

Chapter 3

Nurtured

beginning on March 6, 1954
and continuing for 6 years, 3 months and 3 days

*“Train up a child in the way he should go:
and when he is old, he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6)”*

1954

Childhood served as an apprenticeship to life. I experienced unconditional love, felt genuine security, and learned to trust those adults God placed in my path. I received the Christian faith of my parents both naturally and supernaturally.

My first substantial memory occurred when I was four years and two months old. My sister Jeanne was going to marry Don! It was a very big deal. I remember the excitement and preparation, the out-of-town guests and fancy clothes, the dancing and celebration. My father purchased a thirty-five-millimeter movie camera just for the occasion.

At a rehearsal a few days prior to the wedding, Jeanne told me I was going to be the ring bearer. That was so cool. There would be a circus ring and I could be the “bear”. I mentally practiced my bear growl. I also learned the word “cummerbund”. That was the silly black cloth they wrapped around my tummy and fastened behind my back. The grown-ups gushed at me decked in my mini-tux.

The church ceremony was an adult affair that I didn’t understand. I obeyed my elders as they directed me to walk, stand, and hold out a cushion. Afterward, dad said I didn’t “fidget too much”, which I took to be a complement. Then it was time to dash downstairs for refreshments. There is a picture of me, face smeared with wedding cake, the beautiful bride looking on.

As the celebrating continued, I did begin to fidget. I was a big boy and knew how to use the toilet. However, I couldn’t figure how to unfasten the obstinate cummerbund. I was too embarrassed to ask an adult. They were all too busy anyway. And so, for the last time in my life, I wet my pants. With streaming tears, I ran to mom, who took me by the arm and made things right again—just as she always did.

The evening reception was strange, even to the eyes of a four-year old. The celebration was held in the dingy basement of our home where the giant furnace, clothes washer, and bogeyman resided. Clutter packed the coal room while thirty people jammed into the subterranean space. Couples danced to polka tunes while at the same time ducking furnace pipes. A foot-pumped player piano provided some of the dance music. It was a day to remember. And I did.

The remainder of 1954 remains shrouded. My first niece, Debra Jean Zelen, arrived in September. Jeanne relates the sweet sorrow. On the day after Debbie's birth, she carried the newborn to a different ward in the same hospital. My Grandma Dydek was bedbound dying of cancer. She held her great granddaughter only on this single instance. I can't recall my niece's birth or my grandmother's death.

I vaguely remember Jeanne, Don, and little Debbie moving into our house. They occupied mom and dad's room for a year, while my parents relocated to the second bedroom. In later years it became a sport to figure out where Charlotte, Jack, Eileen, Chris, and Frank slept in 1954.

I do remember children's TV shows that were popular in my fourth year of life, but it's impossible to tell if the memory is from that year or later. There was Howdy Doody; Kukla, Fran, and Olli; and Romper Room. In truth, there were so many shows broadcast and I watched so many hours, that recounting every local show, cartoon favorite, and movie short would be daunting.

1955

My unbroken memory begins in 1955 when mom walked me to Clark School to register for kindergarten. Because I was December born, I began school in January not September like most other kids. My mid-term status aligned my school year with the calendar year.

Miss Bond was my first teacher. As I look back at the twenty-one faces in my class photo, I can name one-third, guess one-third, while one-third remains unrecognized. Eric, Laurie, Karen, and Don would be my class-mates for the next thirteen and a half years. I remember playing with blocks, napping on blankets, counting to one hundred, and reciting the alphabet. I got in trouble once for pushing Eric off the sliding board. Miss Bond commented on my pink report card: "Chris shows dramatic ability and does well in expressing ideas in drawing, but he fails to listen and continues to dramatize when the play is over."

Dad was continually involved in building projects. In 1955 he bricked in the wooden back porch and converted a kitchen pantry into bunk-beds for Jack and Eileen. I was scolded for playing in the construction zone. In August of that year, the Standard Oil refinery caught fire. The blaze raged for days. I remember my family sitting as spectators at the Clark School bleachers gazing at the distant inferno.

