

Excerpt from "My 'BROOKBEND 'Home"

Robert J. "Bob" Chassell

Forget "Kermit D. Frog here." The first person to ever greet me with a cheerful and upbeat "High Ho" was a guy by the name of Bob Chassell, the singularly most unique and interesting human being I have met during my 71 years of life. As I've explained repeatedly in my memoirs, Stockbridge, Mass. was, and is to this day, a magical place. It was especially so for a 14 year-old boy, moving in 1960 from the relatively plain vanilla, conventional community of Pittsfield to what was a diverse and different village populated by distinct individuals and their families. One of those individuals was another 14 year-old boy who would become one of my closest friends for several years during the 1960's.

On the surface Bob Chassell would have fit the classic definition of high school "Nerd." Here was this kid with a pocket protector and half a dozen pens and pencils, the top button of his shirt unfashionably closed, baggy corduroy trousers, way too practical shoes, and yes, a slide rule fastened to his belt. I never knew another kid in all my life who carried a slide rule. In normal circumstances, Bob would have fit the classic definition of "Nerd". He had no sense of, nor did he care about the current social norms and trends of teenage fashion. Conforming to high school social norms simply did not matter to Bob. And that is why he did not fall into the victimhood of being a weak and fearful "Nerd" In fact never once did I ever see Bob show fear.

While most of the kids in our high school did not embrace Bob as a close friend, they also did not reject him or even feel free to make fun of his differences. I think it was because Stockbridge was such a small community, that most of the kids in our high school class had been going to school with him all through elementary school days at The Plain School. This of course was over an 8-year period prior to my moving to Stockbridge. By the time I got there, Bob was firmly in his place within the high school community, a place he largely defined as opposed to having it defined for him. These boys and girls grew up with Bob. They had long ago come to accept the unique and different aspects of Bob's choices, his decisions, his outlooks, his opinions, his dress and his habits. They had long time ago accepted Bob as the class genius, and even those who acknowledged him as being different or criticized him did not ever feel free to reject or ostracize Bob. If there ever was an undercurrent of negativity, it was, "Well there goes Bob again, BUT he is our Bob. He is one of us." Bob in fact was much too confident, upbeat, positive, out-going and, down-right friendly to allow himself to be picked on by high school jocks, popular kids or even faculty members. Bob was tough and Bob was strong. How many kids do you know who slept outside in a wooden lean-to in the fresh air in warm weather or freezing cold weather?

As I've shared many times, Stockbridge was a place of distinct and unique characters. Andrew Carey, Norman Rockwell, William Gibson, Norman Mailer, Reinhold Niebuhr, the Stokes and

Frelinghuysen families and the Fitzpatrick family are just some who come to mind. The influence of Austin Riggs Center (a private psychiatric hospital where Bob's Dad Dr. Joseph Chassell worked) ; the wealthy New York City summer residents; ambassadors and foreign service people; artists, photographers, musicians, playwrights, actors, authors, the influence of Tanglewood, The Berkshire Theater Festival, near-by Jacob's Pillow; and Chesterwood attracted an overlaid mosaic of interesting people including a whole host of psychiatrists, therapists and their families. The Chassell Family living on their semi-farm on Rattlesnake Mountain Road (Bob's mother Margo raised sheep for their wool) was clearly one of those exceptional families.

Bob was raised in a unique combination of exceptional intellectual stimulation and challenge; and yet also, a hard-working, simple European-style country living. (I believe Margot was from Holland.) As if living in Europe before everyone had vehicles, the Chassell's bicycled all over Stockbridge long before bicycling was popular in the United States. Many was the morning that I would be riding in the yellow school bus on my way down into the village to Williams High School and look out the window to see Joe and Bob Chassell peddling their bikes down Prospect Hill to the center of Stockbridge...Joe headed presumably to Austin Riggs and Bob to Williams High. As I recall the vehicle they did own was an old Land Rover or some other four-wheel vehicle long before SUV's or four-wheel vehicles were popular in the US. No one but African explorers owned those things back then.

Life in the Chassell household was almost completely different from that of conventional upper middleclass America. In my home, there were radio stations playing pop music, my Dad listened to some opera and both of my parents had all the show tunes popular at that time. When you walked into Bob's house you were immediately aware of WQXR the nearly one and only Classical music station broadcasting out of New York City. (There was no NPR at the time.) I don't think that Bob ever really listened to WPTR or WTRY, the kid's rock 'roll, pop music stations out of upper New York State. Another thing that would hit you immediately was that Bob's Mom, Margo had a huge loom in the main room of their house with a major project half-way done. I do believe she often used the wool from her own sheep. Now that is something you don't see in the main living or sitting room of every American household. One more thing, if you got to stay overnight as Bob's guest, you more than likely then were in for a treat when Margo, prepared the finest "Dutch", sweet, fluffy pancakes for breakfast. Never had I, ever tasted anything like those pancakes in an average American home. You sure did not get those high-profile sweet-tasting and delectable pancakes out of a box of Aunt Jemima's mix.

