

Voice sets emotion in motion

By J B Leftwich

The telephone rang. My wife answered, then handed the phone to me. "Someone wants you," She said.

I responded, and the voice identified itself. An alumna of Baxter Seminary. A former coed. A voice out of the past.

Don't you just love that line? "A voice out of the past." Suggests mystery. Intrigue. Maybe I had better keep my voice low lest She, the She in my household, overhears me. I can tell She wants a clarification.

I understand that. If some deep voiced male calls and asks for Her by her first name, it gets my attention. ("Cut out on that guy. Who is he anyway? Why's he calling at this hour of the night?")

Truth of the matter is: At our age we get so few "voices out of the past" calls these days, we kind of enjoy the suspense. You know. These calls add a little zing to our routine, spice up our evenings. Sometimes, she teases.

"Who was that, honey?:"

"Oh, just a voice out of the past," She replies.

"Oh."

I want to say, who in blue blazes was he? But I don't. I continue reading. Acting unconcerned.

My silence is spoiling Her fun, I think. Actually, She reads me and knows I am subduing emotion, restraining a demand to know who.

She tires of the game. States blandly it's just a recorded message from our church (we're high tech at church these days) reminding Her of a meeting.

That's disappointing. I was hoping for more intrigue. Some stimulating bit of mystery. But, no. It's just a meeting. At church. The call is about as exciting as a weather forecast of more of the same during a drought.

The caller waited while I made adjustments. The phone and my hearing aids are not compatible. I fiddle with the volume control. Not the elements of intrigue here. More testimony that aging is relentless. As in an old machine, certain components are wearing out.

Finally, we were connected. She, the calling She, was a graduate of Baxter Seminary where I graduated several years before she did. She is writing a history of the institution, a four-year Methodist private high school long ago closed, not a training school for preachers. I don't remember why its name contained the word "seminary." I wish it had been named Baxter Institute or Baxter Academy. When I say Baxter Seminary, people think I'm a preacher. Except those who know I lack the credentials.

She, the caller, wanted to know what Baxter Seminary meant to me. I heard myself saying “intellectual challenge,” “coming of age,” “finding myself.” I knew I was sounding pompous and pretentious. I lacked the spontaneity to make an intelligent response. I needed to think carefully about this topic. I hope she doesn’t use in her book my babbling about “intellectual challenge.”

What did Baxter Seminary mean to me? Everything, that’s what. Compassionate teachers, even a short romance with a classmate. Teachers who knew I didn’t know much and had more ambition than ability.

Elma Upperman, that’s what Baxter Seminary means to me. She, the wife of the president, cultured, educated, understanding, inspiring. She moved us to go beyond our experience. She forced new horizons, such as acting - performing is a better word - in school drama productions, declaiming, raising my reading level, writing. She was there to assist and to support us. She was the female outside of my family who first comes to mind as a vital influence in my life.

I wish I had said, “Elma Upperman,” in response to the caller’s question instead of the “coming of age” and “finding myself” business. Long after I graduated in a “greatest generation” class, I told Mrs. Upperman what she meant to me and how she and Baxter Seminary were fused in the same thought in my mind. She adroitly changed the subject.

“Now, tell me who that was on the phone,” She, the She across the room from me, said.
“You didn’t recognize her voice? That was Elizabeth Taylor.”
“Really? Sounded to me like Demi Moore,” She said.

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