

REMEMBERING JOEL: A STORY OF RESILIENCE

JOEL SEEMED BLESSED WITH REMARKABLE TALENTS, BUT THEY DID NOT REVEAL THEMSELVES IN ANY OBVIOUS WAY IN A SCHOOL OR CLASS SETTING.

THIS IS NOT GOING TO WORK, Joel," I said. I was teaching my Grade 11 geography class, and Joel was just not cutting it. He could not function in a normal class. He came ill-prepared and never did his assigned work. He either stared out the window or read the latest issue of *Scientific American*. "Why don't you go down to the library? I'll see you there in a few minutes." Joel skulked out of the room as I prepared the class for a lab activity on topographic maps.

Joel was an enigma to me. The guidance counselor told me that, although Joel had been given an IQ test, his exact score could not be calculated – but it was well over 160. On a test of musical ability, Joel had attained a perfect score on all four musical attributes – a first for the music teacher. Joel seemed blessed with remarkable talents, but they did not reveal themselves in any obvious way in a school or class setting.

I learned from his mother, some time later, that he had at one time expressed interest in the violin. His parents bought him a violin and arranged lessons. After a few lessons, the renowned maestro who had agreed to take Joel on as a student made a special visit from the city to talk with his parents. He exclaimed with great excitement and animation that young Joel was a prodigy, and that in all his years he had never taught a more gifted student. Joel never returned to the maestro for another violin lesson. He never picked up the violin again.

Joel was not easy to talk to. He would not look you in the eye. With his shoulders hunched and his head downcast, he always seemed to be staring at some point off the tip of his shoes. He was absolutely exasperating to deal with.

I left the class to work on a lab assignment and made my way to the library. In what was essentially a one-way conversation, we made arrangements for Joel to do independent library research instead of coming to class. He chose to start research on glaciation. As I checked in on his progress in the library from time to time, he was doing some excellent work, using resources I had used in my university graduate courses in physical geography.



EN BREF Joel semblait posséder des talents remarquables, mais ils ne se manifestaient pas vraiment à l'école. Ses aptitudes émergeaient toutefois à des endroits étonnants. Son histoire révèle une grande résilience et un succès progressif obtenu en dépit du corset des systèmes et des établissements scolaires. Un enseignant témoigne de la façon dont il a acquis de la maturité et a adapté ses talents et ses imperfections à un monde qui s'accommode mal aux personnes qui ne s'assimilent pas au système.

I was planning a class field trip on glaciation. I invited Joel to come along with me to scout a suitable route. Over the next few Saturdays we roamed the back roads of Southern Ontario, climbing eskers, digging into kame deposits, and sketching drumlin fields. The silences were as vast as the Pleistocene ice sheets. Occasionally we had brief technical discussions about certain features of which he was now as knowledgeable as I. 'Yes' and 'no', however, were still the main words in his vocabulary.

Joel had a job sweeping up and dusting at a local commercial art gallery. He came to school one day claiming that he had inadvertently created 'drumlins' with his broom and dust-bane. Drumlins – those beautiful inverted teaspoon-shaped hills scattered all across Ontario – still posed a research problem for geographers. They did not understand how they actually formed under an ice sheet, but Joel could reproduce them at will on the floor of the gallery. I was so excited about his discovery that I called Dr. Putnam at the University of Toronto, the leading Canadian authority on the Pleistocene era. Joel had some interesting discussions with Dr. Putnam, and for the first time, I overheard him in animated, politely argumentative, discussion.

THE SCHOOL WAS in a terrible state of anxiety at this time. The principal – 'Dimples', as the students called him – was incapable of decisions. The vice-principal, Nigel Barrick,¹ on the other hand, was an ex-British army commando who shot from the hip, firing off a hundred decisions a minute – usually the wrong ones. He roamed the halls like General Montgomery, hands behind his back, forehead creased with furor, and lower lip furled. Only the swagger stick was missing. You could hear his voice in every corner of the building, "You there, stop that! To the office, now!"

One morning, a news-sheet called VICE was stuffed into the doorjamb of every student locker. The VICE logo depicted a hand squeezing a fistful of students. Some were dripping out below the fist. The paper was a brilliant exposé of life in the school and contained scathing satire about the administration, especially the 'vice'. 'Dimples' retreated to his office and Barrick rampaged around the school trying to ferret out the instigators of this inflammatory diatribe. I never asked Joel whether he had anything to do with it; deep down, I was afraid to know.

The Beatles were all the rage at this time. Joel and a small group began to grow their hair long, and by March, Joel's hair was as long as Paul McCartney's. He and the others were warned by the vice-principal that they had to cut their hair. When Joel and several other resisters came to school the next day, hair uncut, they were locked in a room for most of the day. Several students called CBC and CFTO television news departments, and there were rumours of a massive student protest planned for the next morning.

The Superintendent – whom I dubbed The Grey Man, in recognition of his uniformly colourless attire – called

a strategy meeting for 7:00 a.m., in anticipation of the planned protest. All department heads assembled behind a closed door in a front classroom overlooking the entrance to the school. The door opened, and in strutted the Vice Principal, inflated with military presence, followed by the Principal, whose terrified eyes were darting every which way, and the Superintendent. The Superintendent began discussions by listening to ideas on various student scenarios, while Vice Principal Barrick surveyed the scene below. In the early morning light, I remember feeling like I was at the last planning session for D-Day landing. I could almost hear the sound of flack guns going off in the distance.

