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THE LAST WORD

Of Ben Bernanke and the timeless connection

IN A SMALL SOUTHERN TOWN he sits in a local café, both leaning forward and over a bowl of soup. He can be found there most any day. So when the café owners needed a name for the soup, which he and his longtime tennis partner asked for every day, Fowler-Carmichael Soup seemed the perfect name.

It’s hard to tell if he’s thinking about the present anymore, or if he’s moving back in time behind the wire-rimmed eyeglasses and perfectly genteel demeanor that has defined John W. Fowler, Jr., for 92 years. For the ripples of his life extend in every direction.

Before lunch in the café became a routine he was a teacher of more than 40 years, from the pre-World War II era until 1981, and was recognized by three South Carolina governors for meritorious service in the field of education. He served on the President’s White House Committee on Education and the National Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped.

He was a coach and a tennis champion across the Southeast dating back to his college years at Furman (Class of ’41), winning more than 50 state championships. He planned reconnaissance missions as an intelligence officer in the South Pacific in World War II, while an older brother liberated concentration camps halfway around the world in Europe. And before all that he was like many Southern boys in the 1920s and ’30s, working on the family farm in just about any capacity to make ends meet. The Great Depression stamped an ever-fixed mark on his life, as it did for so many.

But of all the roles he played in his lifetime, teacher is the one he savors most. It is not unusual for a former student to spot him over lunch in the café. They are drawn to him, and he remembers every single one. Some he taught, others he taught their parents or grandparents, or children or aunts or uncles, brothers or sisters. It becomes nearly impossible to escape the wide web of influence from which his days as a teacher of high school English literature extend.

ALTHOUGH HE HAD many bright students, on occasion he will catch a glimpse of perhaps his most famous former student on the national news. Ben Bernanke, chairman of the Federal Reserve, upon whose shoulders the great market meltdown of 2008 fell, was his student in the late 1960s in Dillon, S.C. He offers memories only when asked, but this one begs for detail.

With clarity he goes back in time as he gestures to his right, recalling where Ben sat in his classroom and how he was challenged by Ben as much as Ben was challenged by the curriculum. He recalls Bernanke’s exceptional intellect and knew he was destined for some great purpose. Because Bernanke was already in the midst of drafting his first novel, his assignments were more focused on descriptive sketches, short stories and poetic endeavors. “When grading papers, I used to save Ben’s for last. He would use phrases like ‘incredulity is as close to ignorance as to great brilliance.’ Amazing.”

Nearly 40 years later, the two would meet again during a celebration for Bernanke in Dillon. He recalls a phrase written by the teenage Bernanke, “Why can’t happy moments be caught as they happen and displayed in a glass case to admire?” Then he pauses and answers, “They can.”

It seems there is a timeless connection between some students and their teachers.

One lived the Great Depression; the other studied it and became a scholar and historian of it, uniquely preparing him to lead the nation through what has been called the Second Great Depression.

Around him now in the café, a new generation rushes in and out. They talk on and on about their day, their list of things to do, paying more attention to mobile devices than anything or anyone around them.

Meanwhile this near centurion, still brilliant with his history and memories, sits nearby, kindly overhearing and watching. His longtime tennis partner is unable to join him these days. Hard to tell what he’s thinking. But likely he is not pondering the ripple effects of his enormous life that have led across decades, crossing thousands of days and nights to students young and old who have yet to go where he has been . . . or may never go at all.

— BRENDA FOWLER WENSIL

Reprinted with permission from the August 2012 issue of Charlatan, an online magazine. John Fowler lives in Malibu, S.C. Brenda Wensil is his niece.