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Dear Brother: Don’t tell anybody but I have recently passed the Scriptural age of three score and ten.

Not that it really matters except to a few people in heaven who had steadily predicted that I would never make it; Teacher Prokopy and Grandpa Hueschen for example. They always viewed my future with dismaying dimness, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Somehow I always managed to come down to their expectations.

And yet, there is a solemnity about the coming of three score and ten which threatens to be overwhelming. Toward evening, at sundown, I find myself more and more at our window to the west watching for the glory of the setting sun or the distant thunder of a coming storm. More than ever I seem to wait for evidences of finality, intimations of mortality.

There is great danger in this. I am tempted to transfer the evidence of waning in my own life to the obvious changes in the world and in the church. Confronted by the nearness of my own end I am tempted to apply the intimations of mortality in my own body to the world and to the Church. This is the pressing shadow over my eyes.

It is easy to read the present state of the world and the Church in terms of finality, even eschatology. Surely the signs of decay and mortality are upon us. It seems to be the hour of twilight and dusk.

Now, the reading of the future depends on our understanding of the present. Here with the intimations of my own mortality upon me I submit that our reading of our age has often been tragically wrong. It is a part of the shadowy character of our time that we hear some strange references to “Old Missouri.” “If we would only become like ‘Old Missouri’” — “Our fathers” — “If the St. Louis Seminary would only walk in the steps of ‘Old Missouri’ all would be well.” This, I submit, is a semantic hoax. It rests on an obvious misunderstanding of “Old Missouri.” At the age of three score and ten I can claim to remember some of it first-hand. I spent my youth with “Old Missouri.” Today the term is gravely misunderstood.

For many the total picture of 1971 is an invitation to continuing fear. This is one of the basic marks of an un-Lutheran, unscriptural fundamentalism. It is a fear of the life of the committed mind, a suspicion of the free, joyous working of the Holy Spirit which becomes, silently and overnight, a total view of life. Our brethren who have been troubled by this reading of God and of the times are not happy people. They have lost the joy in believing which Luther finally found and which basically separated him from Calvin. Luther could never become the dour hunter of heresies in Philip’s Department of Exegesis.

It is in the context of the correct reading of our times that the days of our years become most significant. I have read more lately about “Old Missouri,” the greatness of the “fathers,” their loyalty to the “Word,” and so on. All of this is true but horribly misunderstood. My three score and ten years enable me to remember “Old Missouri.” I remember Pfotenhauer, Pieper, Fuerbringer, my own grandfathers, Dallmann, J. A. Friedrich, Herman Daib, L. Buchheimer, Wm. Schoenfeld, H. B. Hemmeter, and many others. I remember them very clearly because I loved them as great men in the Kingdom. I heard Pfotenhauer often from New York to Denver, Dallmann on the same Circuit, Pieper at River Forest in 1929. They were giants and not the petty, mean heroes of a much smaller generation. They were the heralds of a new dawn in America and American Lutheranism — calm, courageous defenders of the Truth delivered to them by unseen hands over the new and challenging prairies of America. Yes, there were spots and stains on the heritage — German stubbornness, mistaking German culture for Lutheran doctrine, unexpected isolationism, but there was in none of them the fearful, hateful separatism so evident in the new fundamentalism. I still look with joy and pride to the Ft. Wayne, St. Louis, Frankenmuth, and Perry County fathers. These were really the “Old Missouri” which at its best wrote a chapter of Christendom of which we should not be ashamed.

And so we weathered a troubled century of the Church. It is significant to note that in the general problems of Protestantism the individual parish of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod stood largely untouched. Waves of modernism threatened to wash over churches but the Lutheran parish stood firm and clear. Now and then we had a pale imitation heresy trial but nothing very basic and serious. Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, gained and held a worldwide reputation for strength on the basis of its graduates scattered as good seed beyond the prairies to the islands and continents of the world. The Lutheran parish, by the strange grace of the Lord of the Church, remained aloof from the normal confusions of a changing world.

