

Returns

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I had been absorbing each insight offered in the lecture, and I wondered what Professor Joost would think of my request. His eclectic approach to teaching American poetry and his warm but formal demeanor convinced me to ask. I waited to speak with him after class. “I am certain that my father would enjoy your lectures. Would you allow him to sit in on one of our classes?” Without hesitation and consistent with my expectation of this Mr. Chips type figure, Professor Nicholas Joost replied: “I would be honored.”

One might understand my conclusion that Dad would enjoy the lectures by knowing a little about him. He was 68 years old that day, but it was an older 68 than it would be today. Having been born on March 18, 1899 in the eastern part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Jozsef Chobon and his mother Veronika arrived in America in 1904. Janos, my grandfather, had come earlier and became a sizer in the Knox hat factory in Danbury, Connecticut. Somewhere along the way the family changed its name to Coburn to avoid being identified as “Hunkies,” the pejorative term for Hungarians, and moved to Akron, Ohio. This early life was kept a secret from me and my younger siblings until I was 21. I never knew my grandparents. The secret was enhanced by my father changing his birthday from March 18th to March 17th to perpetuate a fraud that Dad was Scotch-Irish and more Irish for having been born on St. Patrick's Day. I must add that my mother, Margaret Finnegan, was an active co-conspirator.

My father attended the University of Akron for a year or two in the early 1920s and studied engineering. He also acquired a love for literature and philosophy. I remember my father having Plato, a prized collection of leather bound volumes by Alexander Dumas, Balzac, and numerous books of cowboy and mystery fiction on his book shelves.

In 1967, I was a junior English major at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and I was living at home with my parents.



Author's parents, Chicago (ca. 1920s)

I wasn't having a stellar career as a student, but from time to time I was fortunate enough to have fallen into the orbit of stellar teachers. One such teacher was Professor Nicholas Joost, a fifty-year-old, nationally recognized authority on American poetry of the early twentieth century. Professor Joost presented his students with a wide-reaching, eclectic approach to the study of poets and their works and their times. Often there were references to times and events that my parents experienced in Chicago during the 1920s. I have a picture of them sitting on the running board of a roadster which is emblematic of the time and place. They could have been Daisy and Gatsby except for their lack of money. It was evident to me that my father would enjoy the Professor's lectures, and so I set the plan in motion.

As I have said, my father was older at 68 years than one would be today. He was diminutive in stature and a recovered tuberculosis patient. He was nearly deaf in one ear and wore a hearing aid in the other. Deteriorative arthritis in his hip required that he walk slowly with a cane. Despite his desire to assimilate by changing his name and his insistence on correct grammar and being a meticulous dresser during his professional life as an engineer for Shell Oil Company, Dad did things later in life to call attention to himself. He wore a tartan plaid tam-o-shanter, always baggy pants with suspenders, and generally plaid flannel shirts. I went home that day and enlisted my mother's help in preparing Dad for the excursion two days later. It would be a chore getting him moving earlier that day than he was used to.

This was a time before designated handicapped parking spaces were prevalent, and so I dropped my father at the circle in the center of the campus into the custody of a couple of my classmates. They took him to get a cup of coffee while I went to my first class. Later I found my Dad finishing his coffee at the student union, and we walked across the plaza and rode the elevator up to the classroom where the mid-semester lecture on American Poetry was to be given. At the door, I introduced Professor Joost to my father. I explained my father's infirmities and asked if he could take a desk in the front of the room. As we three walked into the room, the Professor confused the class by asking one of the students to move to allow Mr. Coburn to sit in the front row. Professor Joost was accustomed to addressing all of his students as Mr. or Miss and so they assumed that he was referring to me.

I cannot remember the lecture for that day, but it was the Professor's custom to leave ten or fifteen minutes for discussion after his lecture. Often times, as on this day, the questions did not necessarily have a single correct answer. The questions were designed to prompt discussion. And so Professor Joost asked such a question. A few hands went up, and answers were proffered. Each answer was accepted as close to the Professor's point. But after three or four answers, he feigned mild disappointment in himself and turned to the old man in the front row. "Mr. Coburn, perhaps you can help me and explain to my students what I have been trying to point out to them." My father had sat attentively in his chair with one hand on his cane and the other cupped around his good ear for the entire lecture. He had an answer but it really did not matter what he said. The Professor took my father's answer with a gracious thank you and expanded on it for the remainder of the period.

What happened that spring of 1967 was an amazing convergence of good will. All of this happened 50 years ago. The war in Viet Nam raged on; we actively participated in civil rights and anti-war demonstrations, and some of us at SIU marched against the storied segregated Veiled Prophet Ball in St. Louis. It was a debutante ball for white girls. Just the year before, *Time Magazine* featured a cover story asking "Is God Dead?" Yet, three men of different generations took time to be kind to one another.

I loved my father, and I longed to share with him my enthusiasm for the poetry course I was taking. This particular teacher had touched me with his knowledge, his teaching skill, and his polite demeanor. Professor Joost was indeed honored that I thought so much of him that I wanted my father to experience

what I was absorbing three days a week that semester. The Professor's response was one of immeasurable grace consistent with everything else that I knew about him. My father's rapt attention to the lecture was as big of a gift that the old man could give to the middle-age man.

