

P. M. H. Atwater, L.H.D.
pmh@pmhatwater.com
www.pmhatwater.com

FIRST GRADE FOR ME MEANT

PEARL HARBOR, DEATH, SENSORY MIXUPS

by P. M. H. Atwater, L.H.D.

War was in your lap when bombs dropped on Pearl Harbor. Everyday real. Everywhere present.

Any cans you emptied to prepare a meal, you washed, flattened, then set aside in a box to take once a week to the drop-off place where the metal was collected by the Army to use in the war effort. There were Victory Gardens. If you didn't grow your own food you didn't eat much. Going to the grocery store meant taking the food you raised with you so you could can it at the store. Literally, grocery stores were canning kitchens. You paid for metal used at check out, plus anything you could grab from near-empty food shelves. So much was rationed: butter, gasoline, blankets, sugar. Maybe more, but I don't remember the rest. And air-raid drills. Wailing sirens meant lights out. Wardens checked every home, barged right in. You were fined if they found anything, like a cigarette still glowing. We got through this by helping each other. If you had extra food, you'd put it in a paper bag, set it on your neighbor's porch, ring the doorbell and run. People were proud. You didn't want to embarrass anyone.

I started school a little early, not quite six. Washington School was a long walk from where I lived in Twin Falls, Idaho. That walk haunted me for decades. . . because. . . it was a walk of death.

In those days, if anyone in your family paid the ultimate price in the war effort, you were sent a large gold star decal from the government that you put in your living room window – so everyone would know what had happened to one of your own. It seemed to me like those gold stars popped up everywhere. Kids know what's going on. I knew those gold stars were

death stars, and my walk to school was a walk with their death call. One morning, there were six new gold stars on the window of a home I passed. I just stood there and sobbed. I don't recall a single morning in all of first grade, when I didn't have to stop my tears and shudders just to walk in the door of my first-grade classroom.

But that wasn't all. When I entered my school room, punishment greeted me. That's because I was the only kid in my first-grade class who could smell color, see music, and hear numbers. (This sensory extra is called synesthesia or multiple sensing and is an elaboration of the limbic system in the brain.) Who knew anything about what most assuredly must be some form of nonsense? Certainly not the teachers and principal in my school. It was enough that I was born with dyslexia. Reading was difficult, words danced around and letters sometimes changed places. Kids would laugh every time I tried to read out loud. I dreaded such exercises. Took me three years to teach myself how to read. No one else helped. Invented all the "how-tos" I needed by sensing what felt right, then drilling myself hour after hour with comic books and Sunday funnies, matching what I saw with what I said, sneaking in time so no one could guess what I was doing in the "milk house" near the barn. This anomaly shows up today only if get too tired or don't feel well. The three years of "whenever-I-could-practice" paid off. But my sensing differences, the synesthesia, formed a mountain almost too tall to climb.

A kid who could smell color, see music, and hear numbers was beyond the pale. The principal of my school called my mother in twice, trying to get her to allow him to commit me to a special school for "congenital liars." She refused to cooperate, yet for years afterward she questioned the wisdom of her decision. As for the principal, he made certain my first-grade teacher had me sit on a tall stool in front of the class as an example of a bad child who told lies. Many times when this occurred I also had to wear a tall conical hat that said "DUNCE" on it. I knew I was telling the truth, but everyone else thought I was lying. The result? Utter confusion. Truth branded me a liar, people turned on me. Lies, on the other hand, pleased everyone while confusing me.

By the end of the first grade, I was so angry, I decided that I would never become an adult when I grew up because all adults were stupid. This

anger fueled an almost obsessive need on my part to cross-check almost everything and everyone. What teachers and most adults told me, I rejected. I cross-compared and studied every little thing to find out why my world was so different from everyone else's. And I carefully observed how people walked, what they wore, how they spoke, who they were with and when, to see if I could learn anything from their traits that might help me with mine. Quickly I nixed what people said - as few if any said what they meant. Instead I watched what they actually did and what effect that had - like throwing pebbles in a lake: it's not the pebble that matter, it's all those ripples, what they are and where they go. I claim no wisdom here. Just the pain of trial and error.

The anger I felt from my first grade debacle mixed with a deep horror. Pearl Harbor, World War II, Hitler, Nazi "goose-steppers" - all melded into a daily fare that was triggered for me by those gold stars. For years afterward I did everything I could to avoid getting a score of 100% on school papers. If I did, that meant I would be "awarded" a gold star: translate - "death star." I could not tolerate any form of gold until I was in my fifties, could not wear gold or anything gold colored until I was in my sixties. That long.

So here we are with Covid-19 and it's like Pearl Harbor all over again. Scenes of death have mixed with that first year in grade school when I tried to be like everyone else and failed, utterly. Being confined to my home now has been an eye-opener. For 44 years I have been researching near-death states, with a research base now of nearly 5,000 adult/child experiencers, wrote 18 books related to or about the subject, not counting six children's books called the Animal Lights Series, to help parents with early memories of their children. Certainly I was told to do all of this by what I call The Voice Like None Other, which spoke to me during my third death/near-death experience. No arguing that point. Yet, in looking around me, hearing and feeling what today's people are experiencing, it seems to me as if a re-run of my earliest years.

I was born in Twin Falls, Idaho, and I died in Boise, Idaho. What I have accomplished as a near-death researcher only mimics that little first grader with learning differences who death once stalked.

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