

THE TEST

The year was 1954. I was beginning my senior year at a high school in Philadelphia. I came from what was then disparagingly called 'a broken home', my mother having deserted the family a few years earlier. Already I knew that I would have to make my own way in the world. Although my home environment was decidedly un-Christian I had recently come to know Christ at a Christian camp.

College was not in my plans. From Jr. High on I had been in college prep classes but in 10th grade I chose an Art major, hoping to get an art scholarship. Eventually, for reasons I won't go into here, I found that I was losing some of my intensity about art as a career.

Early in 11th grade the guidance counselor called me into his office. Looking over my grades and IQ tests he began pushing me to apply to colleges and work for scholarship aid. I was interested, but college was out of the question without a scholarship and I would be limited to a city college such as Temple U. because I couldn't afford to live away from home. I told him what I really wanted was to go to a Christian college. In my inter-faith Bible study group many of the kids were choosing Wheaton or Houghton College, both far away and out of reach for me. Nevertheless at his urging I spent the rest of the year filling out forms and getting out of classes to take city busses to various interviews around the city. The prize scholarships were the Mayor's, \$4000 per year awarded to the top ten in each graduating class in every school. In those days \$4000 would cover a year of tuition in many colleges! I didn't think I stood a chance for a Mayor's, there were 500 kids in my senior class, but I was willing to try for one of the other, lesser ones.

There was a slight problem, however. With all those art classes I had missed many of the classes I needed to graduate with a college prep degree, so that meant a very busy senior year. I had never had a senior high science class and I needed two history classes in addition to senior English and other 'minor' subjects. I couldn't schedule a Capella Choir, my favorite, but fortunately it was held during a lunch period, so I arranged to 'unofficially' be in Choir, sit in the back and eat my sandwich while I sang.

I soon discovered I had a much more serious problem. I was placed in chemistry class, which had as a prerequisite a year of high school science. I hadn't had a science class since 8th grade but that was overlooked. To make matters worse the teacher was incompetent. He may have known his subject but he couldn't teach. He was half-blind and about a hundred years old, or so it seemed to the class. He seldom had us do our own experiments. If we had questions he'd grunt, "It's in the book." The class was frustrated but we could do nothing about it. There was cutthroat competition for those few scholarships and we saw our chances going down the drain. A group of students came up with a solution: cheat. They invited me to join them. Tactfully, I explained that I was a Christian and could not cheat. That was okay with most of the kids, but a small group was not going to leave me alone. "Miss holy-holy! You think you're too good for us! Well, you can just kiss your scholarship goodbye!" And so it went on, day after day, in and out of class.

The problem was, they were right. There was no way I could get a good grade in that class without cheating. When I flunked the first major test I was sure I would not even pass the class. I began to wonder if I was making a big issue over nothing. Was cheating really so bad? I decided to talk with my Sunday School teacher. "Well, Mary Ellen, you're in a very difficult situation," she began. "Your whole future might depend on that class. God knows that, and I think He would understand if you share your answers. You don't have much of a choice." Wow, that was what I wanted to

hear. But why did I feel so bad? Perhaps I should talk with my minister. We had never talked before, and I wondered if he would take time to talk with a teenager.

He welcomed my questions. "It really is very simple," he told me. "You have been honoring God, and He has promised that He will honor you." He took me to the Bible, the book of 1st Samuel, and read, *'Those who honor me I will honor.'* "It's a principle of Scripture," he said, "and He will give you the strength to do it." He told me to keep on doing what I was doing, "and wait and see what God will do!"

Those words kept me going as I faced the same old situation every day at school. One day I was called to the guidance office. The counselor showed me an announcement about a College Day at a new college, Eastern

Baptist College in the Philadelphia suburbs. I had heard of the school; one of the kids in my Bible group, Tony Campolo, was in his second year at Eastern but I hadn't considered the school because I wasn't Baptist. As if reading my thoughts the counselor said that it was for students of any denomination, and "it might be worth looking at. The only problem is, it's this Saturday." Today was Thursday! He offered to make a reservation for me. If I couldn't go he would cancel it tomorrow.