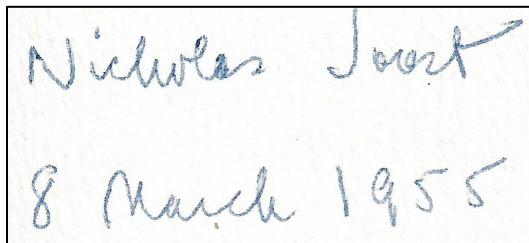
The following year, after four years of university studies, I left school without a degree and entered the Peace Corps. I was gone for three years to the island country of Palau and married a Palauan woman and adopted her daughters. Three years is a long time to think about things. I had a short wave radio, but it became too much trouble replacing batteries and trying to tune in the news from half way around the globe. The mail boat came to our village once a week, and if we were lucky we would get week-old news from the *New York Times*' "Week in Review" or a two-week-old international edition of *Time Magazine*. During this time, I did think about Professor Joost and what happened in that classroom in the spring of 1967. Bringing my new family to the United States in 1971 kept me busy and did not allow me much time to do anything else than to help all of us acclimate to Washington, D.C. It wasn't until ten years later that I took a deep breath and decided to reach out to my teacher and thank him for what he had done for me and for my father. I was one year late. Nicholas Joost died in 1980. I have never forgotten him, and all of you teachers out there should know that my story is only one of thousands and your impact on your students may not be fully known to you but you have left your mark.

And now, as Paul Harvey would say, "Here is the rest of the story." I eventually completed my degree and matriculated at Georgetown University in pursuit of a Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies. It is an interdisciplinary program which includes ethics, literature, religion, international studies, philosophy, and cultural studies. I have a niece who asked me at the time if I would be taking a course titled "Bleeding Heart 401." When I approached the completion of my course work, I started exploring different potential topics for my thesis. I was interested in an idea that history seemed to repeat itself and wondered if, in fact, what history actually did was replicate itself. The best image I could use in describing my thought was a horizontal Archimedean spiral. Each loop is exactly like the prior loop and while the geometrics show them to be identical, there is movement and continuation. It was Jacob Bernoulli, the 17th-century Swiss mathematician, who discovered the mathematical equation for the spiral. It is said that

he wanted the spiral etched on his grave marker with the motto “*Eadem mutata resurgo*” (“Although changed I arise the same”).¹ The motto was tracking my intellectual pondering.

One of Georgetown’s academic advisors told us that as soon as we got an idea for a thesis we should talk with others about it. It was suggested that the process would help one find new avenues for one’s idea and firm up the pursuit of the thesis. I reached out to a friend about my idea, and he suggested that I read a book by a Romanian philosopher by the name of Mircea Eliade. The title of the book is *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. The title seemed to be hitting very close to my line of thinking, and I was anxious to read it. The catalog at Lauinger Library reported that there were two copies of the work on the shelf. I quickly went to the floor, row, and shelf where the volumes were placed. I remember them being on the bottom shelf, and I had to decide whether to pull the book with the original somewhat tattered binding or the book with the generic grey library re-binding. I chose the latter. Much to my distress, I found copious marginal scribbling in it. I wanted to think for myself when reading the book. I might benefit from the notes of others on a second reading, but I wanted a fresh reading the first time. So, I re-shelved the book and reached for the other copy. I opened the book and the frontis piece was inscribed in handwriting I recognized immediately.

This re-connection with my Professor seemed to obligate me to find a way to get in touch with Professor Joost’s family to tell them the story and the “Rest of the Story.” The administrative staff at Southern Illinois University were able to provide me with an address for Mrs. Joost in Florida. I sent her a letter describing all of



Nicholas Joost
8 March 1955

Nicholas Joost’s signature, from the frontis piece of Eliade’s
The Myth of the Eternal Return

¹ Herbert Westren Turnbull, “The Great Mathematicians,” in *The World of Mathematics, Volume One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 147.

what I have related here, and she in turn sent me a very gracious note thanking me. In her note, Mrs. Joost told me that besides having donated many of the Professor's books to the University, she also donated the Professor's papers and thought that I might be interested in reviewing them. Professor Joost received his BA from Georgetown University in 1938.

One cannot just walk into the area of the library that houses the special collections. I made an appointment; having shown up with only a pencil and a notebook as stipulated by library rules, I was given the index for the Joost Collection. After I selected several files which contained mostly personal information, I waited at my table for the cart with the files to arrive. I wondered what I would learn. What would Professor Joost have determined was important enough to keep? It has been a while, but to the best of my recollection there was correspondence about a sabbatical in India and a question as to whether he would be paid in dollars or rupees. I remember there being several letters going back and forth with university officials on the disciplinary proceedings of a student. Then, as I leafed through the papers, I found a handwritten letter on blue aerogram paper. It was the very light weight paper that folded into an envelope after one has written the message. Aerograms were used for international mailings. *The letter was from me*; my closing remark was that if Professor Joost ever had the time he might find a willing listener at my mother and father's home in Roxana, Illinois.

Returns occur in time. Mircea Eliade dichotomizes time as linear and cyclical while somehow being co-joined. The marking of linear time from the 1967 classroom event, to the letter from me to Professor Joost in 1969, to my learning of his passing, to my discovery of his signature in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, to my examination of the special collection at Lauinger Library track Eliade's identification of a heterogeneous, temporal time. To me, the return at the intersections of Professor Joost's life and my life are profound and represent the other side of Eliade's balance of the temporal and the sacred. I am the person I am today, in part, as a result of these returns.

I never pursued that particular thesis regarding history replicating itself, but I am amazed and pleased with the repeating intersection of events in the lives of Nicholas Joost and myself. There was no myth in our returns.