that every Sunday morning, like clockwork, I could count on 45 people to listen to me, with 42 returning every Sunday evening. When installed by Louis J. Person, then East Coast Superintendent, he spoke from 1 Timothy on the theme, "Let no one despise your youth!" We worked hard together in that congregation, building a foundation under the old church on High Street (later a Union Hall and now some kind of exercise center), and the influence of all those folks is a benediction still. My contract called for one meal a day in a member home, a room at the local "Y," and a salary of \$2,100. They also supplied me with a beat-up old Plymouth you had to wire shut from the inside on entering. Glen and Jane Wiberg, then in Haddam Neck, their first parish, were wonderful to me that year, sharing meals and events too numerous to mention, and even inviting Alyce out to stay with them over Christmas so we could be together.

Returning in the fall of 1953 and marrying Alyce in June of 1954, we finished

Seminary a year later, even while serving the Bethany Church on Chicago's south side that last year. Earl Dahlstrom, who had just moved up to the Seminary to teach, shared many funerals with me at Bethany, causing my Brother Zenos to remark one day, "You're really slaying them down there, aren't you?" Vivid memories abound from there, such as the Sunday night I felt too tired to preach, even though prepared. Announcing so as I went to sit down in the first row of the lovely Fireside Room there, I said, "We'll just remain silent until someone feels led to say something," I waited with the assembled fully 4 minutes in total silence. Finally, sensing it was not going to work, I was about to get up and say, "O.K., I'll preach!" when George Fischer, an Archie Bunker kind of man who inspected meet for Swift and Company--the kind we've all known and sometimes assume seldom if ever have any spiritual thoughts--rose like a ramrod from his seat in the back row of the Fellowship Lounge and shouted, literally shouted, "O God, what a sinner I am!" It was an electric moment, and led to an outpouring of both honest witness comforting reminders of God's grace from others.

Had God made me feel weary to teach me a lesson? Love people as they are and where they are, underneath all they appear to be. Listen to them. Take time to really enter into their lives. David Nyvall, I later discovered, put it well: "People want you to think more highly of them than they think of themselves."

### **Ministering**

The years following, from graduation in 1955 to retirement in 1994, were one more stage--indeed, four more stages--on life's way.

At Redeemer with the venerable Herbert Palmquist on Chicago's south side from 1955-1958, I served as associate pastor and youth director. Palmquist was just starting to write columns for *The Covenant Companion*, and one of the things that I noted as he sometimes shared one with me was how he shaped them over and over--editing carefully and thoughtfully, cutting out superlative and superfluous language to "wizen" them--i.e. parsing language to make his point without sending someone off in angers of their own over one thing or another. I asked him once, "How do you minister meaningfully to 600 people (the church membership at that time) as a pastor?" "Well," he said, "you really don't. But I have learned that when I wake up in the morning with someone on my mind, I go right away to them as their pastor." What a joy it was to work beside such a giant!

While at Redeemer and for a full year following, I was pursuing studies in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, majoring in Old Testament--thinking of teaching. But when called to Paxton in 1959 I had to make a critical decision. If I continued at the U of C I would be forced under new rulings to take all my language exams in one day--Hebrew and Aramaic in the morning, Greek and Syria in the afternoon, and French and German in the evening--a working knowledge of all these necessary to being a legitimate scholar. I was not prepared at 29 for that, and the more I considered it the more I realized that pure scholarship was not where my gifts were. Further if I were to teach I could not imagine doing so other than at North Park, and with my father and brother already there that seemed a bit much. The stage was thus set for full-time commitment to the pastoral ministry, already began in Paxton, Illinois in

1959 while studying at the U of C and eventuating in the acceptance of Hilmar, California's call in 1963—the parish in which my parents had grown up, whose first pastor in fact was my maternal grandfather, Ole Myhren.

Paxton was a church full of wonderful people, many of them devoted Christians, yet with a reputation over years for staying “ever the same.” We ministered there during the days that Covenant Women were asked to unite at every local church level. We worked hard to promote that, but in Paxton each woman's group had their own dishes, and woe to the one if they used the dishes of the other. The real problem lay deeper, however. People who had gone to church with each other for over 50 years had never been in each other's homes. And the family memories often worked against a necessary coming together. Nonetheless we had happy years there raising three of our children, learning at yet another stage how to encourage people out of their doldrums without an exaggerated sense of our own self-importance. We still pray for that church and people, as well as for the Lord's forgiveness for however we might have failed him in facilitating what he had in mind.

Hilmar was a different story, as it continues to be even today. Though located in a small town south of Turlock it was an impressive church with a deeply rooted and active membership. “Hilmar is a small town but we are not a hick community,” I was told by the one who first approached me on their behalf. “We want good preaching and teaching, as well as pastoral care. And,” he added, “I think it's a call to wider ministry as well.” I had no idea what that meant. Reflecting back on our years there from 1963-66, I feel now much the same as I have felt in every situation we have ministered—that the people did more for us than we did for them.