Please note well, brother, that I emphasize the parish level in the story of our quiet life in the nineteenth century. It is on the denominational level that we have run into trouble. The heresy problems of Stoeckhardt and Pieper, as outlined in recent issues of the Concordia Historical Quarterly, were not the kind that required a nationwide war chest of $100,000 or a special publication called Die Christliche Nachricht. Dr. Walther could attend Grabau’s church without special news reports in Der Lutherer. True, “Old Missouri” was not all peaceful. Even I can recall pastoral conferences in which Dallmann, Zeile, Voss, and others rumbled and roared like the New York subway. But beyond the eloquence and vehemence of the debates there was a peace, a deep inner peace, which descended over us like an undeserved benediction. It was as if God were telling us that despite our obvious weaknesses He had a love for us which was infinitely wider, greater, and deeper than our fluttering faith. “Old Missouri!” Let no one with hate in his heart and fatal fear in his life speak to me of “Old Missouri” as a harbor of suspicious separatism. It sometimes acted that way.
especially at general conventions (which, in Missouri, are normally unpredictable) but the parish heart of “Old Missouri” was always strong and good.

Missouri’s history in the 19th century was woven of strangely interwoven skeins. Is it blasphemous to say that one of these was the famous Missourian sense of humor? Our fathers knew who they were and what they were about with a humble, almost deprecating, awareness of their place in the ongoing incongruity of history — the defiant work of the Holy Spirit being done by singularly small, inept tools. In a score of meetings over the years I saw this basic, essential humility before God appear at critical moments, usually at the end of long discussions. There were the times when a patriarch already humorous with the long view of heaven would point to the dangers of judging too hastily and failing to see the long footsteps of God. Except in Dallmann’s case, or Eckhardt’s, these delicate theological observations were presented in German, a fact which makes the task of the latter-day-historian almost impossible. How can I translate the kindly tone of voice and twinkling of the eye in Engelder, whose kind eyes viewed also the theological world with amused detachment? How can I reproduce the lurking humor in Pieper when he observed that the solemn deliberations of the “Verteilungs-Kommission” in 1928 would be straightened out by hordes of mothers-in-law?

Surely these were not heresy-hunters or even the ancestors of heresy-hunters. They could get mad, but at such characters as Karlstadt and Muenzer, men who unbalanced divine truth by overplaying one part of it. Our fathers were deeply aware of the potential heresy of the exclusive emphasis and therefore had no use for theological enthusiasm of the kind manifested by the strange collection of non-Lutherans now appearing in our extracurricular journals. Always their sense of humor came to the earthly rescue of their theological balance. To make the identity of Jonah’s fish the sine-qua-non of eternal salvation was not only wrong — but ludicrous. God gave us the ability to laugh — and this part of “Old Missouri” life we have largely lost.

It is also painful to see the subversion and distortion of words which seem to accompany these intramural quarrels. I know that both sides are complaining of this and well they might. This does not eliminate the tragi-comedy of the misuse and abuse of words in our current hassles. Before we examine our theology, therefore, we must look closely at our semantics. Someone has said that every change in our corporate life begins with the perversion of words. Is there yet integrity and honesty in our use of words? Even simple and obvious ones? To start as simply as we can: What does the word Synod mean? To be sure, it is now asked among us with qualifiers: e.g., a brother approaches me with a fratricidal gleam in his eye: “Are you still loyal to Synod?” What does this mean? Agreement with a resolution adopted in 1928 in the last few minutes of a hectic session at which Sauerbraten fell off the sled at the first turn? Is my orthodoxy to be entirely measured by my Grandfather’s description of the circumstances surrounding the adoption of that resolution?

Or consider the horrible, evasive words “liberal” and “conservative.” Was it the Mad Hatter in Alice in Wonderland who presented the classic rule: “Words mean what I say they mean”? By the way, it is an interesting hermeneutical footnote to our present troubles that almost all the words we argue about are non-Biblical. St. Paul, bless his “Old Missouri” heart, never used the terms “liberal” or “conservative” against his detractors in Corinth or in Rome.

