

The Vintage Voice

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■ April 2007

In Memoriam

The Rev. Frank Carson Knebel

“. . . that we, being renewed both in body and mind . . .”
(The collect for Easter)

Of the four most gifted instructors I studied under during my checkered learning career, three, including the late Sam Garrett, were part of the faculty of Church Divinity School of the Pacific in the mid 1950s. The fourth was Dr. Raymond Alf, a wiry, middle-aged polymath who taught the Natural Sciences at the private prep school I attended in the 1940s. With an earned Ph.D. in Biology, a number of honorary degrees in disparate and self-taught fields such as Paleontology and Geology, and an all-consuming zeal to communicate the wonders of evolution, he was the finest teacher I ever knew. Arguably, he was also the most truly spiritual.

Today the Alf Museum, constructed on the Webb School campus in Claremont, east of Los Angeles, and named in his honor, boasts one of the world's finest collections of fossil trackways, huge sandstone slabs preserving the footprints of dinosaurs and other ancient fauna collected from the American badlands. The largest, sometimes more than ten or twelve feet high when standing on end, line the walls of the central display area like a displaced Stonehenge, monuments to the wonders of life on earth and eternal human curiosity.

Elsewhere, if memory serves, there is an ascending wrought-iron spiral, a flat coil perhaps forty feet long, representing the known universe since its explosive beginning some ten to fifteen billion years ago. Elegantly scripted legends mark its milestones, far apart at first, then increasingly crowded as the pace of evolution quickens: the first nebulae, galaxies and planets, the appearance of primordial life in the oceans, the first vertebrates to colonize the land, and, ultimately, the emergence of the first primates. From within this many-branched family tree, there would ultimately develop, besides the great apes, *Homo neanderthalensis* (Neanderthal Man), *Homo sapiens* (Cro-Magnon Man), and, finally, doubly-wise man, *Homo sapiens sapiens* . . . us.

According to Science, we are the last of our kind, the single surviving species of genus *Homo*. According to classic Christian theology, it is through one of us that God has chosen to jump-start a faltering creation. Truly, we have our work cut out for us.

At the tip of the spiral, a final signpost notes the passage of some seventeen thousand years since the first Cro-Magnon shamans carried flaring torches deep in the Stygian blackness of European caves to paint Edenic masterpieces of sympathetic magic on their walls. This currently open-ended period is represented by a thin layer of dust, easily blown away.

Classes in this remarkable environment with this even more remarkable man were a true adventure and challenge, and our days spent peering through high-powered microscopes at the teeming primordial life forms, freshly dipped from the school Koi pool, would arouse both instructor and student to new heights of enthusiasm. Even the simplest of animate creatures were seen as rife with cosmic overtones. “The secret of life,” Dr. Alf would proclaim at least once a day, “is in POND WOTAH!” An intensely creative academic, he would, for example, without losing a sentence in his lecture, illustrate the principle of brachiation (the use of the gibbon's long arms for swinging through the trees) with a spontaneous leap toward the low pipe-lined ceiling where he would casually chin himself . . . with one hand.

Always, his transparent amazement at the gibbon, the protozoa, the round worm, the butterfly, and the nightmare beasts that once shook the earth where Rapid City, South Dakota, now stands, assumed an ultimate Author of it all. Often as not, a new student 'discovery' would bring forth a loud cry of "*Laudate Deo!*" followed by a classic Latin aphorism or a quotation from Shakespeare.

What Ray Alf's denominational affiliation was, I do not know, but his religious and proverbial Latin was not a major clue. At Webb School, chapel and Latin were required, including memorization of the alleged, "Speech of Spartacus": "*O socii! Romani non sunt aequi! Puer eram in opido meo, et vita gratia semper erat.*" Most of the instructors had at least a passing knowledge of the subject, and thus Ray's endless supply of Ciceronian platitudes and Biblical quotations did not carry the assumption of a Catholic upbringing. Such exultations were simply spontaneous explosions of a poetic heart and an educated mind, expressions of both Divine and humanistic joy, far removed from the sterile, self-aggrandizing formularies of the televangelists.

In the Gospel According To Alf, each day carried with it a Divine dimension, an affirmation of the millions of years of Creation which had preceded it, an opportunity, then as now, for Easter-like renewal, a celebration of life to be savored and investigated. Creation was not to be confused with God Himself, the book for the Author, the art for the Artist.

This respect for Creation as a whole was essentially indistinguishable from his respect for the gift of learning . . . and for the individual learner. Even within a highly selective and carefully screened student body, there was always the outstanding scholar . . . and the class dolt. The former was often allotted special projects, sometimes leading to national science awards. The dolt was provided with extra help. Everyone knew who was scholar and who was dolt. And no one cared, for, besides the Divinely-directed exultation of "*Laudate Deo!*", Ray's second target of praise were the students themselves, and rare was the week when each of the latter did not receive his most heart-felt plaudit, "Good boy!"

This pattern continued over the years. In his later life, he was an inveterate correspondent, keeping up with scholar and dolt alike. Probably categorized as a 'quasi-dolt' among the 'old boys,' I was always extremely grateful when Ray Alf chose to respond to some natural science article I had presumptuously sent him to comment on. Always there was a note of positive encouragement. Once, eight years after leaving Webb School, I received a note acknowledging the news of my Ordination which had appeared in the local paper. "Good boy!" it said.

If an admittedly inaccurate memory serves, Raymond Alf died approximately a decade ago, well into his 90th year, still giving tours of his namesake museum.

Even with my distaste for insipidly literal "streets of gold" depictions of heaven, with St. Peter and a back-up band of trumpeters and harpists greeting saintly souls at the Golden Gates, it is not a real stretch for me to envision Ray's arrival at the Great Throne, an exemplary human being laden with wisdom and honors. White-haired and balding, muscles still stiff from fifty trips in and out of the Grand Canyon, he would nonetheless be carrying his battered geologist's hammer and books by Darwin, ancient Romans, and Biblical scholars, his eyes already darting about for a site to commence a new "dig," and a spot to set up class.

And God would watch him approach, and nod familiarly, and greet him with the well-deserved words, "Good boy!"



The Rev. Frank Carson Knebel is a retired priest living in San Diego, attempting to jump-start a renewed career as a writer. Both his sons and six grandchildren, by last count, live in Phoenix. The eldest is founder and CEO of a burgeoning music and entertainment business, and the younger holds a Doctorate in Aquatic Biology and teaches at a local community college.