I always felt as if Bob were trying to educate me, to welcome me to his world of greater intellectual capacity... to gently bring me along. He was never critical of me personally. When visiting Rattle Snake Mountain Road the chances were better than not, that Bob, and Joe would be discussing or debating the details and the merits of some recent article in Scientific American. I mean how many average high school kids even knew Scientific American existed, never mind make the time to read these peer-reviewed and often in-depth articles covering a broad range of scientific topics? Needless to say, as bright as I was, these discussions more frequently than not flew way over my head...and this brings me to another positive attribute

about Bob. Robert J. Chassell knew that he was much smarter than the rest of us, that he had accumulated and mastered far more knowledge than we mere mortals. But..NEVER ONCE was Bob arrogant about his superior knowledge. He enjoyed his friendships. He genuinely cared about, and sought common ground with those of us who could not join him on his mental Mount Olympus. Bob sought to lift us up, not put us down. As a result, Bob was comfortable with all kinds of people.

An afternoon playing in a Prospect Hill hay barn is a perfect example of how Bob could live in compartments and flexibly reach out to different people at different levels. One hot summer day after the hay had been baled and harvested and put up in a loft of a large barn on Prospect Hill, Bob introduced me to this summer visitor "new kid"..I do not remember his name. The three of us teen boys spent an entire afternoon building caverns and tunnels in the hay bales in that barn. You do not want to know the pain and discomfort hay scratches cause on a kid's arms, neck and back crawling through hay bale tunnels..not to mention the potential danger of collapse and suffocation. Now I have no idea of the intellectual capacity of that summer boy, but I sure do know that the three of us delighted in building hay tunnels and highways for hours one summer afternoon. (Lots of agony from all the cuts afterwards.)

Bob was the type of kid that never got into trouble the way most teenage boys get into trouble by directly angering or violating authority. There was only one time that I saw Bob get into trouble with a teacher. During my first two years at Williams High, we had a class advisor, homeroom and social studies teacher by the name of Pierce Lalor. Mr. Lalor was a very conservatively-minded hard-core World War II veteran blinded in one eye and very firm in his beliefs about discipline. One day he was lecturing on the Nazi Hindenburg disaster in New Jersey and he referred to it as a balloon. Well Bob did the number one "No No". He corrected Pierce Lalor in front of the class. He told Mr. Lalor that no the Hindenburg was not a balloon, but a dirigible. Mr. Lalor got really upset and frustrated and challenged Bob. Bob being the ever accurate and erudite person then proceeded to look up and cite the differences between a free-floating balloon, a semi rigid motorized blimp and a fully rigid zeppelin type dirigible. Although accurate, this display of intellectual prowess was too much for Mr. Lalor. I am vague about the outcome, but he reprimanded Bob for correcting him as I remember suggesting he was too smart for his own good.

I only got seriously upset with Bob on two occasions.

My EGO Out of Place:

During the winter of 1961-1962 the snow fell heavily on Rattle Snake Mountain Road. It was cold and the wind was fierce. As a result, huge drifted and packed snow banks piled up on the West side of the Chassell house. They really were deep and packed down hard. Something Bob read or talked about inspired him to build a for-real igloo. Using large shovels and tools one could actually cut out huge packed snow blocks and build a for-real igloo..not the snow piles dug out by little kids all over New England, but real blocks..a real igloo.. ..Bob invited me to

come up (we were 15 I think) and help him build the igloo. I spent the day..all day cutting, hauling and building the igloo with him. We worked until sundown. My memory fails me, but it may have even taken a second day as well. In any event when it was done, you could slide down below the snow line and back up into the igloo and it was warm inside: not house warm, but warm enough to sleep in a sleeping bag with clothing on. We really enjoyed that igloo.

What I did not know was the somehow a reporter was contacted or a reporter found out about the igloo, and that reporter / photographer went to the farm to shoot the photos and to write the story. I never knew about it until I read the story in the newspaper with a black and white photo of Bob and the igloo. Also apparently the picture got picked by AP or UPI news distribution and the photo began to show up in newspapers all over the US. Bob became famous with his fifteen minutes of fame. Well, call me egotistical, call me insecure, but I was not a happy camper with my dear friend. Why hadn't he called me or told me. I mean we did that igloo together. I was responsible for at least 1/4th. or 1/3rd.of the sweat labor to build that thing (I was never as strong or as fast as Bob.) I mean we should have been in that picture together as a team! It is many decades now, but I do think I spoke to Bob about it, but since I really did not regret his having gotten the coverage (I just wanted to be there, too...I felt left out.) , I'm not sure I really pressed the issue too much.

