Peeling the Onion

For the last 30 years during the wassail celebrations, I have read you short stories I have written. Most of them have been set either in my hometown of Enid, Oklahoma, or my mother’s hometown, Pond Creek, which is 19 miles north of Enid. This morning, I shall depart from that pattern and read you a piece on a subject that -- while on its surface may seem quixotic -- is close to my heart. I discovered the idea while reading essays by George Orwell about discrimination. Orwell’s assertion was that, if there’s something in your psychological makeup that you find disgusting, it is your duty as a moral being to get rid of it. Orwell described the process as similar to peeling an onion.

You need to know this morning that for my undergraduate education, I attended the University of Chicago. I chose that institution for four reasons: I wanted to get away from the State of Oklahoma and its racism. Before the Supreme Court’s decision on Brown vs. Board of Education, the state had separate schools for black children, but it mainstreamed Latino and Native American students. To me, that situation made no sense. The state’s integration process was orderly and thoughtful – at least compared to
neighboring Arkansas, then being led by Gov. Orval Faubus. Still Oklahoma seemed to my 18-year-old mind backward and parochial.

1. I wanted to get away from “the southern belle syndrome,” what I considered the tendency of privileged white women to get married, perhaps have children, retire at an early age, be put on metaphoric pedestals, and worshipped by their mates.

2. I wanted nothing to do with the military so I wanted to attend a campus that had no mandatory Reserve Officers Training Corps.

3. I wanted to get away from big-time football like that at the University of Oklahoma, and I wanted nothing to do with fraternities where it appeared my friends would be chosen for me.

There were also things I liked about the University of Chicago.

1. It was in a city that was known for its jazz. Even though my musical tastes have broadened in the last 55 years, jazz is still my favorite music.

2. I was tired of living in a small city and wanted to try a big one.

3. Finally, I read that the University of Chicago’s faculty and alumni had received more Nobel prizes than any other college in the United States. I thought that was cool. I wanted a Nobel Prize.

The University of Chicago was founded in 1891 on the site of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair by two renowned Baptists, William Rainey Harper, an eminent scholar, and oil magnate John D. Rockefeller. For years after its founding, students sang a parody of the doxology that emphasized Rockefeller’s generosity to the campus. It went:

“Praise John from whom oil blessings flow.”
Praise him all students here below.
Praise him above ye heavenly hosts.
Praise Father, Son, but John the most.”

Because the campus when I was there from 1959 to 1964 drew heavily on students from the Chicago area and the eastern seaboard, both of which have large Jewish populations, the university at that time had a student body that was about 35 percent Jewish. For that reason the University of Chicago was comically known as “a Baptist institution where agnostic professors teach Jewish students all about St. Thomas Aquinas.” The university is now non-denominational.

When I checked into my residence hall, I met 26 young men. Almost all of them were from east of the Mississippi River and north of the Ohio River. The only ones not from there were me and a Mexican youth from Corpus Christi, Texas. I really liked my new friends, and I had a particular fondness for the Jews. Several of them from Chicago invited me to their homes for Yom Kippur, Passover, Hanukah, and other Jewish holidays. By the time I went home for Christmas break, I was quite adept at Yiddish swear words.

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving in 1959, a Jewish friend invited me to accompany him to the annual latke-hamantash debates in the campus’ Hillel House. Before I describe the debates, let me tell you about latkes and hamantaschen. Latkes are pancakes, if you will, made from grated potatoes, flour, and egg and sometimes garlic and onion. They are – if you will – the Jewish version of hash browns. They can be served with sour cream or
applesauce. They are the traditional dish of Hanukah, the celebration in December that observes the freeing of the Jews from the Maccabees. The oil latkes are fried in is symbolic of the oil that was needed to last for eight days when there was only enough fuel to last for one day. That was the miracle of Hanukah and the reason why the menorah before us this morning has eight candles. Latkes are somewhat round. In contrast, hamantaschen are baked and are triangular. They are traditionally filled with poppy seeds or prunes, but in recent years they have been filled with such things as peanut butter and even Nutella. Hamantaschen are the traditional dish of Purim, the spring celebration of the anniversary of Queen Esther’s ascent rose to the throne. She freed the Jews from the oppression of the Babylonians. We should also note that Haman, Esther’s nemesis, who was hung for putting moves on her, wore a three-cornered hat, the shape of a hamantash.

The annual controversy between latkes and hamantaschen often involves their shapes. Latkes are round like the sun, the moon, the cycle of the seasons and symbolize unity. Hamantaschen are triangles and call to mind mature trees, mountains, or even Abraham Maslov’s hierarchy of human needs. If you fit two of them together in the proper way, two triangles form a Star of David. (Hold the triangles up.) This comparison also informs you of the comic nature of the debates.

