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Editor's Corner

a rambling, blog-like piece by Helen Gunderson

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Life here in Ames is full with gardening and plenty of napping to deal with fuzziness in my system that is probably a reaction to stuff in the springtime air. However, I did get time to shorten the video that I produced in 1997 about the road I where I grew up. The show is now 10 minutes long and short enough to post on YouTube. Some of you may have already seen it in a 13-minute WMV file. Hopefully, by being on YouTube, it will get more visibility. I will embed the program here, add some thoughts about Miss Marcum, then plant onion seedlings that I started a few weeks ago. They need to get in the ground before they perish in the containers, which are the bottoms of gallon milk jugs.

Recently, I did some journal-writing with the thought of editing the material and posting a new essay. But alas, it is hard both to write and keep up with the gardening.

Miss Marcum

Some of what I wrote was about Miss Marcum and the new appreciation I have of her, now that I am signing up for Medicare. I had thought I was nearing the age that she was when she served as principal, Latin and English literature teacher when I was in high school. But it turns out that I was wrong. She was 77 years old when I graduated in 1963.

The Rolfe school had been organized with Kindergarten through high school in one, three-story brick building until 1959, when the district merged with the Des Moines Township school and junior high classes were held there. So even though Miss Marcum's official role was as a high school educator, she was an icon of authority not only for the high school students but for those of us in the lower grades as well.

She had taught my great aunts and uncles as well as my father, Deane Gunderson, who was a 1935 graduate of Rolfe. They and most of the community had high regard for her. That meant, like it or not, I had to get along with her.

Many of us have had moments of dismay or delight when we realized that we were taking on characteristics of our parents. Well, I have been thinking a lot about Miss Marcum this winter and how I may have more in common with her than I ever thought.

She was single. I am single. She had cats. I have cats.

I was not a fan of Miss Marcum. However, I remember one summer during my high school years when I had too much time on my hands and was lamenting that she had her favorite students. My mother, Marion Gunderson, suggested that if I wanted to get on Miss Marcum's good side, I could take beef liver for her cats. And contrary to what seems now to be good judgment, I did just that, buying a half pound of liver at the SuperValu grocery store. I was not relaxed at all as I knocked on the door of her Victorian house with turret. I was not relaxed as I sat in her living

room—a tidy and formal space. I was a fake, and Miss Marcum probably saw right through me and the gift of beef liver for her oversized Calico cat. But we were cordial, and I was glad to be out of that mansion at the end of our conversation—superficial as it was.

I doubt if Miss Marcum had chickens. I do have chickens. They are in my garage. I am under the impression that she did not have a car. I don't have a car. However, she probably didn't have a bicycle, but I love getting about Ames with my bicycle and trailer. She was NOT an advocate for girls sports. In fact, she most likely preferred that the school never have girls teams. As it was, the school did not offer girls sports until 1959, until I was a freshman, even though there is evidence that Rolfe sported a girls basketball team in the early part of the 20th Century. I was an ardent advocate of girls sports.

She was disciplined and most likely a morning person, walking the four blocks from her home to school early to be prepared ahead of everyone else. I am neither well-disciplined nor an early riser.

She did not like the deterioration of the English language and insisted that students say, "Yes" rather than "Yah." If alive today, she would not like the relaxed way I use the language but would appreciate my disdain of words such as "veggies" and "fridge."

She was devoted to one town and one career, retiring at the age of 80. I was an educator, too, teaching junior and senior high girls physical education for six years. However, I have lived in different states, tried different jobs, and lived like I was retired for a number of years. And I am only 65.

I never saw Miss Marcum in anything but a dress. I never wear a dress, and my shoes are not at all like her sturdy, black high heels with laces that I called "old lady" shoes.

I dislike Miss Marcum's authoritative style. I couldn't stand her role as junior class advisor and how she controlled the theme for the homecoming float and the prom. And when I look at the 1950's home movies that Superintendent Mortensen shot and see Miss Marcum crowning the homecoming queen, I wonder what that was all about. I am not big on homecoming coronations, but if there is to be one, why did an older school marm crown the queen? The thought of "vestal virgins" enters my mind.

Miss Marcum could be unkind and unfair. An anonymous person from the class of 1930 wrote an essay for this Web site about a freshman boy, whose widowed mother was forced to leave the farm and move to town with her children. When Miss Marcum called him before the class to report on a theme paper:

Her criticism of him was harsh while he stood almost in tears. Finally she told him curtly, "Take your seat!" He never appeared in class or school again and if she noticed his absence, she didn't acknowledge it.

