



What Dad Never Taught Me

By Jerry Woodfill



What did my dad ever teach me? I inventoried sports - never taught me anything about baseball, basketball, or golf, the sports I enjoyed. Though he'd been a collegiate tennis champion, he'd not seen fit to impart his knowledge to me. In fact, I taught him the finer strokes of ping-pong, a sport akin to tennis. Wouldn't you have thought, since he'd played trumpet, had his own dance band, and was also a virtuoso of the sax, he would have schooled me in these instruments of his youth? No, he'd paid an instructor for my weekly trumpet lessons.

My joy as a parent of two sons was the opposite. Honing their basketball skills was a passion. It consumed me such that I coached both their YMCA teams in back-to-back practices. Likewise, I taught their Sunday school classes for eight years on the basis that I would only teach if both boys, though two grades apart could be in my class. (The superintendent agreed. They were short of teachers, and, besides, I was the superintendent.)

When the older boy lost focus in High School Trig making an F, I authored a curriculum for one. My class of one went from F to A in six weeks. (His instructor cited this as some sort of academic miracle.) Likewise, the younger lad was deemed by his third grade teacher as math challenged, certainly, not college material. Teaching him nightly, assisted by his adjunct instructor, my wife Betty, he earned a BS Degree in mechanical engineering.

When the oldest boy seemed drawn to the guitar, I'd become his instructor till his interest ebbed. Yet, Dad had not shown such interest. To his credit, he was not living his life through my successes as, perhaps, I was through my sons. Why, had my Dad been so unlike me?

Searching the inventory of memories a half century past turned up nothing Dad had mentored his son to do. There was nothing automotive, academic, mechanical, electrical, or practical he gave instruction to in my behalf. Surely, there must be one thing. Then, a sentence came to mind from this wearisome sojourn into the past -

"'Twas midnight on the ocean, not a streetcar was in sight..."

Dad had taught me a poem! And not any poem. One of almost a half dozen verses. Could I still recite it - though my teacher schooled it to me fifty years ago? Quickly, I scribed the verses on scrap paper:

'Twas Midnight on the ocean, Not a streetcar was in sight, I walked into a cigar store, And asked to borrow a light.

The man behind the counter, Was a woman old and grey, Who use to peddle peanuts, On the road to Mandalay.

All her children were orphans, Except one little tot, Who lived across the wayside, Above a vacant lot.

While the organ pealed potatoes, Lard was rendered by the choir, The sextant wrung the dish rag, The church was set on fire.

Women and children first he cried, As he passed his plate for more, Now his head resembles heaven, For there was no more parting there.

Amazing, not a word missed! My memory ripped it off, like a machine-gun picking off Iraqi terrorists. But did I have it right? Unfortunately, neither Dad nor I had

written it down. It was one of those folk-lore things, passed from generation to generation, word of mouth like. He told me his father, Jared the second, taught him the poem. Dad's grandfather, Jared, the first, had taught it to Dad's father.

But were the words accurate? To my astonishment, one of those vast question and answer Internet web sites polled the entire electronic world of countless millions and found no one with the accurate wording in its entirety. Dad had left his mark, not in passing along academic, athletic, and artistic skill. He had made me, perhaps, the sole repository of a ridiculous poem. I was the Library of Alexandria's remnant of poetry, after the fire, the resurrection of "'Twas Midnight on the Ocean..." Thank you Dad.

Perhaps, that's what Dad passed on to me, a strange penchant for memorizing puzzles, poems, and passages as well as lyrics, limericks, and lists. This, among other traits, set me apart as a Brantwoodian. No Freudian analyst can ever logically explain the bizarre things my inner id compels me to memorize. Perhaps, it's a competitive passion. Remember the Rubik's Cube, that multicolored block of movable cubes within a cube whose challenge was having each side the same color after moving the hellish little single colored mini-cubes in the correct order?