The first latke-hamantash debate was held in 1946 at the University of Chicago at the instigation of Rabbi Maurice Pekarsky, who was in charge of the campus’ Hillel House. He was joined in the organization by Sol Tax, professor of anthropology (whose daughter Marianna was one of my
classmates), and Louis Gottschalk, professor of history at the University of Chicago. According to Ruth Fredman Cernea, editor of the book, *The Great Latke-Hamanstash Debate*, the purpose of the event was twofold: The first reason was that scholarly life in the 1940s generally discouraged open displays of Jewish ethnicity. This event provided a rare opportunity for faculty to reveal their Jewish souls and poke fun at the high seriousness of everyday academic life. The second reason was that this was a period in the mournful wake of the holocaust when students as well as faculty needed an event that would lift their spirits and provide relief not only from the news of the horror but also from the university’s rigorous academic program. In addition, Ms. Cernea claims the event rose from a tradition of spoofing Talmudic study during the celebration of Purim.

Several long-standing customs are observed at the University of Chicago during the annual latke-hamantash debates: Participants must have a Ph.D. or an equivalent advanced degree. They must make a formal entry in academic garb to the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance.” One of the four debaters must be an acknowledged Gentile. Let’s hear it for ethnic diversity and the debate founders’ ability to peel the onion. This event has spread. Today latke-hamantash debates are held on more than 40 campuses throughout the United States.

Whichever food wins the debate is served along with coffee and hot spiced apple cider, which -- as you experienced wassailers know -- is similar to wassail. My experiences at the debates was that the food usually served is the latke because it is easier to make. However, if you congregants sing well
this morning, as I know you can, both foods will be served to your
gastronomic delight.

Now, for an abrupt transition, let’s turn our thoughts to genealogy. If you have a fantastic pedigree of some sort, congratulations. I must confess I am a mutt, and I come from a family of mongrels. That lowly fact has not kept some members of my family from doing considerable genealogical study.

In 1964 my name appeared in a St. Louis area newspaper. A woman sent the clipping to her father, John Francis Brisbin of East Lansing, Michigan. He sent me a letter asking me, “Who are you? Where do you come from? Why do you spell our family name in that strange way?” I referred the letter to my father who only knew that his great-grandfather’s parents had been killed in an Indian war in Texas and that my great-grandfather and his brother had been raised in a Catholic orphanage. When the orphanage released the brothers, the nuns knew their name was Brisben, and they spelled it the way they thought it sounded.

Pop sent this information to John Francis Brisbin. Pop received an eight-page, single-spaced letter that stated all the original Brisbanes, Brisbins, Brisbons, etc., had come with William the Conqueror from Normandy in northwestern France and defeated the Angles and Saxons in the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Mr. Brisbin showed my father how the family had emigrated to Scotland, then Ireland, and then America. He showed how the family had gone from Pennsylvania down the Ohio River to Kentucky and Tennessee and eventually to Texas. Pop found a link to a Brisbane family in
Tennessee, and we were admitted to John Francis Brisbin’s family tree – despite our aberrant spelling.

Following one of my pilgrimages to our partner church in Janosfalva, Romania, I went to Caen (that’s C-A-E-N), France, in Normandy where William the Conqueror launched his campaign in 1066. In a museum named in William’s honor I found records of my ancestors, all of whom went to England with him. I also learned that in old French my family name means “broken bone.” Given what has happened to my left ankle in 1998 and the eleven subsequent surgeries, how proverbial could I possibly get?

The Normandy museum some years ago wanted a statue of William the Conqueror. The curator had no picture of him, but there are descriptions. The curator sent these descriptions to the people at Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum, and they made the museum a statue of a blond man in a tunic with a breast plate holding a shield and a sword. He has a page-boy haircut, and he looks just like Charlton Heston.

So much for my father’s side of the family.

Now for my mother’s side: I had an uncle, the late Carlyle Goldsmith, who did genealogical research, but he had a reputation for stretching the truth and making linkages that were suspect. For example, he was always trying to relate our family to Abraham Lincoln. The Goldsmiths and the Lincolns had been neighbors in Kentucky, but my cousins have since discovered that’s as far as it goes. Uncle Carlyle needed to peel the onion.