Charlotte went to Alaska after high school. She visited our uncles Joe and Stutz who were in the Air Force. I remember the celebration when she returned. She brought back all kinds of exotic treasures. I remember the plastic key chains with "real Alaskan gold dust" embedded inside. The Eskimo yo-yos were fun. They consisted of two fur-covered balls at opposite ends of a rope. We held the rope in the middle and tried to make the balls circle in opposite directions. She also

brought back a polar bear skin. What ever happened to that rug? But the best thing Charlotte brought back was herself. I missed my sister.

Cookie was the little black dog that moved with us from Ohio. As I remember, the rotund canine seemed eternally old and dyspeptic. I think my parents bought the pet for Jack, but dad ended up the reluctant care giver. I don't remember ever playing with Cookie or walking her. I'm sad to say she was more of a nuisance than companion. As a result, I never acquired an affection for dogs—that is, until much later in life.

Frank and I were raised on television. That flickering screen was our world and we indulged unsupervised. All the way through grade school we sat more hours in front of the tube than on reading or doing school work. On October 3, 1955, the Micky Mouse Club debuted. I was hooked. I wore the mouse ears to bed and played the vinyl recordings continually: “Who’s the leader of the club that’s made for you and me? M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-U-S-E.”

Our toy of choice became two-inch Disney figurines we dubbed “Little Friends”. Frank and I loved these globs of colored plastic and would play make-believe for hours imagining Donald Duck, Goofy, and the seven dwarfs, in endless adventures. We used blocks and tinker toys to build our play-scape. Frank’s favorite dwarf was Sleepy and mine was Bashful. Perhaps our preferences provide insight into our dispositions.

A big event was the “twenty dollars-worth of toys” day. Some of mom’s Ohio friends worked at the Marx Toy Factory. When they visited, they brought boxes and boxes of plastic toys. I remember mom saying with little friends we could baby-sit ourselves for hours. Frank and I were content as long as we held a toy between our fingers and a bite of salami between our teeth. We didn’t box up our toys until Boy Scout days. Make-believe lasted a long time.

1956

My first-grade teacher was Miss Zeller. I learned how to read using *Fun with Dick and Jane*. The covers of these readers still provoke my soul to nostalgia: “Oh, look! See Sally. See Sally jump up and down.” The storyline of Dick, Jane, Sally, Spot, Puff, and Tim filled my literary world. I also remember addition, subtraction, singing, crafts and story time. I was a bit dyslexic but I was able to keep up with school work. Dad and mom seemed content that I was average in scholarship, effort and conduct. Average equaled good enough. I was always perfect in attendance.

My family took bi-yearly trips to Bellaire to visit relatives. Mom would prepare salami sandwiches and dad would pack the pee bottle for me and Frank. There would be few stops along this eight-hour trek. Dad always drove the Hudson and mom would sit next to him. Jack, Eileen, and I sat in the backseat. Frank made a nest of blankets under the back window. Dad would point out sites along the route. I remember McCullough’s Leap and the “House we pass

three times” as ritual landmarks. Dad would simmer when our speed slowed behind a line of trucks. He loved to return to Ohio and boasted about the wonderful Ohio rest stops.

Once we arrived in Bellaire, adults talked, laughed, and played cards. Frank and I existed in our own bubble. We would greet our elders appropriately then retreat to our play things. Grandpa Foreman was seventy-five in 1956, and my aunts, uncles, and cousins were too grown up to connect with kids. But Frank and I were satisfied to be in our own world and participate in adult activities only when required. I do remember my Aunt Mary once asking about my coonskin cap and me explaining about Davy Crockett, who I knew to be the “king of the wild frontier.”

On one trip to Bellaire, dad extended the drive eastward. We stopped off at Niagara Falls, Gettysburg, and Washington, D.C. before making our way back home. An old photo shows mom and dad in front of the Capitol Building with Jack, Eileen, Chris, and Frank in the foreground. Four of us have a melting ice cream cone in hand.

Flowers and Charlotte will always go together. In first grade I learned the song “I know a pussy willow”. Charlotte helped me pick these tokens of Spring, carry them home, and put them in vases. She pointed out the lilies of the valley that grew up and down the alley during the month of May. Our favorite tradition was the annual trip to Eggers Grove to seek out the first violets of Spring. Charlotte would load us in the car and drive us across the state line. She would shout with joy whenever she spotted a clump of violets.