Through heroic rote practice of a solution given in a learned text, I averaged times of 25 seconds. On occasion, I nearly achieved a world record. A recent Cal-Tech tournament classed 25 second averages as world class competitors. Surely, no Hessvillites could ascend to these elevated Rubik's heights. I pursued valedictory acclaim among Highland's Redeemer Lutheran Church catechumens (eight in number). This led to reciting the Bible's sixty-six books flawlessly. Such earned me the coveted *Praying Hand Award*. In later life, I challenged neophyte Bible Bowl boys and girls at my Methodist church to recitation contests. I offered a five dollar reward to those who could best my 22 second time in calling out those sixty-six books. One child burst into tears, losing to me. Instantly, I became Satan personified, in the view of her parents.

So much for that idea as an evangelism tool. "But does this gift of yours make any money?" My wife often questioned.

"No, it never has!" "Dad. Thanks a lot."

To recover the respect of my Sunday school children, I became a biblical thespian. Taking on the persona of the likes of Gideon, the boy David, Goliath, and Paul required a wardrobe. My wife's brown bathrobe, worn inside out by inserting my arms so that the opening was in the back like a hospital frock, became my Old Testament tunic. Her sleeves were a half foot shorter than mine. This made my exposed forearms quite authentic as far as my students were concerned. Of course, her silver winter scarf wrapped several times around my forehead became Gideon's headwear.

I used a water balloon concealed in a fox-fur as a fleeing trick. Remember the story about the wet fleece being a sign of divine instruction? When I squeezed that fur, I broke the water-balloon. The flood of water might as well have been a tidal wave in the sight of those bug-eyed kids.

They'd never forget that story for the rest of their lives. Nor would I. The bursting balloon soaked through my tunic into my church clothes so that it looked like I'd urinated on myself. Happily, it dried quickly. I'd been scheduled to usher that day, and they would have been one short for the offertory. Fortunately, a church friend, liked the idea of theatric Sunday school ministry and assumed my role. Henceforth, I called on him for such performances. But when my sons graduated from Sunday School, I retired as a biblical mimic completely.

Nevertheless, that thing of which Hollywood's finest evolve burned within my theatrical being. I must pursue this latent gift for the good of all mankind. I'm uncertain when, how, or why another one of those inexplicable projects struck. As always, it offered no monetary rewards - only the satisfaction of inspiring the nation's youth. In this case, not in ecclesiastical endeavors, but, perhaps, in a related realm - to voyage among the stars - through a NASA career.

I'd gathered my art supplies to sketch a scene along the Chicago River, a few blocks from the Chicago Art Museum. Stepping onto the Michigan Avenue sidewalk turning north, I saw a southbound motorcade approaching. Police cars with lights swirling and several stretched limos passed. Their destination was only a short block west, within a few minutes walk.

And that's what I did. Postponing my creative outdoor assignment, I walked within listening distance of Presidential Candidate Richard Nixon's whistle stop speech to by-standers in the Chicago Loop. Indeed, I was impressed by the rhetoric, the emotion, the passion Nixon seemed to possess, akin, to that talk I heard by the Lt. Governor of Indiana visiting Lincoln School. Surely, he would defeat Senator John Kennedy in the fall. But he didn't.

Again, I was on the wrong side. First Dewey, now Nixon. I bet those Hessville steelworkers were responsible. Dad and Mom were aghast. First Truman over Dewey, now their beloved Ike Eisenhower's protégé Nixon's loss to another Democrat. Mom always felt threatened by Catholic folk, having one as president didn't sit well. But, for the first time, I began to see differently. Especially impressive were President Kennedy's televised speeches. He presented himself, his ideas, and his dreams for our nation in a charismatic fashion that won me over.

(September 12, 1962) Now, it was John Kennedy, not Richard Nixon speaking about his dream, "As we set sail (for the Moon), I ask God's blessing on the most hazardous, and dangerous, and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked."

While 40,000 cheered his speech in Rice Stadium, I looked on, vowing to be part of the endeavor. And I was. Forty years later, long since Armstrong made the "first step" I recalled the President's passion on that day, how it set the course for the Moon, but, more importantly (for me, that is), my life's work.

"Couldn't I inspire others, especially youth, like President Kennedy had inspired me forty years ago?" Like I had once memorized Dad's poem, "'Twas midnight on the ocean not a streetcar was in sight," neighbors heard me talking to myself walking the neighborhood before work, memorizing and reciting JFK's words, "We do this thing (going to the Moon) not because it is easy but because it is hard."