When we moved back to Chicago in 1966, at Clarence Nelson's invitation to become editor of Covenant publications, we had no idea that we would remain there until retirement. I had never planned to be an editor, much less a publisher, but while in California I was asked to take on that role for *The California Covenanter* whose editor of many years, C. Milton Strom, had died just before I arrived. Two years there led to 28 with the *Companion* and, after Carl Philip Anderson's leaving, 24 of those as executive secretary of the department of publications.

I knew right away that this was God's “call to wider service.” and his will for me. My whole life in earlier stages—growing up in a community where most of our ministers were trained and many of our lay leaders educated, clearly pointed in that direction. I was a child of the very Christian community now calling on me to help it “stay in touch” and understand what it means in our place and time to be “a companion of all those who fear God” and love his appearing (Psalm 119:63). Where else would I rather have been than where the Lord finally directed me, both preparing the way and honing my gifts?

The years in Chicago were not without struggle, but they were wonderful. Our five children, each born at a different stage along the way—Chicago north, Chicago south, Paxton, Hilmar, and Chicago north again—all grew up in North Park, the very community in which I had been nurtured. To this day that inheritance lives in them, even though differently in each case, appropriate to their personalities and the stages along life's way where their pilgrimage has taken them. They are all, with their children and grandchildren, a tremendous blessing to us—feisty, creative, and independent, yet

clearly bound by love for and desire to be in touch with each other. The stages through which we have journeyed together as family have not been uniformly without struggle for us. Nor have they been for them. Being our children, the nephews and nieces of Zenos and Barbara, and grandchildren of Eric and Lydia was not always easy. Yet those influences were clearly formative and through them all God has been incredibly faithful—so faithful in fact that the bonds between all of us going forward grow stronger and deeper every year. With children, their wonderful spouses, grandchildren and great grandchildren, we are now 36 in all—not counting dogs.

### **Retiring**

After retiring in 1994, I was asked by Covenant Publications to work at home a year on finishing the hymnal, which extended into another volunteer year until it was published in 1996. Having moved in the meantime to White Bear Lake in April of 1995, I entered yet another stage—this time haunted by the shelves of Covenant literature in my library and the riches therein contained that would soon be lost to new generations unless somehow gathered and edited in some meaningful way. Over the next six years that became my private passion, scanning, copying, and cutting and pasting readings from our literature throughout our history. As you know, *Glad Hearts* was the result of all that, finally published in January of 2003, and given through funds we had gathered to all our active Covenant ministers in attendance at the Midwinter Conference that year.

Alyce and I have been otherwise occupied as well in several interim ministries – at Winnetka, Illinois (1997-98); Bethany, Richfield, MN (2001); Roseville, MN ministering to seniors (2002-03); and most recently for 16 months at Bloomington, MN (2004-2005). After a rich summer off with children, grandchildren, and other family occasions and activities, we also served Interim in Salem, New Brighton from 2005-2007), where I currently continue as Pastor of Visitation.

Why stay involved? Call plays a large part. Nowhere near Abraham in age, I still feel called—a call Alyce shares with me—and like him it is often “to a land we know not where.” I am old and hopefully wise enough to know how little I know. But I remain young enough in spirit to feel passionate about staying engaged. There is a lot at stake in modern church life—not to mention God’s concern for life in general—and generations need to resist the temptation to separate themselves from each other, as if any single generation—or any of us as individuals—have all the wisdom. Wisdom lies in the body of Christ and all its parts need to be seeking new manifestations of the Spirit together for the common good.

That is not to say that retiring is bad. Or doing what scheduled responsibilities in former times prevented us for enjoying and doing. Health issues play a large part, too, as do energy and people’s openness to use us. But settling down to almost nothing when we are still vital and available is contrary to our biblical sense of call—not to mention our ordination vows. It also borders on presumption, especially when we are tempted to think we have earned the right to isolate ourselves from the mainstream of life, or allow others to assign us there for their own sometimes inglorious purposes.

Late in 2007 and early into 2008, in cooperation with my grandson Christopher

Hawkinson in California, a computer whiz, I had another dream fulfilled in the April, 2008 launching of a personal website, [www.rootedwings.com](http://www.rootedwings.com). The ongoing process of supplying it with what hopefully is life and good insight, is truly energizing. At base it is a celebration of all the roots—biblical and historical—out of which I have come and still am emerging. But its intent is much broader—to give wings in our day and time to all the resources for living those roots so richly supply.

I do not want ever to be in life's way. But I don't want either to abandon it as if my years have left me with nothing to contribute. I prefer for myself and recommend to you the wisdom of Robert Frost, who in spite of his love of solitude once wrote, as if to each of us individually and all of us together:

*The woods are lovely, calm and deep.  
but I have promises to keep  
and miles before I sleep,  
and miles before I sleep.*

JRH  
07/03/08