That old melodrama — the perversion of words has a heady fascination for reformers and pseudo-reformers alike. As I said at the beginning of these notes, I have now reached the age of three score and ten and yet I have never, until now, heard such strange words applied to brothers who sat near me at the Sem and learned more than I did. Last week a new one popped up. Some of my brethren were called “deviates.” The word has ugly, sexual overtones and I first thought that I was reading a text on abnormal psychology rather than a theological statement. But there it was: “Brother Fuerchtenicht, the counselor from Zion, is a ‘deviate.’ ”

There are other twisted words, torn and broken, in the synodical arena before us: orthodox, loyal, free, authentic — “Words mean what I say they mean” — or more apt and true: “If ye continue in my Word, ye are my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” Words! That last adjective is stunning in its devastating dismissal of all those who use words lightly, who read in them the confusing reflection of their own theological misunderstandings and fears. That last word is “free” — not “orthodox” or “safe” — but free with the splendid, joyous freedom of the Spirit of God. As I have indicated, that freedom and joy is largely missing in our present screaming, our investigations, and our hates.

And yet — I was almost ready to give up my pen. This, I said to myself, is just another small tempest in a small teapot — a momentary squall in a little denomination which will have a hard time explaining its latter days on Judgment Day. In that mood, thank heaven, I ran across an older churchman who had played a leading role in a similar intramural fight in another denomination about thirty years ago. He came out on the winning side (if there ever is a “winning” side) but there were tears in his eyes when he remembered the time. “O.P., I hope you will never see the bitterness, the agony, the pain of a denominational fight like this. Families split apart, sons not speaking to their fathers, parishes in fellowship not talking to each other — an atmosphere of loneliness, hate, separation. I know and respect the Missouri Synod. I hope that this will never happen to you.” He turned to the window from which he could see our Chapel across the road. Then and there I decided that ours was finally more than a problem of semantics. There was another sound in my quiet room, not new but very old and very true: “Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do.”

With that I felt that I should let the matter rest. It was a sullen spring evening, and my thoughts turned to my good brother who, I know, had been having trouble with Sauerbraten again. For him, wrestling for Sauerbraten’s soul this night, the emanations from St. Louis and Chicago were only the faint echoes of a distant row somewhere on Olympus. My good brother’s troubled thoughts this spring night had to do with Sauerbraten’s latest lapses from righteousness rather than with the dubious existence of a man whom we have irreverently given the name “Deutero-Isaiah.” Thinking of Sauerbraten’s socially accepted sins my troubled brother remembered the Isaiah who wrote about “One who was despised and rejected” just because of men like Sauerbraten. Who wrote that famous sentence was much less important this spring night of 1971 than the sinning reality of Sauerbraten who caused it to be written.
A few months ago I took off for Orlando, Florida, to spend a few days with the counselors of the Florida-Georgia District. They gathered at their beautiful District Headquarters, a striking mansion in the heart of Orlando. Somebody had seen the value of good real estate. I went down there somewhat skeptically because someone had once told me that the Gospel had never been really successful in the subtropics. Life in those blessed areas, with palms and oranges and bananas and blue water, was just too good and comfortable to permit people to get interested in another world. Christianity had not succeeded in that climate since St. Augustine. I should have known better. At least Lutheranism really fits under the palms and the magnolias. The brethren in Florida and Georgia (and Southern California) have built beautiful churches, in most cases fitting snugly into their immediate surroundings, active parishes, lively schools.

There I luxuriated for a few days and enjoyed every minute. What pleased me most deeply was that here were some brethren who had not lost their sense of humor. Was there, I wondered, some unique connection between their obvious success and their joyous laughter? I must admit that under a whispering palm in Orlando, St. Louis seemed very far away and the land of microphones and accusing tape-recorders seemed to be on another planet. Perhaps this was the reason for the bubbling humor of the brethren.

