



James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation

“Reflections from Rising Star”

Rev. Richey

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I would like to introduce you to a very special man. His name is Hiram Gee. He was born in Sep. 1918. He has seen the world at war several times, and has transitioned from a time when he can remember the first cars in town, to creation of the World Wide Web. He has journeyed almost 100 years gaining insights and wisdom that only comes through experience. And it all came about in a little town, of seemingly little consequence. This place when in 1874 seven families moving “Westward” to follow their dreams settled in a fertile valley in central Texas.

They arrived tired and travel worn. They had faced many challenges to arrive at this place where they would make their new home. They built a small “town hall” right away, and began homesteading while seeing to the business of making a community of themselves. One night they met to name this new home. They were worn out from all the work and some of the newness had begun to dissipate.

They discussed all evening, then began to argue all night. They finally had to adjourn since the horizon was coming to life with the morning glow. Frustrated and discouraged they filed out of the hall. Some continuing discussion, but most just ready to get home. Some looked at the beautiful sky, and noticed the morning star, and commented on how beautiful to see the rising of the morning star.

Someone commented on it being the last star of the night. Another said, “No, that’s the morning star, it ushers in a new day. They all became silent, and experienced one of those moments that only happen every now and then, when the feeling of community is strong. They looked at each other, and someone voiced what most were already feeling. Let’s name our town “Rising Star” the signal of a new day, and of a new life. They all agreed. They took in the Rising of the sun, and then went their way “home.”

Hiram and his new wife Maude (he always called her Ma though) settled in Rising Star in 1940 with similar hopes and dreams as those first seven families. Hiram is fictitious character, created from the memories of my childhood, growing up around the area of Rising Star. He is a collage of family and friends. And his first name, Hiram, comes from a ceramic toothpick holder that my mother received one day at a “Secret Pal” dinner at church.

The local women’s group had a “secret pal” by choosing names from a hat. They would send cards, and small inexpensive gifts to the person they chose telling a little bit about themselves. The person whose name was drawn was to try and figure out who their secret pal was. It was great way to build community and get to know each other better.

My mother brought home a gift one night, after the dinner, and displayed for my father, brother and I, this small elfin ceramic figure with a basket on his back which was full of toothpicks. There was a note with him that said, "Hi, my name is Hiram." We all laughed and thought he was so funny. He held a place of honour in our home, and is still part of parents' treasures.

The last name Gee, is my mother's maiden name, and is given to this character in honour of my grandparents, Dot and Fat Gee, whom I knew as Daddy Fat and Momma Dot (remember, I do come from the South!).

Now I would like to introduce to you Hiram Gee-----sharing historical nuggets of wisdom-----

Hello everyone, my name is Hiram, and it's great to be here. I have to warn you though, I'm here to share some my story, which includes a lot of mistakes, and it concerns me to some degree to have my thoughts referred to as "historical nuggets of wisdom."

Today I want to share with you, the story of one of my greatest teachers, my daughter Clara Belle, that's with two e's-----Ma wanted it that way. I also have a son named William and I came here last year to share a little of his story, but today.....
Is Clara Belle's day.

Ma and I settled in Rising Star after an adventurous trek from Oklahoma between the years of 1929 and 1930. We had only been married a few short months, and we were young and full of hopes, dreams and energy. For myself I would have to add that I was bit cocky and self assured. A few short weeks after settling in Rising Star, Ma became pregnant (we couldn't even say it that way at the time, but now it sounds as though she just suddenly woke up pregnant one day---funny how we word things).

Ma glowed with excitement from the first few weeks of conception. On September 18th, 1930, just ten days short of my 22nd birthday, our little girl was born. I had been teasing Ma for weeks that our baby was going to wait and be born on my birthday. Ma must said, "Hiram you just hush, every thing's not always about you! This child will be born when it's time to be born."

Well she may have said that, but when the time got closer to my birthday, I think Ma didn't want to be wrong, so she got up one day and went out and worked extra hard in the garden just to make sure that baby didn't wait till my birthday, and sure enough----
She went into labour that evening.

We sent word for Doc Salinger, and after all the hollering finally stopped, Doc Salinger came out of the room looking like a ghost. I was excited to hear words, but Doc went right passed me and into the kitchen and poured himself a big Iced Tea. He came back and grabbed me by the arm, and said, "Hiram, come with me, we need to talk."

I tried to protest, but he tightened his grip on my arm and said, "Hiram.... Now!"

He leaned over to the nurse as we passed her in the hall, and she hurried off to Ma's side. He led me out the door and onto the porch. My mouth was talking but the sounds came out all garbled-----"is it Ma?-----Is she?.....the baby?.....Can I?....."

He just said that Ma was fine and that the delivery went fine.

He then, took a breath, and asked me, with his eyes down, if I knew what "Mongolism" was (keeping in mind that was the term commonly used then). I stammered trying to think of something to say. He said that

our little girl, whom Ma had said to name Clara Belle, was born with a birth problem, and would not be normal.

I felt as though, I had been hit with a 2 x 4. He called her a Mongoloid! No, not my little girl...that can't be. We hadn't done anything wrong.....