Also, as high school principal, Miss Marcum was in charge of report cards. One 1960's alumna, who was at the top of her class, claims she ran into problems when applying to colleges. At one point, in a discussion with an admissions officer, the student discovered that Miss Marcum had tampered with her transcript and lowered her grades.

Even my brother, Charles Gunderson, an attorney who graduated from Rolfe in 1962 and refrains from idle gossip, says that decades ago, he heard an 80-year-old woman say that Miss Marcum had altered the grades of students that she did not like. Of course, a lot depends on perspective, and it is hard to verify these kinds of claims. Perhaps they are simply small town speculation.

Miss Marcum may have done a great job of teaching students to diagram sentences, but I never gained a love of or aptitude for writing from her. And she dampened many a spirit for reading when she reprimanded anyone in English literature for reading ahead of the assignment for the day. Admittedly, though, I never was one to read the actual assignment—for instance, in Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities*—on time and was glad when I was able to make it to the end of the class without being asked a question.

Miss Marcum led a classroom experiment each year in something akin to ESP (extra sensory perception) that smacked of mysticism. I was one of her guinea pigs and was sent outside the classroom while the other students decided where to place a small item. When I returned, she put a white cloth loosely around my head to serve as a blindfold. Then she stood on my left, holding my left hand in her left hand and putting the palm of her right hand on my upper back. A classmate stood on my right, holding my right hand and putting his left hand on top of her hand on my back. The three of us shuffled along, and indeed, I found the item. It was on her desk. In one respect, the exercise was spooky. In another, it was hokey. I found the item, not because of some psychic connection, but because Miss Marcum was physically leading me—albeit subtly—by the pull of my hand and pressure on my back. Did I challenge her or laugh out loud? No. Even I, who at times was an obstreperous student, was under her spell of authority and did not talk back to her.

But imagine her career success. She was a self-supporting, professional, single woman and highly respected in the community in an era (or should I say eras) in which few women were so well-accepted and influential. No one that I knew used the term "feminist" in Miss Marcum's era, but if the term had been in the vernacular, I doubt if she would have identified herself as one. Yet in many ways, she is a model of success, even if she was not someone I want to model my life after and even though we have some things in common: I am single, without car, have cats, and like to be in control when I organize congregational meals at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames.

Miss Marcum was frugal. I ride a bicycle throughout the year for in-town travel, buy my shirts at the Goodwill Store, and occasionally engage in dumpster-diving. However, in general, I am far from frugal.

She accumulated a lot of money and left much of it to the Rolfe schools, to the tune of about \$150,000. The bequest was to be used for educational purposes, but the school board used a large chunk of it to build new locker rooms in the 1970s. I assume she would have been livid if she knew from the grave how her funds had been used.

In looking at cameo appearances of Miss Marcum in the 1950's home movies that Superintendent Ralph Mortensen shot, I wonder who she really was. I know her exterior persona, for instance, when she stood at the front of study hall, arms folded across her chest, rocking onto the balls of her feet in those clunky black shoes, and glaring at whoever presented a hint of being out of line. And I recall her classroom formality, when students were not allowed to move from their chairs, when the bell rang at the end of class, until she said, "Class, rise and pass."

Feelings

I wonder what she felt inside. Could she be herself when not on duty, or did she have to maintain a 24-7 school persona? Did she ever let down her hair? Did she have chums who she could be affectionate with and share deep concerns? It probably would have been risky for her to be close to anyone, man or woman, for fear of rumors. But there are photos on this site, circa 1917, of my grandmother, DeElda Gunderson, and her friends being chummy, like holding hands, in a day when intimate friendships between women did not raise eye brows.

I have even seen two photos of mock weddings from that era with an all-woman cast. Those weddings probably didn't mean the women in them believed in same sex relationships. But then again, the participants were engaging in a ritual that would make some people in this era blush.

Did Miss Marcum consider marriage? The rumor was that she had been engaged when she was a young woman, but her fiancée died in a war, and she never dated again.

Marriage Equality

In the spring of 2009, after the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that the state's ban on same sex marriage was unconstitutional, I went to a rally on the Iowa State campus and prepared a simple YouTube video about the decision. I feared it would be risky to post the video on this site, considering there is a wide range of visitors.

Some would be offended by the decision and video. Some would applaud them. Finally, though, I think it is time to provide at least a link to the video. If nothing else, it is interesting to read in it the actual words of a key part of the rationale.