In the springtime, front lawns became super-saturated with rainwater. Hundreds of earthworms would squirm above the soil and wiggle onto the sidewalks. On the walk to Clark school, most little girls would step around the worms and many little boys would stomp on them. I chose to scoot them back to the grass with the toe of my little shoe.

Our church sponsored a summer picnic at Forsyth Park. I remember being overheated and overstuffed. Dads played softball while moms talked and looked after children. I remember vividly a foot race for six-year-olds. My dad shouted, “Ready, set, go!”. He then side-galloped down third base to call the winner. He was so disappointed I had tied for first place. He asked why I was deliberately lagging.

I introduced him to my new best buddy and explained that I wanted the two of us to cross the finish line together. Dad was at a loss for words.

I was beginning to know some of our neighbors on Lake Avenue. Mary Ann Kokot was Eileen’s peer and lived to our right. Her two older brothers kept a hunting dog named Duke that would scare me sometimes. Joey Piscure, a hyperactive kid, lived on the far side of them. Across 118th Street lived old lady Smeric. She spoke Slovak and would yell at us in unknown tongues when we retrieved a ball from her back yard. Across the back alley stood First Baptist Church. The artificial hill that rose to its foundation was our only rise in elevation. We would sled down the hillside in snowy weather. Finally, mean Mr. Cruell lived kitty-corner from us. He would send a

policeman to our door whenever he caught Cookie leaving a mess on his front lawn. The cast of characters and encounters could fill pages.

I remember mom and dad ushering the family off to the First Church of Christ every Sunday of the year. Dad would put on his suit and tie; mom would underlie her fancy dress with a girdle; and each of us kids would put on our Sunday best. Jack was always the problem. Dad would shout to motivate him into the car. I would go to a children's service and sit with my buddies. My longtime friend, Jacky Wetnight, was my favorite.

I cannot remember a time when I was not a Christian. As the twig was bent, so grew the tree. I acquired the gift of faith by singing and gesturing to Sunday school songs. The nursery was my theological seedbed. First, I learned about the love of Jesus.

“Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,
Little ones to him belong. They are weak, but He is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.”

“Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world,
Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.”

I learned the primacy of scripture, Sola Scriptura.

“The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me.
I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E.”

I learned the need for salvation.

“Behold, behold, I stand at the door and knock, knock, knock.
If anyone hears my voice, I will open-open-open the door. I will come in.”

I learned about Christian joy through standing, sitting, pointing, and clapping.

“I'm in right, outright, upright, downright happy all the time!
Since Jesus Christ came in and cleansed my heart from sin,
I'm in right, outright, upright, downright happy all the time!”

I also learned about eternal security.

“Safe am I, safe am I, in the hollow of his hand.
Sheltered o'er, sheltered o'er, with His love forevermore.
No ill can harm me, no foe alarm me, for He lives both day and night.
Safe am I, safe am I, in the hollow of his hand.”

Finally, I learned the wisdom of self-control by pointing to body parts.

“Be careful little feet where you go.
For the Father up above is looking down in love,
So be careful little feet where you go.”

I continue to be careful about where my little feet go, what my eyes see, what my tongue says, and what my hands do

1957

In the first half of second grade, Miss Fisher was my teacher. Like many primary school teachers of her era, she was born around 1900 and educated around 1920. She was an old-fashioned spinster, dedicated to her calling, but perhaps burned out. I remember continuing with *Dick and Jane*, but expanding to other children's books. She read to us every day. I could identify with the adventuresome *Boxcar Children*. We began to learn other subjects. Geography and history were my favorites.

Miss Parker was a first-year teacher for the second half of second grade. Her big thing was American Indians. We put on war paint (finger paint), made necklaces (dyed macaroni), donned a native vest (fringed paper bag) and sang pow-wow songs. I can still do the gestures. She introduced us to a publication called *My Weekly Reader*.

Frank and I had some vague rules about how far we could stray from home. One day Frank, Jacky, and I stretched those rules by wandering three far blocks away, next to the busy Indianapolis Boulevard. While playing in a vacant lot, Frank tumbled and got a nasty gash on his knee. He howled at the sight of so much blood. Jacky and I got him home as best we could. Mom had to break herself away from a cluster of ladies to deal with her wounded and wailing boy.

