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Glimpses of My Life

John W. Gardner rarely wrote about his personal life. His subject was larger than himself; he focused on how to live truly and well, on strengthening society, on the America he loved, on the work to be done. Here we gather glimpses of the more private side of his life from his journals, speeches, essays, and books. "When the cage of memory opens," he said, "who knows what will fly out—something endearing or something heart-rending, a bird that will sing to us or one that will fix its talons in us?"

I was born in Los Angeles, California. When I was about a year old my mother decided to move out into the country eleven miles west of the city. There, in an area of lima bean fields as far as the eye could see, one of the first of the legendary California real estate developers had laid out a pattern of streets and had built the Beverly Hills Hotel nestled against the foothills.

We moved into the hotel, and my mother bought the nineteenth house in the development. It grew rapidly and soon had its own school, but there were still only three or four stores and one policeman, Charlie Blair. It was a very small country town. Everyone knew everyone else. It was a great place to grow up. There was no way for small boys to get into any serious trouble.

But it wasn't quite your typical American small town. Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford were building a large place in the foothills. Movie

stars were glimpsed from time to time. And the film companies shot some of their scenes on the streets of that peaceful place.

As a boy in California I spent a good deal of time in the Mother Lode country, and like every boy of my age I listened raptly to the tales told by the old-time prospectors in that area, some of them veterans of the Klondike gold rush. Every one of them had at least one good campfire story of a lost gold mine. The details varied: the original discoverer had died in the mine, or had gone crazy, or had been killed in a shooting scrape, or had just walked off thinking the mine worthless. But the central theme was constant: riches left untapped. I have come to believe that those tales offer a paradigm of education as most of us experience it. The mine is worked for a little while and then abandoned.

I attended Punahou School in Honolulu just after World War I, when I was seven years old and living with my grandparents. The school had a Christmas play. I was one of the Three Wise Men: a seven-year-old wise man in a Japanese kimono with a bath towel as a turban.

When the Three Wise Men marched on stage I was astonished and captivated by the sight of the audience. It seemed like thousands and thousands of people, though it could not have been more than three hundred. My grandparents were out there somewhere, and my friends, and their parents, and my teachers—and I had to locate them. It interfered somewhat with the modest duties of a wise man.

When the time came for the Three Wise Men to exit, two of them did so and the third remained studying the audience in utter fascination—until I heard my teacher's voice whispering urgently "Johnny, it's time to go!" I scampered off stage, the audience roared with laughter and I was deeply embarrassed.

So much for early promise.

In the 1930s, college days were magical. Those were the days before students carried their test scores around as a blessed or ominous verdict, before the shadow of admission to graduate school hung like a Sword of Damocles. Modernity, that great bird of prey, had not yet fixed its talons in us.

I appreciate the enormous value of a liberal education. I've had my share of learning in the thick of life, but the college years were unique. I grew in every dimension—not just intellectually but in every other way. I sorted myself out. I enjoyed. I made dumb mistakes. I laid the basis of breadth and depth of interest that has given a greater richness to everything I've learned since.

It is not easy to tell young people how unpurposefully we learn, how life tosses us head over heels into our most vivid learning experiences, how intensely we resist many of the increments in our own growth. In my first two years at Stanford I had little time for studies. I was setting records in swimming, and dating required serious attention. But I did have one little burst of scholarly imagination, sparked by a \$100 prize that the Colonial Dames were offering for the best essay on American History by an undergraduate. This was the Great Depression and I needed the money. So I wrote a piece on the New England fisheries. Somebody else won the prize, which did not surprise me.

The next day in my class in American History, Professor Thomas Bailey (a nationally known scholar) said, "I would like to see John Gardner in my office after class." Had I done something wrong?

When I arrived at his office, he was sitting at his desk wearing a green eyeshade. He said, "You know, you came within a hair of winning that Colonial Dames' prize. The only reason you didn't is that it was perfectly clear you hadn't been trained in research, and you did have a little tendency to exaggerate the role of the codfish in the American Revolution. But the judges were very impressed."

"Now," he said, "why are you getting a D in my course?"

I said, "Well, I love the lectures, but I am awfully busy on other things." I didn't elaborate on the "other things." I came away with the conviction that I had better take my studies more seriously, which no doubt was Professor Bailey's intention.

I was married in my senior year to a girl of extraordinary grace and beauty, Aida Marroquin. When we first met, two years earlier, she spoke no English and I could not converse in Spanish, but it was a negligible barrier.

It was unheard of in those days for an undergraduate to marry. One of my closest friends took me to the Peninsula Creamery for a milkshake and set out to persuade me that I was indulging an emotional impulse that would wreck my career. I listened patiently, but I wasn't convinced.

