

Tom Burns - Autobiographical Statement
25th Ottawa Hills High School Reunion – 1984

Ottawa Hills and the class of 1959 were mostly good to me. As one of the few K-12 class members, I saw it all, and I can't explain why my experience within the class was nearly always happy. While I danced my Snoopy dance at the party, I know now there were others who never got an invitation. In retrospect, I am chagrined by the narrowness that created the exclusion, this among children who were as violets to one another, beyond the larger view of daffodils and orchids and poppies.

My Ottawa Hills dance was beautiful, but it gained its beauty at the expense of being optimally sheltered and naive. The burden of such dancing is the expectation that the world measures itself by the steps of one's little troop. It is possible to never release this baggage of self-aggrandizement and to build the fantasy of childhood into the myth of adulthood, disguising intolerance and insensitivity by declaring the dance as sacred and the dancers as the chosen ones. From what I know of my Ottawa Hills friends, most have escaped this peril.

All of my adult life I have been in love with Inger – the daughter of a Norwegian missionary to China and a teacher of missionary children – hardly a woman with an Ottawa Hills background. Twelve years of teaching at the University of Pennsylvania in the bargain basement social sciences has kept me close to the agitation of youth and the provocation of ideas – hardly the typical occupational, intellectual, economic Ottawa Hills experience. The last six years of research in an urban Black Church community has required me to recognize the importance of the spiritual in man, art and culture – the antithesis of the Ottawa Hills focus in life. Yet, I live on the Whitman candy estate in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania – Ottawa Hills writ Mainline, writ absolute. Talk about juxtaposition! From the pristine blue pool off the west wing, to chalk white classrooms of talk, to cockroaches running the couch edge behind gospel music.

The real trick is to make the cockroaches walk on water, without having to talk about it. I'm not there yet, but like many of my classmates, I suppose, I am still in search of a myth to justify the dance of my creation, my Ottawa Hills childhood.