

130 - Remembering Greg

20 Sept., 2011

(Full disclosure – This is a recycled piece that originally appeared in my column in a tiny market student paper. I came across it while cleaning out files so I could donate an old computer and just thought I'd like to post it again. – *Brer Michael*)

I was reading in my local paper the other day about what they label "Student Standouts". These are usually high school students who have distinguished themselves in some way or another, frequently involving community service activity, excelling in one or more fields of endeavor or overcoming some adversity. These kids (and many more who never come up on the paper's radar) richly deserve praise and I'm glad to see them get it.

I'd like to suggest a standout student of my own. His name was Greg Pickering. I say *was* because Greg's been dead more than forty years, but he's as alive for me today as you are, or you, or you...

I don't know what Greg's grades were like, although I suspect he did all right. His mom was one of the teachers at the school we attended and even had that not been the case, Greg never struck me as the kind to do anything halfway. But that's not what made him stand out for me.

He was as popular a kid as I ever knew, was Greg. He had this wicked smile that made you just know he was contemplating some harmless mischief. That smile of his warmed and warned you at the same time. But that's not what made him stand out for me, either.

We attended St. Louise School together through the eighth grade and we were in the same class every year as I remember it. Greg was involved in just about everything we did, every class play, every sports team, and every practical joke. Everybody liked him and with good reason – he liked everybody, without qualification or reservation. I never saw or heard any indication he disliked or disrespected anyone.

Greg was one of the best at every sport we played and I was one of the worst. But you never would have known there was any difference in our abilities, not from Greg, that is. He was generally one of the team captains and he always picked me and a couple of the other less-than-stellar athletes. Consequently, he frequently found himself on the losing team, at least according to the final score.

I never really cared all that much about the sports we played in the dirt field next to the church parking lot. I didn't care about winning or losing or whether I could head the soccer ball. My inability to correctly hike the football mattered to me not one whit. And as for basketball, I thought for years that a fast break was an injury you faked in order to be allowed to sit on the bench and watch the rest of the team work up a sweat.

I couldn't be bothered about field goals or laterals or sliders. But I did care about one aspect of our sporting events. I cared about being chosen. I cared desperately about being waved over by a team captain who wouldn't scowl and grumble when he realized I was the last available choice. I spent the first few minutes of every recess and P.E. period praying to St. Jude, patron of lost causes not to let the team captain who chose me spit on the ground before pronouncing my name.

St. Jude must have had a direct line to Greg Pickering. Greg always smiled when he chose me and sometimes even took me second-to-last. Trust me when I say there's a wide gulf of self-esteem between second-to-last and not picked. Somehow Greg knew that although I would never be the best player, it was humiliating to have to acknowledge every day that I was the worst. He always seemed eager to have me on his team and I was grateful to have him choose me.

When some of the kids would pick on another for being chunky or having tape-repaired glasses or bringing something unusual for lunch, Greg would refuse to join in the taunting and he'd be particularly nice to that kid for a day or three. Most of us could be cruel from time to time and some of the kids were downright nasty most of the time, but not Greg. He just didn't have a mean bone in his body.

Greg and I were never especially close. His family operated a private resort on the shore of Lake Sammamish and occasionally a group of us would go there for a church youth group activity. Other than that, I never saw him outside of school. But buddies or not, he was one of the most important friends I've ever had. He let me carve out a little bit of space in the uncertainties of childhood where I could just be me without apology.

I have children in grade school now and I get torn up when some other kid hurts their feelings. I want each of them to have one friend who'll accept them as themselves no matter what. I want so badly for them to have a Greg Pickering in their lives. It's in honor of Greg that I've always told my own kids "If you want to have a friend, be a friend."

I wish you could all have known Greg Pickering. I was about fifteen when he passed away. My family had moved down to California by then and I hadn't seen any of the old crowd in almost a year when I got that call. It was one of the worst moments of my life.

We should all have a friend like Greg. Better yet, we should all be a friend like Greg. Thirty-odd years later, he's still the very first person who comes to mind when I think about heroes. I'd say that makes him a standout in anyone's book.