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# Pro Rege

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Volume 37  
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue* 2008

Article 7

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December 2008

## Me and My Tribe

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### Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2008) "Me and My Tribe," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 37: No. 2, 9 - 13.  
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A quarterly faculty publication of  
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

# Me and My Tribe

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*James Calvin Schaap*

Somewhere in the tiny cedar box which holds my mother's most treasured belongings sits a three-by-five spiral notepad. On its blue cover, if I remember correctly, is the title, "The Lost Arrow Club." Inside that notebook, five or six pages tell the short history, the official proceedings, of a boyhood club to which I belonged. When I was ten years old, I knew nothing about articles or motions, so the proceedings amount to a disjointed narrative about a half-dozen boys who claimed allegiance to a scruffy organization headquartered in a backyard garden shed on what was then the eastern edge of Oostburg, Wisconsin.

The proceedings explain how these boys would hike out to a deep gulch north of town, a fissure in the earth where some ancient river once flowed east to the lake, but in the 1950s offered blessed privacy for boys exploring themselves and the world, the kind of wilderness that existed then but probably does no more in the rural areas of Sheboygan County. We called that place—everybody did, nobody laughed—the Big Hole, and there wasn't much there but trees and water and an old dump, scattered, as I remember, with empty Prince Albert tobacco tins. The notebook details the tragic loss of an arrow—they cost a quarter back then, at Daane Hardware—and how Davey Lensink was shooting the wooden 25-pound bow his dad let him sling along on our expeditions, how he was shooting at a tree or a starling and how the arrow snuck into the meadow grass and escaped our feet and hands. Hence, the name of the club, I imagine.

In a ten year-old's language that notebook explains how, in our private wilderness, we followed the creeks and built huts from sod and felled tree branches. The "proceedings" of the Lost Arrow

Club glory in a treasured steel trap we hung like a prize from a nail hammered into a stud on the wall of the shack we met in, and those club notes promise how muskrat and mink pelts will make all six of us rich enough to afford more arrows. I don't think we were old enough yet for BB guns, at least I wasn't.

That notebook chronicles unimaginable boyhood freedom in the middle of the strict righteousness of a Dutch Calvinist village that was surrounded on all sides by a bountiful boyhood wilderness. That notebook recounts my own Tom Sawyer boyhood, adventures growing like thin birch saplings from the woods and sand dunes of a childhood garden. Those two sources—the wilderness and the church—form the confluence from which my own identity has flowed.

The lakeshore wilderness I remember well. My mother said it was too dangerous for us to cross busy Highway 141 that ran from Milwaukee to Green Bay, so we had to be old enough before we were allowed to escape the village—that age may well have been ten or eleven or twelve. Once we could cross the highway, we were gone. Honestly, the freedom I was given as a boy in the fifties is unimaginable today, in part because the lakeshore is all private property; back then, it seemed all wilderness.

A stunning paradox lies at the heart of my reflections about being a kid in small town Dutch-America in the Fifties. Despite the fact that we lived in a world tightly controlled by four Dutch Reformed churches (most everyone in the community was Dutch), our freedom as young, growing boys was limited only by how far we could pedal our bikes. We'd leave in the morning and not return until supper, and all our Moms would ever ask was whether or not we had fun. Of course,

we did.

At first we'd get off our bikes and walk across that busy, old state highway, scared silly of the steady stream of cars and trucks with the strangers in sunglasses. But once across, we'd be in a whole different world than the one in the shadow of foursquare Calvinist churches. Entire days we'd spend in the woods, jerking down old logging shacks, plugging creeks like baseball-capped badgers, blowing wet hunks of rotten wood from upturned stumps with M-80s or cherry bombs, smoking cigarettes some of us simply stole from our dads. At the lakeshore we were in a real boy's world—no teachers, no mothers, no playground supervisors to keep our language sweet or our zippers up. The lakeshore was one vast unlined and unfenced wilderness.

Sometimes we'd find un-imagined things in the ditches: pictures of naked women that prompted urgings we could feel but not name, and wine bottles with little in them but the smell of sin. For maybe three years I had been old enough to cross the highway, when one day we took along a rookie and found a skin magazine in glorious color.

"Women don't really look that way, do they?" he said.

We laughed because we remembered our own first discoveries.

Like the Big Hole north, the Onion River west, and Nysee's woods and the old pea refinery south, the lakeshore wilderness was not all that different from those peaked steeples, but what we knew in the woods and sand dunes was really a marvelous freedom that seems altogether incompatible with the caricature image of Dutch Calvinism. Perhaps it was.