Carlyle did link the Goldsmith family to Oliver Goldsmith, author of the novel *The Vicar of Wakefield,* the pastoral poem “The Deserted
Village,” the play “She Stoops to Conquer,” and the classic children’s book *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*, from which we have the phrase “goody two-shoes.” (We English majors never make much money, but we do have a lot of fun.) My family is descended from one of Mr. Goldsmith’s younger brothers who made his fortune trading and managing black slaves in the West Indies. That is a skeleton in my closet of which I am not proud -- but I have peeled the onion.

Carlyle’s research took him as far back as the early 16\textsuperscript{th} century when a man known as John the Traveler came from Spain to live in Ballymahon, County Longford, in central Ireland. His arrival there begs some questions. For one, he should have been known as Juan the Traveler. A second is “Why did he leave Spain?” Here is a probable answer: In 1483 King Ferdinand appointed Tomas de Torquemada as inquisitor general to conduct the Spanish Inquisition and rid Spain of Jews. So John the Traveler was probably a Jew fleeing a possible burning at the stake. Perhaps he was really known as Johann the traveler. He probably was what is now known as “black Irish.” In Ballymahon John the Traveler married into a family of goldsmiths. Indeed, making objects from and trading in gold might have been his profession in Spain.

About that time, the British were forcing the Irish to adopt last names so they could keep track of their subjects and their lineage. Many took the name of their hometowns. That’s why we have such names as O’Leary, or “of the town of Leary.” Jews at that time were not allowed to own land, so they went into trades. The family of John the Traveler adopted their trade as
its family name. Societal pressures eventually caused the Goldsmiths to change their religion from Judaism to Anglicanism, but the name lingered on. Being the dissembler that I am, I told older anti-Semitic members of my mother’s family that we might be descended from Jews, and I was met with a series of negative reactions. Those people need to peel the onion and rid themselves of anti-Semitism.

Let’s return to the University of Chicago, and let me describe a truly seminal moment in my life. It is a lovely April afternoon in 1960, and some of my buddies and I have decided to skip class on a Friday and attend opening day of major league baseball in Wrigley Field. We are looking forward to a great game. Bob Buhl will be pitching for the Milwaukee Braves with Henry Aaron and Eddie Matthews and a highly touted rookie catcher named Joe Torre. They will be batting against Don Cardwell, the ace pitcher for the Chicago Cubs, with the iconic Ernie Banks in the field. My friends and I walk from the Hyde Park campus through the Woodlawn neighborhood and catch the famous el at 63rd Street and University Avenue, then known -- because of the el tracks -- as “the street where the sun never shines.” The car is crowded, and I am standing next to the exit door holding an overhead rail. The train goes underground through the Loop and rises and becomes an el again. I am having a great time shooting the breeze with my pals. When the train arrives at Belmont Avenue, a friend taps me on the shoulder. I turn around to see what he wants, and there is an elderly Hassidic Orthodox Jewish gentleman complete with a black homburg hat and suit, a gray beard, and curls cascading from above his ears. I step aside. He passes by me. He steps onto
the platform and turns to face me. I look at him and smile. With his blue eyes blazing, he shouts at me, “Christian Trash!” Just at that moment, the doors to the el car close. My friends laugh. The el takes off.

For the most fleeting second, this thought crossed my mind: “Hey, I am this sandy-haired, blue-eyed, freckle-faced white boy from the South, and you’re not supposed to do this to me. I’m supposed to do it to you!”

That thought deeply disturbed me. Of course at the time I did not know my own genealogical makeup. But over time, especially after reading Orwell, I realized that I badly needed to peel the onion. I realized I could not hate that old Hassid without simultaneously hating the Jew in myself. I needed to get rid of every nasty thought I have ever had about a race, ethnicity, religion, women or any other type of group about which I have ever harbored an unnecessarily negative thought. I also came to realize that I owed that old Hassidic gentleman a debt of gratitude for realizing what thoughts and habits I had to get rid of to become a better human being, or what the Jews call “a real mensch.”

As I prepared for this morning’s presentation, I thought about the Unitarian-Universalist Association’s seven principles. As we close the old year, I thought I would read them to you so you could consider them and how your life is matching up with them:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person.
2. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement for spiritual growth in our congregations.
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
5. The right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

That’s what I had to tell you this morning. If you have some aspects of your own personality that don’t please you and don’t match your principles, I invite you to peel the onion. After all, the new year and the time to make resolutions is coming. You can start right now by meditating. Just lean back in your chairs, put your feet flat on the floor, put your hands on your knees, close your eyes, and breathe. Breathe out thoughts you don’t like harboring, thoughts that no longer serve you, and breathe in thoughts you feel you should have, thoughts that will serve your personality, your family, and your community and allow you to retain the basic generosity of the human spirit. Let’s spend a few moments breathing out the negative and breathing in the positive.

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