Official sample of the Florida fanciful humor from the District paper: A brother who was very much interested in books ran into an unbookish acquaintance who had just thrown away an old Bible which had been packed in his attic for many years. He mentioned it. "Who printed it?" the brother asked. "Somebody named Gutenberg," recalls the man with an effort. "Not Gutenberg!" gasped the brother. "You idiot, you've thrown away one of the first books ever printed. A copy sold at auction for over $400,000." The man was unmoved. "My copy wouldn't have brought a dime," he answered firmly. "Some guy named Martin Luther had scribbled all over it."

I looked up from my notes and saw a bit of paper under the door. I investigated and found the following note from Theophilus. He must have been in a hurry to be somewhere else. Here is his epistle:

Dear O.P.,

I have set aside this evening, the eve of your seventieth birthday, for the remembrance of things past but not forgotten, especially these past thirty-three years of our comradeship in the Quartermaster Corps of the Church Militant.

You were a five-star general and I a sergeant first class, but we wear many of the same campaign ribbons. Do you remember the bloody Battle of the Dance? There was that fellow whom old Reggie called "The Master Barber" charging all over the place uncovering concupiscence in every fox-trot and a veritable sinkhole of mental fornication at Valparaiso University. The Church almost lost a university in that battle. Sadly, we did lose some very fine young people who refused to submit their thoughts and motives to the libidinous judgments of a vocal element of the officer corps.

And how about the Liturgical Movement? As I look back on that campaign tonight, I realize that we actually lost it, even though at the time we seemed to have won. We were accused of Romanizing tendencies when actually all that most of our men were committed to was Anglican gents wear. We got the cassocks and surplices and stoles, but only a few of our best men made it to those theological heights that entitled them to be called High Churchmen, that is, men who had a high vision of the Church in its true holy, catholic, and apostolic nature. And we neutralized their force by labeling them and treating them as amiable eccentrics, to be cherished as living evidence of the tolerance of a church body better known for its intolerance of dissent.

And then — remember? — there was the Great Evangelical Dust-up which we old-timers will always associate with the first use (by the other side) of atomic hermeneutics. We took some grievous losses in that battle — two or three generations of promising young scientists and scholars who left our division rather than assent to what was, to them, a lie. Happily, there were other divisions of the Church that were glad to receive them. Unhappily, not all who were driven out from among us found their way into these other divisions.

And finally, not to dwell too long on battles long past and almost forgotten, there was the Race Riot with Mad Andy Schulze and his Special Services boys infiltrating blacks and reds and yellows and wogs and dagoes and chinos into the pure Aryan ranks of the Missouri Uhlans. You were the first officer of flag rank to legitimate these operations, and if you had nothing else to be grateful for as you pass your seventieth milestone you ought to be profoundly grateful for the grace that led you to the side of the angels on this issue.

Well, enough reminiscing. Your memory, I know, goes back even farther — to the Wilderness Campaign Against Life Insurance, the Heroic Defense of Betrothal, and the Chinese Term Disorders. There has apparently never been a time when our division of the Church Militant was not involved in some sort of bloody action — usually with more casualties among our own ranks than within the ranks of the Enemy — and I presume that those who come after us will find their own occasions to turn upon their brethren.
And that brings me to the subject of Milwaukee. No, O.P., not even the prospect of sharing your room at the Y tempts me away from my little section of the perimeter into that futile maneuver. Judging by the Convention Workbook, I might be taking my life in my hand if I ventured into that assembly of angry men who have found in the American Lutheran Church an enemy worthy of their steel. What if the word got out that I have been shamelessly fellowshipping with any Christian I can find in my dark corner of the deep Midwest? No. You go, and write me a nice long letter about what happened. Or better still, stop over on your way home and give me the whole story with gestures.

