

The Old Schoolhouse

By Michael Groetsch

There was not a time when I drove by the old schoolhouse that I didn't feel its presence. It always seemed as if it were reaching out for me to come closer. The aging, vacant structure with boarded windows still watches over the schoolyard on which we once played. Like the life rings of a fallen oak, layers of peeling paint expose the building's hidden past. Formerly known as St. Theresa of Avila, the doors were closed for the last time in 1971. Its many rooms still hold prized memories, buried away like gemstones from another era.

My father and I both attended St. Theresa over a half-century ago. We were also baptized in its nearby church. Another lifetime has passed since we entered the school that meant so much to our family. The new owners of the building have given us the key to our past. Contractors are preparing to convert it into condos. Dad and I want to travel back to a place and time that is held close to our hearts. This is the second Mother's Day without Mom. We visit the old schoolhouse before it is transformed into something we no longer know. We only wish that Mom could share this moment with us. Perhaps she does.

We approach the front entrance with curious enthusiasm. The once sharp edges of its marble steps have been worn smooth by the thousands of visitors who have walked through its doors. The doorbell to the right of the weathered steps is frozen in time. A young and apparently homeless man is curled up on the doorstep. As I fumble with the key and open the door, the young man, red-eyed and disoriented awakens from a fitful sleep. Within seconds he has disappeared into the urban landscape like a frightened stray.

After decades of being vacant, the building's musty odor provides a nostalgic allure. It promises to unveil the many memories waiting in the shadows of our thoughts. Dad and I enter a darkened hallway and are immediately drawn to our former first- grade classroom that is left of a winding staircase. We open its twelve- foot solid oak door and stand quietly in the back of the room. Slate blackboards now sit on the floor in the far corner. The high ceiling, decorated by a large antique medallion, begins to reflect the past. Black and white images of earlier times begin to download in our mind's eye. In a moment of intimacy, Dad and I discuss the flashbacks we see.

It is the first day of class and Sister Mary welcomes the first graders with a bright smile. She is dressed in a blue gown and white habit that resembles a small sail. The children have just finished reciting their morning prayers. They sit at attention as she begins the roll call. One by one, they raise their hands as they hear their names. My friends Bruce Luchie and Mike Flanagan are present. Dad's friends, Ray Lacombe and Jay Cuccie, are in attendance as well. As they lift their arms in response to their names, they seem to glance at us with welcoming smiles.

Sister Mary passes out book covers and a list of supplies that the children will need. Dad and I watch in awe as we see him, as a boy, sitting in his small desk putting the book covers in a new knapsack that his mother bought at Woolworth's Five and Dime Store. He places his nose close to the bag and inhales the scent of new leather. He looks up and sees us staring from the back of the room. We make eye contact with him as he acknowledges his future while we visit his past.

We leave the first grade classroom and continue our journey into long ago spaces. The building's wide foyer summons us into the school's spacious assembly hall. The auditorium once served as a harbor for the hundreds of families who celebrated within its walls. It now serves as a refuge for their memories.

Except for a stage that endured nearly four decades of use, followed by three decades of neglect, the auditorium is now but an empty shell. The once shimmering floor reflected the images of PTA meetings, bingo games, carnival balls, variety shows, boxing matches and wedding receptions. The floor is now worn and covered with broken furniture and heavy dust. I stand with Dad in the quiet of the large room as we continue to share many, many memories.

In our mind's eye, we watch Dad's oldest brother and his brother's new wife dance to the sounds of Glenn Miller at their wedding reception, the reception at which he asked Mom out on their first date. Looking towards the stage, we see my father holding his hands high in the air as he wins his first boxing bout in an auditorium filled with excited spectators. In a black tuxedo laced with a pink carnation, I watch myself walking nervously through the center of the auditorium with my first- grade class during our annual Mardi Gras ball. Coming from our right, we hear a familiar voice call out "B-15" and see Mom jumping from her chair yelling, "BINGO"! My grandmother and aunt are present and respond with applause. Mom looks towards us with loving eyes. Dad takes a deep sigh as his soul touches hers

Near the right side of the stage is a crawl space littered with ancient artifacts. Old water coolers, cafeteria tables, desks, and chairs with the name St. Theresa of Avila on the backs lay broken and scattered throughout the space. These are the same tables, desks, and chairs on which we once sat and ate. The water coolers are those from which we once drank. Like the slate blackboards in the first grade classroom, they help us connect the present with the past. They now have little material value but are priceless for the memories they have sustained.

Dad and I return to the building's foyer and ascend its steep staircase. An upstairs hallway flanked by several long abandoned classrooms helps us recall more memories of our childhood at St. Theresa, scenes almost forgotten. Room by room, we continue to reflect on our past.

I look into my second grade classroom and watch as I win a spelling bee. Sister Theresa hugs and gives me my award. It is a statue of Jesus. I glance through a second door and see the many friends and schoolmates that I will miss. This is my last year at St. Theresa. In September, Mom and Dad will move our family to a new home and neighborhood 15 miles away. Dad glances to his left and suddenly sees himself sitting in his sixth grade classroom. He passes a love note to Antoinette, the pretty Italian girl with jet- black hair. Sister Sebastian intercepts the note, expresses her disapproval and quickly escorts them to the front office to see the principal.

