



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Salute

I've done virtually everything in this life out of traditional sequence, against great counsel, or on a passionate lark. Not exactly the full contrarian, who withdraws when ordered to attack, and says yes when he means no, I still went to college. I even protested the first Gulf War by quoting Abby Hoffman at some horribly self-conscious rally of the patchouli-oil-and-granola set. On the quad. With a bull-horn.

I secured a delightfully meaningless graduate degree — and a mountain of student debt. Finally, I shunned the graduation ceremonies, had them mail my diploma to a series of forwarding addresses, then declined the

GI Bill and enlisted in the Marines as a private first class.

But there was more to do.

I made a daughter of mixed ancestry, a beautiful miracle, and a kind of footnote in the legacy of the war in Vietnam. I went cowboy-ing once, and then again, and then a third time, against increasingly desperate protests from those who loved me. I taught composition and English literature to rooms full of unemployed welders, single moms, and lumberjacks at a small community college. I married one of my students. I became a laconic police detective in a deep blue city — and now I look up to find myself a journalist of sorts.

This is not the way I imagined it. As a young lad I suffered from the delusion that I might actually be the second coming of Roger Staubach. Later, I saw myself as, variously, Atticus Finch, Jack Kerouac, Yakima Cannutt, or a kind of Jim Harrison in training.

Most of my ideas, the results of feverish and non-stop day-dreaming, never panned out. I still don't have an actual plan, but now that I'm somewhat winded from climbing the high hill of advancing age, I'm starting to see a lesson take shape in

the mists below.

That's a lie. I have been trying to see it, but the way things go, it took a reading from Antoine de Saint-Exupery, and a morning at Sisters High School, to hit me like a dump truck — and make me see it.

In 1941, shortly after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, St. Ex, a Frenchman decamped by the Nazi takeover of his homeland, was asked to give a speech to young Americans by Dorothy Thompson, head of The Progressive Education Association. In his speech, which can only be considered a master work, St. Exupery told the assembled: "I never got anything that mattered out of my work when it was only something to be exchanged against a pay scale... My work meant nothing if, while feeding me, it did not also make me part of something: pilot of a specific airline, gardener of a specific garden, architect of a specific cathedral, soldier of a specific country."

And so there it was, an accurate illustration of my proclivity for exploring the Great American Rabbit Holes.

"That which you give to the community builds the community, and the existence of the community

enriches your own substance," St. Ex went on to say, addressing a room full of young people facing an existential World War, and not least on the their hearts and minds the roles they might play in it. For some, it would mean death.

Which brings me to Veterans Day at Sisters High School.

While students elsewhere in our nation, outnumbered by the cameras, were protesting the result of free elections by ditching class and shaving off their eyebrows, the students at Sisters High School demonstrated with perfect clarity and respect their appreciation not just for military veterans, but for individual sacrifice, and the role that plays in building strong communities.

Because we all benefit. I most certainly have. And the students at SHS will one day graduate into a country that remains a land of opportunity, free to enjoy their own feverish and non-stop daydreams, to explore their own rabbit holes, free from the oppressive and violent tribalism that quashes aspirations in so many parts of the world — free to worship how they choose, free to vote, free to protest policies they disagree with, free to engage in heated civil

discourse, free to fail miserably, free to find other-worldly success.

But enjoying a benefit is only half the story, and the easy part. The second and more important piece is to look ahead for ways to contribute. And so I was heartened when Lexi Stewart, a 15-year-old sophomore, told me that for her the Veterans Day activities were not just about gratitude, but a way of thinking about "what we can do as a younger generation."

And so that is my salute, a heartfelt thank-you to the students at Sisters High School, and to my fellow veterans, whose sacrifices helped ensure that others — even mere saddletramps and carpetbaggers like me — can find a home at peace, with liberty to pursue our imaginations, and our ideas, to see them realized, and to work each day to pay that legacy forward.



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