

## THE “TRAUMA” OF CATHOLIC SCHOOL

*Q: Well, school now. You went to what, Catholic school?--*

QUINN: Saint Philip Neri elementary school on the Grand Concourse near 201st Street. I started in first grade. I did not go to Kindergarten. I don't think it existed.

*Q: Who ran it, I mean were they nuns?*

QUINN: They were nuns. They were called Mother. So I don't know what Order they were, but Mother Mary Thomas was my first grade teacher. I was at that school for three years.

*Q: How did you find them? I mean there were all these stories about nuns wrapping knuckles and --*

QUINN: Oh yeah, but that happened when I was in fourth grade. We had moved so I transferred to Immaculate Conception school just off White Plains Avenue on 211th Street. I remember the nuns at Saint Philip Neri as being OK. Mother Mary Thomas, my first grade teacher, was especially kind. I don't recall a lot about what happened in class, but there were a few traumatic moments in first grade. One came on my very first day of school, where we were instructed to color the sections of a circle that was divided into three parts. First of all, I didn't have any crayons. None. I was mortified. And sitting next to me was Joseph Muceller, who I remember as a big heavy kid. He had this huge box of 48 crayons with every color imaginable. Desperate, I asked, "Joseph, could you let me use a crayon?" He was so nice and agreed. So, I was saved from trauma number one.

Mother Mary Thomas had given us instructions by drawing a circle on the blackboard. She said "Well, here's what you do, children. Divide the circle into three parts." And then she put a little dot in each one of the three sections and told us to make one red, one blue, and the third yellow.

So Joseph Muceller loaned me those three crayons, and I made a little dot in each section. He meanwhile was coloring in the whole section. I was laughing to myself thinking he didn't understand the assignment. I had my three little dots, which I was sure was what we had been instructed to do.

*Q: Yeah.*

QUINN: And then, and then, Mother Mary Thomas walked up and said, “Oh Kenneth, you didn’t understand. You were supposed to color in the entire section, just like Joseph did.” Oh, the humiliation!

*Q: Oh yeah.*

QUINN: You can see that I’m still deeply scarred even until today.

*Q: We all -- absolutely. I mean these are the things --*

QUINN: Yeah.

*Q: And you never really recover from them.*

QUINN: No! And then--there was more. The only other memories I have of those first three years are: of making my First Communion, all dressed in a white suit with short pants and walking in procession into Church on a Sunday morning: and of having a part in the first grade school play. I was one of three hobo-like figures whose job was to sing a song titled “I’m the Rag Tag Man from Ricketty Row.” We rehearsed and rehearsed and I knew the song, but when the day came I panicked about being on stage. I told my Mother I was sick and couldn’t perform. She pushed and pressed and cajoled me, but I was adamant I had to stay home. She was forced to phone to tell them I couldn’t make it. I am sure she was super disappointed.

My grandmother, Mary Davin Donahue, whom I called Maudie, constantly told me, “Kenny, wait ‘til the Brothers get hold of you.”

*Q: Oh.*

QUINN: Fourth grade was when the Brothers (male equivalent of nuns, infamous for the physical pain they would inflict to enforce discipline) took over teaching at St. Philip Neri. The Brothers were supposedly strict, harsh and, demanding. Maudie said they were going to whip some sense into me.

*Q: Yeah.*

QUINN: So I lived in mortal fear of fourth grade. And then deliverance came, when, for some reason, we moved to another part of the Bronx, where I would attend a different school. At first, I was thankful we were moving away so I wouldn’t have to suffer under the harsh rule of the Brothers. We moved 11 blocks up to Gun Hill Road and 211th Street near White Plains Avenue.

The same EL that ran along Webster Avenue turned and went up to White Plains. I don't know why we moved, but leaving the Block on Decatur Avenue—the locus of my identity--turned out to be so painful. It meant leaving all of my friends and my sense of belonging behind. I recall sitting in the taxi about to drive off when a group of the kids gathered and sang the traditional farewell song. It went like this:

“We hate to see you go!

We hate to see you go!

We hope the heck you never come back!

We hate to see you go.”

I still remember how deeply sad I felt listening to that song in 1951.

We lived on the sixth floor of an apartment building on Gun Hill Road. I went to this brand new Catholic school run by Dominicans, in an all Italian neighborhood, named Immaculate Conception. Every kid in school was Italian except for two boys: me and another boy named Patrick Bowden. We were the only Irish kids in the entire school, the entire church. They still gave the sermons in Italian at half of the Masses on Sundays, and heard confessions in Italian! The nuns were tough Dominicans, dressed in white habits.

At the time, the school only went up to fourth grade. They were adding a new class each year. The work load was incredible. I remember having this big heavy brief case that was filled with all sorts of homework every night. So, every morning, I would lug it over to school, a few blocks from our apartment, and put down my book bag in the place where we were supposed to line up and wait to be marched into school.

One morning, I was just running around, chasing other kids, when the nun who was the principal came and grabbed me and several other boys. She dragged us into the school and into an empty classroom that was not yet being used. She lined us up and started lecturing to us about how dare we run around before school. I recall even today standing there, quaking in fear, and not comprehending what I had done wrong. She then walked down the line and with her open hand slapped each one of us across the face as hard as she could. I can still feel that hit. I can still see the blue lightning that flashed through my eyes when the blow struck. I still didn't know what I had done wrong.

Discipline is the only thing I recall from that school. A good part of the time we didn't even have a regular teacher. We often had the maintenance man--the janitor, named Angelo--who would come in to keep order. All he cared about was whether anyone talked or not. If there was a slight hint of disruption, everyone had to sit silently at their desks with their hands clasped behind their backs. After a while your arms would start to hurt. Girls would start to cry from the pain. So my main memory of the school is being slapped and forced to endure what now sound like enhanced interrogation tactics (laughs).

*Q: It does!*

QUINN: Another memory I have of Gun Hill Road is of being forced to carry out atomic bomb drills during which our family had to practice taking cover in the basement of our apartment building whenever air raid sirens went off. We also were being processed at school to get dog tags so our bodies could be identified after any atomic bomb attack. There were signs being put up around the city showing where designated air raid shelters were located. The fear of attack by the Soviet Union, exacerbated by the Rosenberg trial for giving away our atomic secrets, was so palpable, that there were even prohibitions against sirens being played on TV as part of a movie. So if you were watching an old black and white cops and robbers movie on TV, whenever a car chase came on with police car with its siren blaring, the sound immediately went dead, turned off by the broadcaster.

Another memory from the fall of 1951 is that I stayed home from school in October to watch the Dodgers-Giants playoff game in which the Giants' Bobby Thomson hit the 9th inning winning home run that was called, "the shot heard around the world." It allowed the Giants to go to the World Series, which was a huge victory for their fans, even though they eventually lost to the Yankees. Having three teams from New York City vying for the pennant and Series crown, only added to the sense that post-war New York was the capital of America and the World.

It was my trivia knowledge of that game about who was on deck when Thomson hit his home run (the answer is a rookie named Willie Mays), that, 35 years later, would so impress Ambassador Winston Lord that, I jokingly say, caused him to hire me to be a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the East Asia Bureau, and eventually nominate me to be Ambassador to Cambodia. But that is a story for another day.

I may have been sick that day or just faking it to stay home and watch the game. I used to miss a lot of school because I had sinus infections. Who knows? Maybe I just didn't want to go to school since sometimes older Italian kids would chase after Patrick Bowden and me after school and threaten to beat us up. Thank goodness my Dad took a job in La Crosse, Wisconsin and we moved there sometime in the spring of 1952.