Are Reality, The Physical World Real or Not, and What About God? ..The Great Debate:

There is one camping trip in April 1962 that I shall always remember. I was turning 16 that April. Bob was still 15 I believe. Our friend David Drake was a year older than us. We three took a canoeing / camping trip for quite a few days in the cold of early spring to a stream, swamp, pond on Tom Ball Mountain in West Stockbridge / Housatonic, MA. The three of us hauled our camping gear, the canoe, paddles, everything up the old dirt road to the top of the hill where the swamp /pond was located. We then paddled to a forested dry higher ground on the other side and set up camp..the tent, the sleeping bags and the camp fire. This I believe was the camping trip where Bob spilled hot liquid from the fire (boiling water, soup, coffee, ?) and scarred the side of his hand. He had that mark forever after that..but that is another story.)

In any event as the really cold of night set in and we were preparing for a rather uncomfortable night of chilly sleeping despite sleeping bags, we got into a discussion about perceiving the cold, experiencing the physical world about us and the nature of reality. Now at that time I was very active in the Congregational Church Pilgrim Fellowship. I believed in God as the Creator of the material physical world, and that it was real. Bob proposed that what if this were all just a large mental image. What if this were all not real, not physical. We could overcome our aversion to cold simply by imagining it to be warmer. We could change everything by imagining or mentally creating another reality. Well I'm ashamed to say that Bob upset me so much with this imagination, make-believe stuff..the thought that we mentally create it all, (sounds like a benign version of The Matrix). I told him if I shot him, he'd find out how real it was. If I stabbed him or hurt him, he'd surely know it was real. His answer was that his imagination would then in keeping with sanity, imagine pain or even death. The debate expanded to the topic of the nature of real and tangible versus energy or mental creation and imagination.... and also the

nature of God. Bob doubted God and this re-doubled my angst and debate with him. I cannot remember how the night ended, but we finally went to bed. I believe David served as a peacemaker; he must have patched it up because we then spent two more days canoeing and investigating the wilds of this area.

A Visit to Cambridge University and The Best Thanksgiving Ever

Bob was studying in Cambridge University (I always forget which college) in the UK the same Michael Mass Term I was studying at The London School of Economics during the fall /early winter of 1966. I saw Bob at least four times while I was in London. Once I took a train to Cambridge to spend a weekend with him. I remember that in order to eat at the college dining hall, we had to pass me off as a college student. We were not above resorting to bribery. Bob figured a way to ahem, "purchase" a dressing gown or black robe which students had to wear to eat in the college dining hall. I think a few British pounds went a long way so I got to share the experience of eating British school style at the long tables. However, the one visit that really stands out is Thanksgiving of 1966 when Bob invited me to join him as his guest at the home of his older sister Sonya and Geoff who lived I believe out in Berkshire England. The details of the party and the day have blurred with time, except I remember that several Americans were invited and Sonya prepared a Thanksgiving dinner. I also remember being introduced to Dubonnet for the first time at this party by an older American guest. It was a typically cold grey autumn day outside and this made the party even more pleasant inside the Chassell / Caston household at the time...truly another time that Bob did me a great favor with his warm friendship.

A last and a lasting memory.

In 2014 I had not spoken to Bob in decades. My one long term endearing memory of him was a small Russian nesting doll he had brought to me or sent home to me in Stockbridge in 1964. It's a small doll, and nests only two dolls, but it is precious. Other than a few oil paintings I painted as a child, and an ancient wind-up mantle clock my mother and I bought at an auction in 1960 to fill our "BROOKBEND" home, this is the oldest object I hold on to in my private office and bedroom. There is the inscription on the bottom barely legible now, "From RJC, 1964."So fifty years from the time Bob gave me that Russian doll, I went to the Berkshires for my 50th Williams High Class Reunion. During that reunion one of my classmates (I think it was Mary Ford) told me that Bob was in a nursing home in Great Barrington, MA. Following the reunion, I decided to stay some extra time and go visit Bob. I was fearful. I did not know what to expect because I was told he was pretty much fully paralyzed. I found him able to blink according to code and squeeze my finger still. He was very pleased and very excited to see me. I could see that in his eyes. Bob was not expecting me...a dear old, old friend whom he had not seen or heard from in decades. But he rallied and responded so well. I asked a whole bunch of "yes' or "no" questions and I also knew he could hear and understand me so I told him all about my life and my move to

Maryland. It was a good visit for both of us. I know he deeply appreciated it, and I cannot even begin to tell you how grateful I am that I made the decision to find Bob at that long-term care home.

Because I did not remain close to Bob over the past several decades I have no idea of his spiritual beliefs or lack thereof. I know mine have changed considerably. I no longer believe that the distinct wall between spiritual creative energy and material items is in fact true. I believe that there is a cognizant energy spiritual realm. I raise this because I so hope that Bob and I shall be reunited again. Friends in Eternity. That I'll hear his greeting of "High HO" and experience his warmth as he tries to teach me Russian greetings and expand my mind with a million years discussion on the nature of things.

Dale T. Read

July 7, 2017

daler@marketingarmgroup.com