Jerry Woodfill was becoming the personification of John Kennedy, at least during those two-mile morning walks. Even the nasal pronunciation of JFK's "h" words like hard, became *hod*, sounding as though I had a *Ha-a-a-ward* education. My resolve was sincere, cloning JFK's demeanor, his attire as well as the props accompanying his speech - a podium, American flag and Presidential Seal. The easiest of those three - demeanor, attire, and props, was demeanor. I could readily replicate his hand motions, passion, and, of course, the words of the speech. However, his attire, i.e., his appearance, was a formidable challenge. Finding a Navy blue suit like he wore with such thin lapels in 2002 wasn't easy. Likewise, a search of Houston clothiers for JFK's narrow matching blue tie proved unfruitful. Perhaps, used clothes outlets like Goodwill had donated suits akin to those worn years ago? Alas, none were found at such stores.

Remarkably, the Dillard's® Men's department had a single tie on the floor which sort of matched the photo of the President at Rice Stadium.

It was a Tommy Hilfiger®. That tie, including tax, probably cost about as much as the President's suit, \$45.00. Ugh! But, never mind, this had become a patriotic contribution in behalf of space exploration.

I never found a thin lapelled Navy men's suit. Instead, I substituted a blazer that sort of looked JFK-like. Besides, Betty worked for a local clothes store and got a 20% discount on the thing. This added another \$35 to my donation. My tattered Haggis® brand combed cotton Navy pants closely matched the blazer's color.

I've had an unfortunate habit of keeping my hands in my pockets which frays the fabric, but the length of the blazer hid the damage. This would have to do. Besides,

the pants cost nothing. At least, my wardrobe was now in place. Clothing was the least of the appearance challenges. My age, my face, and my hair posed big problems. I wore glasses. He didn't. He was 45. I'm in my 60s. He had a full scalp of hair with its original color. I had neither. What hair I had was styled in a combed-back fashion. His was parted. He was handsome. I'm not. (Though I believe my wife is even more attractive than his was.)

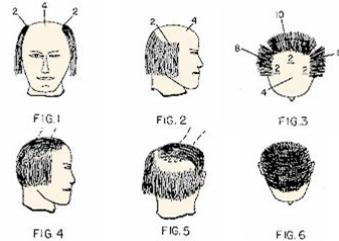
In due course, I dealt with each hurdle. With regard to our faces, I discovered a store in downtown Houston which sold latex party-masks of famous persons. The JFK look alike cost me \$25.00. The rubber-like full headed covering fit perfectly. For good measure, should I extend this talent to other recitations, I also bought George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan.

Unhappily, when I practiced the speech wearing the mask, I nearly suffocated. Added to this dilemma, the words sounded slurred because my lips vibrated against the wet clammy latex, often making a wholly inappropriate bathroom-like sound. A copious flow of saliva collected on the mask's inner latex surface. It would have drowned me midway through the speech, had not this river of expectoration run down my neck, soaking the double Windsor knot of my Tommy Hilfiger \$45 tie. Add another \$25 to my patriotic space contribution. Now I had collected three such masks (Kennedy, Bush, and Reagan), available only for masquerade party use.

Perhaps, I'd be more successful with my hair? I searched the Internet for a suitable wig. Only the Elvis types appeared authentic enough to use. But they had a peculiar un-JFK-like pompadour swirl. This Elvis-like curl looked most un-presidential.

"Maybe, I could grow my hair so long that I could shape and style it on the top, the sides, the backs, over, under, around, through, with multiple combings into JFK's style. Once achieved I'd liberally apply Helen Curtis EXTRA HARD TO HOLD spray with multiple coatings akin to decoupage." This would mummify the locks of hair. They would stiffly stand in place during my performance.

I discovered a patent for such a technique, the *Extreme Comb Over*, a U.S. Patent issued in 1975.



However, I'd seen a colleague at NASA perform such a miracle. His immaculately groomed, full-blown hair style was the envy of every over fifty years of age space center male. I had no idea that he was *follicly* challenged until the day a wind blast struck us on the way to a presentation.