My best friends were Jacky Wetnight and Jimmy Francis. Both boys lived on my block. The Wetnights were part of my church life and Jacky was the fifth of six kids like me. From my earliest days to eighth grade we were best buddies. Then he moved away to Munster. Jimmy Francis enrolled at Clark school in second grade and our friendship continues to this day.

Jim and his family were Baptists and for a few summers I attended Vacation Bible School with my classmate. I don't remember much about what the old guy taught. What sticks with me is his genuine affection toward his charges and how he embodied God's love.

God's love was also at work in our house. I did not recognize it at the time and it often embarrassed me. My mother would welcome all kinds of strange people into our living room. First came visitors from Ohio, mostly young people who needed temporary housing and counsel.

Then came a stream of troubled women often in tears and in need of comfort. My mom would pat their hands and listen to their woes. Sometimes I overheard rude remarks aimed at these poor souls by visiting friends of Jack or Eileen.

Our dog, Cookie, began to have seizures and one day dad took her on a one-way ride to the vet. Still my parents thought pets would be good for Frank and me. We had two hamsters for a while. I was amazed to see them devour dandelion stems then appalled to see them do the same with their offspring. Dad constructed a really neat wooden cage, but the rodents gnawed through the bottom and escaped into the wild.

We kept dime-store turtles for a year or so. Mine was called *Hotrod* and Frank's *Pokey*. We would race them down a three-foot wooden track. We were inattentive in our play and often the little turtles escaped in the house. I remember one day looking around for Hotrod. Eileen joined in. As she searched, one of the bedroom doors wouldn't open wide. She gave the door a shove—*crunch*. She discovered the reason for the door jam and graciously provided a jewel case in which we buried my crushed turtle.

Eileen also kept a pet. Tweetie Pie was her yellow and green parakeet. She would feed the bird by putting a treat between her lips and then kissing the colorful face. I remember Eileen playing her accordion and Tweetie flitting about shoulder to shoulder

The seventh year of life is an enchanted age. Alice of Wonderland was seven when she walked through the Looking Glass. Childlike imagination and an emerging practical sense merge into a magical world. I wrote a story about my wonderland of 1957.

As I walked down the alley behind my house, something caught my eye. It was an umbrella poking up from a garbage can. I plucked it from the trash and studied it. I saw the broken spokes and torn fabric and knew it wouldn't be a prize I could show to mom.

But I thought, "this could be a cool sword." So, I waved it over my head and smacked the metal can. I succeeded in making clangs, but the umbrella was too unwieldy for a sword.

"Maybe it's a walking stick." I put the point into the gravel and strutted past a few backyards, but that didn't work either. The umbrella fell open. I stepped on the black nylon and nearly tripped.

I was about to stuff my prize into another trashcan when I noticed the umbrella knob in my hand. Wow! It sparkled like a diamond—and a big diamond too, about the size of my seven-year-old fist. I was too grownup to believe it was really a diamond. My big sister Charlotte had just got a diamond ring from her boyfriend. He said it cost hundreds and it was only the size of a BB pellet.

I twisted the diamond top, but couldn't separate it from the umbrella stalk. I walked into the basement and found Jack reading a Mad Magazine. My big brother looked up. "What you got there?"

"I found this in a garbage can."

"Hey, can't you see it's broken," he laughed.

"I know, but look at the diamond on the end."

Jack snatched the umbrella from my hand. "That's not a diamond, just cut glass."

"I know, but it's still pretty neat. I want to keep it but I can't pull it off."

These words were taken as a challenge by Jack, a freshman in high school. He strained and twisted, but the knob wouldn't budge. Then he went to dad's work bench, grabbed a pair of vise grips and unscrewed the top diamond. "Right tool for the right job," he said. I recognized my father's voice. "This looks nice. I think I'll keep it". Jack stuffed the diamond in his pocket and raised the booklet hiding his eyes.

With one burst of lung power, I screamed, whined, and snorted.

Jack lowered the Mad Magazine revealing a grin. "Just teasing," and he tossed the treasure to me.