Though I said this, I felt differently. Inside I felt that me or Ma must have done something wrong for this to have happened. Doc wasn't much on reassurance either. Not that he said otherwise, but his discomfort spoke volumes through his silence.

When I went in to see Ma, I expected the worst. I was all prepared to tell her she didn't do anything wrong. Doc had explained that it was birth defect that happened sometime, and there was nothing that anyone could have done.

I slowly entered Ma's room and she looked up at me, still having the glow she'd had for the past nine months, and said, "She's beautiful! She's a little doll. Just wait 'til you see her!"

The truth is that I hadn't even seen my daughter yet. I panicked thinking that Ma didn't know there was something wrong.....couldn't she tell? Hadn't they told her?

The nurse was working on our little girl. They had to clear her esophagus because she had what they called an esophageal atresia which babies like her could have. Later I would find out that Clara Belle had Down's syndrome even though most people didn't use that term back then. It's caused by an extra chromosome 21. I would come to hate the term Mongoloid. It was a mockery of little girl to call her that. Over the years I learned to hear that word in whispers though I might not discern another word in the conversation.

Clara Belle's head was smaller than usual (a term called microcephaly). Her eyes were also slanted upward in what was called Mongolian Slant, and is where the name Mongoloid came from. Still to come was the information that Clara Belle would probably not live a full adult life, and would most likely have health problems for the rest of her life.

Ma took an almost arrogant pride in Clara Belle. She made sure that Clara Belle always wore the prettiest dresses, almost dressing her up like "China Doll." Over the next few months our friends visited us less and less, and their visits became briefer and then all but stopped. I was both angry and embarrassed, but Ma seemed not to notice. I still couldn't shake the feeling that we must have done something wrong.

Ma began to go to Fort Worth since it was the big city, and go to the library. She brought home books and notes on Down's syndrome. It seemed the more she learned the better she felt, but when she shared her information, like epicanthal fold, or Simian Crease---all this did for me was to make my little girl more abnormal. Ma, however, adopted these terms as a badge of honour. They gave unbiased reasons for what had happened, and I think that's why she didn't seem to feel as ashamed as I did.

Clara Belle became Ma's little girl....and they would walk hand in hand when ever we went to town. I would slink behind with my hands in my pocket. But Ma, would walk tall and proud.

When Clara Belle was 5 years old, Ma, was pregnant again, though we had tried to keep that from happening again out of fear. But in November 1935 Ma gave birth to a perfect baby boy! I have to admit to you today, that at the time I felt vindicated.

A funny thing happened though. As Clara Belle got older, she rebelled against the pretty dresses.....no, she said, "I want to wear just like William!" Her brother. Ma finally gave in, and Clara began to wear jeans and

boys shirts. I can't say why but Clara and I got closer and William seemed to prefer to be with Ma.

I grew fonder and fonder of Clara Belle, and Ma began joking that Clara Belle must be an angel to turn me around like that! I began to think of her as my little angel.

One day I was walking hand in hand with Clara Belle downtown. By this time one store had put in big windows out front. I was awestruck one day as we passed by and I happened to catch our reflection in the window. There was this man, walking hand in hand with spry and smiling girl. The man was walking straight with his chin held high.....just like Ma used to do.

My revelation came none too soon. Within a few months of that day, in 1946 Ma took to bed with a fever. She had caught a violent strain of flu. Several people in our town also fell victim to this plague. On January 20, 1946, God saw fit to call home the best woman he ever made.

Months later, I was going through some of Ma's things in our closet. There in a chest I found a packet with my name on it. I opened it up, and found several books on Down's syndrome as well as a couple of self care in times of crisis books. There was a hand written note as well that read, "Hiram, I love you and I'm so proud of you. Take care of William and our little angel. You can do this. I love you--Ma."

I continued to learn from both of my children. I continued to make mistakes and to grow from them. In 1969 Clara's heart just wore out. She had a murmur and other challenges sometimes present with Down's syndrome. My heart almost burst in my chest as I said goodbye to my little angel, now a grown woman.

I've learned through my own failures to watch my language when I'm describing people or situations. I've learned to be aware of the language of "othering." It's phrases like, "those people" or "them" instead of "us." It often happens during the best of intentions, but just the word "mongoloid." These words and phrases are loaded and they only succeed in further alienation and division.

Today, I often experience "othering" directly with regard to "seniors." I often hear people talking about "them" or "they" as if people over a certain age aren't an integral part of society.

I've also learned that's it's okay to make mistakes. I think sometimes political correctness only succeeds in further separating people into the "those who know" and "those who don't." Too often I hear well intentioned friends, who believe themselves to be Social Justice minded, putting down "those who don't get it."

I also have come to believe that greatest tool for overcoming oppression, isn't political correctness, but empowerment and authenticity. I think that in a way, Ma dressing up Clara Belle, was just another way of coping with her differentness. I know that I didn't find "my angel" until we allowed her to be herself. And then her sacred beauty shined through.

Well that's my nuggets of historical wisdom for today. Thanks for having me and God bless.