

The View From Right Field by Rick Ohler August 6, 2020

## Common Ground

Imagine this scene: It's 1957, or maybe '58, and you're monitoring a drone as it moves down South Grove from the Roycroft Inn toward Oakwood Avenue. I know, I know, drones were still a good half century away in the '50s, but play along. You're hovering above the grand stone wall that lines the street when you spot something intriguing. On the west side of the wall just before the pillar at the wall's southern terminus are two little boys. They can't be more than seven or eight years old because the wall is 28 inches high and seated as they are, cross-legged, their heads don't rise above it. Bringing your drone down a little closer and turning on the attached GoPro-Livelt© camera, you can see that they're playing cards. The brown-haired kid in the horizontally striped t-shirt and dungarees rolled to expose his white high-top sneakers has just laid down a red jack; the sandy-haired boy in a blue sweatshirt and plaid shorts counters with a jack of his own. "War!" they shout in unison. Quickly, both of them peel off three cards from their piles. Brown hair and dungarees then flips a nine—uh-oh, could be trouble. Sandy hair hesitates then turns over a...nine. Both of them holler, "Double war!" with such excitement that they don't notice the stern fellow with the graying brush cut staring down at them from the other side of the wall.

"Home! Now! March!" he says, his voice like a sledgehammer on granite. I march, double time, back to 472 Oakwood, followed by my father. The other kid, Teddy Nichols, scoops up the cards and slinks across the street to 461 Oakwood.

Your drone won't let you see that I have been sent to the 472 Oakwood Brig, otherwise known as my room, for an indeterminant length of time. No doubt I was instructed to use the time in lockdown to "THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE DONE." Mostly I was thinking that I wouldn't be invited to dinner; if I was lucky my brother would be allowed to bring me a plate.

Teddy, you see, a great guy but a bit of a prankster had committed some behavioral foul or other and had landed (and not for the first time) on my parents' no-play list. That meant he couldn't come to my house, and I wasn't allowed to go to his or to have any contact with him for a week. So, being best friends, we engaged in a little subterfuge, sneaking down to the conveniently located stone wall for some cards. After all, we were best friends and weren't about to be separated.

The illicit game of War with Teddy hadn't gotten my first grounding, nor would it be my last; I suspect that few of us escaped grounding of some sort in our formative years. Those days of quarantine seemed like lifetimes; the separation from our friends ripped at our souls, convincing us that missing a Wiffle ball game, a hangout behind the Roycroft, dodgeball at the Boys Club or, later, a chance to commune with the fairer sex at Hamlin Park would damage us forever, socially as well as psychologically. I threatened to call my grandmother to report the human rights violation, but grounded was grounded. (*Note: One interesting exception was the Cotillion, a series of über-formal dances in eighth grade, that required boys to wear suits, shoes*

*and neckties and young girls to wear dresses and white gloves as we fox-trotted and waltzed around the second floor of the old fire hall to music of the our parents' generation and sipped punch from impossibly small cups. We kids, of course, hated it; our parents thought it was necessary for our evolution from hopeless philistines (RIP Snake) to gentlemen and ladies of polite society. What happened if I was grounded when a Cotillion was scheduled? To be made to go would be punishment for me but would also violate the terms of my grounding. A conundrum for Mom and Dad, although I have a feeling I was strapped into my suit and delivered to the dance.)*

Sixty-some years after the stone wall caper, we find ourselves grounded once again, not by parents, but by Covid-19. Reunion Weekend in the 14052 would have attracted hundreds to the old hometown for hoopla and reminiscing at the end of July. Not this year, the streets were empty. Six-feet-distant, I met with old friends the Hatch Brothers—Steve '69 (now living in South Carolina), Brooks '72 (Oregon), Scooter '77 (downstate NY)—at the Right Field Satellite Office's round table on reunion Saturday. They had come home not only for reunion, but to spread their parents' (Bob and Betty Jo Hatch) ashes at beloved sites in the area. We had a lively conversation about the old hometown (for the most part, they approve of what we have and have not done) and their adopted ones. But we were the ONLY four people, besides masked staff, in the building. Last year we would have stood shoulder to shoulder in a crowded barroom, no doubt spraying respiratory droplets (harmless, at that point) wantonly about the room.

No sweat, we'll see everyone for real next year when this is all over, we keep saying, hoping.

Until then, and maybe longer, for the sake of ourselves and everyone around us, we are grounded, so we better get good at it.

Being grounded doesn't have to mean being punished; being grounded also means being "mentally and emotionally stable, sensible and realistic, unpretentious," according to the dictionary app on my phone. That seems like a tall order in a pandemic, right?

For us, the craziness began on March 17, when East Aurora and New York State effectively ground to a halt for everyone except essential workers as hospital filled and casualties mounted. The day before, sensing the enormity of the toxic cloud coming our way, our gang (longstanding friends) had gathered at Wally's for a kind of laughs and lagers swan song. I wonder how many of us believed, even privately, that the virus might really "miraculously disappear," as we were told.

By the second and third weeks, we were getting the idea that the virus was running the show, scoffing at the pronouncements of doctors or politicians. So, we tried Zoom, just to keep in touch. I had no idea if it would work or what the mood would be when I gathered my buddies, but after laughing, joking, giving each other unmerciful grief, telling ribald tales out of school, perhaps being a teensy bit politically incorrect for an hour, I began to feel, well, certainly "unpretentious" and perhaps even "mentally stable," although a transcript of the evening's

shenanigans wouldn't indicate that. We Zoomed every week for March, April, into May, laughing and communing our way through the worst of New York's nightmare, blessed that all of us and our loved ones survived. By May, we had scuttled our 35<sup>th</sup> annual fishing trip. We'd all missed out on vacations, weddings, funerals, reunions, time with grandchildren. Planning became the stuff of fancy.

As the weather warmed, and as we learned more and more about the virus, we felt that with at least six feet of separation, if we arrived in separate vehicles, with individual coolers, drinking vessels and lawn chairs, we could gather, carefully for beers and brouhaha. Shifting from house to house, we have kept these Wednesdays going, now into August, no doubt annoying neighbors with our unbridled laughter and wide-ranging topics of conversation, often expressed vociferously.

This fall will be contentious, uncertain and like nothing we've experienced, no matter what your leanings, your circumstances, your worldview or your occupation. Nobody, not scientist, academic or conspiracy theorist; not shaman, clergyman or prophet has any inkling where we go from here.

I know only, that on Wednesday evenings, I will continue to be grounded by sitting in a circle with some of the best guys on Earth for an hour or two. There will be laughter, genuine caring, sarcasm, gentle noting of others' shortcomings, displays of brinkmanship, unmerited braggadocio, good-natured disparagement and immaturity all adding up to "mental and emotional stability," otherwise known as grounding.