

Fate Stepped In
by Vera Lilly

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I loved being a teacher. I don't regret one single day I spent in the classroom! That is a rather ironic statement to make considering the fact that I didn't intend on becoming a teacher. I was going to be a journalist, a writer of great news events. So, how did I become a teacher? Sometimes our lives take turns we could never have foreseen. So, I will begin at the beginning.

I was a student at Aberdeen Central High School when one day in December we were all called to an unscheduled assembly in the Civic Theater, where all our assemblies were held. The Principal, Mr. Deimer, announced that we were to hear a message from the President of the United States. And so, we listened to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt speak, via radio, tell us that our country was at war. Pearl Harbor had been bombed just the day before, Sunday, December 7, 1941. I remember how absolutely quiet that assembly was. At the end of the address, Superintendent Dalthorpe made some remarks, and we went back to our classes. It was a subdued student body. There were classmates who signed up immediately. Everyone was wondering what would happen next. Is there something I should be doing...

I heard about a program at school which really got my attention. The announcement said that if you were going into your senior year and you had the required grade point level, you could apply for college admission, and, if accepted, and if you maintained a specific grade point, at the year's end you would have not only a full year of college credit but you would also receive your full high school graduation diploma. I wanted to do it! My parents gave me permission to send out letters applying for admission. I now had two older brothers in the army, and my younger brother was going into the navy. I wanted to do something.

Because I had always planned to go into journalism, I looked for colleges with good journalism reputations. And being a good Lutheran, I started with their colleges.

I was very impressed with Valparaiso University. I wrote them and was told they weren't participating in the program. Fine -- I wrote another Lutheran college, Wheaton, only to get a similar reply. Undaunted, I wrote to Augustana College, much closer to home, anyway, but received another not participating reply. Well, enough with these church schools, I said, and dashed off a letter to the University of South Dakota in Vermillion where I knew there was a good school of journalism. Well -- an

immediate answer came back. It was -- send us your transcript and come on down! And that is what I did in the fall of 1943. I registered as a freshman at the University, rather than as a senior at Central High.

All went well and in the spring I came home having finished successfully that freshman year. I immediately went up to Central to pick up my graduation diploma. Well -- we had a new Principal and Superintendent. They knew nothing about the program I had done. Mr. Holgate said he would have to go to the School Board about it -- and he would get back to me. He did -- and the conclusion to that story is that I received my Central High School graduation diploma, class of 1944, having never attended one day of senior classes.

Oh, there was a college program all right!

It seems the program which I had heard about was one actually set up because the army was in need of officers. In order to become an officer candidate, you had to have a year of college. So, actually the accelerated program was for males only, never intended for females! But, I didn't know that when I applied and was accepted at the University of South Dakota. Was it just a mistake? Did they misinterpret my first name? Whatever the reason, it did explain why those first three schools turned me down because they were not participating.

The following year, I again began classes at the University as a sophomore. One Saturday in January, I will never forget. I was at the University library that afternoon working on a term paper when I was called to the librarian's desk to take a phone call. It was my mother and through her tears she said, "Come home". Robert is dead. He was killed in the Battle of the Bulge with General Patton's Third Army attack. Robert was the middle brother. Our birthdays were the same week in February. We were three years apart. I was able to catch the afternoon train and got back to Aberdeen very late that night. It was a traumatic and sorrowful weekend.

My life changed directions overnight. I still had two other brothers overseas, and I felt my parents needed me to be closer. They never said that, but I just knew I had to be with them, if and whenever I could. And so, when I went back to the University, I immediately changed from a journalism/political science major to an education/political science major. I stayed all summer and was able to do my student teaching (we called it practice teaching, then.) in a Vermillion grade school. Miss Charlotte Noteboom was my teaching supervisor. I learned so much from her, and many times in following years I would ask myself if whatever I was attempting to do was the way Miss Noteboom would do it!

That fall, I began teaching a fifth and sixth grade combination

room in Bowdle. Transportation was actually much better then, and I came home on the train every Friday night, returning to Bowdle Sunday evening. I have never regretted for a single moment making the decision I made. I believe it helped my parents in that I could be with them during that dark time. Of course, my degree was delayed, but I did get that job done, too.

I loved what I was doing. There was never a time in my life that I didn't truly love to be in school as a child. It seemed becoming a teacher was a natural progression even though it wasn't what I had set out to do. Because school was such a wonderful place for me, I always tried very hard to make learning enjoyable. I involved the students in every way I could. Believe me, my room was always well decorated with things the students had done. And they loved it as much as I did. I always hoped and planned that my students would want to come back. I only taught in Bowdle one year. Now, I still see some of those kids, but they are all grown up. In fact graying, but it's like the years are erased when we bump into each other on the street or at the mall.

I later taught in Mobridge for six years in grade and junior high school. I see some of these grown up kids very often -- in fact, Sundays at my local church, and it's so good. Then, coming back to Aberdeen, I taught at the SD School for the Blind & Visually Impaired for nineteen years. That was an entirely different teaching experience in that I had to learn Braille, read it and write it. Teaching in a residential school was an entirely new experience, but teaching blind and visually impaired students is still teaching kids. I was able to take on some new teaching experiences there that would not have been possible in another school setting. Besides the regular subjects taught in grade school, I was able to begin working with older students in a Daily Living Program. I was asked by the Superintendent to write the first curriculum guide for what we called the Apartment Living part of Daily Living. I worked with students who were learning how to live on their own in a separate apartment on campus, responsible for all that learning program. I am proud to have had a part in growing that program. I often see some of these students who have remained here in Aberdeen to live and to work.

I would not have wanted to miss any part of the twenty-six years I spent as a teacher. I think it is a noble profession, one which my own mother entered as a very young girl way back in the very, very early years of 1900. She, along with those early elementary teachers, surely paved the way for the decision I made many years later. Today, my younger daughter follows in our footsteps; she is a teacher. It was the right path for me and today, when I meet some of my students who are all grown up, it feels good to think that perhaps in some small way I helped them along life's path. Fate stepped in, I changed directions. I'll never know if I could have been a Barbara Walters interviewing the leaders of the world! But

then -- she will probably never know the joy of being a teacher. I do.