My father was not encouraging. "Go ahead," he said, "but don't get your hopes up. You know I can't afford to send you to college." He could not go with me. I would be on my own. Very early Saturday morning I caught a trolley, then an El train and then a commuter train, arriving an hour and a half later at the station in St. Davids. Now, how would I get to the campus? An older couple heard me asking directions of the station master and offered me a ride there. With no hesitation I hopped in their car. They dropped me off at the campus.

I was immediately struck by the beauty of the place, a former private estate. But before long I was feeling increasingly out of place: everyone was with a family, and I was wandering around alone. Why had I come? I told myself that I had come this far so I might as well make the best of it. I attended the sample classes and hated to see each one end; I visited the dorms and talked with the students; I walked the campus and drank in the beauty, and then had an interview with the Man in Charge. To my surprise he was very interested in the test scores and transcripts I had brought along, though I couldn't bring myself to tell him about Chemistry. He said they would love to have me as a student if I could get scholarship aid and commute from home. As a very new school they had no help to offer, but, "You never know what God might do." He urged me to apply to the school.

With his words in my ears, so like my pastor's words, I found my way to a stone bench by the side of a lovely dark lake which was ablaze with the reflected glory of an autumn landscape. I was captivated by the beauty, by the classes and the professors, and by that same welcoming acceptance I had experienced the first time I went to Bible camp. "Oh, Lord, if only I could be a student here! I don't know how You could do it....but this is my prayer...."

Back to the real world, 'Miss holy-holy' and chemistry class which was going from bad to worse. Another call to the guidance office. The counselor had a very sober look on his face. "I am in shock. That one of my students...." My heart dropped. What was he talking about? "...that one of my students should be awarded the Drexel Foundation scholarship!" He was smiling now. "Mary Ellen, there are only two awarded in the whole city, one for a male and one for a female. And they chose you! It's for \$24,000....\$6000 a year, to be used at any college.

"But...but, why me?" I knew I was no longer a top student. He explained that the judges chose on the basis of academics and character. "But what about my Chem grades?" I asked. He told me they weren't looking at this year's grades, the decision had been made last year. He asked me not to say anything about it. "It will be announced at graduation."

Graduation! As I stumbled out of the office in shock, my happiness was stifled by the thought that if I didn't pass Chem class I would not graduate with a college prep degree! So I would be ineligible for a college scholarship. Besides, who would give an academic scholarship to someone who had flunked a class?

Over the next few weeks I was surprised and, I'll admit, pleased at the teachers who came up to me and congratulated me. The news, although not public, was known to the faculty.

One day our Chem teacher delivered a stunning announcement. He had analyzed test results and discovered a pattern of cheating. He was contacting parents and he was requiring all the guilty students to take the test again with their parents present. Once again I was in shock. How close I had come to cheating, to disgracing my Christian testimony!

This ended the harassment. Other changes followed. A girl in the class who I scarcely knew came to me and offered to tutor me. The teacher had asked her to and she said she was happy to do it. I had gone to the teacher early in the year and asked for help but he had brushed me off. Now, this girl worked with me after school on her own time until I finally began to understand the subject, and even to like it. In time my grades inched up to C's, never any higher. For someone for whom anything less than an A was cause for alarm it was a humbling experience, but at least I knew I would graduate.

It was time to contact Eastern Baptist College. Another trip, on a school day and again on my own, I sat with the Man in Charge. He was delighted with my news. Tuition was \$4000 a year, and with the additional \$2000 per year, a campus job and summer job earnings, I could live on campus! This time I floated out of his office and on down to the stone bench and the lake which now reflected a winter landscape. With tears in my eyes I reflected on the path which had gotten me here, on God's faithfulness and His goodness. And I had special thanks for my guidance counselor, a kind Jewish man who talked me into considering college, pushed me to apply for scholarships, and thought of me when he received a College Day flier.

I was to spend three years at Eastern Baptist, now Eastern University, going on to other schools where I received Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Those three years were the most significant years of my life. I grew up, enjoyed a delayed childhood (that's another story), became grounded in my faith and formed a Christian world-view that has shaped my life for sixty years.

And I have learned, again and again, that God honors those who honor Him.

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