

The Day I Became A Cub



By Thomas Ard Sylvest, Jr.
November 3, 2016

My dad, Thomas Ard Sylvest, is 91 years old. We recently listened to the 6th game of the 2016 World Series between the Cleveland Indians and Chicago Cubs. We hadn't done something like that in a long time. Between innings we recalled so many of our shared baseball memories. This evening was as special as any I have ever had. At one point, Dad brought up a memory that has become legendary in lore of who I am as a person. I would like to share it with you. Get some Kleenex.

Many of you who know me even a little would not believe I was once painfully shy. When I was a child, I cringed at the thought of having to deal with people. I hid under tables, behind curtains, and in closets to avoid strangers. A nauseous feeling in the pit of my stomach grew with the anticipation of relatives coming to visit. Meeting new people gave me tremendous pain. Any new situation that hinted at the notion I may have to speak to someone I didn't know produced debilitating levels of anxiety. The physical and mental torture scarred me for life.

I was shy.

I have become a happy-go-lucky, confident, out-going, and gregarious old man. I have stood on stage before thousands. I have given speeches at seminars. I have performed music before audiences. I have acted on stage. I have taught college classes. I can work a room like a politician without the baggage of being a politician. I can tell a joke and weave a story as well as anyone in the entertainment industry. I can carry on a substantive conversation with anyone; and I mean anyone. I fear no one. I relish new encounters. I see people as an adventure waiting to be experienced. I look forward to bringing joy to those around me. I embrace people.

I am not shy.

That quivering kid who was so very afraid of the world of people still lives deep within me. I remember that tike. I cry for him and the pain he endured. I see him in children who huddle behind their parents legs when strangers are introduced. I recognize him in the little boy or girl who stands to the side avoiding folks in a social setting. I feel for the babe in arms that buries his head in his dad's shoulder when others approach. These young ones I hold close to my heart. I know them well. I was one of them. I still am.

I once heard it said, "I'm shy, but I hide it well." I claim that adage. It kind of applies to me. Shyness never goes away. A person finds ways to negotiate the journey through shyness. The behaviors that work and work consistently tend to be repeated. After a while, these things we do become a part of our repertoire. Shy people find all kinds of paths to get to a point where they can cope.

The road to become the un-shy person I am today began long ago. I do not remember the actual first steps I took to learn to cope with my shyness. The blurring of these memories helped me develop the ways and means to cope. I attribute some of the things I learned to Dad. Dad's a friendly fellow and, as a child, I always wanted to be like him. So perhaps some of my earliest lessons I picked up here and there from him. Of course, I had teachers and coaches throughout my life that also contributed to my ability to deal with people. But there is one person who stands out in my memory who had the most important influence on my shyness, my mom, Eloise Marie Theresa Sobert Sylvest.

I was seven years old and the oldest of five children. My dad changed jobs with his company, so we had to move. Our family, Dad, Mom, grandmother, and the kids, moved to Port Sulphur, Louisiana from Chalmette, Louisiana. We moved in April of the year. This meant we only had a few weeks left in the school year. This also meant I didn't have a lot of time to meet new kids and teachers and all of the other scary folk at school before the Summer vacation started. For me, this was fine. I didn't want to meet a whole bunch of new folks. I wasn't ready to throw myself into a new situation that threatened to be painful. I couldn't be happier about not having to deal with this stress. I would have nearly three months to build up a huge reserve of anxiety for the next school year. Mom had other plans.

Unbeknownst to me, Mom had gathered information about various activities that might occupy her children during the Summer while she established our household. She found help beyond Mammon, her mother, for the chores around the house. Since she had infants and toddlers,

Mom didn't need my brother and I under her feet during the day. She needed safe, supervised activities for her little boys.

I was seven years old and turning eight in a few weeks. I was old enough for Little League Baseball. Mom saw this as an opportunity to give me something to do. It was safe and supervised. It also took up enough time to get me out of her hair for a good while each day. Little did I realize that my mother was an evil schemer.

My birthday is in early June. I got a baseball glove as an early birthday gift this particular year. I didn't think it odd to get a gift early. I did find it peculiar that she loaded my carcass into the car and brought me to a spot near the school. In the distance I saw baseball parks filled with men and boys. I turned back to Mom with unspoken questions stuck in my throat.

Needless to say, I was shocked. There was no way I was going thrust myself into that crowd of strangers. How could my dear, sweet mother show such a vicious disregard for my feelings. She knew full well how hurt I would be to have to face people I didn't know. I was angry. I was scared. I was hurt. I hated my mom. This was the most evil thing anyone had ever done to me up to this time. Of all people, it was "she-who-had-given-me-life" doing it to me.

I finally got out of the car after the numerous threats and consequences she proposed if I didn't leave the car. She said I could stand there at the edge of the field for all she cared. She told me she was not coming back to get me for two hours. I was devastated. She drove away as I stood there with my head buried in my new baseball glove crying my eyes out.

After what seemed like an eternity, I walked towards the baseball fields. An old fellow, probably about twenty-something-years old, walked up to me. He asked me, "You want to play baseball?"

I reluctantly and silently responded with a nod of my head. He walked me over to a group of boys my age, pried my name out of me, and introduced me to my new teammates. I commenced playing baseball.

Mom came back two hours later. Our baseball practice broke up and everyone dispersed. I ran to the car. I threw my arms around Mom's neck. I cried joyful tears, grateful tears, and thankful tears, repeating over and over, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

I found baseball. I found life-long friends. I found the beginnings of the cracks in my shyness. I found Mom to be one great woman. She had only been a mom for short of eight years, but she knew a thing or two I had decided. It was still a mystery to me how she knew so much about an eight-year old boy. She hadn't done this sort of job before. She didn't have brothers. She didn't play baseball. I left the mystery alone. Somethings I guess we aren't supposed to know.

Many years later, when my relationship with Mom had changed and we spoke with each as adults I learned even more about Mom. The little story I just related came up a few times in our conversations. Now and then, when we talked about it, there was always a bit of something in Mom's voice or facial expression I thought was curious. I finally asked her, "How did you know I would react the way I did after you dropped me at the baseball fields?"

She said, "Tommy, I didn't know how you would react. As a matter of fact, I was scared to death for you. It hurt me so badly to drive away and leave you there crying. I drove away slowly, very

slowly. I cried the whole time. I kept looking behind me to see what you would do. When I saw you turn and walk towards the crowd of men and boys, I stopped the car and watched. Then I saw John Doucet walk up and speak to you. I sat there in the car crying for you, hoping you'd be okay. Then I reluctantly left. When I came back to get you, you made me very happy. I was so relieved. Son, I never wanted to hurt you.”

I cried while she told me what she went through. I cry now as I write this.

This incident stands out as the big one in helping me work through my shyness. It was a precious gift a mom gave to her little boy. I am always grateful to my mom for this gift.

She also gave me the gift of baseball. She and Dad were ardent supporters of me and my brother, John, and all of the baseball teams to which we belonged.

The first team I joined that day in June so long ago was named the Cubs.

That was the day I became a Cub.