But at ten years old, one doesn't understand being poor, even if one is; neither does one understand the severity of righteousness. Besides, growing up in a hall of mirrors offers no comparisons, and while today, in retrospect, it is not all that hard for me to talk about the repression of Calvinism, a quarter century ago not one of the members of the "Lost Arrow Club" had any sense of the rigors of the tightly religious culture in which we grew up. Every discarded bottle we found on our way to the lake simply smelled slightly like sin.

Growing up in a Dutch Calvinist conclave meant going through a litany of church activities which, at ten, I rarely found all that laborious

because they were simply taken for granted. When I was a boy, it never struck me that other people might not be running the same gauntlets. Weekly catechism, weekly Sunday School, devotions at every meal, twice-a-Sabbath worship—plus after-church hymn sings or missions reports—all of these composed the altar of our lives. Some of us went to Christian schools, some didn't. At age ten, few of us understood the difference.

In some ways, it was a very tight world. Few childhood songs ring through my memory as clearly as "Be careful little eyes what you see . . . be careful little feet where you walk . . . be careful little hands what you touch." I remember an uncle of mine, speaking in our church somewhere around the 1960 election, telling us how the pope would run America should this brash young Massachusetts senator be elected to the Presidency. I was Christian Reformed and the grandson of a preacher, so dancing was still frowned upon in the late '50s, drinking was skeptically tolerated in those who had not yet settled down to the easy chairs of home and family, and divorce seemed unpardonable. I remember a woman standing up to confess her sin against the Seventh Commandment, remember a man publically drummed out of the congregation for crimes he'd committed, apparently without remorse. My wonderfully faithful Christian father despised the Fourth-of-July lottery that was the climax of the town's holiday's activities, but I remember wondering why he was disposed against it when I saw my mother's favorite cousin running the whole show and, one year, my uncle, the anti-papist, winning the grand prize garden tiller.

When the Fourth of July landed on Saturday, village folks were caught in a conflict: empty popcorn boxes, silvery Eskimo Pie wrappers, and ketchup-y napkins flecked the green park grass and turned that whole section of the village into an unholy mess. But no one dared to pick up the place the next day, on the Sabbath. Even cleanliness, in my Dutch Calvinist colony, was something less than godliness.

I certainly don't need to document the repressive nature of Calvinism. "Puritanism," said Mencken, "is the suspicion that someone, somewhere is having a good time." The caricature is deeply laid in our history, from the English roundheads, image-busters, and theater-closers, to the American Puritans. I grew up in a Calvinist world, but

twentieth-century Dutch Calvinists were not witch-hunting, stocks-slammng zealots, and life in a Dutch Calvinist town was certainly no death-in-life sentence.

Each childhood Christmas lives in my memory in rich sepia tones: the Christmas Eve Sunday School Program, complete with shepherds and angels and forgetful three-year-olds; a free brown bag of candy and peanuts and usually one orange for nutrition; the after-program ritual around the tree in our living room, always begun with a homily on the Greatest of Gifts—these memories live in me, for better or worse, as standards of family love and unity. Some of the heroes of my life were uneducated men whose strength and devotion and love spread over me like some indomitable ageless pine on some lakeshore ridge. My ethnic and religious inheritance includes suffering the repression that always attends devout faith, but that repression was not something I knew when I was ten.

These two worlds, the wide-open world of the wilderness lakeshore and the tight world of the village, shaped my childhood like a pair of sculptor's hands, so that even at ten I knew I lived in two worlds, one righteous—full of the blessings and curses of enforced righteousness—and the other, free and natural, the buttercup world of spring in the lakeshore woods. And so I have always been conscious of two worlds, of being in but not of, of living in a religious subculture in the very center of what seemed to me to be all the wonders of the American wilderness. Those two arenas still color everything I see even today.

The very first short story I ever wrote concerns a boy who hears his Dutch Calvinist elders hold forth on the excesses of worldliness in the wilderness of a new country. When two Hollander kids, circa 1915, drown in Lake Michigan on the Sabbath, Edgar Hartman, the main character, feels the hell-fire passion of a church elder proclaim that the *dominie* should be tougher on sin, hears him claim that through these deaths God himself is reproaching his people for such Sabbath desecration. A day or two later Edgar goes to the farm of an American to bale hay and listens to the burly man claim the drowning was due only to the boys' tragic negligence. The two versions of the story play off against each other in his mind—the excess of Calvinist allegory against the naturalist version of the dangers of the wilderness. The boy at the heart of things realizes

that he is living in two worlds simultaneously, two worlds he'll likely tight-rope forever.

