



## The View from Right Field

by Rick Ohler

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**“Gathering Our Belongings”**

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A funny thing happened on the way to Right Field this week.

I had planned to make this week’s offering from Right Field an erudite (RIP Snake) discourse on the nature of belonging. In the pre-writing stages of composition, where I let ideas pinball around inside my head in the hopes that they will coalesce into something readable, I imagined a fairly serious discussion about how, as humans, we all feel the need to belong to some sort of group—a tribe, a community, a fraternity.

I envisioned evoking the late novelist Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse Five*, *Cat’s Cradle*), who spoke often about concepts of human belonging that he named “granfalloon” and “karass.” A granfalloon, according to Vonnegut, is an artificial, contrived group of people who affect a shared identity or purpose. They might sport identical t-shirts or bumper stickers—“I Love Pomeranians,” “You’re in Bills Country,” “Make America Grate Again”—and they might assume they are thick as thieves because of that common identity, when they have no real spiritual connection to each other. Granfallooners might think that by checking the same boxes on a questionnaire—geographic origin, religious affiliation, political party—they are lifelong friends, when in reality they don’t even get along, and their connection, however authentic in a demographic or anthropological sense, is meaningless.

Members of a karass, according to Vonnegut, on the other hand, are bound to each other by spiritual inevitability. Those in a karass might never have met and might be dissimilar on the surface. But when they do meet, they discover a chemistry already in place, a dynamic set in motion by forces unseen and not fully understood. They are, in today’s parlance, kindred spirits, soul mates.

I planned to weave these arcane concepts of granfalloon and karass into accounts of two reunions I attended on successive weekends in June, each attracting people I had not seen in years or decades.

The first event was my 50<sup>th</sup> Nichols School class reunion. As a gawky assortment of 51 young men, we Nichols '68ers came from disparate places—Buffalo, Williamsville, Warsaw, Eden, Orchard Park, Cheektowaga, Kenmore, and an outpost called East Aurora, which, in the '60s before the 400 and the 33, was a torturous hour's drive from Buffalo. My dad taught English (what else?) there, for which he was severely underpaid, so I got a free ride—a bargain, even if it did come with the underlying subtitle, “scholarship kid.” In June of 1968, with diplomas in hand we dispersed to college and then to new adventures. In my case, good fortune prevailed, and I landed, eventually, on Knox Road with my sweetheart Kateri, either seven or eight blocks (depending on how you count blocks as you go around The Circle) from the old homestead at 472 Oakwood Avenue. Others stayed in Buffalo to become the captains of industry, while most fled to California, Boston, Colorado, Minnesota, Montana, London. Four, sadly, have left this mortal coil. As we shook hands at the reunion, we looked each up and down, pretending not to notice (and judge) the effect the years had had upon us. We felt a little glow of recognition, began to catch up and then fell to reminiscing. I wondered: do our identical diplomas from a fancy private school, where I learned those RIP Snake vocabulary words, constitute granfalloon or karass? Should my status as a “scholarship kid,” still make me feel like a beggar at a banquet even though I parlayed that education into a gig as an award-winning columnist at the world's best hometown newspaper? Are we karass or granfalloon?

A week later came the triennial Ohler family reunion, held in New London, New Hampshire. Fifty of us, ranging in age from nine months to 94 over four generations, came from as far away as Vancouver and as close as down the street, donned name tags and set about the pleasant business of connecting the dots of our relationship to my grandparents and, thus, to one another. On one level, there was a comfort in coming to a place where writing “OHLER” on one's cooler or Frisbee doesn't really differentiate it from other coolers or Frisbees that have “OHLER” on them, too. On another level, we were eager to believe that a thread more substantial than an Ancestry.com printout binds us together. We talked, laughed, took pictures, played our triennial wiffle ball game, ate (too much), marveled at our kids, and as we left, we hugged a little more tenaciously than we had just a few days before. I hope for karass, not granfalloon on these weekends, and I imagine that there lives within all of us descendants of my grandparents—blood relatives, spouses, sweethearts, children and grandchildren, a kindred spirit that is worth belonging to.

Those two reunions might have made an interesting column, but then a funny thing happened as I set about writing this week's “View From Right Field.”

Two weeks ago in this space, when I wrote about the triskadekaphile, I also bashed my former softball teammates from the Concretestadores, calling them “aging and

increasingly hapless.” Well, unbeknownst to me, Bill Shanahan, one of those hapless former Concretestadores, working in committee with three other hapless teammates, combined to pen a scathing rebuttal to my characterization in a letter to the editor in last week’s *Advertiser*. (Notice it took four of them to write one letter.) My bosses at the paper were hesitant to publish the letter, worried that my fragile ego might be bruised. When they told me the author’s name, I thanked them for their concern, and told them that my old friend Mr. Shanahan, unable to handle the truth, was obviously being facetious in an attempt to exact revenge. It was all in good fun, I assured them, and besides, a vibrant free press is the sign of a healthy society.

Later that day, I was riding my bike down Main St. when crossing guard Dave Thomason approached me with genuine concern. “Man, why was that guy so nasty to you in the paper today?” I thanked him for his concern, and said that taking criticism came with the job. I was touched that throughout the day, several readers expressed their support for me as the hometown newspaper guy who had been wronged by a reader. I felt liked I belonged to something bigger than me.

That night, I was having office hours at the Right Field Satellite Office when Bill Shanahan walked in. We had a good laugh about the letter, and we thought that would be the end of it, when who should bound through the door but uber-townie Lenny Mazurkiewicz, perhaps the most thorough *Advertiser* reader on the circulation rolls as well as my former softball teammate. He looked at me and bellowed to a full bar, “WHO THE HECK IS BILL SHANAHAN AND WHY IS HE SAYING THOSE TERRIBLE THINGS ABOUT OUR COLUMNIST?” I introduced him to Bill Shanahan, whom he had never met, and, as you can imagine, laughter ensued.

Being a townie—is it granfalloon or karass? Either way, it’s nice to belong.