

First Awareness

(A True Story)

by Robert Neff



In August, 1950, at age 16, I traveled by myself from northern Minnesota to Wheaton College Academy in Wheaton, Illinois.

I took a bus to Duluth, a train to Minneapolis, and another train to Chicago. I then took a cab to another depot where I caught the, now defunct, computer commuter line, “The Chicago, Aurora, and Elgin (the “roaring Elgin”)” to the stop at Prince Crossing.

It was after dark and raining when I arrived. The brochure stated there was a path across from the stop that led to the Academy.

After the train pulled away, I saw a well trimmed garden across the tracks and presumed it was where the path was located. Picking up my two suitcases, which contained all the clothes I would need for four months, I crossed the tracks to the garden. There was no path, only an enclosing fence.

I re-crossed the tracks and walked up the road about 100 yards where I found the path.

On entering the Academy I was greeted with genuine warmth and felt this would become an enjoyable phase of my life. I was correct in my estimate.

As I entered the boys’ dormitory I was met by Bill Johnson who was very welcoming, very friendly, very helpful, and asked me one question, among many others, “Are you going to go out for football?”

I am still shocked by my answer, “Yes, of course.” I was shocked because I never expected the question. I was shocked by my “yes” answer because I always had considered myself as such an inferior athlete that I never had even contemplated trying out for any team.

That question, that answer, immediately thrust me into an atmosphere of camaraderie that I had never imagined.

When Bill Johnson greeted me in boys’ dormitory, because of his youthful appearance and stature, I thought he was a student. I later learned that he was the Dorm Counselor and was on the faculty as the biology teacher. He also was the

basketball coach. He was, and is, a good friend and mentor.

The next morning, after breakfast, some of my new friends were going into the town of Wheaton and asked me to join them, which I did. When we had walked down to the train depot, they, with one voice, warned, “Never, ever, go close to that third rail! It will kill you instantly!”

That is one of the rails that, in the rain, in ignorance, in innocence, I had stepped across, in both directions, with two heavy suitcases, the night before.

My friends never knew, perhaps still neither know or suspect, that at that moment I knew for certain that God had a purpose for my life. He still does!