I carried my prize upstairs, washed it in the bathroom basin, shined it with toilet paper, and walked out the front door. I waved the diamond over my head as I strutted around the block. That's when I discovered its magical powers. Whenever I held it in the sun, the diamond made rainbows! I couldn't believe how it worked. I covered it with my hands and the rainbows went away. Then I held it in the sunshine and the rainbows reappeared.

I showed the diamond to Jacky who was sitting on his front stairs. He tried it a few times and was amazed. I showed it to snooty Linda who was walking back from the corner store.

"I know," she said with a sneer. "My mom's got one of those hanging in front of her kitchen window."

Once I took the top diamond to school for show and tell, but since there was no sunshine in the classroom there was no rainbow. Miss Fisher called my prize a "prism". I sometimes wrapped it in paper to hide around the house as pirate treasure. I remember when mom helped to attach a string to it so it would dangle in my bedroom window.

As a teenager, I had a science project on prisms. I looked for my glass ball in all my closets and around the basement, but couldn't find it. Did I hide my treasure too well to never find it again? I couldn't remember. I sighed as I recalled the enchantment of childhood, a time when common objects could reveal hidden magic. It proved impossible to reclaim that kind of wonder again.

1958

My third-grade teacher was the fabulous Mrs. Chambers. How much did I like her? Well, from that point forward, my ambition was to become a school teacher. She knew how to speak to us kids as adults, yet relate to us as children, never condescending always kind. She was my Disney's Snow White and I was one of her seven dwarfs—*Bashful* by name. She would read to us, encourage us, and send notes home to mom about my accomplishments. More than anyone, she saw potential in me that no one else saw.

About that same time, my mother began to work at Clark school. She was a *janitress*, and worked a split shift—two hours before school and two hours after school. She said she needed to do this because my dad's salary was not enough to keep the family fed and clothed. I remember the times I stayed after school to help her bang chalk erasers and empty waste paper baskets. I believe she worked at the school for about five years.

One of the perks of mom's job was her claim to discarded school items. At the end of every school year she would bring home a huge bag of unclaimed pencils, notebooks and small toys. This booty recovered from lost and found provided a June Christmas.

The oddest thing mom ever brought home was a human skull. She recovered it from a waste basket in the biology lab. She presented it to me and Frank as an educational item. However, we used the head bone as a prop and made "skull island" for our little friends. Someone must have told mom the skull was an inappropriate plaything and soon it vanished from our sandbox.

Several years later, I thumbed through the Clark School year book. The caption under one photo read, "Here is the biology teacher posing next to 'Mr. Bones'". I was not surprised to see the skeletal display headless.

In 1958 a new family moved into our back apartment. They were the Buchmans from Orange, Texas. The father, Chester, migrated north to construct the Interstate highways. Jessica looked after three daughters—Linda, Lorene, and Janette. The family constituted a longtime project for mom and dad. Some neighbors referred to the Buchmans as *white trash*. The three girls seemed to be in constant trouble with the law or with boys. Jessica became one of the troubled women who consumed my mother's time.

In the summer of 1958, my parents invited the Buchman family on a car expedition around the perimeter of Lake Michigan. Dad had read about the grand opening of the longest bridge in the world and figured driving across the Straits of Mackinaw would make for a fine vacation. I do remember the three Great Lakes we visited, but more I remember my parent's effort to patiently work with the Buchman family. It never succeeded. Chester and Jessica got divorced, the girls got pregnant, and in 1963 they all returned south.

At twenty-one years old, my sister Charlotte appeared as a movie star to me, always flitting, wearing a fancy dress and red lipstick. In my early years, Char would bend me backward in her arms and plant a giant red kiss mark on my cheek. A parade of male suiters walked through our front door to escort Charlotte on dates. I was surprised when she chose to marry Jim Walker late in 1958. He was not my favorite of the bunch. I don't remember much about the wedding, except after Charlotte left our home, some of the joy departed with her.

Newton Minnow famously described American television as a "vast waste land" and for most kids growing up in the 1950s his description is apt. I calculate my TV habit to be three hours per day with a steady diet of Bugs Bunny, Superman, and Garfield Goose. I knew all the shows in TV Guide and could lip-sync every commercial. My TV-scape is too vast to enumerate every show. If you were to ask a typical baby boomer to narrate their childhood, most would include a recitation of favorite TV shows.