Dad and I are drawn to yet another staircase that rises to the third floor. It leads us to where the school's maintenance man lived and sought relief from his busy day. The tiny four- room apartment with its kitchen and bath now sits barren. Two empty jars, a rust covered metal table and a broken three- foot tall headless statue of an unknown saint are all that remain of his former presence. Although I don't recall the name of the man who cleaned the school, the emptiness of his former home leaves me with a sense of loss.

Our journey through the old schoolhouse has come to an end. As Dad and I descend the stairs to the foyer below, we glance towards the upstairs landing in hopes of clinging to the many memories that remain in the shambles above.

Our former classmates and friends seem to suddenly appear at the top of the staircase and wave farewell. We look closer into the crowd of children gathering on the landing and once again see Dad as a child. As he did in the first grade classroom, he looks at us intently to witness what we have become. He then smiles, turns and walks away to finish the past so that he may make way for our future.

We leave the old schoolhouse and step upon the sidewalk to the sounds of church bells. The bells of St. Theresa still call out to those who hear their message. Yearning to continue our journey, we follow the old but not forgotten path that leads to the chapel in which we once prayed.

On this day Dad and I enter the religious services to the beautiful voice of a soprano. Her angelic voice echoes across the high ceiling and open spaces. The singer's voice is passionate and pure and seems to come from a heavenly source. We sit in the

back of the church and savor its familiar surroundings. The quaint and rather humble appearance of the chapel provides a sense of warmth. Several large concrete support beams convey its strength. The partially opened stained glass windows provide a morning breeze that caresses those in prayer. Its simple yet artistic design gives us a sense of spiritual peace.

The interior of St. Theresa has changed little since we last entered its doors in the 1950s. The soft pastel colors of beige, gray, and pink accentuate the familiar white and gold marble altar where Dad and I both knelt and made our First Communions decades apart. The antique altar where he and Mom were married is still adorned by statues that honor St. Barbara, St. Francis, and other patron saints. But the memories of St. Theresa Church lie deeper than its mortar and stone. For five generations, it has transcended time and connected present congregations with those of the past.

Dad and I sit and celebrate the mass. He whispers and points towards a gray marble font located in the far corner. He reminisces that the font is where his mother and father, my grandparents, held him as the priest poured water over his hairless brow during baptism. He shares a flashback in which he sits with his classmates while receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation. Dad sees himself and Mom holding hands as they walk from the altar on their wedding day. His dark deep-set eyes suddenly begin to tear.

Dad's moment of reflection is suddenly interrupted when the priest asks for the Mother's Day congregation to share the sign of the peace with one another. A young woman with bright auburn hair turns and extends her hand to both of us. I glance into her eyes and want to express my feelings about the richness of memories that her church holds for people like us. A second glance suggests that she may not fully understand. As

the priest raises both of his hands, he bestows his blessing, smiles and tells us to go in peace.

Dad and I leave the chapel and walk towards the house in which we once lived. Our former home is located within two blocks of St. Theresa's Church. As we stroll through our old neighborhood, the smell of Sunday's fried chicken and the songs of Johnny Cash come from a small Creole cottage with light gray shutters. We are both struck by the sameness of homes that have withstood the intrusiveness of time, residences that still bear the images of families past.

With curious anticipation we turn a corner near our former house but are immediately disheartened by what we see. A radiator shop and warehouse with bags of garbage strewn about have replaced our home. To the left of the warehouse, a 30-foot gray steel beam supporting two large billboards is planted in an empty shell lot where our neighbor's home once stood. Our prior lives and those who lived near us have faded into the backdrop of radiator repairs and large signs that proclaim silent messages that few people see.

In an effort to compensate for what time has removed, Dad stares at our former home-site and shares what he sees. While he details the home in which we celebrated our first Christmas as a family, a flashback of a pretty woman with soft blonde hair suddenly appears.

She wears a dark blue dress and is kneeling in front of our home's circular garden. It is Mom. She is once again a young woman working in her garden as she so often did. As she focuses on a cluster of red roses that she arranges in a small bouquet, Mom suddenly turns and looks towards where we stand. For a moment, just a moment, I feel that we can almost touch her. Although we both grieve, Mom's pretty blue eyes tell us that she is at peace.

Knowing that I must let her go, so that we can complete our lives with her grandchildren and those yet to be, I gently place my hand on Dad's shoulder and suggest that it's time to leave.

As Dad and I turn, we hear the sound of a man's voice. We look upward towards an overcast sky and notice a worker dressed in green fatigues. The man is helping his partner stretch a new message across the wide billboard. Although I want to share with the workers what once existed below their silent message, Dad and I quietly walk away. Like the young woman we met earlier in church, they probably wouldn't understand.

Returning to our car, we notice that the young homeless man from earlier in the day has returned to the school's doorstep. He seems startled when I pause to hand him five dollars. It's Mother's Day. Perhaps he will use the money to call his Mom.

"Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." – Dr. Seuss