A few years later I tried a longer form than short fiction. I started with a missionary, home on vacation after seven years of forgetting about the influence his own tough-as-nails Dutch immigrant father had on his own values. By the end of the novella, the old man, broken by his wife's sudden death, asks his son for comfort for the first time his son can remember, and the missionary wavers between acceptance or rejection, not only of his father's need for compassion but of his father's entire vision of the world, a world which includes his own motivation for becoming a missionary and the seven years he has spent on the field.

In *Romey's Place*, a novel with significant biographical roots, a boy learns grace, not from the precepts laid down by his righteous father but from a friend from a troubled home, a friend whose life has certainly not been blessed by the peace and joy which heartfelt devotion has lent to his own—and he learns it in a fight on the lakeshore, not in church.

Willa Cather claimed that every major theme a writer would ever use is embedded deeply within him or her by the time the writer is no more than eighteen years old. If my Calvinist upbringing hovers forever over my shoulder, it is perhaps no more unusual than the deep shadow of some other ethnic or geographic or religious past looming over them. It is simply the world from which I've come, the worlds we still carry in the synapses of our brains and the sinews of our hearts. In my case, it's what I still am.

These days, on Saturday mornings, I often go off by myself and watch the sunrise over the vast open spaces of the emerald edge of the Great Plains, where I live. The vision takes some remaking, but I like to think of that world as wilderness. On Sunday, I'm in church. I still live in two worlds.

But understanding who I was and likely still am is a process, an education itself, something I've never stopped learning. Nonetheless, I remember two stories, both of which occur at Terre Andrea State Park, where I worked during three summers of my college years, a kind of dividing line, in fact, a sculpted wilderness regulated by the requirements of a wage-earning job.

The first incident came in the person of an honest-to-goodness Dutch person, maybe the first

I'd ever met, who rolled up to the booth at the park entrance to register his campsite. When he gave me his address—somewhere in the Netherlands—I pointed at my name tag and proudly announced that I too was Dutch. He looked scornfully at me—he was maybe forty years old. “You’re de kind wat can’t ride bicycles on Sunday,” he said, as if he had me and my people totally cased. “Ve got rid of all of dose years ago.”

I'd never really considered that my people could have been someone else's trash; but I knew my tribe of Dutch Calvinists were exactly what he'd described: throughout the years of my childhood, I'd never ridden a bike on Sunday. Simply wasn't permitted. Oddly enough, the disdain in that man's eyes angered and yet strengthened me.

The second event came as the culmination of a process. There were one or two other Dutch kids working at Terre Andrea, but most of the crew had more familiar Sheboygan county roots. Tight-fisted communities, to their own chagrin, often create rebels who wield their own tight-fists—and it was the Sixties, when rebellion was a way of life. I remember quitting time one late afternoon, when some kid on the day crew told someone from the night shift that there were Oostburg kids in a particular camping site, then laughed. I knew what that meant. It meant, “bust ‘em.” What he meant was, get the holy rollers.

I think I laughed myself, quite frankly. That the Oostburg kids would not be drinking beer was not questioned; they likely would be. So would others. That they would inspire profiling wasn't surprising to me either. I understood the joy the others would take in nailing those blasted self-righteous Hollanders.

But when I left the park that night, I realized I'd witnessed a kind of discrimination: the Oostburg kids were signaled out for special attention, not because they were any more raucous, but because to my non-Dutch friends they were somehow worth nailing. And then it struck me that they'd said what they did with me around, as if I weren't one of them myself, an Oostburg kid—and that was, well, disturbing to me because I was, and still am.

By that time in my life I had already begun to attend a Dutch Reformed college out in Iowa, where I'd discovered, almost shockingly, that there were kids from all over North America who were similarly imprinted with the same Heidelberg

Catechism, kids who'd undergone the same kind of education in school and church as I had, kids with whom I could play a strange game later generations would label “Dutch bingo.” At that point in my life, I'd begun to realize that my growing up wasn't all that different from that of literally hundreds of others from places I'd never heard of—Platte, Lynden, Oskaloosa, Celeryville, Roseland, Artesia, Drenthe, Edgerton, and even a gallery of real live American cities.

I knew more about who I was because I'd seen more of us, so I recognized, I think, that I was a member of a group I'd begun to understand in a college soc class: in Sheboygan County, I was a minority, a minority specially designated—*profiled* is the word we use today—for, literally, discrimination.

And that moment was a big deal—not simply because I could claim victim status, although I did consider that fact. That moment was important to me for two reasons—I learned something deep and abiding about community, about who I was, about how we mark ourselves. I was “an Oostburg kid,” too, after all, even though, strangely enough, my own non-Hollander friends never determined that their profiling Oostburg kids would offend me.