At one point Vice Principal Barrick excused himself to go below and check things out. He returned a few minutes later looking a little shaken.

"Give us an update, Barrick," the Grey Man requested.

"The students are starting to gather, sir, and they are carrying placards."

"And what do the placards say, Mr. Barrick?" the Grey Man pursued. Nigel froze. He looked at the Superintendent and tried to speak. His eyes watered and grew red.

"What do the placards say Mr. Barrick?" the Grey Man asked again, firmly and somewhat impatiently.

Nigel's lip began to quiver. "Hang Barrick, Sir", he said, his voice trembling.

The battle unraveled in the media for a few days. Joel held his ground. In a meeting with the Superintendent, he was told he couldn't return to the school until his hair was cut.

Joel never returned to school again. He and his family moved to Winnipeg a year or so later and we lost touch.

SEVERAL YEARS LATER, my family and I moved to Germany, where I was seconded to the Department of National Defense Schools in Europe. One day, I answered a knock at the door of our house in a small village in the Black Forest, and there stood Joel. He asked if he could stay overnight as he was on a holiday trip around Europe; he stayed with us for over a year. He was fond of our daughters, one year-old Kate and five-year-old Lindsey, and they loved him.

Joel was still a very frugal conversationalist, but over time I was able to piece together what he had done since we were last together. He had landed a job as a mail clerk at Carleton University, but his frequent absences from the job got him into trouble. When interrogated about his regular disappearances, he admitted to getting sidetracked by the computers in the university computer centre, where he lost all sense of time.

He was then reassigned to Computer Services; within weeks he was in trouble again. He was not doing the job. His supervisor sought an explanation: what was he doing that interfered with carrying out his simple tasks?

"Oh, I dunno," he said. "I guess I just write programs."

"What kind of programs?" she persisted, her curiosity

aroused. "Let me see what you've done." He shuffled off to a desk and pulled out a wad of computer paper. She looked at his sheets. "What are you doing here?" she asked, pointing to one of his sheets.

"It's a program to generate Fibonacci numbers," he explained. He had read an article in *Scientific American* about these abstract theoretical mathematical numbers, and he had developed a program to find them. He also had developed an elaborate program for playing blackjack that provided the odds on every play of a card and kept a running tally of all scores.

"Where did you learn to do this Joel?" his supervisor said.

"I dunno" he replied.

"I didn't know that you had taken computer programming," she said.

"I haven't," he answered.

She studied his programs for a while, shaking her head in disbelief, then tried to convince the Department Head to hire Joel as a programmer. He reluctantly agreed to give Joel a chance. If Joel could write a program in two weeks in Cobol, they would hire him. Joel brought in his new program the next day and got the job.

A year later, he decided to travel for three months in Europe. That's when he ended up on our doorstep.

Joel settled in to life in Germany and got a job on the base working in the dairy department of the base supermarket.

One day he bought an antique German motorcycle, reputed to be part of Goering's motorbike pool. He had discovered, however, that his Ontario Motor League international driver's license was stamped valid for automobiles

only. In order to qualify for a German motorcycle license, Joel had to take a six-month course. He was not prepared to do this. When I came home late from work one night, Joel was sitting at the dining room table surrounded by newspapers, potatoes, an exacto knife, and an ink plate and roller.

"What are you up to Joel?" I asked.

"I'm completing my international driver's license."

I looked at the intricate stamp in his license. It had "Ontario Motor League" printed in a circle around the outside edge, the OML symbol in the middle, along with the year and the date.

"You'll never do it. You're wasting your time," I said and went to bed. When I woke in the morning, Joel was still at the dining room table, and the pile of potatoes had dwindled to nothing. "Watch this", he said, and with all of the flair and ceremony of a bureaucrat, he opened his license, squished the potato in his hand onto the ink plate, nonchalantly stamped the motorcycle entry, and handed the license to me. I couldn't believe my eyes.

We eventually moved on to CF Baden Air Force base and Joel remained in Lahr. His round trip air ticket had long expired, but when he decided to return to Canada, I understand that he doctored his useless airline ticket – all three copies including the carbons – and flew home to Ottawa.

IV YEARS PASSED and we heard stories of Joel's marriage and his career in computer programming with the Canadian federal government. One night, when I turned on The National, there was Joel being interviewed, still staring at that point just beyond the tip of his shoe. He and his wife Nancy had just had a daughter born through in vitro fertilization. Through all of his painful shyness there was a glint of the proud father, and I thought back to our treks through the Black Forest and the Vosges Mountains with my young daughter Kate perched perilously on his shoulders. I thought of the time he stayed up all night to bake Kate and Lindsey the biggest ginger bread house I have ever seen. I remembered the hours he spent reading and playing games with them.


At my retirement party, after the customary speeches by colleagues, I rose to say a few words. As I gazed across the crowd at all of my friends and colleagues, there at the back, near the door, stood Joel – two decades after he last visited us in Germany, and looking me straight in the eye. He stood there wearing an ill-fitting blue suit and bright red high-top running shoes. He was the proud father of newborn triplets! In a brief moment, I had a flash – a teacher and a student driving silently through the lush spring countryside of Southern Ontario, looking for eskers... **I**

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Note

1 All names and nick-names have been changed to protect identity.

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