

November 12, 2007

A LOST FRIEND REMINDS ME OF WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN LIFE

Don't look now, but Thanksgiving is just around the corner. It's a good time to get things in perspective, to reflect on all the things for which we have to be thankful. In truth, we should never let the sun set without giving thanks for our blessings, but we are usually too focused on being nibbled to death by ducks to appreciate how good we have it. It's called human nature.

I may be the world's worst at keeping things in perspective. I have spent most of my life grinding over matters that history has determined were of little or no consequence, even though I deemed them the world's most important issues at the time. While I was tilting at windmills, I was ignoring a lot of things that, in retrospect, really mattered. Sadly, I am still inclined in that direction.

Take the case of my best childhood buddy, Charles Wesley Dobbs, better known to all as Charlie. We met on the first day of school in the seventh grade at Jere Wells Elementary in East Point and became inseparable. We went to the same high school together (Russell High), attended Georgia State College (now Georgia State University) together and double-dated on weekends. As a matter of fact, his first girlfriend later became the Woman Who Shares My Name.

Charlie Dobbs was the funniest human being to ever inhabit Planet Earth. He was voted "Most Witty" by the senior class at Russell. Nobody else was even in the running. He was also audacious to the max. When we graduated from high school, Charlie and I hitchhiked to Daytona Beach — something that would be unheard of today. Coming home, we were flat broke. Fortunately, two guys headed for Detroit picked us up in middle Georgia. They were returning from Miami where they had lost all their money gambling, were low on gas and were trying to reach Chattanooga to borrow money from a relative to get them home. To me, they looked like gangsters. But not to my friend, Charles Wesley Dobbs. To him, they looked like opportunity.

"You are in luck," Charlie announced grandly from the backseat. "I happen to know a shortcut to Chattanooga." While I held my breath, he proceeded to guide them up through the state, into the city of East Point and about one block from his house. As we got out of the car, he informed the Mafia-looking guys that just around the curve ahead, they would see a big sign that would indicate that they were on the outskirts of Chattanooga. Of course, that was baloney. Chattanooga was more than a hundred miles from East Point. As they drove off, Charlie waved, wished them well on their journey, and as they rounded the curve, he looked at me and yelled "Run!" We were safely at home laughing ourselves silly before those poor guys realized what had happened. I wouldn't be surprised if there isn't still a contract out on us to this day.

Charlie left Georgia State my sophomore year, and I transferred to the University of Georgia. Later, we both married and slowly drifted apart. It has been more than 25 years since I last saw him.

A few weeks ago, I learned that Charles Wesley Dobbs, my boyhood friend, had died. I am ashamed to say that I had not stayed in touch with him. I would like to blame it on how busy I was carving out a career and raising a family, but that is not true. I let less important things get in the way.

That gets me around to perspective. Don't get so caught up in the issues of the day that you forget what is important in life. It is not politics. It is not the drought. It is not the economy or the war or football games. It is friendships and not letting them evaporate. This is a lesson I should have learned sooner. I won't ever again have the opportunity to tell Charlie Dobbs how richly he blessed my life, but I will have the memories. That is more than I deserve.