His hair blew back like a tropical palm hit by a hurricane wind, leaving the top barren. His hair now covered only his shoulders and back. Actually, his hair had been something of a wig attached at his neckline, peeling off his head like an orange rind, leaving a pale pink bald topping of shiny flesh.

Next, I bought one of those hair spray miracle products, as seen on TV, and tried it on my balding head. It actually seemed to work. I thought I'd solved the challenge of cloning JFK's hair. However, after applying the spray, I found that on warm days like the day the President spoke in Rice Stadium, the brown colored spray wasn't "heat-fast", i.e., it wasn't "perspiration-fast", flowing from the center of my head down my forehead into my eyes. It gave me the look of a tribal warrior sporting streaking facial

tattoos. Add another \$8.00 to my donation. That can of artificial hair spray joined my twenty year old can of Ole Spice on the bathroom shelf.

A wig it would be! But then I saw a NASA colleague leave the office and jump into his MG convertible with the top down. To my horror, he not only brought the MG's top down but the top of his hair down, throwing his wig into the back seat. He had scalped himself bare-headed.

That striking contrast discouraged me from using a JFK look-alike wig. What a shock it would be for the audience, seeing a full-haired JFK turn into the balding Jerry Woodfill at the conclusion of the recreation! Nevertheless, I decided to dye my hair a JFK brown then comb what little I had over that aggravating bald spot.

My glasses posed no problem. Since I'd memorized the speech, I'd not need them for reading. And well that I didn't with the ravages of myopia giving me 20-400 vision at this writing. Besides, not wearing glasses was a distinct advantage for me. One of my worst traits is a self-conscious inability to look others in the eye when I speak. Without glasses, I'd be looking at faceless-eyeless "head-forms." There would be no loss of confidence even when I botched the words. Without glasses, it would be, as though, I was speaking to animated manikins.

Now came the final challenge, the props needed to recreate the 1962, JFK Rice Stadium Space Race Speech: a flag, a podium, and the Presidential Seal. No problem with the flag. I had three, collected over the years. Except that a flag stand might have been expensive until I discovered a solution. In the attic, I found a discarded three foot tall Foley's Department store artificial Christmas Tree in all its yuletide glory – 10" diameter gold and silver balls with strings of golden and silver beads meshed about its green toilet brush boughs, pinecones attached.

A vicious wire-cutter emasculation transformed the holiday ornamental offering into an ideal flag-stand base. Its erect perpendicular pipe exactly fit like a glove around the aluminum shaft of my seven foot American Flag. (Forgive me, Lord, for such desecration, but it was for a good cause.)

Divine providence sent forth from above, onto a neighbor's curb, a 50 inch tall white pedestal, (a plant stand). I saw it only moments before the arrival of the garbage collectors. In fact, I discovered it during my well-rehearsed JFK recitation that day, which included the words, "surely the opening vistas of space promise high costs..." I was thinking about the cost of a podium. Here stood one at NO COST. I carried it home, barely breaking stride, as I recited the final words of JFK's speech. Best of all, I could stow the podium comfortably in the rear luggage compartment of my Ford Explorer if I folded the center seat forward. Now, I could transport it to podium-less venues along with the flag and the converted Christmas tree stand.

Surely, this was the same patriotic spirit which compelled Lincoln to study his law books by candle light. I, like our esteemed president, would employ primitive means for a higher good.

Finally, came the most difficult hurdle among the props, the Presidential Seal. I would not have predicted this difficulty at the onset. Yet, such became the case.

Since my performance would be an official government activity, I would need approval to use the Seal. To that end, I drafted a letter requesting use of the Presidential Seal in a theatrical recreation of the JFK Rice speech. After several weeks, a White House counsel responded. "Though your efforts are commendable, regulation of the use of the Presidential Seal precludes such use by United States citizens." (a paraphrase).

Without the Presidential Seal, the recreation would be wholly unsatisfactory. Students would find it unrealistic. Downcast, I put aside my quest. I assessed the cost of research books, cosmetics (latex mask, hair spray, artificial hair spray, brown hair dye), clothing attire (Tommy Hilfiger tie, Navy Blue Blazer), and paint for the discarded podium. It totaled more than one hundred dollars.

