

Fresno Pacific College: A Doorway into a Wider World

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September of 1969, following the summer of Woodstock, the Manson murders, and the moon landing, an eager student arrived on the campus of Fresno Pacific College. A world of new experience beckoned.

I hadn't considered applying to any other college. Pacific seemed inevitable, approved by my Mennonite Brethren church and an acceptable extension of my home and community in rural Kern County. It provided a context where I could begin some serious thinking, questioning, and the testing of new ideas.

I was happy to be at a school small enough to permit anyone to know everyone by name. Classes aroused interest, provoked curiosity, inspired exploration. Dorm life was fun, activities exciting. I quickly began to absorb what Fresno Pacific offered, to take it all in. And I was learning, not just in academic ways, but in enlarging my world view, or rather, how to think critically about the world and how I fit into it.

At the end of the sixties decade, a tsunami of events from the wider context swept us into a world where we questioned the formerly unquestionable, and this shaped many of the stories one treasures from the experiences at Pacific.

The assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. were painfully fresh, then Nixon visited China, Earth Day was first observed, Ms Magazine was launched, the Vietnam War had become a quagmire and the Kent State shootings made Vietnam an ugly word, and the first rumblings of the Watergate scandal were heard. These multiple dramas unfolded for the next four years, and still more. As my time at Pacific was coming to an end, Roe vs. Wade made abortion legal, troops were leaving Vietnam, Saigon was falling and the Watergate hearings began.

While student demonstrations on campuses across the country listed grievances and made demands, some of us at Pacific College, in class and outside of class, felt stirred to question beliefs, resist givens, to make sense of the senseless, to decipher the riddle of our times and of our country. Our thinking, questioning, challenging took many forms. Some large and global, some cultural and trivial.

Letters posted on the Wittenburg Door in Alumni Hall argued campus issues and addressed larger topics such as the daily tragedy and body counts from Vietnam. Students participated in off campus anti-war protests. The reality of war was very close as fellow students were being drafted into the military by lottery.

“The times they [were] a changin’.” When a male student was called into the Dean’s office and told to cut his hair, the postings on the Wittenburg Door caught flame, eventually resulting in a student-administration debate during Chapel Hour. The student with the objectionable hair, totally befuddled by how long hair could cause such a ruckus, left at the end of the school year.

The most personal issue for me was the differing standards for male and female students. I began my college education just after the dress code requiring women to wear skirts to class was dropped, but my friends and I wanted equal treatment in other areas as well. Of course, female students enjoyed certain privileges such as dorm delivery of hot cinnamon rolls on Sunday morning allowing us to prepare for church without the dining hall routine, but the guys got the greater breaks. Why, we asked, did women have curfews and need to sign in and out when leaving campus when there were no such requirements for male students? My roommate and I attended dorm council meetings and made the case for equality, but felt dismissed when the response was a rush to the next agenda item.

We women had our unique rituals, such as the “Candlelighting Ceremony” which seemed a relic from the past. (In the darkened dorm lounge, women seated in a circle passed a lit candle encircled by an engagement ring. Suspense heightened until the candle reached the girl who owned the ring who blew out the flame.) Whispered questions—Was this ceremony more meaningful than graduation? Was it, traditionally, the hidden significance of a successful college experience? Frankly, I came for the cake that followed, very good cake by the way.

The spirit of protest was in the air when a committee I served on was given the task of offering a nomination for Homecoming queen. One of our committee played the part of our candidate, acting as a robot (a mechanical, programmed woman who was introduced to the student body, wearing a mask and giving a prerecorded robotic speech on her hand held tape recorder). We

made our point about the objectification of women, and soon after, the ritual was dropped.

At Pacific, I benefited from a well rounded liberal arts education which took place both in and outside of the classroom. In the evenings we watched films brought to us by film aficionado, Richard Wiebe. I was part of a small group who spent a semester in Europe studying art and literature led by Larry Warkentin. This is where I developed a love of reading, art, film, architecture, diverse cultural experiences, cuisine, customs and travel. These discoveries continue to enrich my life immeasurably.

Remembering my college experience uncovers deeper theological discoveries. It was at Pacific that I was first introduced to Anabaptism. Having grown up a fundamental Mennonite Brethren, I was profoundly shaped by “Anabaptist Week” when deep roots in Russia, Poland and the Netherlands came together into a new configuration of theology, faith and life. It was a second conversion experience, the beginning of a real sense of discipleship, the gaining of a theological identity that fit my faith in a way that was transforming. What I understood and believed needed to be oriented towards peace and justice in our world and grounded in a strong sense of community.

Five years after graduation, following my husband’s death in Taiwan, I moved back to live in my home community and Pacific came with me. I found the convictions about discipleship, service and concern “for the least of these” wore well. The transitional time at college, the cross cultural experience of Asia now shaped me in my job as a third grade teacher, as I served in the Christian Education department and church kitchen of my home church, and among the wider circles of friends.

For the ways in which I was formed by my years at Pacific College, my deepest feeling is gratitude. It is my hope that FPU continues to provide and cultivate a space for students, as it was for me, to think, question, learn, grow, and see a wide world open before them.

