

Facts and Reflections

Michael Brann—October 1991

The following will be a few random facts and reflections on my family and me.

I was the third born amongst the children after Marcella, Mark and prior to Mary Jane, the youngest. We were all two years apart in age, and as you may have noticed, all of our names began with the letter “M.” Quite a mark of distinction all would have to admit.

I must say we were not a very close family in terms of outward displays of love and affection, but I suppose we all loved and supported one another regardless. I’m not sure why we were this way. There were no problems of drugs, alcohol, physical or mental abuse or such things.

I guess the closest I’ve come to placing blame is the fact that my Dad always worked 2nd shift at the local Alcoa Aluminum factory. He was a mechanic there, which is really all I know about his job. Second shift meant from about 2:00 PM to 11:00 PM Thus, as a family we were never much all together at one time except on the weekends, and even then everyone seemed to be on a different schedule.

About the only thing I remember doing together with any frequency was eating breakfasts and dinners on Saturday. Breakfasts were always enjoyable because pancakes were usually served. Dinners I usually dreaded because I HAD TO EAT EVERYTHING ON MY PLATE!!! I hated vegetables. I was usually mad at Mom secretly because I thought she was always preparing vegetables just to make me angry. (After all, I was a child and children think such things.)

I suppose we were a typical lower middle class family. My Mom and Dad opened their own business on the side, J & B Upholstery. J&B stands for Jim and Bernadine (Bern for short) which are their first names. Imagination didn't run in our family...just practicality. They worked hard there in that converted garage. I used to help sometimes. I liked to tear off the old material and remove the 10,000 staples or so that were left behind in the wood frame. Little dumb details like staple pulling are a Virgo's delight! Sometimes there were bonuses. I'd usually always find a little loose change and small toys, combs and the like. Mostly there were just old cookie crumbs, though. I would often help my Dad pick up and deliver the furniture. They were pretty proud of their work, and I think they really did do very good work. Even through my teen years, people would compliment my parents' work to me. In fact, my Mom still works in a shop from time to time with a friend of the family.

We were all Catholics, except Dad. His side of the family was Protestant, while my Mom's were Catholic. She was one of 10 children, I think. I think that caused some friction in the family relations, but I never heard any mention of it. We frequently visited our different relatives since all lived in the area, but I don't think my Dad much enjoyed socializing.

Maybe it was because he felt he should be doing some work or felt uneasy around people or Catholics or because he felt inferior. I don't know why we had these visits then. I hated them more than he did. We always had to take baths and put on our better clean clothes and behave ourselves. I would have much rather been out playing baseball!

All of us children attended Catholic Grade School, which meant more disciplinarian actions from Nuns and Priests. We went to celebrate Mass EVERY day of our young lives, except Saturday. I don't know how I didn't die of monotony. At that time, the Mass was in Latin, which meant I didn't really know what was going on, but pretended that it all was very important and relevant. I was a choir boy and an altar boy. I finally quit being an altar boy because I didn't like being that involved in the ritual and repeating endless Latin prayers.

I think I discovered then how meaningless it all was after being behind the scenes and somehow concluding that even the Priests and Nuns were mesmerized by the pomp and circumstance.

It was like Dorothy discovering that the Wizard of Oz was a fraudulent little wimp (excuse the vernacular, please). Anyway, my quitting caused quite a stir in the local church with the Nuns and Priests expressing extreme disappointment over it. Somehow, I got away with it and I became kind of a folk hero with some classmates at 12 years of age!

We always had pets while growing up. I remember three dogs (all Toy Fox Terriers, small, ferocious chickens at heart), Buster, Mickey and Tuffy. One parakeet named Perry who got sucked down the vacuum cleaner when someone was cleaning the cage and lived to peep about it. I really can't remember who did it. It may have been me, but I rather think it was someone else. I do remember that Perry had to have a leg splint (actually it was a toothpick) for awhile. I was also told that our first dog, Buster, ran down into the sewer, but later found he was struck and killed by a car.

There were several play friends that I could speak about, but what I would rather talk about are the adult neighbors I only vaguely recall. I wish I could remember them more carefully because they were very kind and friendly towards me. Mr. and Mrs. Weisemann. He was a fisherman. He must have been retired because that is all I remember of him. He was always cutting fish heads off in the alley behind the house and there would be flies everywhere. He was the first person I knew who died.

Another neighbor I only recall as “Hiney.” I once kicked him in the rear end and ran away. I have regretted doing that ever since, because he was just an old grandfatherly type working-class man who was full of interesting tales he’d spin. He always wore blue-jeans and suspenders.

Then there was Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Berhalter. She was the Witch of the neighborhood, but her bark was just loud...underneath she was very giving. Charlie was a good-time Charlie. Looking back, he fits my picture of an alcoholic. He looked worn and haggard, smoked heavily and laughed regularly. He always seemed to be in hot water with his wife.

The Cox’s had two children, one Danny was about two years older than me, but was very small for his age and had a strange deep voice, wore coke bottle glasses and spoke in a slow, choppy fashion. He had a hole in his heart. I wasn’t sure just what that meant, except that he wasn’t supposed to have any “rough play.” I liked him, but at the same time felt kind of sorry for him.

The last neighbor I’ll mention is Mr. Feining. He ran a small grocery store not one-half block from our house. He didn’t seem to especially trust kids and was always kindly leading us out the door, except if we had 25c to spend. I always used to get the Hostess Chocolate Cupcakes—2 packs for 24c.

I liked our neighborhood area. In the summer evenings I would lay on a cement slope on “D” Street and look at the stars and just think and wish or talk with someone. There was always something very mysterious and interesting about it.

We moved across town when I was 13. I didn’t want to move. None of us did except Dad and Maybe Mom. I was afraid of trying to make new friends and of going to a different school. It turned out just fine, but it did take a solid year or two to adjust. It was a difficult time, too, because of puberty.

I survived, but looking back I wish I had had someone who was aware of my struggles. I realize the others were probably having similar problems that were likewise unnoticed. School, sports, girls and cars occupied the rest of my High School years. My life became less interesting as far as I am now concerned.

While a Senior in High School and just about ready to graduate, my Dad died. It was a very unusual experience. I was pretty much shocked and very much confused. It was the darkest day of my life up till then, but later on I looked at it as though I was free from my Dad’s discipline and constant direction. He had wanted me to go to a trade school and be a tool and die maker or maybe a draftsman.

I wasn't sure what I wanted, but I didn't want to be either of those things for some reason. (Later, I asked Mom why Dad seemed angry or in a bad mood and she told me he was sick a lot with various illnesses over a long time. He died when a valve ruptured around his heart. He had been on sick leave for about a year before he died at age 46. I guess it is hard for children to perceive such things.)

After college, I moved to Florida to get out of the cold Indiana winters where I got into the office furnishings and supply industry. I was there for 10 years before meeting and marrying the best thing that ever happened to me...Ginger! Now life is interesting again.