One final, stray thought. I used to think that the old saying about the good dying young meant that good people were not given many years on this earth. Now that you have made it, against all reason and probability, to seventy, I have had to find some other interpretation of that saying and I think I now understand what it really means: that however many years a good man piles up, he never loses his youth. Even in old age he is young, like Moses whose eye was not dimmed nor his natural strength abated. Stay young, O.P., and some of us will grow old less quickly.

Maranatha —
Theophilus

While I was thinking about the convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod at Milwaukee in July one of our unofficial grape-vine tenders told me that Missouri membership in LCUSA would come up for discussion and scrutiny. Now at the age of three score and ten I was dismayed. I foresaw some strange and irrelevant debate. In a sudden self-centered historical fever I checked back on previous issues of these yellow sheets to see what I had said about this issue in the dim past.

There it was — in my notes on our synodical convention at Detroit in 1965. Today, in 1971, I would not change a single word:

LCUSA — And so at 11:50 a.m. on June 23 the Missouri Synod voted to join LCUSA with less than 50 dissenting votes. When the matter was first presented, the air became electric. President Erwin Paul, chairman of the committee, presented the matter with a cool, objective introduction. I was somewhat distressed, I must confess, by the presentation of the seven outstanding theologians who represented Missouri in the consultations with other Lutheran bodies since 1962. There is always an immediate negative reaction when too many big wheels appear at the same time. Theophilus always dives under the table.

The discussion itself was marked by some strange inconsistencies. There was, for example, the brother who began by saying that there had not been time to study the constitution, and so on. Then he spoke for fifteen minutes, demonstrating clearly that he had studied it line by line and knew what it was all about.

Another curious factor in the discussion was the loud voice, about every three minutes: "We have two extremes in Synod, and we must now weed out both." I have long maintained that this is pure fiction. Who and where are the so-called leftists? The left in postmodern Christendom means "denial of the Incarnation, the Holy Trinity, the Authority of Holy Writ, the Resurrection, and so forth." Now — where are these characters in the Missouri Synod? In forty years of wandering around and sitting in parsonages late at night — the moments of complete truth — I have never seen one of these — no, not one. Why do we work so hard to maintain a fiction?

At 11:55 a.m. the welkin rang with Hallelujahs and anguished cries. One group maintained that the millennium had come; another said that Missouri was now on the broad road to hell. To the worried brethren I would say this: These men with whom we now join hands are our real friends. Such men as Fry, Schiotz, Fendt, Rogness, Empie, Preus, Schramm, Malmin, and many others have been close to us in many parts of the life of the Church for a long time. They have been faithful and beloved brethren these many years and our vote at ten minutes to twelve (a significant hour) on June 23 will not change them now. So we are not working with former "opponents." We are joining hands with members of the Body of Christ — and this is very, very good. All we are really doing is what our Lord and the Emmaus disciples did toward evening — we are walking the Way together before night falls.

SECTION FOR AND ABOUT THE BIRDS

This late winter after much debate (mostly inner) I decided on a birdfeeder as my own private contribution to an equitable ecology. After further soul searching I decided to attach it to a telephone post just beyond my study window where I personally could spend my lonely hours watching my feathered friends getting themselves something to eat.

I must now confess that it hasn't worked out as planned. The whole thing is literally and symbolically for the birds. True, they come these warm days and gratefully attack whatever my housekeeper has put in the feeder. I watched them for a few moments; a fugitive from the dull stuff on my desk. But suddenly the process changes. The birds beyond my window become a stately reproduction of the ecclesiastical life as I have known it in the twentieth century. I begin to recognize them; I can almost call them by name. There is the big fellow who stays on the ground below the feeder. He never looks up to see the beauty above him. He is content with the seeds eventually and hopefully dropped by the birdfeeder-box fillers. He is taking no chances. Although he is a bird obviously destined to fly through the air, to be free and lonely in freedom, he prefers to stay on solid earth.
The feeder above him has three openings for birds arranged in a vertical line. I note that the bird at the bottom hole is always nervous, looking around for a better place, higher up the line, or what he considers “higher up” — it may not be at all, but it looks that way. So he watches and waits. Perhaps the guy above him may suddenly fly off — perhaps to become executive secretary of something.