It's hard to explain, but 1950s television was like video gaming and social media rolled into one package. All the kids watched the same set of programs. Often, I would discuss favorite shows, like Zorro, with my school mates. We guys would act out the slapstick of Moe, Larry, and Curley. Adults were clueless, while we giggled and horse-played. There were a few oases in the wasteland. Once, I amazed Mrs. Chambers by spelling E-N-C-Y-C-L-O-P-E-D-I-A. I didn't tell her it was Jiminy Cricket who taught me the word.

My family was faithful in church attendance and in 1958 the First Church of Christ voted on its "mother of the year". During an evening celebration the aluminum-foil crown was placed on the head of my mother. Church ladies cheered and handed her a bouquet. It came as no surprise when a month later my dad was voted "father of the year". The newspaper clipping shows the two of them, arm in arm, surrounded by church members, and grinning at the camera.

My second niece, Susan Jane, was born in August 1958. I remember visiting the hospital to see Jeanne and her new baby. However, it was after hours. So, when we returned to the parking lot, Jeanne flung open her third-floor window, shouted to us, and held up Susie so we could all take our first look.

I associate Susie's birth with hula hoops. It was about that time we were singing, "Hula hoop, hula hoop, everyone's playing with the hula hoop". Eileen and Mary Ann were good. I could do only three spins before the hoop fell to my ankles.

Frank and I were not only into Disney toys, but also plastic dinosaurs. Dad knew what was at the top of my wish list for Christmas 1958. He had to know. I had scissored out the picture of a dinosaur set from the Sears catalogue and taped it strategically to the refrigerator.

A week before Christmas, I began snooping around the house. I looked in closets and under beds. Finally, I found the Sears box of dinosaurs in the basement under some blankets. At first, I was overjoyed. But what could I do? If I told Frank, he'd squeal to mom and I'd get scolded. But it was so hard to keep such a big secret without exploding. On Christmas morning I pretended to be excited. After this experience, I concluded it was better not to know about surprises in advance.

1959

If Mrs. Chambers was Snow White to me, my fourth-grade teacher, Miss Benny, was the Wicked Witch—the teacher with a poison apple. I nearly failed fourth grade, and my accomplice in misbehavior, Jim Francis did fail. He was put back one semester and we were no longer classmates. To be fair, I can't blame Miss Benny. I was disruptive, unfocused, and shoddy in my schoolwork.

I remember a grade-school punishment for misbehavior was the relocation of your desk to a corner where you sat staring at the wall. That happened to me once. After my penalty week, Miss Benny said I could scoot my desk and join the class again. I was honest. I replied that I preferred the solitude of the corner. My introverted personality—later identified as INTJ— was already established.

My parents were permissive toward Frank and me. We were never rebellious, did okay in school, so they left us to our own devices. Our table manners were atrocious. We seldom combed our hair or brushed our teeth.

I can still remember a dreaded date. I held a note from our local dentist, Dr. Vukovich, dated February 24, 1959. That was the day when I would have to walk into his office, sit in his waiting room, and submit to the extraction of a decayed molar. I remember the sights, sound, feel, taste, and smell. I remember walking home, turning my gaze away from people I met. With Novocain pumped into my gums, I thought my jaw was swollen to twice its size. When I looked in the mirror at home, I was shocked to see my familiar nine-year-old face.

In 1959 Jack and Eileen were both teenagers, deep into popular music. They bought dozens of 45s such as: *Poison Ivy*; *Go Jimmy Go*; *Sixteen Candles*; *Mack the Knife*; and *La Bomba*. Our transistor radios were always tuned to WLS-AM from Chicago. Eileen collected the *Silver Dollar Survey* listing the top forty songs. Rock and Roll seeped into my brain and never drained out.

Jack was also buying comedy 33 rpm albums by the likes of Jonathan Winters and Andy Griffith. When I wasn't watching television, I heard the tunes and laughed to the humor. How could we possibly find time for homework?

My summers were wide open—about eighty days of unsupervised unstructured time. Both Jacky and Jimmy preferred our home to their own, so they hung out at the Foremans watching TV and playing around the house. A hundred steps away and across the alley lay a vacant lot we called *Brown Field*. This quarter acre of dirt and weeds was our stomping ground. We dug holes, threw rocks at cans, and catapulted objects high into the sky. It was also a haven for bugs and toads.