One of my props had been a large printed color photo of President Kennedy

speaking that day at Rice Stadium. I'd bought an easel for \$15 (I forgot to add it to the above costs.) to display the photo as I performed the speech. This would, more perfectly, involve the listeners in the experience. Listening and watching me, they could glance at the actual picture of the event. Perhaps, this would be my last time to examine the picture of the scene I'd experienced that day as a student at Rice.

Carefully, I read the Presidential Seal: "The Seal of the President..."

What came next must be akin to that process which gave Einstein his theory of relativity, the moment which led from Newton's equation $F=MA$ to Einstein's $E=MC^2$. I saw the Seal's wording change to the phrase –

"The Seal of **A RESIDENT**..." from the words "Seal of the President..."

All I need do would be to cover the word "the" with the word "a" as well as cover the letter "P" in President. This would accurately classify me just as the White House letter required, as **a RESIDENT of the United States of America**. And, for good measure, I crafted an altered Latin motto to include on the "resident's" seal. Instead of "in God we trust", I scribed the Latin phrase for IN God We Believe – In Dei Credamus.

The official Presidential Seal had been transformed into a *residential seal*, a theatrical likeness, suitable for the recreation.

(September, 2004) Space Center Houston, the world class space museum, adjacent to the Johnson Space Center, was hosting 500 teachers in the plush IMAX theater, with its four story tall screen, attached to the facility. The honored speaker was a NASA astronaut, veteran of three shuttle flights. An excellent speaker, the astronaut received an appreciative ovation at the conclusion of the informative message.

The guests began to leave when the moderator, shouted over the PA system, "Wait, there is one more talk, a brief concluding presentation, a recreation of President John F. Kennedy's Rice Stadium Moon Race Speech."

Suddenly, JFK's picture appeared in four story splendor on the giant IMAX screen. (The same photo I'd planned to mount on the easel.) The teachers sat down, awed by JFK's enormous image. Forty feet below, to the left of the screen, stood a likeness of the President, in the flesh, with \$45 Hilfiger tie, hair combed sort of Kennedy-esque, without spectacles, in navy blue blazer, tattered blue slacks, and best of all - a presidential-like seal Velcro attached to a pedestal-like podium.

Yet, his words, his passion, his hand gestures, even his Harvard-like JFK accent captured that same spirit of wonder, excitement and resolve put forth that day long ago in Rice Stadium. It was a brief recitation but memorable to the extent that a long applause sounded throughout the cavernous IMAX theater. Likewise, appreciative educators and students descended onto the stage for autographs and well wishes.

Most appreciative among the praise received was from a bright-eyed eighth grade girl, "I really enjoyed your talk and the picture of President Kennedy."

And then, she said that thing which the sixty year old NASA man would never forget,

"Only thing is...you're better looking."

Dumbfounded, I looked at her closely,

"She's serious...not joking."

Thank you Dad for teaching me how to memorize that poem.



What Dad Never Taught Me Comprehension Questions
(Enter answers on the line to left of each question.)