Any man who has been married to the same woman for many years has a special understanding of continuity. But the continuities are not incompatible with change or the need for change. In real life, the fact that people and institutions keep the same name over the years gives an illusion of stability that isn't there. I say that I've been married to the same woman for sixty-six years. In fact, it's the same name and the same social security number, but the person doesn't remain the same. Thanks to her capacity to grow and change, I've been married to a whole series of women over that period—each more delightful than her predecessor, I hasten to add.

When Aida and I were planning to marry, my mother offered me a plot of ground that was right next to two little student rentals that she owned. She said, "I will give you the ground if you build a house and look after the two rentals." I was a better mobilizer, even in those days, than I was a carpenter, so I got my brother, my two cousins, my stepfather and his two brothers, and we all built the house. My mother designed it.

It was the depth of the Great Depression, which turned out to be an excellent time to build. The owner of the lumberyard would meet me at the gate, he was so eager for customers. In 1934, everything was dirt cheap. We built the house for \$1,600. There were essentially no labor costs, except for the plumbing and electrical work.

I remember the plumbing because the man who did it said something I've never forgotten. He came from some distance to take the job. One day he said, "Mr. Gardner, I have to leave early. I hate to leave a job early, but President Roosevelt is having one of his Fireside Chats tonight. I just feel that if he's willing to sit down and talk to us, I should be there to hear him."

Clearly he felt an almost personal bond with the President, and I counted it a remarkable testimony to leadership. It may also be testimony to the fact that radio was in some curious way a more intimate form of communication than television turned out to be.

The Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley contained, among other things, one of the great collections on Spanish colonial days in the West, presided over by Herbert Bolton. I was working toward a Ph.D. in psychology, and Bolton's older brother Thaddeus was one of the distinguished figures in the early days of American psychology. Capitalizing on that thin connection, I paid a call on Bolton one day to obtain some guidance in the study of California history, a field I had no business paying attention to at that moment in my career. He worked on a reading list for me and I began a leisurely exploration of California history that has continued to this day.

It was, perhaps, an odd diversion for a psychologist, but it was just another theme in the omnivorous reading that began when I was five and continued for some forty years.

One day during World War II there occurred a wholly unexpected turning point in my thinking about life and the world. I was a Marine Corps officer stationed in Italy, thirty-two years old. There was a saying in the wartime military that life was "Hurry up and wait." At times you had to act in a desperate hurry, and other times you just had to wait. In one of the moments of waiting I was walking along a hillside when it occurred to me that my life had been turned upside down twice by events in the outside world—the Great Depression and World War II—yet I had never studied the economic, political, and social forces that produced such events. As a psychologist I had confined myself to individual behavior, leaving it to others to worry about the big world.

I concluded that I hadn't been very smart in that neglect, and wrote home for a couple of books, beginning a course of study that broadened and deepened over the years. In a sense, that day laid out the agenda for the rest of my life.

It took a good many years to come to the realization that teaching was in a sense my life work. I began teaching when I was twenty-three and I wasn't very good at it. Nor did I like it very much. When I left Mount Holyoke after Pearl Harbor, I was pretty sure I wouldn't be teaching in the future.

When I first arrived in Washington in 1942, I was asked to head the Latin American section of the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service. Since I had a good knowledge of the Spanish language and of Latin America, I had no doubt of my intellectual capacity to handle the job. I was astounded when I began to receive good marks on my management skills. It was wholly contrary to my image of myself, wholly at odds with my plans for the future. I was twenty-nine years old and had never run anything. I had no ambition to run anything. From my earliest years, I had thought of myself as a student, an observer, pleasantly detached from the mainstream of the world's action. From that point on, my life was to be governed by constant conflict between the life of action and the life of reflection.

In later years when I found myself in leadership roles, I discovered that teaching was an absolutely necessary part of leading. In the only kind of leadership our society can really admire, leaders explain. They communicate the facts and reasons that people need to know if they are to reach wise decisions. They teach by precept and example, in speeches, in writing, in exemplary acts.

I found that I liked teaching, and when my active leadership days were winding down, I returned to the classroom. In my course on leadership at Stanford University, I pointed out that the best leaders are incessantly teaching, and the best teachers are leading.

The year my mother passed the hundred-year mark, she called me and said, "You know this business of aging bothers me so, I can hardly stand it. I find it terribly upsetting."

I said, "But think how lucky you are that you're physically healthy and mentally alert."

"Oh, I'm not talking about myself," She said. "I'm talking about you and your brother."

And more recently, I had news of a ninety-nine-year-old friend in the East. I was told that he had occasional lucid intervals, which pleased me enormously. I must say, without wanting to brag, that I've been having lucid intervals all my life—and they have not diminished in frequency since I turned eighty. That's why the news of my ninety-nine-year-old friend was so thrilling. I could name people half his age—some of them in high places—who would be lucky to have occasional lucid intervals.

I don't think of myself in lofty terms. Looking back over the years I see a California boy finding his way through life, endlessly challenged, surmounting obstacles, falling on his face, regretting that he hadn't done better, always studying, always trying, always wondering. . . .