One summer day we discovered that Brown Field was losing its toad population. We attempted to replenish the stock by visiting a distant field we dubbed "Toad Field". Four of us filled up a red wagon with the little creatures. We had to be careful, because we heard if a toad peed on you, you could get warts. We pulled our livestock down several blocks to Brown Field. One kid would pull while three hand-lifted escaping toads back into the wagon. We offloaded most of our cargo, but it was to no avail. The next day all the toads had vanished.

On July 4, 1959, the stars of Alaska and Hawaii were added to the American flag. Eileen came up with a brilliant idea for the Whiting Independence Day parade competition. She dressed me as Uncle Sam to march in the center. Frankie rode a tricycle to my left dressed as an Eskimo and Debbie rode to my right arrayed as little Miss Hawaii. We were awarded second place and won ten dollars.

During this same month, I received word that my first nephew—James Alan Walker—had been born in far-off Anaheim, California. Charlotte brought him to Whiting a few months later for all to see.

During that summer there was a plague of mosquitoes and city workers ran trucks down our streets spewing thick billows of DDT. Jacky, Jimmy, and I trailed behind these trucks on our bikes inhaling fumes and pretending we were pilots in a cloud bank. The frustrated driver would hop out on occasion to yell at us stupid kids. We fell back a while, then followed again. It's a wonder we ever survived into adulthood.

I also played with liquid mercury. Once dad brought home a baby jar half-filled with quicksilver. It became a toy, like my slinky. I'd pour out a puddle on the kitchen table, separate it into beads, then push the beads back into a glob. I would squeeze silver dimes and quarters with the substance, bringing them to a high shine. After a few days, the coins turned dull. I even took the stuff to school for show and tell. The toxic substance was no big deal at the time.

On hot days Eileen would walk with Frank and me to Wolf Lake. It was about twenty minutes one way. The sand scorched and the fudgesicles cost seven cents each. We played and splashed for hours. On one walk Eileen asked me if I knew the longest word in the English language. She said it was "antidisestablishmentarianism". I said, "Oh, yeah. How about 'Eeny-meeny-tipsy-teeny, apple-jack john sweeny, hokey pokey dominoky, out goes Y-O-U in the middle of the deep dark blue sea with a dishrag wrapped around your knee'?"

Eileen was incredulous and said "that's not a word"! She patiently explained to me the difference between syllables and words. I played dumb. I knew it wasn't a word, but it flustered Eileen.

On another walk home, Eileen picked a handful of stickers next to Wolf Lake. She carried them nearly home and threw them onto the lawn of Mr. Cruell across the street from us. She said it was revenge because Mr. Cruell had always been so mean to our dog Cookie.

Jack got a motor scooter when he turned sixteen. It was kind of a misbegotten motorcycle. The color was called "maroon". (That was the first time I heard the word.) It had a big square open box in the front and a push horn that went "UU GAH". I was so proud when Jack rode me around the block. I would duck down inside the box and then pop up fast to wave at my amazed friends. Sometimes Frank would be in the box with me and sometimes Jim Francis. "UU GAH" became a special signal between Jim and me.

In the Autumn kids at school began to talk about baseball. I didn't know about the sport but since it was a topic of childhood conversation, I was pulled along as a fan. The talk was thick because the Chicago White Sox had won the American League pennant. Like all my boy peers, I followed and discussed every game. Alas, the LA Dodgers won the World Series, but in the process, I became a baseball aficionado.

Whiting had a rhythm of seasons: baby birds and blossoms in the Spring; mowing lawns and lake swimming in the Summer; raking leaves and back to school in the Autumn. Nothing marked the change of season as definitely as the first snow of winter.

Burdened by homework drudgery, I stare out my window between arithmetic problems. Almost done, almost dark, almost time for bed, I see artful frost etching corners of the glass. Lost in subtraction, pencil on lined paper, I glance up from my dreary task.

Swirling in the street lamp, dancing through the air, winter's first burst of snow invites me out to play. Slamming the textbook and bumping the table, I erupt from my wooden chair. Grabbing my coat and flush with excitement, I shout "Oh, boy! Oh boy!" and dash for the door.

