

WALTER MITTY
By Jerry Tammer "Gus" Denny

That day in 1959 started out the same as the other ones for years had begin. Wake up with a hangover and get started on one right away for the next day. But on that certain day something happened that would change my life for the next 41 years. Did I quit drinking? No. I just started on an adventure that would have been unthinkable a few days prior to this particular event.

At this time in life I was working as a bartender at a local private club to help defray expenses so I could pursue a "so called education" which amounted to a little more than nothing. You put nothing into something and nothing comes out. There was one exception in this case, I received a G.I. bill check.

A couple of the regulars came in that day, which was nothing, earth shaking. But they had with them a fat guy, with glasses on, a pocket full of pens in his Guevara shirt. I looked at my self and saw the same things, fat, pen, glasses and the Guevara shirt that I always wore. After the introduction I learned this "big" guy was a new member of the mathematics department at the local university, and was being courted to join the club where I worked. That day unbeknownst to me at that time started my life as Walter Mitty, the great mathematician

The first thing you learn as a bartender is your customer' drinking habits. This guy didn't drink beer. He threw them down. Two to one over his companions. Then I knew we had more in common than Guevara shirts. Membership was easy to come by and in a few weeks my friend was a full pledged bar stool anchor. I sensed in our conversations that my new friend was holding back and not at easy with me. Then I felt my feeling had been one of not holding back but of a feeling of not being on his intellectual level. I was to learn later that my new made friend had never finished grade school, high school, never received a bachelor or masters degree from college, but had graduated from the university of Texas as one of the younger PHD's from that university. Needless to say this was hard for a person on "my level" to comprehend, the reasons for the above schooling soon unfolded.

My friend was promoted out of grade school into high school early for a greater challenge and then out of high school early for a greater challenge in college. Out of the bachelor and masters program for a greater challenge in the doctoral program at Texas (later I was to know as much about the great men that taught him as he did. The names of Dr. Moore, Dr. Ettinger, Dr. Walls, became household names to me and a personal association with one of them became a huge event in the life of me: Walter Mitty.

Now how in the world did we fit together, other than beer drinking? Here I was a person who had made a "D" in remedial algebra (better know as a meat head course) associated with a person of my friends intellectual capacity in mathematics The "D" in this course came only by my promise to a young graduate teaching assistant who looked on me with

a certain amount of “fear” and “pity”. The fear; I was older than him, a veteran of the Korean war and always reeked with beer at the 5 p.m. class. The pity came with his knowledge that I didn’t know crap about algebra. Even though he was a good teacher, he was not good enough to do the impossible job with me. Thus, the promise: if I would never step foot again in Broun Hall (math building) he would deliver the “D” grade. This will explain the fainting later on in the story. Then what did Ben and I have in common? One thing I knew every beer joint in Lee county, the owners, and most of the customers. I could speak their language. I was a hero (redneck) to them. I was a “college boy” who was just like them, and could drink more beer than their ace drinkers. I knew hillbilly songs and loved the old time hymns which I didn’t mind singing. This turned out to be one of the secret loves of my new intellectual friend. He wanted to be one of “the boys” a life he had missed growing up. What would a redneck like me see in a pointed headed college professor?

First of all I liked the guy very much. Second he held something I admired and wanted; an IQ thus the “odd couple” established a friendship that was undying for 41 years. Let me introduce my friend: Ben Fitzpatrick, Jr., doctor of mathematics, beer drinker, country music and hymn singer, arm wrestler and a man of great strength both physical and intellectual, a man of character, compassion, and a code of honesty that could not be shaken, a family man that truly loved his wife and family. Last but not least, a cook extraordinary, who could make chili so hot it cried and then it passed the tears on to the consumer. You name it he could cook it. I just thought I was good at cooking!!!! We cooked, we ate, we drink beer, but most of all the math parties and the association.

Very slowly I Walter Mitty in my make belief world was becoming a mathematician. When you become a permanent fixture, you become “pegged” by association as to what you are. The association was great because where Ben was, I was there also. Ben was very protective of me in the “open space” of mathematics as he knew my limitations. If I got caught in a heated discussion of some math theorem with people who knew he always found a way to intervene and deliver me from exposing my ignorance of math.

On one occasion we were to pick up at the airport a noted mathematical from “up north”. As we ventured back to auburn he discovered he had left behind his shirt at home. I took him by my house and him one of my best Guevara, which he was grateful. We visited and “discussed” mathematics with Ben as always intervening at the right time. The next day on the return trip to the airport the visiting professor was very cool to me and didn’t mind showing it. In a bit it came out that he was deeply hurt and embarrassed that after the attention I had given him I did not have the courtesy to attend his lecture, which he noted that I would have enjoyed very much as it was in my field of study. Thank goodness the air port was in sight and the plane took away another close call.

One of the great events was Ben and I made a trip to Texas where he was to give a lecture at a major university there. As we entered the lecture hall Ben introduced me as Gus Denny, his friend from Auburn. The august crowd automatically assumed that since I was with Ben and from Auburn I had to be a mathematician and I was treated as

such. After the lecture one of those in attendance told Ben that his colleague had not shown him respect during his lecture by not paying attention and playing tic-tac-toe during his talk and further his friend had not taken a note or put down anything he had said. Ben's answer was why should he since he taught me every thing that I said today. In reality I had not understood a work Ben had said during the lecture. Well it's a long way from Texas to Alabama. Saved again.

One of the greatest Walter Mitty epics came with the national meeting of the topological association that was held in Auburn with the world renown mathematicians in attendance. I had helped Ben and his (and mine) associates for three days in preparing a huge Texas bar-be-cue for the event. There was brisket, beans (hot and mild), slaw, cornbread, wine by the gallon, and kegs of beer that would have made any beer distributor turn green with envy. At the conclusion of the meeting a line of the local mathematician was on hand to thank the visitors, and since I had been a worker in the preparation of it Ben insisted that I be in the receiving line. Of all the notables in attendance was the long ago graduate assistance that had so gracefully given me the "D" in the remedial algebra course.

There I stood shoulder to shoulder with some of the worlds renown mathematicians at a meeting of such importance. He fainted. There are so many stories that could be told of my life as Walter Mitty, but I am sure that in the millenniums to come as Ben sets at the table with the greats like Drs. Ettenger, Moore, Walls, he will say; did I ever tell you guys the story of the time I got to live the life of a redneck as Walter Mitty thru my friend Gus Denny. Thru Ben my mind was opened to the taste of the knowledge of history, English, music, philosophy, botany, etc. But most of all I was able to enter the door that had a no admittance sign on it: the world of mathematics

If you try hard, think of things out of reach, (and a few beer) you can reach the invisible configuration where no one sees you in the real world but only as Walter Mitty. The day Ben died; two great mathematicians died. The real one and world renowned Ben Fitzpatrick Jr. And me who lived only in a make belief world of my friends.

<http://www.ajalmbert.com>