The other two birds at the higher levels are harder to classify. Like most of us, they do unexpected things. I shall report on them at the next synodical convention. They look suspiciously like opportunist.

MEMORY OF “OLD MISSOURI”

In my discussion of “Old Missouri” above I omitted one name — largely because I wanted to devote a special paragraph to him. He is F. J. Lankenau, long a vice president of Synod, one of Missouri’s greatest orators, and a most stimulating representative of “Old Missouri.” A graduate of Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, in the class of 1893, Lankenau first interested me when I heard that he was one of three members of one of the most famous classes in Springfield’s history. The other two were Ernst Berthold and Marcus Wagner, men who became the most prominent preachers in “Old Missouri.” It interested me even more that in 1892-1893 the Springfield Seminary was going through a time of transition. Deaths and removals had reduced the number of men on the faculty to such a point that there were not enough teachers to cover the class of 1893. Result? The Board of Control, bless their “Old Missouri” hearts, resolved that I Sem (the class of 1893) would have no lectures during their entire senior year.

And so it was. The class read books avidly, reported to individual professors regularly, wrote sermons steadily, and kept busy. It has always appeared to me superbly ironical in our day of academic technicians, so many hours of classes per week, grades, and tests, that three of the greatest preachers “Old Missouri” ever produced appeared without benefit of professors or all the other helps we insist upon today. I heard all three of them in their pulpits — and through the nostalgic years I remember them as “great” in every sense of the word.

One of these was Lankenau. Later I came to know him better — as the generous vice president of Synod visiting the classes of a raw beginner, as a good friend, and as an unflagging supporter of young people’s work before it became the faint, blurred echo of government agencies.

And so it came about that in 1939 we invited Lankenau to preach the opening sermon at the Walther League convention in Kansas City. He had been very ill and I consulted the venerable president, J. W. Behnken, before I extended the invitation. (We did that in those days.) We agreed that he could do the job, he accepted, and we found the most comfortable way to get him to Kansas City where we anchored him in a cool room.

On Saturday afternoon before the convention we held a resolutions committee meeting on the mezzanine of the hotel. A page reported: “Dr. Lankenau insists on coming downstairs.” A few moments later there was a commotion outside the door of the room, and out in the hall we found Lankenau stretched out on a mezzanine couch. I knelt beside him and desperately began to whisper the Twenty-third Psalm over his unconscious form. A few minutes later his breathing stopped. I knew then that there had been no need for the desperation in my whispering. He had been very tired and was now ready to come home.

And so his ministry ended — on a couch in a modern hotel surrounded by the wondering young people whom he had come so far to serve. Here was “Old Missouri” — loyal, devoted, loving — and in his face, now white with the strange whiteness of death, I saw the great strength of his past and the beckoning promise of a future made possible by his devotion. Now at three score and ten, and after an additional thirty years since that hot July day in 1939, I see no reason for being disloyal to his memory or marring his image as a compelling reminder of “Old Missouri.” He died as he had lived, not a synodical investigator or official, but a singleminded preacher of the Gospel.

And so we go to Milwaukee in the protecting and beckoning hands of “Old Missouri.” Once they spoke the most devastating criticism of life in America and provided an answer which, now in 1971, is still good and strong and true. It was an answer which recognized the farthest and final truth about man and the Universe, the sweep of the human soul into the presence of God through the love of a Cross which is still new and so late the excellent glory of our ministry.

“Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar. And he laid it upon my mouth and said, 'Lo, this hath touched thy lips and thine iniquity is taken away and thy sin is purged.' ”

Let Milwaukee be a convention of forgiveness — forgiveness of our pride, our strange forgetting of our heritage, our misunderstanding of “Old Missouri.” It will then be the live coal which we shall bring, please God, to an altar higher than our own.

As ever,

O. P. Kretzmann