Mom is smiling. "Don't stay out too long." She turns on the porch light and pulls up my mittens. Chasing flakes like a kitten after yarn, I drag my galoshes, kicking patterns on

the sidewalk. Lost in the snow, feet on white carpet, I play in my kingdom until my fingers grow numb.

1960 up to June

In fifth grade I was blessed with my first male school teacher. Mr. Thomas was stocky, commanding, and good hearted. As a boy, I could finally identify with a role model of my own gender. Mr. Thomas was a former Marine and would relish leading his class in singing the Marine Corps Hymn. Occasionally a few of us ornery boys would substitute the word “corpse” for “corps”. He would glare at the offenders, but I knew a smile lurked behind the scowl.

On January 15, 1960, my parents celebrated their silver wedding anniversary. About a dozen friends were over the house to mark their twenty-five years together. I remember helping Eileen glue twenty-five silver dollars onto construction paper to form the digits two and five. The official photograph shows a family of thirteen: John, Jenny, Jeanne, Don, Debbie, Susie, Charlotte, Big Jim, Jimmy, Jack, Eileen, Chris, and Frank.

It seemed dad was always tinkering with the house. In the basement he installed a second toilet and a shower stall. Those additions were mostly for Jack, but they proved useful to Frank and me as well. Dad also improved the attic, constructing one long corridor with mats for sleeping at either end by the gabled windows. He paneled the peaked ceiling and installed book shelves along the entire length of the corridor. The bonus space was too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter, but year-round it was a great place to hang out with friends.

When dad re-furbished the attic stairway, he uncovered a lost treasure. Beneath the bottom tread lay a pound of sugar, a box of baseball cards, and a ration coupon book. Mom recognized it right away. “During the war we all hid things away like that.”

In school I was an average achiever. The one subject in which I truly excelled was geography. I could recite all the states and capitols. I collected maps pulled from National Geographic. In May I received an award from the Daughters of the American Revolution at a school assembly. My name was called and I walked to the stage for my plaque. Both mom and dad were proud of their son and took a dozen pictures.

In the Spring of 1960 Frank and I began to follow Major League baseball in earnest. He was an LA Dodgers fan with Sandy Colfax as his favorite and I was a Milwaukee Braves fan, favoring Warren Spahn. From the Hammond Times we snipped out Major League Standings and every day pasted them into notebooks. Frank kept detailed statistics of the sixteen teams.

By 1960, I saw less of Jack. He was hanging out at the bowling alley and rolling cigarette packs in his shirt sleeve. Frank and I grew closer to Eileen. After meals we had a routine. Eileen would wash dishes, Frank would dry, and I would put away.

During the several years we did this—until she left the home—Eileen taught Frank and me crazy songs. This one, taken from Mad Magazine, we sang to the tune of the Air Force anthem, *Up We Go*:

Up we go into that wide mouth yonder looking for molars to fill.
There's a tooth waiting to hear our thunder. At 'em boys.
Give 'em the drill, RATA-TAT-TAT.
We dislike cavities left untreated. Teeth look bad full of decay.
When we're in doubt, we pull 'em out. Oh, nothing can stop a dentist today.

Little did Frank know when he sang that song, he would be both an Air Force officer and a practicing dentist.

Some songs were passed along by house guests. We learned this parody to *Back Home Again in Indiana*:

Back home again in dear old Whiting and it seems that I can see
the electric lights still shining bright o'er Lake Michigan for me.
And Amazo sends out its fragrance o'er the streets I used to roam.
And when I dream about the whistle blown at midnight, then I long for my dear old
Whiting home.

Eileen also taught us to recite the sixty-six books of the Bible, from Genesis all the way to Revelation. Frank and I got so proficient that we would challenge each other. He'd say, "Can you name all the books in one breath?"

I would fill my lungs and after sixty-five books, squeak out *Revelation*. Then I would challenge Frank. "Can you name all the books of the Bible in one breath while hopping on one foot?" And Frank could do it. What fun to have a little brother like Frank. What joy to have a big sister like Eileen.

Looking back at my first decade of life, I can say that my entire family—dad, mom, Jeanne, Charlotte, Jack, Eileen, and Frank—all did their parts to create a joyful and godly environment to "Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. (Ephesians 6:4)"