

Prologue

Growing Up Absurd. That is what this book should be called. Alas, that title is taken—by Paul Goodman, in a book that for a time was my *Bible*. So I'll pay homage and slip it into the subtitle. Just as, also, in homage, I once slipped a quotation from Andrew Marvell into a poem written for a girl whom in Grade 7 I briefly presumed to be the love of my life.

Well now I have allegedly grown up—and *most* absurdly. And now, as a grown-up, I'd absurdly assumed I could impart wisdom to my university students who are the same age I was when I found a grown-up called Paul Goodman who understood how absurd it all was. However, when I put Goodman's book on a recommended reading list for my Psychology of Art class, those who dipped into it merely found it "annoying"—or, at very best, "uninteresting". But then so did that sweet lust of my 7th Grade life find my poem. There is nothing more disappointing than others' tepid responses to one's personal passions.

This is sad because passion, even more than misery, loves company. It is no secret that we are at our most passionate in our youth—and probably more passionate *about* our youth than any other time of our lives. With age, the urge to share our passions becomes stronger, as if they need an infusion of young blood or they will weaken and fade. Unfortunately the young rarely seem to understand their elders' passions, even their elders' youthful passions.

It is an admittedly arbitrary line drawn in the sand of my life that I chose to delimit my 'youth' by high school graduation. It certainly isn't intended to suggest I was mature thereafter. But high school graduation is a traditional border crossing, and for me it was an actual physical crossing, for it involved 'emigrating' from the metaphorical equivalent of a "Third World" country to a "Developed Nation". From my birth back in 1946 until making it through high school in December 1963, I lived at 6518 South Paulina on the infamous South Side of Chicago. I then spent 4 years in the very different world of Chicago's North Side, after which I emigrated again, this time to Canada—an even more 'developed' land. This book is about the South Side years of my life, which probably could justifiably be called my 'formative years'. My wife certainly thinks so, for whenever I do or say something particularly outrageous, she always remarks that "you can take Ken out of Chicago, but you can't take Chicago out of Ken." She could be more precise, for it is specifically the South Side of me that too often in social situations inappropriately reveals itself like a flasher at a church service.

This is of course totally natural. We are all shaped (or misshaped) by the environment in which we spent (or misspent) our youth. Nothing that happens to one, no matter how calamitous or wonderful, will ever significantly reshape that inner core of self that hardened in the mould as our physical bodies grew from infant to adult. Developmental psychologists can argue about which are the *most* 'formative' years, but no one thinks it is as young adults or middle-aged citizens.

You can fix up your house, put on new siding, add a sunroom, knock down interior walls to make one big room out of two, even install a security system to protect against intruders, but the foundation and the basic framework remain the same. Old friends visiting from afar will say they don't even recognize the old homestead, but you live there and you know it is, at heart, the same place. Go to a high school reunion. The kid everybody called Fatso may now be slim and tanned and a senior executive in an Armani suit—ah, but watch his face closely as he approaches the snack table.

So I admit it: my South Side is still lurking inside my current persona, ever desirous to show itself. And I figure—why fight it? Hence, this book. But I hasten to add—for those who most reasonably ask “Who cares?”—it is not so much about me specifically, as it is about what it was like for a kid with intellectual pretensions and ambitions growing up at a particular time in the peculiar place called, perhaps euphemistically, ‘working class’ America. That is something I feel is worth recording.

It is also a somewhat nostalgic look back to a time and place where there was no conception of political correctness this side of the Iron Curtain, where the young weren't over-protected, where being young was a real adventure—with real dangers. But if this be a nostalgic vision, it is not a utopian one. Gang fights may seem romantic, but they aren't desirable. While I feel we've gone way too far in trying to socially engineer away the only-too-commonplace evils of societies such as those of the South Side, I can't say I would want to now live in, or have had my children live in, such a society.

P.S. I have to add, for both legal reasons and in acknowledgement of the dubious reliability of individual memory, that while some resemblance to persons living and dead might be expected, memory is one of the best fiction writers around. *Caveat lector*. Note, too, that to protect the innocent (for were we not all innocent in our youth?) and the guilty, the further precaution has been taken to change the names of many of those who have taken up residence in the crumbling edifice of my memory. It would, however, be an outright lie to claim that “No resemblance to any persons living or dead is intended.” But this is not to say that eyewitnesses to some of the events recorded here may feel this should be labelled a work of fiction. It's well established that eyewitnesses are not to be trusted. And yes, of course, that includes me.

—Ken Stange

“Prologue” is the introduction to a work-in-progress: *Chicago Days: Growing Up Absurd On The South Side*, a memoir.

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