Another of Miss Marcum's key roles was that of teaching the high school boys Sunday school class at the Presbyterian Church, which had its irony. Many people felt, that at school, she favored the Catholic boys since they were well-versed in Latin. I grew up in her congregation and have a Master of Divinity from a Presbyterian seminary, but now I am a member of the Unitarian.

Did she teach the Bible as history and literature? Did she talk about faith issues? Would she have appreciated a Unitarian Universalist congregation or been disparaging of a liberal denomination even though it has Christian origins and has included many stalwarts of literature and founders of our country among its members?

If she were alive today and again in the role of senior high boys Sunday school teacher, what would she tell her class about the court ruling? What wisdom would she draw upon from her classical education and personal experience as well as from the Bible? Would she explain that one of our country's principles is the separation of church and state and that there is a difference between religious and civil marriage? Would she refer to the advice that is attributed to Jesus, "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." Would she teach tolerance and a "live and let live" attitude, or would she advocate changing the state constitution so that people of the same gender would be denied the opportunity to marry? My guess is that she would be a moderate Republican who would want to restrict marriage to one man and one woman, but she would not hound the State House to change the law.

In general, though, I suspect that there is little known about who Miss Marcum really was and what she really felt. However, I must note that John Wiegman of the class of 1946 wrote an essay about growing up next door to her and his affection for her. It is endearing to read his sentence, "I also remember hearing her loving voice calling her cat, Tommy Tucker, late at night: 'Here, Tucky-tuckytuck!'"

That said, I doubt if Miss Marcum would have been successful if she advocated ideas contrary to mainstream attitudes. She was no maverick nor activist. Also, expressing feelings was not in vogue in the Rolfe area in her lifetime. And not being able to express them can take its toll. In that regard, I feel sorry for her, if indeed, she could not fully be herself.

Death of a chicken

I had intended to plant onions after drafting the above material. But when I went outside, I was shocked to see that one of my laying hens, Goldie, was lying dead in the straw of the chicken run on the side of the garage. She had seemed vibrantly plucky in the last few days.

I never questioned until now, several hours after discovering she was dead, whether it was appropriate to say she was lying peacefully. How would I ever know what she was thinking when she made the "great transition?" How do we ever know what a pet is thinking about life or us, their owners. As I think of it, she did look comfortable. There was no smell, no mess, no blood, no excretions.

During high school, I raised chickens for 4-H. However, I knew little about what I was doing with the 80 chicks that I bought at Beckord's Hatchery in Rolfe and housed in an old shed on the farm. There were times when I would go to the shed and find a dead, young bird that looked unappealing in ways that I will not describe here. Luckily, that was not the case with Goldie.

Goldie and the other four chicks that I got 11 months ago had become my pets, or perhaps even my friends. And I have been proud to be part of the backyard chicken movement.

I had been aware of the pros and cons of naming chickens and treating them as pets. However, I followed the suggestion of a long-time friend, Joy, and named my five after the chickens in *Cheltenham's Party*, a Golden Book. I had Goldie (a Buff Orpington), Agnes (a Barred Rock), Rita Jane (a Rhode Island Red), Lacey (a Gold Star), and Houdina (a Black Australorp.) It was intriguing to watch them overcome developmental challenges and learning about the dynamics among my five siblings, my parents, and me by watching and reflecting on the interactions among the chickens.

I am reminded of an early trauma that I accidentally inflicted on Goldie. At the time, she was a young, fuzzy chick with a dried wad of poop on her bottom. I had talked with Marilyn, a friend who had been the poultry adviser for her 4-H club near Roland. She said I needed to wipe the wad off soon. When I finally got around to the task and pulled gently with a moist towel, it would not do the job. Then I tugged. And oh my, I was shocked to see that I had pulled off Goldie's fanny feathers. I thought that for sure, I had created a vulnerable patch of skin and Goldie would die of infection or shock. But I called Marilyn, and she said not to worry. It took only minutes, and Goldie seemed on with life.

Goldie was a gorgeous blonde with long feathers—some that fluffed about like a yellow chiffon skirt in the wind. Occasionally, I let my chickens roam in the large yard for what I call "supervised field trips." When hen I tried to catch and put them back in the pen, they, especially my foxy Goldie, would run me in circles. Did she know I enjoyed our game even though it was frustrating at times?

Perhaps, late this morning, there was a clue that something was wrong. I intended to move the chickens from the small, fenced area next to the garage to a larger pen near the garden. It's my standard procedure, but if a chicken is in a hen box, waiting to lay an egg, I leave her alone and move her later.