- _____ 1. Jerry's dad taught him how to:
a. play tennis
b. ride a horse
c. swim
d. memorize a poem
- _____ 2. Jerry was like his dad regarding teaching his sons.
(T)rue or (F)alse.
- _____ 3. Jerry's hobby of memorizing _____.
a. profited him richly money wise
b. led to a career as a Thespian
c. made him a Rubik's Cube master
d. won him a scholarship
- _____ 4. Jerry heard President Truman give a speech.
(T)rue or (F)alse.
- _____ 5. His Sunday school student cried because _____.
a. Jerry threw a water balloon at her.
b. She lost a race to list Bible books.
c. She was frightened by Goliath.
d. Her parents were angry with Jerry.
- _____ 6. How did Jerry learn JFK's speech?
a. listening to it on his Walkman
b. by taking a memorization class
c. associating pictures with the words
d. reciting it during his morning walk
- _____ 7. Why did Jerry receive *praying hands*?
a. He was a devout catechumen.
b. He memorized the lessons best.
c. His dad was the pastor.
d. He was Gideon in a church play.
- _____ 8. Why did Jerry choose JFK's speech? His parents were Democrats.
a. JFK and Jerry looked alike.
b. JFK's speech inspired him.
c. Jackie Kennedy was attractive.
- _____ 9. Jerry tried to look like JFK by _____.
a. using facial "make-up"
- b. using life-sized JFK poster
c. wearing a latex mask
d. having "plastic surgery"
- _____ 10. How did Jerry copy JFK's tie?
a. buying one at a used clothes store
b. paying nearly \$50 for a designer tie
c. printing one on his HP color printer
d. having his wife sew one
- _____ 11. How did Jerry copy JFK's hair style
a. buying an Elvis wig
b. using *Miracle Grow* for hair
c. combing his dyed hair over his bald spot
d. having hair follicle implants
- _____ 12. How did he use the President's Seal?
a. by getting White House permission
b. by using the Great Seal instead
c. using the Kennedy Coat of Arms
d. cleverly changing one letter
- _____ 13. What was good about not wearing glasses?
a. He had to memorize the talk.
b. He looked better without them.
c. He had a character flaw about looking people in the eye.
d. JFK wore contacts.
- _____ 14. How much did Jerry spend?
a. one hundred dollars.
b. one hundred fifteen dollars
c. nothing, he used discarded props and clothes
d. NASA paid for everything
- _____ 15. Jerry presented the talk _____.
a. at Rice Stadium
b. behind the actual podium JFK used at Rice Stadium
c. at the Moody Gardens IMAX theater
d. beside a four story tall image of JFK at Rice Stadium projected on the Space Center Houston IMAX screen
- _____ 16. The audience came forward for _____.
a. free ice-cream coupons offered to those who would stay for Jerry's JFK talk
b. two-for-one coupon for dinner in the NASA cafeteria
c. complimentary tickets to the Hollywood movie SPACE COWBOYS
d. well-wishers and autographs of the JFK mimic
- _____ 17. What quote was in the speech?
a. "Ask not what your country will do for you, but..."
b. "...tear down this wall..."
c. "We do this thing not because it is easy but because it is hard."
d. "Why does Rice play A&M?"
- _____ 18. What was not among Jerry's props?
a. an American flag
b. a plant stand podium
c. a converted tree stand for the flag
d. the presidential seal
- _____ 19. Why did Jerry discard the JFK mask?
a. It would frighten young children.
b. The lips didn't move.
c. It made an inappropriate sound.
d. It look like Nixon, not JFK
- _____ 20. What did the student think of Jerry's talk?
a. It was too long and uninspired.
b. The astronaut was much better.
c. His voice was too loud.
d. Compared to JFK, Jerry was better looking.

What Dad Never Taught Me Vocabulary List

| <u>Word</u> | <u>Synonym</u> |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. adjunct | auxiliary, assistant |
| 2. mentor | wise counselor |
| 3. valedictory | bidding farewell |
| 4. catechumen | one under instruction |
| 5. neophyte | novice, beginner |
| 6. Thespian | actor or actress |
| 7. tunic | an ancient gown garment |
| 8. latent | hidden, concealed |
| 9. ecclesiastical | churchly |
| 10. rhetoric | oratory, usage of words |
| 11. aghast | filled with sudden horror |
| 12. protégé | disciple, follower, trainee |
| 13. charismatic | attractive, appealing, winsome |
| 14. embark | to engage, begin or start |
| 15. personification | essence, type, image |
| 16. demeanor | conduct, behavior |
| 17. replicate | clone, duplicate |
| 18. copious | abundant, plentiful |
| 19. pompadour | uplifted from forehead hair style |
| 20. decoupage | multilayer clear coating |
| 21. immaculate | spotlessly clean, pure, unblemished |
| 22. myopia | near-sightedness of the eye |
| 23. emasculation | weakening, depriving of strength |
| 24. desecrate | to profane |



President John F. Kennedy
Rice Stadium September 12, 1962



Jerry Woodfill, A.K.A. JFK recreation
NASA Open Houses
August, 2001



Jerry Woodfill as JFK
Before NASA Coop Corps