But I also came to understand more about why that discrimination took place—specifically, about how righteousness could so easily look, for all the world, like self-righteousness—how not riding a bike on Sunday could look to all the world like prissy pretense. I understood—I think I really did—*why* we were profiled and why, in the words of the Dutchman, they'd simply thrown us out: to so many other Sheboygan County residents, Hollanders appeared for all the world like some weird cult of holy rollers.

In the late Sixties, that realization was both edifying and crippling, both of which made me want, more than ever, to understand who I was in that world. And that quest—the quest to understand who I am, what I carry, why I behave the way I do, why all of us do, the quest for identity—is not only the first question of any writer's catechism—“why?”—but also a universal search, something we all do.

At least some of these words I wrote almost thirty years ago, when I was asked to speak about faith and writing at a writers conference. You can find at least some of this text in a book titled *35 and*

*Counting.* Today, I'm sixty. You do the math.

In the 30 years that have passed, I've written a good deal more than I needed to, I suppose, and much of it has been in the service of the Christian Reformed Church and the Dutch Reformed community in general: mediations for kids and adults, the history of the denomination of which I'm a part, countless stories and several novels that feature Dutch Reformed characters. I've been a regular essayist for *The Banner*, the official magazine of the CRC and, as many of you know, a regular contributor to conferences that celebrate the heritage of the Dutch Calvinist people in North America. For better or worse, I happen to be among the most well-known writers from my tribe.

I have much to be thankful for because I harvested most of what I've written from a childhood world where two marvelously contradictory streams of inspiration and depth bestowed upon me my character, my passion, and my very breath—the tightly-bound community of middle-century Dutch Calvinism on one hand, and my own patch of American wilderness on the other. Honestly, I wouldn't trade either for anything.

As I sit here now and write, I have to pull the hand brake at my side because I could go on and on, as I have throughout my writing life. I could tell stories forever—like this one: Somewhere in junior high, the boys I hung around with started playing pool in Flipse's Tavern, downtown Oostburg, kiddy-corner from uncle's Mobile gas station. Eventually, I started going in with them, sort of clandestinely, through the side door on the south side—wary as heck about who might be seeing me, sure that someone would tell my parents. Years later, my father told me how, when he was a boy, he used to play pool in the tavern too. At that revelation, I felt both relief and anger—relief that my sin wasn't alone, and anger that somehow he'd created a world in which I had to suffer immense guilt for doing something he done himself when he was a kid. Somewhere in that story lies the church and wilderness, and the uneasy peace in which I lived then, and still do, for that matter.

No single story of my childhood is so profoundly important to who I am than a story which brings the world of the church and the world of the wilderness into stark contrast. I was just a kid when we'd started to steal cigarettes from local grocery stores. It went on for years, as I remember, before

we were caught. That story is told in the first chapter of *Romey's Place*. And it's memorable for one single image—that of my parents crying at their shocking discovery that their son was a thief. I don't believe I carry any guilt from that night anymore, although I'm guessing I did for some time. But what affected me even then, even that night, was that I wasn't more taken by their tears and that I lied, even then, when they pressed me for the whole truth. I was just a kid, but that night I learned I wasn't going to be my father—and that lesson was pure existentialism, both liberating and frightful. Today, fifty years later, it's not hard to realize that that night was my first step into adulthood, a step all of us have to take. It may well be that I got an earlier start than some of my more righteous friends.

All of which is not to say I've got all of this figured out—not at all. My Dutch Calvinist soul has left imprints in me that still emerge. I'm not altogether sure why, but my most recent area of interest is Native Americans, the Sioux of the Great Plains and the Navajo of the Southwest. In just a few months, a long essay of mine will appear in *Books and Culture*, a magazine from the Christianity Today family. That essay develops out of my attempt to understand my preacher-grandfather, who spent thirty years on what was once called “The Heathen Mission Board” of the CRC. I am interested to know how a man of his standing and piety could have simply bought into the culturally defaming reality of the boarding school idea in a mission school just outside of Gallup, New Mexico—how was it that my people determined that the best way to bring the Navajo and Zuni to Christ was to try earnestly to make them into Anglo Christians? It could easily be said that I'm still trying to understand the immense forces which I identify as Dutch Calvinist in me.

Having grown up in two really significant worlds in Sheboygan County—the world of the Hollanders and the old world of the wilderness—allows me to view both, I think, with some objectivity, and yet I never really know for sure how significant and how deeply set those values reside. And that's why I'm thankful for both of them and their respective incredible powers. Both have laid a claim on my life that is as undeniable as it is mysterious.