Goldie was nesting in the straw on the ground, bathing in the sunshine next to the garage. I thought her behavior was peculiar. I even said, "Now, Goldie, don't go starting a new trend of laying eggs there in the straw rather than in your laying box." But I left her there where she could have access, if she wanted, to the laying boxes in the garage. Later, when I finished writing the first part of this piece, checked on the chickens, and discovered she was no longer of this world—she was only a foot away from where I had last seen her.

Having pets

I got my five baby chicks when they were three days old at the end of last May. I got my two cats, a mother and her grown daughter, last August.

I have often thought about my grief when I was in fourth grade and my dog Dandy died. She (or was it he) was a plain, rust-colored, not-so-tall dog. When I arrived home on the school bus one day, I was told that Dandy had followed the tractor and equipment to the field and had been run over. I was upset but don't remember the details of how I expressed myself. But I do remember Mother asking why I was more emotional about the death of a dog than the deaths of people.

During my months of being a new pet owner, I have reflected on the fact that, unless something tragic were to happen to me, I would outlive my chickens and cats (Micah and Shimmer). I am not a stranger to death, especially after Mother died 2004, but I have gotten sentimental, thinking that my pets would predecease me. You could call it regression—that my inner child still has a lot of growing and healing to do in terms of losing a dog such as Dandy.

By the way, people have asked, and I have responded that I will not butcher and eat my chickens but let them live to old age. That decision has its own set of challenges.

I wonder what I learned about death and grief from the Rolfe Presbyterian Church—the congregation I was raised in. I draw a blank except to say that we were never taught about the value of knowing our feelings and having avenues to express them.

I wonder what Miss Marcum taught her boys in Sunday school about feelings. I also wonder what wisdom she had gleaned from studying the classics that would apply to dealing with grief. Surely, someone who could translate and lead class discussions on Homer's *Iliad and Odyssey* and who was an expert in English literature, would not be a lightweight. She often told us, in an unsentimental tone, about how every empire in the history of the world had fallen from power and that the same would happen to the United States. Talk about a sobering message that we Rolfe students didn't quite believe and certainly didn't want to hear.

I also wonder how she dealt with the death of her cats. Certainly, in her 86 years, she must have had several generations of cats come and go in her home. And she would have seen many generations of students come and go at school. How she grieve the death of her cats and students who predeceased her? Did she allow herself to regress and honor her inner child? Heck, she probably would scoff at the term "inner child." Did she have close friends who consoled her?

Fortunately, I have some fine friends I can confide in.

But first, after seeing that Goldie was dead, I called Ames Animal Control. The officer was warm, matter-of-fact, and understanding. When I asked, she said I could bury Goldie on my property, but the city requires a three-foot, deep hole. Then I thought about taking a shovel and inviting friends to go to a farm north of Ames to have a ritual honoring Goldie and bury her there. I even fantasized about placing a temporary, white wooden cross, at her grave. But at the time, no one was available to go with me, and I could not reach the people who owned the farm. So I wrapped Goldie in a burlap bag and put her in a cool spot in the garage.

When I called a friend, who had given me my cats and has a degree in animal science, she was wonderfully sympathetic. There was no scolding, like in "What did you do wrong?" When she stopped by after work, we sat on the cracked and pocked concrete in the driveway while she gently and thoroughly examined Goldie's body to see if there were clues about how she died. There were none. Like much that is related to death, the cause of Goldie's demise is a mystery.

I liked my friend's combination of nurturing support and pragmatism. I liked her recognition that Goldie meant a lot to me, but on the other hand, that death happens, pets die, and their corpses need to be dealt with. She agreed to dispose of Goldie. I opened the burlap wrapping and took one last look at my golden girl before sending her with my friend.

I told Goldie that she had brought me a lot of fun and meaning. I didn't say the exact words, "Good bye." But that's what I meant. And I hoped that Goldie knew I had meant her well in this life and that I also wished her well in her journey—if indeed chickens have a soul that continues on when they are no longer physically present.

Also, I will have the opportunity, if I want to take it, to light a "milestone" candle at the UU Fellowship during the Sunday morning program and tell the congregation that Goldie had died. And I know people there, young and old, would understand and value the lighting of that candle. I don't know as there ever was a similar opportunity in the Rolfe church, and I am not sure what Miss Marcum would think about a church ritual honoring the life and death of a chicken.

I'd like to think that just maybe, she would wish that she could have had some of the opportunities I have had. But that is imaginary and wishful thinking. Even so, it's fun to fantasize and reflect on these kinds of things.

May Miss Marcum, her cats, her students who have died, Mother, my Dandy and Goldie rest in peace.



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